

The Essential Reality of *The Excursion*

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In his classic study of *The Ruined Cottage*, Jonathan Wordsworth engages one of the more vexing passages, which was all but eliminated in *The Excursion*. In the passage, the Pedlar issues a spoiler alert by beginning the story of Margaret at its somewhat ghoulish end.

She is dead
The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,
Stripped of its outward garb of household flowers,
Of rose and sweetbriar, offers to the wind
A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked
With weeds and rank spear-grass.

(103-08)¹

The spear-grass, which is eventually an “image of tranquility” for the Pedlar (and for his *Excursion* counterpart, the Wanderer) is an image of tranquility at the outset as well “because,” writes Jonathan Wordsworth, “the standards by which it seem[s] a weed” are ultimately “limited” and “irrelevant.” “It is only insofar as they are man-made,” he continues, “that the surroundings of the cottage have declined, and to think in these terms is, for the Wordsworth of March, 1798, to see merely ‘the forms of things, their outward shapes, not their essential reality’ (116). This point may be difficult to grasp, whether at the beginning of the story or even at the close where the spear-grass is explicitly a palliative. But difficulty is precisely the point, not just because “essential reality” is environmental and seemingly non-anthropocentric for the 1798 poet but because the environment—or nature—is readable to ends in *The Ruined Cottage* that are integrative, consolatory and, in that sense, both symbolic and “man-made.”

By the time, however, that Wordsworth set about repurposing the 1798 narrative for inclusion in *The Excursion* sometime around 1810, his sense of an essential reality had shifted from a binarism or even a dialectic, where nature was a book and readable as the ultimate reality, to a reality that tilted decidedly in a different direction, where the focus (quoting the Prospectus) is “On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life” (1). “Human life” could conceivably represent some synthesis of man and nature on either somatic or empirical grounds (i.e., human nature). But the implicit point of the line, which brackets nature by doubling down on “man,” is that the essential reality for Wordsworth is increasingly “human life”—and I would further venture everyday life—as opposed to life in extremis, whether phenomenologically in, say, the Solitary’s reported vision of “glory beyond all glory” (832) in Book II or as tragic incident in the case of Margaret, whose story spanning “nine tedious years” (I. 871) is subsumed by the larger poem with which it is formally continuous.

This new focus is particularly evident in the apparatus, which is primarily an interlocution, and where as early as Book I, attention is suspended between what is being told and the on-the-ground experience of taking it all in, where the narrator is mostly a listener.² While it is in the ensuing books that the time of reading becomes indistinguishable from that of representation, which is also the time of audition, the break that Wordsworth introduces as early as Book I between the Wanderer’s recitation (“He ceased” [957]) and the narrator’s response begins a process of situatedness, or of being-in-the-poem, where the unities of space and time predominate for what often seem like “nine tedious” books.

The tedium of *The Excursion* has long been a point of controversy, from the initial responses of Francis Jeffrey and Lord Byron (who commented acridly in *Don Juan* on the “rather long *Excursion*” [Byron 374]) to critics who view the poem as inaugurating “Wordsworth’s anti-climax.” And although it may be tendentious simply to transform the cultivation of boredom into something of a threshold experience, where reading is tantamount to being resituated or thrown in ways that Heidegger would describe in his critique of Cartesian dualism and its phenomenological aftermath, there is, in the succession of moments that accrete to the “long *Excursion*,” a sense of being-there (*Dasein*) or “being-in” (as Heidegger variously describes it [BT 52-59]) that proves both challenging and de-familiarizing. The interest of *The Excursion*—certainly the effect—is not necessarily in the content of the various monologues, much less in the debate that they never quite rise to. The interest/effect, for better or for worse, is in very their sequence or succession, which is close at hand and generally too close, in contrast to a moment such as the ram scene toward the end, which is seemingly fleeting and at a distance:

In a deep pool, by happy chance we saw
A twofold image; on a grassy bank
A snow-white ram, and in the crystal flood
Another and the same! Most beautiful
On the green turf, with his imperial front
Shaggy and bold, and wreathed horns superb,
The breathing creature stood; as beautiful,
Beneath him, showed his shadowy counterpart.
Each had his glowing mountains, each his sky,
And each seemed centre of his own fair world:
Antipodes unconscious of each other,
Yet, in partition, with their several spheres,
Blended in perfect stillness, to our sight!

