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### Wordsworth, Ruins, and the Dialectics of Melancholia

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WORDSWORTH, RUINS, AND THE DIALECTICS OF MELANCHOLIA

by

Colin Mark Dekeersgieter

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York.

2014

This document has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

WORDSWORTH, RUINS, AND THE DIALECTICS OF MELANCHOLIA

by

Colin Dekeersgieter

Advisor: Professor Richard Kaye

The concept of melancholia as it pertains to Romantic poets is often relegated to its simpler meaning of *gloomy* or *depressed*. This work provides an analysis of the motifs of melancholia in the work William Wordsworth as an allegory of the artist's relationship to their art. I am interested in melancholia as the tension between the melancholic's acute awareness of his temporal actuality and the grave desire for transcendence as a poet. Operating within this dialectic fractures Wordsworth's interiority as he struggles to ground himself in both realms. This dialectic is most often reconciled when the poet finds a way to assimilate within the liminal space between these two realms. The possibility of this assimilation is symbolized in the lasting vestiges of humanity within nature: Ruins.

## Table of Contents

	Page
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTERS	
1    Melancholia and The Poetical Commonwealth.....	8
2    Melancholia’s Visionary Gleam.....	20
3    The Human Ruin.....	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	56

## Abbreviations

KL	<i>Keats's Collected Letters</i>
MW	<i>Wordsworth's Major Works</i>
WFL	<i>Wordsworth Family Letter</i>

*Ruin is always over-stated; it is part of the ruin-drama staged perpetually in the human imagination, half of whose desire is to build up, while the other half smashes and levels to the earth.*

—Rose Macaulay

## Introduction

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Throughout history, melancholia has undergone a persistent shift in classification. Hippocrates was the first to develop melancholia into a medical theory, asserting that it was brought on by a humoral imbalance of *black bile*, leading to erratic shifts in temperament.<sup>1</sup> Adopting Hippocrates's humoral pathology and Plato's legitimization of divine madness, Aristotle initiated the association of melancholia with extraordinary traits and literary genius.<sup>2</sup> Pseudo-scientific diagnostics of melancholia reached an apex in Robert Burton's (1577-1640) *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621): through personal digression and medical doctrine, Burton's work renders melancholia an unavoidable state inherent in the human condition.

We call him Melancholy [who] is dull, sad, sowre, lumpish, ill disposed, solitary, any way moved or displeased. And from these melancholy dispositions, no man living is free, no stoic none so wise, none so happy, none so patient, so generous, so godly, so divine, that can vindicate himself, so well composed, but more or less

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<sup>1</sup> The word *melancholia* comes from the Greek *melaina chole*, which translates to 'black bile.'

<sup>2</sup> Plato writes, '[I]f it were simply the case that madness is something bad, it would be beautifully said; but as things are, the greatest of good things come into being for us through madness, when, that it, it is given with a divine giving' (Plato 244a-244b). Hippocrates believes the humor associated with melancholia is highly erratic, shifting randomly from hot to cold bile. According

<sup>2</sup> Plato writes, '[I]f it were simply the case that madness is something bad, it would be beautifully said; but as things are, the greatest of good things come into being for us through madness, when, that it, it is given with a divine giving' (Plato 244a-244b). Hippocrates believes the humor associated with melancholia is highly erratic, shifting randomly from hot to cold bile. According to Aristotle, cold black bile leaves people 'sluggish and stupid', but those affected by hot black bile, 'being near the location of the intelligence, are affected by diseases of madness or inspiration, whence come Sibyls and Bakides and all the inspired persons' (287). Aristotle's first example of melancholic greatness is Hercules (Heracles), whose epilepsy was named the 'sacred disease' because of its relation to melancholia. He goes on to state, 'Now in later times, of the well known [melancholic] people there are Empedocles, Plato, Socrates, and many others. Further, there are most of those connected to poetry' (279).

some time or other, he feels the smart of it. Melancholy in this sense is the character of mortality. (104)