(IX. 439-51)

The ram scene was intended originally for *The Prelude* and, like other nodal moments in *The Excursion* beginning with the story of Margaret, it derives from an earlier source. Still,

even as it has been repurposed to make a specific point about fleetingness, the scene aligns with the overall effect in producing an audible silence amid the Wanderer's closing discourse in the same way that hearing Margaret's story swaps out one essential reality for another. The borrowings in *The Excursion* also foreground the religiously-focused effort to rescue the Solitary and others like him from despondency, whether in modeling a faith-based response to Margaret or in the theodicy of the poem where "combinations" like the ram "cannot be lasting in a world like ours" (IX. 468-69). But they manage, as borrowings, to highlight how the purpose of the poem such as I have described it is just as much a "repurpose" if only in the way these borrowed or imported moments accord equally with the purposiveness of the poem as something excursive, ongoing, and on-site rather than with any argument or project or goal.

In a scene, for example, describing the Pastor's son and a friend who have just returned to the parsonage from fishing, the narrative shifts suddenly to the present tense, grammaticalizing (in effect) a reality that—its "spiritual debate" (*Wordsworth's Poetry* 300) aside—the poem has continuously brought to view.

suddenly the door

Flew open, and a pair of lusty Boys
 Appeared, confusion checking their delight.
 —Not brothers they in feature or attire,
 But fond companions, so I guessed, in field,
 And by the river's margin—whence they come,
 Keen anglers with unusual spoil elated.
 One bears a willow-panier on his back,
 The boy of plainer garb, whose blush survives
 More deeply tinged. Twin might the other be
 To that fair girl who from the garden mount
 Bounded:—the triumphant entry this for him!
 Between his hands he holds a smooth blue stone,
 On whose capacious surface see outspread
 Large store of gleaming crimson-spotted trouts;
 Ranged side by side, and lessening by degrees
 Up to the dwarf that tops the pinnacle.
 Upon the board he lays the sky-blue stone
 With its rich freight; their number he proclaims;
 Tells from what pool the noblest had been dragged . . .
 A splendid sight, together thus exposed;
 Dead—but not sullied or deformed by death. . . .

(VIII. 544-70)

If it seems churlish to describe this passage as being comparatively about nothing, it is the case too that the scene at the parsonage is an aperture onto everyday life or what the poem, amid the arguments and speechifying, has registered from a different angle in its very *duree*. To call the scene (and its tense shift) a reckoning is probably a little strong. But the parsonage scene is, at the very least, a symptom, coming not just late in the poem, but in the wake, more importantly, of the numerous epitaphs in Books V, VI and VII,

where the "solid facts" of human life (or lives), independent of any "abstractions" they may serve (V. 637), give additional access to a "reality" that has been invoked procedurally—and in that sense purposively—more than to any purpose or goal.

The epitaphs are summoned specifically by the Wanderer to lend substance and "solid[ity]" to what has been a war of ideas or abstractions, ignoring, in effect, the "war's" facticity as such: both as an ongoing event to which the reader has been exposed in a poem written (for all practical purposes) to the moment, and as the discursive complement to lives that, however framed by the Pastor in partnership with Wanderer, align with the purposiveness of the poem in focalizing reality of a different kind. Nor is it a coincidence that these are literally buried lives, figuring a world that, as Blanchot or Cavell might describe it, is by definition "missable" (*Philosophy* 25). Bearing no record apart from the oral transmission that is doggedly transcribed (and experienced as such), the lives of the dales-people, particularly as narrated, register an investment in what Hartman, speaking of Wordsworth, has called the "unremarkable," which remains "closely linked" to "experience" that is "immediate if repeated" (*Unremarkable* 211).

The scene at the parsonage, where the tense shifts unexpectedly to the present, is an attempt to separate immediacy and repetition and to make the unremarkable remarkable as something visible as if for the first time. But in the churchyard books, which precede that scene, the "scattered subjects" (V. 935) are unremarkable in various ways: beginning with the use to which they are put as *exempla*, which is often largely descriptive rather than didactic, and in their passage, generally, to un-remarkability, where even individual character is an accelerant and where "immediacy," here as elsewhere in the poem, is more about bearing witness to the accounts or simply being there. This configuration is slightly different from the one that Hartman explores, where immediacy and repetition combine both to suture but ultimately to disarticulate the unremarkable as something more like the "un-remarkable." And it differs as well from Alison Hickey's related sense of the *exempla* as "plots of deviation and deferral" that continually "enact the inevitable temporality of experience" (74). For in Books VI and VII, the continuous slide to un-remarkability—or from disinterment to reinterment—opens onto a stratum of experience to which the poem turns (these are lives after all) but also turns away in a reminder of the way ordinary life is buried life and missable by definition.

The task of bearing witness in the churchyard turns out paradoxically to be less a quest for the deceased in some individuated, exemplary form, or for "objects" (as Hickey describes them) "on which a reductive narrative machinery can express itself" (103), which the Pastor both undertakes and often satisfies, than a "quest" for the "ordinary," where amid his recollections and resurrections, the immediacy of the moment is met, just fleetingly, by the immediacy of a

remembered past. These latter details—involving everyday life (or lives)—come mostly by accident or by “transient observation” (7. 934) in contrast to the dissection of character, which is not just a generic matter but a matter curiously distinct from epitaph—the term commonly applied to these accounts—where, as Wordsworth famously cautions in his essay on the subject, the epitaphist should refrain from anatomizing “the internal frame of mind” (452). And so what the Pastor performs—amid the repetition of exhumation and reburial—is more a series of obsequies where private lives are open momentarily to view and to public or religious discourse. The Pastor may or may not be doing it wrong in contravention of the directives in the essay, which were in any case contemporaneous. Still, there is clearly a distinction in these books between the “sober and . . . reflective act” (454) that Wordsworth explicitly extols in his essay and what, borrowing from that same document, is very much a “dissect[ion] . . . by the side of the grave” (452).

The “picture from the living” (V. 670) with which the Pastor begins turns out to be paradigmatic in a different way, then, refraining both from “anatomy” and from the palliatives of faith, whether for the subject in life (or at the end of life) or for the Solitary prospectively, whose despondency remains front and center. More about “living,” in fact, rather than about the lives they led, the inaugural description of “the wedded pair in childless solitude” (V. 692) is strangely errant, focusing chiefly on the “intermingled work of house and field” (V. 709) and thanks to the Wanderer, who turns out to have been the beneficiary of their hospitality at one point, ordinary leisure:

Hospitable fare,
Frank conversation, made the evening’s treat:
Need a bewildered traveler wish for more?
But more was given; I studied as we sate
By the bright fire, the good man’s form and face
Not less than beautiful; an open brow
Of undisturbed humanity; a cheek
Suffused with something of a feminine hue;
Eyes beaming courtesy and mild regard;
But in the quicker turns of discourse,
Expression slowly varying, that evinced
A tardy apprehension.

(V. 775-86)

Like the scene at the parsonage later, this moment of virtually stopped or slow time is both consistent with the experience of *The Excursion* as a readable/audible event in close to real time and, in a remarkable instant of reflexivity, even slower than the poem, opening onto a space or stratum to which the dales-man’s “tardy apprehension” gives access in lieu of a response.

Something similar is at issue in the tedium overall, which involves, as boredom always does, a hyper-mindfulness of the surround that the poem-as-debate sweeps by as the

necessary cause of that attention to begin with. Consequently, when the Wanderer turns once more to the “good man’s” wife and to the practice of everyday life as he remembers her describing it to him (in a rather unbelievable feat of recovery), he not only exposes what is mostly hidden or available only synecdochically in the “epitaphs” that ensue, where lives are typically narrated and mined rather than distended or described in scenes like the one above; he also exposes what *The Excursion* simultaneously turns toward, and turns the reader toward, in imitation of the matron who, insofar as she is living, is an example as well of someone thinking:

All day long the house-clock ticking in mine ear,
The cackling hen, the tender chicken brood,
And the wild birds that gather round my porch.
This honest sheep dog’s countenance I read;
With him can talk; nor blush to waste a word
On creatures less intelligent and shrewd.
And if the blustering win that drives the clouds
Care not for me, he lingers round my door,
And makes me pastime when our tempers suit;—
But above all my thoughts are my support,
My comfort. . . .