The Aristotelian link to genius and Burton's proclaimed ubiquity of melancholia continued into the eighteenth century, where it became not only a fashionable disposition for the poet who desired its lauded sensibility, but a prevalent mood among the general population as well. 'Whether attributed to their cold and foggy climate, the coal-smoke of their cities, their excessive consumption of meat and ale, the severity of their Protestant sects, or the systematic rigor of their empirical sciences, melancholy was viewed as a distinguishing feature of the English nation' (Gidal 24). There is little critical theory that avoids relegating William Wordsworth's melancholia to this generalized sense of the term. The majority of the literature that considers Wordsworth and melancholia primarily focus on his personal bouts with the ancient disease, thereby deeming this pervading theme a sense of somber nostalgia rooted in the unobtainable bliss of youth. This approach to Wordsworth and melancholia avoids the most demanding and difficult matter, which is taken up here: it is Wordsworth's melancholia that allows him access to both heightened sense and sensibilities and is therefore the driving force behind his pronounced skill as a poet. The notions of melancholia examined throughout this work pertain specifically to this type of dialectical melancholia and not necessarily to Wordsworth's personal bouts with nostalgia, depression, or despair. In examining Wordsworth and the dialectics of melancholia, this work aims to locate the manner in which he is able to reconcile the dialectic through the art and practice of poetry in order to begin to answer

Aristotle's question: 'Why is it that all those men who have become extraordinary in...poetry are obviously melancholic?'<sup>3</sup>

Wordsworth's melancholia manifests itself in enigmatic terms that are enshrouded in metaphysical slippage; it is likely because of this slippage that scholars tend to focus on Wordsworth's direct referencing of melancholia in order to explicate their understanding of the disease. Some have attempted to break away from this limited type of reading. In *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (1987), Geoffrey Hartman is correct in stating very simply that the root of Wordsworth's work that appears melancholic is not necessarily the sense of nostalgia I have mentioned, but rather the link between melancholia and the imagination (141). This link is of the utmost importance, as it will come to bear that melancholia and the poetic imagination are at times indivisible. But where Hartman falters is in his inability to avoid thrusting Wordsworth into the tradition of Romantic poets that, afflicted with gloom and depression, sought Nature as a remedy to this type of melancholia. In *Wordsworth, The Sense of History* (1989) Alan Liu discusses the manner in which Nature is both Mother and vengeful God, and therefore the impetus for the very dread Wordsworth seeks to avoid. This paradox, where Nature is both remedy and bane, is only one of the primary elements in Wordsworth's melancholia. What has yet to be addressed in the literature and is the primary focus herein, is how Wordsworth manages to reconcile the many paradoxes of melancholia that have haunted his life and work. It is my belief that it is not nature that provides Wordsworth with a means to reconciliation but rather the constant presence of ruins in his poetry.

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle asks this in the opening paragraph of *Problems* 30.1, in his chapter on 'Problems Connected With Intelligence, Understanding, and Wisdom.'

During his 1818 *Lectures on the English Poets* at Surrey University, William Hazlitt (1778-1839) stated that Wordsworth ‘sees nothing but himself and the universe’ (323). And in his essay collection *Table Talk* (1821) he writes, ‘[Wordsworth] lives in the busy solitude of his own heart; in the deep silence of thought.... He is the greatest, that is the most original poet of the present day, only because he is the greatest egoist’ (37). Wordsworth's intense egotism is one of the primary contributing factors to his melancholia, and no one provides a better framework for Wordsworth's egotism than John Keats (1785-1821). Keats attended almost every one of Hazlitt’s Surrey lectures, using them to formulate many of his poetic theories.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the lectures, Keats was as drawn to Wordsworth as he was to his critical master. But Hazlitt’s lectures came to change Keats’s understanding and appreciation of Wordsworth, leading him to label Wordsworth the poet of the egotistical sublime.

Keats’s understanding of Hazlitt resulted in a view of the external world that he would claim to be antithetical to Wordsworth’s. Wordsworth’s understanding of the force of nature was adopted from the English legacy espoused by both Burton and Thomas More, in which the state of nature was, or could be, set in direct correlation with the state of humanity. For Keats—though deeply affected by Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*—any conception of nature as a mirror to the human condition or having any moral influence on humanity would be considered absurd. Keats’s nature was, in the vein of Thomas Burnet, an indifferent and ‘eternal fierce destruction’;<sup>5</sup> nature had only an aesthetic value, not one whose real or metaphorical status

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<sup>4</sup> It was Hazlitt’s lecture ‘On Shakespeare and Milton’ that led to Keats’s notion of negative capability, perhaps his most famous theory.