(V. 814-24)

The matron goes on to wish for thoughts more in accordance with the positions and sentiments of the Pastor and Wanderer: specifically those by her “Redeemer taught” (826). But what her resourcefulness as a thinker underscores—and as a secular thinker “above all”—is an attention not necessarily to her environment as such but to something in the surround that, in Heidegger’s description, “concerns and touches [her] in the surely mysterious way of escaping her by withdrawal” (*BW* 350). The narrator goes through something similar in Book I, when, at the end of the Wanderer’s recitation on Margaret, he “turn[s] aside in weakness,” reviewing “that Woman’s sufferings” before turning or “returning” to the cottage and to the “secret spirit of humanity . . . which still survived” (I. 919-30). The secrecy of this humanity is linked obviously to its palpable absence. However, it also points to something elusive and present that neither the pathos of Margaret’s life nor the Wanderer’s moralizing upon it, where the “passing shows of Being” are “an idle dream” (I. 951-52), can get at, and from which the Wanderer’s faith is explicitly “a turn[ing] away” (I. 955). It is this secreted “life,” then, that thinking “above all” involves in *The Excursion*, either as something “veiled” and “buried” or as a turning, in Heidegger’s further description, toward what “turns away” (350). And it is a process, an excavation, that the churchyard books perform in what amounts to a secondary disinterment, where, with the matron and her husband as a baseline, “human life” is routinely “put forward,” as what Lyotard (in a slightly different context) has called “the missing parts.”³

These parts bear little relation, if any, to the “parts” of person’s character that Wordsworth, in the essay “Upon Epi-

taphs," charges the epitaph writer to present in making that person "appear more dignified and lovely" and as "truth," paradoxically, "of the highest order" (452). However, in addition to steering clear of those incursions or "discriminations" that the Pastor routinely practices in seeming disregard of the advice in the essay, the "missing parts" serve at least one epitaphical function, according to Wordsworth: they are "points . . . wherein all men resemble each other" (453). Often these points are irretrievable or secreted in the way that Margaret's are and that only the materiality of her cottage manages to retrieve from tragic narrative. This secreting is particularly evident in the account of the wet nurse Ellen (6. 831-1052), whose rapid demise amid feelings of guilt and unworthiness in the wake of being abandoned by a lover and then abandoning her own infant who subsequently dies, is not only likened to Margaret's story but fails notably to incite the milder interest that the site of Margaret's "life," however ruined, instills. By contrast, the account of the widower-father that follows (VI. 1115-91) segues quickly from the maternal grave to the surviving daughters: both as surrogates for the deceased as well as for sons never born, and importantly as individuals, whose pleasure in the garden that each cultivates "for her own flowers and favorite herbs" (VI. 1163) literally calls a halt to a story of melancholy endurance where life is otherwise taken from the living. This pattern of disclosure continues in the lengthy account of the disappointed priest, which shifts from a narrative marked by winnowing expectations and continued frustration to the thinkable life of domesticity, where in focalizing "a fair carpet, woven of homespun wool / But tintured daintily with florid hues, / For seemliness and warmth" (VII. 186-88) the Pastor and the poem mysteriously trade one timeline and accompanying mimesis for another.

The term frequently employed with reference to these "points," where character fades and where men resemble each other in circumstances that are mostly practical and material rather than personal or internal, is "mild" or "milder," in the "milder interest" that the cottage provokes in Book I and in the "milder worth" of the deaf dales-man, whose disability licenses a "secret" world, where silence or inaudibility is "interesting" because, like the secret spirit of humanity in Book I, it is more properly an auditory veil:

The bird of dawn

Did never rouse this Cottager from sleep
With startling summons; not for his delight
The vernal cuckoo shouted; not for him
Murmured the laboring bee.