<sup>5</sup> After spending the day by the sea Keats writes, ‘I saw too distinct into the core / Of an eternal fierce destruction, / And so from happiness I far was gone. / Still am I sick of it, and though, to-

affected the morality of mankind. ‘Only rarely does “nature” have any meaning beyond that of the out-of-doors world external to man and man’s culture.... The refreshment that nature provides [Keats] is a result of its beauty, peace, and solitude, and not a result of the fact nature is our “nurse, guide, and guardian,” as Wordsworth finds it in “Tintern Abbey” (Haworth 1). Keats believed that descriptions of nature should involve a perception of the object *in itself* that nullifies the poet’s personality through the attempt at inhabiting the subjectivity of that object. ‘A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity—he is continually in for and filling some other body’ (KL 195). This is Keats’s notion of the chameleon poet, which leads to an aesthetic in direct contrast to his understanding of the Wordsworthian experience of transcendence. Wordsworth’s transcendence was more akin to a typical Christian union with the Absolute. Keats’s vision does not near Wordsworth’s poetic power as far as actual transcendence is concerned; and it seems that Keats generally took the egotistical sublime for granted, overlooking the inherent paradox that Hazlitt expressed in *Table-Talk*:

With the passions, the pursuits, and imaginations of other men he [Wordsworth] does not profess to sympathise [sic], but 'finds tongues in the trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.' With a mind averse from outward objects, but ever intent upon its own workings, he hangs a weight of thought and feeling upon every trifling circumstance connected with his past history.... It is this power of habitual sentiment, or of transferring the interest of our conscious existence to whatever gently solicits attention...that is the striking

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day, / I've gathered young spring-leaves, and flowers gay / Or periwinkle and wild strawberry, / Still do I that most fierce destruction see' (*Dear Reynolds, as last night I lay in bed* 96-102).

feature in Mr. Wordsworth's mind and poetry.... *His strength, as it so often happens, arises from the excess of his weakness.* (44-45 [italics mine])

Wordsworth's egotistical sublime, his almost perpetual regress into the self through the inward eye, not only makes his poetry original and situates it within the canon, but also initiates an intense poetic gaze that seems to seek ascension into a spiritual world, or at least in to something preternatural. The egotistical sublime is a means to heightened poetic sensibility, however if it ran its course entirely (that is if Wordsworth fully regressed into himself) he would be unable to differentiate himself from an other through his sense perception of the external world. This is the 'power [of creation] so antithetical that it could tear the poet loose from nature and take him into a world of his own, restituting him for the defense of self-isolation by isolating him yet more sublimely' (Bloom, *Poetry and Repression* 76). Unlike Hazlitt's statement, Wordsworth's poetry never consists entirely of nature or internal reminiscence; in fact it is contingent upon humanity because it is in the face to face with the human—or the reminder of humanity that is left throughout the English landscape in the form of ruins—that Wordsworth is able to tear himself from the form of egotistical sublimity that would 'tear him loose from nature' and rob him of his perception. This is undoubtedly a type of death, particularly for the poet whose entire livelihood is reliant upon proper sight and poetic sensibility.

Just as Keats professes the ability to inhabit forms of nature, Wordsworth's ability—and perhaps desire—to regress into the egotistical sublime is done in order to transcend and render in verse a state of incarnational or immortal poetics that, having merged so fully with nature, would attain its permanence. But in striving for realms beyond the temporal, Wordsworth is in danger of the annihilation of self and the convergence with utter sublimity that leaves behind both nature

and humanity. This yearning for the transcendent, while utterly aware of humankind's mortality, is the most pronounced and profound form of melancholia. The reconciliation of this dialectics of melancholia, this duality, is found when one is able to operate in the liminal realm between temporality and transcendence. This ability is figured in the final chapter on the incarnate Human Ruin.

## Melancholia and the Poetical Commonwealth

*I will yet, to satisfy and please myself, make an Utopia  
of mine own, a new Atlantis, a poetical commonwealth.*

-Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

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As far back as the earliest vegetation myths, cultures have conflated the state of the natural world with societal well-being. Perhaps because of their lasting fixation on melancholia, many British writers carried this theory into England's early modern era. Robert Burton dedicates a substantial portion of his *Anatomy of Melancholy* to the civics of what he calls a 'poetical commonwealth,' a utopian ideal that through civic engineering would have melancholia eradicated from the human condition. While Burton's utopia includes reform in every aspect of social life, including education, economics, and religion, he is particularly preoccupied with the need to reform the English landscape:

I will have no bogs, fens, marshes, vast woods, deserts, heaths, commons, but all enclosed; (yet not depopulated, and therefore take heed you mistake me not) for that which is common, and every man's, is no man's.... I will not have a barren acre in all my territories, not so much as the tops of mountains: where nature fails, it shall be supplied by art: lakes and rivers shall not be left desolate. All common highways, bridges, banks, corrivations of waters, aqueducts, channels, public works, buildings, &c. out of a common stock, curiously maintained and kept in repair; no depopulations, engrossings, alterations of wood, arable, but by the consent of some supervisors that shall be appointed for that purpose, to see what reformation ought to be had in all places, what is amiss, how to help it. (74)

This pressure Burton places on the importance of environment is due to the belief that, following the myths of postlapsarian Genesis, it is human iniquity that has led to the rough, sometimes uninhabitable terrains of the world. In Book X of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, following Adam and Eve's disobedience, God's angels are set to task to realign the stars and planets to 'shine / As might affect the Earth with cold and heat / scarce tolerable' (652-54) resulting in 'change on sea and land, sidereal blast, / Vapor and mist and exhalation hot / Corrupt and pestilent' (693-95).<sup>6</sup> It is the fallen state of humanity that produced climates that are, as Burton writes in his section titled 'Bar Air, a Cause of Melancholy', 'hot and dry, thick, fuliginous, cloudy, [and] blustering' (1: 149) that in turn subjugate the populace and the body politic to corruption. This vicious cycle is again echoed in Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1690): 'and this *Decorum* seems to be observ'd, that Nature doth not fall into Disorder till Mankind be first degenerate and leads the way' (182).

Burnet's original Earth, which he continuously laments, was a largely featureless sphere of perfect symmetry and proportion. His theological rebuke of the asymmetry of the world, the mountains, tarns, and bogs that mar the once glassy earth, is wrapped in a paradox that symbolizes another important dialectic of Romantic melancholia: Burnet, a judicious aesthete of symmetry, was haunted by an incongruous obsession with the majesty and beauty of nature that, like Burton, drove him into deep episodes of melancholia. 'Wherever we look among [Burnet's] passages on wild nature, we find conflict between intellectual condemnation of asymmetry and emotional response to the attraction of the vast' (Nicolson 213). Conflicts like these form the

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle writes, 'But we prefer to treat what we've been discussing from the beginning, that in nature already such a humor—the melancholic [or black bile]—is mixed: it is a mixture of hot and cold; for its nature consists of these two things. And this is why black bile becomes very hot and very cold' (*Prob.* XXX.I, 285). Melancholia, then, is an inescapable aspect of the human condition, affecting some greater (geniuses, as Aristotle contends), and some less.

basis of the melancholia herein, figured not necessarily as any sadness but rather by contradictions, which the sufferer cannot seem to reconcile in the mind. There are many altering views throughout Romanticism regarding the nature of the world and man, but they almost always bring us back to this dialectics of melancholia: desire for perfection and transcendence figured as union with the absolute is always established within and by a Nature whose very sublimity is one of imperfection and postlapsarian temporality. Burnet would find the answer to his internal conflict in Malthus, who writes:

The infinite variety of the forms and operations of nature, besides tending immediately to awaken and improve the mind by the variety of impressions that it creates, opens other fertile sources of improvement, by offering so wide and extensive a field for investigation and research. Uniform, undiversified perfection, could not possess the same awakening power. (152)

Unlike Burnet, who saw nature as a perpetual reminder of a postlapsarian condition, Wordsworth's appreciation of natural objects is Malthusian; Wordsworth's expressed indebtedness to nature and its 'awakening power' was due to the fact that 'To him every natural object seemed to possess more or less of a moral or spiritual life, to be capable of companionship with man' (Pater 130). But Wordsworth hadn't always sought nature for moral and spiritual value, and only came back to it after his life in politics would founder.