(VII. 405-409)

This nature is very different from the "essential reality" that Jonathan Wordsworth summons in his reading of *The Ruined Cottage*. Less about the ultimate scheme of things and more about something milder to which the poem slows by exercise of a faculty where men typically resemble each other, nature figures an ordinary that, for the dales-man somewhat repre-

sentatively, is also thinkable and perennially a goal. The same might be said of *The Excursion* overall, where the ordinary is secreted in the use to which human life, beginning with Margaret, is typically put by one spokesman or another, but is the result as well of a repression where the repressed—what returns willy-nilly in the figure in the priest's carpet—is linked to a mindfulness, a desire even, that the repressive elements, and the boredom they invoke, paradoxically instill. The dales-man has overdeveloped faculties—chiefly those of sight and touch—to compensate for the lack of hearing. And while it may be too much to make this claim for the effect of boredom in the poem, which is an overdeveloped faculty of sorts in the awareness (or awarenesses) it both facilitates and consists with, the status of *The Excursion* as a readable/audible event in and over time provides room—and a good deal of it—perceptual maneuver, involving details (including people) that are mostly circumstantial and easy enough to miss.⁴ "If sleep," writes Walter Benjamin, "is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation" and, in a rather extravagant figure, "the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience" (III: 149). It is this "experience," then, the buried or missing or secreted experience to which the experience of the poem leads, that defines and circumscribes the "reality" of *The Excursion* and, further, its essential reality. There is a metaphysical reality here as well of course, or the prospect of one, encapsulated in the Wanderer's assertion (in response to the Solitary) "that the procession of our fate, howe'er / Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being / Of infinite benevolence and power" (4. 13-15). But if this is a reality, or just the Wanderer's reality in contrast to the proverbial "dream" of life, it is also a coping mechanism or "support" where "human life" is reduced to "mortal life" and where "calamit[y]" takes precedence over what is "milder," close at hand and always incubating, to borrow Benjamin's figure, in the *duree* of the poem.

Calamity plays a big part in *The Excursion* as well: for the Solitary, first, whose disappointments are both private and public, and for many of the dead in the churchyard who had suffered calamity either directly or indirectly. But equally striking is the milder, even microscopic, interest—marked occasionally by a tense shift to the present—that these narratives generate as memorials to living. There is the recollection, for example, of the soon-to-be-deceased toddler, "catching at some novelty of spring, / Ground-flower, or glossy insect from its cell / Drawn by the sunshine" (7. 680-82) and the brief vignette of the boys-to-men "all in bright attire / And graced with shining weapons," who "weekly marched" to a "central spot" to learn "the rudiments of war" in what proved (absent any invasion) to be a "festival of unencumbered ease" (VII.766-79). These are fugitive moments in an otherwise "long" *duree* that threatens to absorb them, or would absorb them were it not so visceral and so tedious an experience. For, following Sir Alfred Irthing, who, the Pastor fantasizes, was drawn to "this vale" in Elizabethan times by "transient observation," the particular hold that *The Excursion* ultimately exerts—possibly the only hold—

involves the respite from “service” (VII. 931) or, in this case, “discourse” that its essential reality provides.

NOTES

¹References to *The Ruined Cottage* are to the text in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*. All other references are to the texts in *The Poetical Works William Wordsworth: “The Excursion,” “The Recluse Part I Book I.”*

²For the role of the reader and of reading in the poem see my discussions in “‘Imperfect While Unshared’: The Role of the Implied Reader in Wordsworth’s *Excursion*” and in *Revision and Authority in Wordsworth*. See also Sally Bushell, *Re-Reading The Excursion*.

³Lyotard uses the term in reference to Kant’s notion of the sublime and to certain ideas “of which no representation is possible,” which Lyotard also sees a blueprint for the “postmodern condition.” In modernism, by contrast, the “unpresentable” is “put forward as the missing parts . . . offer[ing] to the reader”—and for my purposes the reader of *The Excursion*—“matter for solace and pleasure” and, I would further add, thought (*Postmodern* 78-81).

⁴For a discussion of how “oppositional” elements in a given text or narrative operate as a type of resistance to a manifest purpose or intention, see Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver*.

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