In 1790, Wordsworth visited France in the early stages of the French Revolution; he returned from 1791-92 where he was involved in its crucial development. This period of his life takes up books IX-XI in *The Prelude* (1850) and signifies the primary moment of 'The Growth

of the Poet's Mind.'<sup>7</sup> As he implies in *The Prelude* it was this very involvement in politics that led him to consider a career in poetry in the first place. The early days of the revolution represented for Wordsworth, and most of Europe, the coming of a 'human nature...born again' that 'was felt, no doubt, / Among the bowers of Paradise itself' (X, 704-5). Following the execution of Robespierre,<sup>8</sup> Wordsworth's feelings of dejection surrounding the foundering revolution ceased, and he saw again the potential of a poetical commonwealth. In book of XI, the utopic stars seem to be aligning and the possibility of society mirroring Nature is full-fledged:

From that time forth, Authority in France  
Put on a milder face; Terror had ceased  
Yet everything was wanting that might give  
Courage to them who looked for good by light  
Of rational Experience, for the shoots  
And hopeful blossoms of a second spring:  
Yet, in me, confidence was unimpaired....

Youth maintains,  
*In all conditions of society,  
Communion more direct and intimate  
With Nature,—hence, oftentimes, with reason too—  
Than age or manhood, even. To Nature, then,  
Power had reverted: habit, custom, law,  
Had left an interregnum's open space  
For 'her' to move about in, uncontrolled.*  
(XI, 1-34 [italics mine])

This movement of and toward natural law led Wordsworth to believe that a complete reconstitution of the human condition, figured in the promising nascent stage of the French Revolution, would result in a communal Paradise found not in a transcendent realm but rather on Earth:

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<sup>7</sup> This is the alternate title to *The Prelude*.

<sup>8</sup> Wordsworth learns of Robespierre's death while gazing upon a 'dilapidated structure, / a Romish chapel' (X, 558-59).

Not in Utopia,--subterranean fields,--  
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!  
But in the very world, which is the world  
Of all of us,--the place where, in the end,  
We find our happiness, or not at all!  
(XI, 140-44)

The dream was never realized. Wordsworth soon recognized that the Revolution, which had strayed greatly from its initial mission, would not spread to England without war. Fearing the label of traitor, Wordsworth abandons his political aspirations, and returns home with the expressed purpose of becoming a poet. After the disappointment of the French Revolution's sudden changes, nature became the most comforting feature of his life, believing he could turn to it until old age had stripped him of his poetic faculties and sensibility. This removal from political life did not mean Wordsworth had gone beyond political discourse in his poetry. In fact, an implicit political strain continues throughout. Perhaps this abandonment of the explicitly political strain was due to the fear of persecution during The Reign of Terror, but more than likely it was due to his discovered belief in the futility and vanity of political motivations that lacked the spirituality and morality he sought. When Wordsworth returns to England he creates his own poetical commonwealth—his own heaven on earth—through visionary and revolutionary poetry.

Returning to his home near Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), Wordsworth and Coleridge set out to write *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798), of which the primary project is a democratic leveling. Wordsworth writes in the 1802 preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*:

The principal object...proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men...and, further, and

above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature...because in that condition of [Humble and rustic] life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity.... and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (*MW* 596-97)

Unable to find his utopia in the French Revolution—which had promise of placing humanity in ‘The bowers of Paradise’—Wordsworth seeks one through the poetic conflation of human life with ‘the primary laws of our nature.’ But this desire to locate a transcendent moral, spiritual, or poetic capacity that operates outside and above material existence can only be attempted through the use of those very materials, resulting in a melancholia that perpetuates itself through this very aspiration. (Shelley seems correct in stating that ‘man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave.’)<sup>9</sup> Within the Romantic tradition, this dialectic of melancholia is manifested most within the allegory of the ruins strewn across and integrated with the English landscape as a result of King Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries.<sup>10</sup>

Between the years of 1534 and 1541, the Dissolution of the Monasteries left over 800 monasteries, abbeys, and convents ransacked and abandoned, setting in motion the extensive ruination that would come to exemplify England's countryside. The transformation of these houses of God into ruins resulted in a series of paradoxes that would become exemplary of England's ethos and a primary subject for British writers. This is mostly due to the political and emotional heft ruins maintain due to their inherent relationship with history.

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<sup>9</sup> ‘A Defence of Poetry’ (635).

<sup>10</sup> ‘The 18<sup>th</sup> century represents the climax of the widespread interest in ruins, now seen essentially as elements of a landscape rather than as architecture, and the romantic approach prevails’ (Zucker 122).

The paradox of eighteenth-century ruin was that the figure of decay was at the same time the image used to authorize England's autonomy as a world power....

The authority of antiquity was one thread in the fabric of common nationality, and was visibly available in architectural ruin, the physical trace of historical event in the countryside. (Janowitz 2-3)

For Theodor Adorno it is this connection to a tangible cultural history delineating the progression of England into a world power that creates the ruins of Romanticism as an object of aesthetic beauty. The 'cultural landscape' becomes the very basis of beauty, one that—echoing Malthus—is felt only through the travails of history.

[P]erhaps the most profound force of resistance stored in the cultural landscape is the expression of history that is compelling, aesthetically, because it is etched by the real suffering of the past. The cultural landscape, which resembles a ruin even when the houses still stand, embodies a wailful lament that has since fallen mute....*Without historical remembrance there would be no beauty....* Wherever nature was not actually mastered, the image of its untamed condition terrified.

This explains the strange predilection of earlier centuries for symmetrical arrangements of nature. (Adorno 64-65 [italics mine])

Ruins become not only political symbols of life and death, of past, present, and future but also man made constructions that assert a mastering over nature necessary for the appreciation of its often terrifying aspect; their aesthetic appeal is due to their declaration of humanity within the vastness of nature. Walter Benjamin states this in his chapter 'Allegory and Trauerspiel'<sup>11</sup> from

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<sup>11</sup> Translated as 'play of mourning,' *trauerspiel* is a direct allusion to Sigmund Freud's 'work of mourning' in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917).

*The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928): ‘The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the forms of ruin’ (177). For Benjamin, the aesthetic beauty of ruins lies in their transition from ‘material content into truth content’ (182), which is the movement from symbol to allegory; objects are rendered beautiful under the ‘gaze of melancholy’ because ‘the only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory’ (185). Since ‘it is by virtue of a strange combination of nature and history that the allegorical mode of expression is born’ (167), ruins become ultimate allegory as they represent the confluence of history, represented as man made forms, with organic history. Because ruins are ‘the home of saturnine beasts’ (179), they become the primary and most immediate metaphorical vehicle for the melancholic’s fixation with the union of humanity and nature.<sup>12</sup>

This fixation often results in the use of misguided allegorical appropriation in a figurative attempt at mastering nature. Early models of this are found in many poems of *The Lyrical Ballads*. In ‘The Nightingale’, one of Coleridge’s contributions to the collection, the nightingales are inherently not melancholic, as they’re a part of the natural world. They are only transformed into melancholic birds by the poet’s very mention of them. It is the strain of myth (primarily of Philomela) and poetic philology that asserts the melancholia. In ‘The Nightingale’ the poet, himself a melancholic,<sup>13</sup> ignores the forewarning to sing of natural beauty so that he might align

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<sup>12</sup> In humoral cosmology, the melancholic’s planet is Saturn.

<sup>13</sup> Coleridge writes in the footnote to the poem, “‘Most musical, most melancholy.’” This passage in Milton possesses an excellence far superior to that of mere description: *it is spoken in the character of the melancholy Man*, and has therefore a dramatic propriety. The Author makes this remark, to rescue himself from the charge of having alluded with levity to a line in Milton: a charge than which none could be more painful to him, except perhaps that of having ridiculed his Bible’ (Italics mine).

his poetics with nature's properties and 'share in nature's immortality.' Wordsworth writes in a letter to John Wilson:

[A] great Poet ought to do more than [write according to human nature]; he ought to a certain degree to rectify men's feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, *to render their feelings more sane, pure and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving Spirit of things....* I may illustrate this by a reference to natural objects. What false notions have prevailed from generation to generation as to the true character of the nightingale. As far as my Friend's Poem in the Lyrical Ballads is read, it will contribute greatly to rectify these. (*WFL* 268 [italics mine])

'But 'twill not be so,' the true character of the nightingale is not rectified, and the poet does not create a poem 'more consonant to nature.' Instead, the poet mistakenly takes the nightingales' proximity to a ruin as a clear sign of their melancholic and therefore allegorical significance.

And hark! the Nightingale begins its song  
"Most musical, most melancholy" Bird!  
A melancholy Bird? O idle thought!  
In nature there is nothing melancholy.  
—But some night wandering Man, whose heart was pierc'd  
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,  
Or slow distemper or neglected love,  
    ...he and such as he  
First named these notes a melancholy strain:  
And many a poet echoes the conceit;  
Poet, who hath been building up the rhyme  
When he had better far have stretch'd his limbs  
Beside a 'brook in mossy forest-dell  
By sun or moonlight, to the influxes  
Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements  
Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song  
And of his fame forgetful! so his fame  
Should share in nature's immortality,  
A venerable thing! *and so his song*

*Should make all nature lovelier, and itself  
Be lov'd, like nature!—But 'twill not be so;*

.....  
I know a grove  
Of large extent, hard by a castle huge  
Which the great lord inhabits not: and so  
This grove is wild with tangling underwood,  
And the trim walks are broken up, and grass,  
Thin grass and king-cups grow within the paths.  
But never elsewhere in one place I knew  
So many Nightingales.

(12-56 [italics mine])

In ignoring nature and subjecting an inauthentic trait onto it, the poet's fame will be forgetful, for he has not traced the primary laws of nature and will therefore be thrust further into melancholia. The ruin, interdigitated with nature's thin grass and kingcups, in actuality signifies the very harmony the speaker promotes in the initial stanza quoted above. The birds are not drawn there because of its melancholic aspect, but rather because it is suited to their needs and uninhabited, allowing them to 'surrender [their] whole spirit.' The nightingales are in fact 'merry' and if the poet's associations didn't corrupt them (despite his attempt to avoid this) they would represent the potential for the human spirit to give itself over to a natural way of life, free of vanity and aspirations of transitory fame.

Coleridge's ruin is an amalgamation of several edifices, including Alfoxden Castle, Enmore Castle, Nether Stowey Castle, and Stogursey Castle (Mays 518). Nether Stowey was destroyed in the fifteenth century as a penalty for the local lord's involvement in the Perkin Warbeck rebellion against the taxes of King Henry VII and several of the other castles mentioned had similar fates (Greswell 169). In Thomas More's (1478-1535) *Utopia* (1516) More states, 'The Utopian way of life provides not only the happiest basis for civilized community, but also one which, in all human probability, will last forever. *They've eliminated the root causes of*

*ambition, political conflict, and everything like that.* There's therefore no danger of internal dissension, the one thing that has destroyed so many impregnable towns' (113). Lacking aspects of the poetical commonwealth, the castle is destroyed and the 'great lord' is forgotten and washed into the rush of history's river to be replaced by the Great (Eternal) Lord of Nature. Here Coleridge and Wordsworth allow the ruin to be appropriated by nature through an implicit reversal: the lord's castle and dominion are usurped by the *king-cups*;<sup>14</sup> flowers reign, integrated with humanity's ruins so that the proper order of the universe, an order humankind would look to augment through hubristic civic engineering, is organically restored.

This is an early understanding of the ruin's relation to nature, which Wordsworth corroborates not only in his collaboration with Coleridge but in his letters as well. He adopts the implicit allegory of the ruin as the confluence of humanity and nature throughout his *The Lyrical Ballads* because ruins go hand in hand with the mission of the poems to take the humble and rustic lives and 'render their feelings ... more consonant to nature' (*WFL* 268). By the time Wordsworth writes 'Resolution and Independence' his melancholia and the resultant poetic gift reaches its climax and he adopts the understanding that More adopted late in life: 'if we get so weary of pain and grief that we perversely attempt to change the world, this place of labor and penance, into a joyful haven of rest, if we seek heaven on earth, we cut ourselves off forever from true happiness' (*De Tristitia Christi* 20). In the end, Wordsworth's continuous augmentation of nature to mirror the proclivities of his mood could no longer suffice; when the lucidity, and frankly the naiveté, of youth is made extinct by the reality of sheer economics and death, the ruin can no longer serve to assert the promising union of humanity with eternal nature

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<sup>14</sup> King-cups are also known as *marsh marigolds*, and so we learn that the castle is furthered associated with melancholia, as according to Burton marshes engender melancholia.

and so it is dispensed with and replaced by the attempt at union with an Absolute (God), presented incarnate as the Human Ruin discussed in chapter three. But first, the manner in which melancholia's motifs have been integrated with Wordsworth's poetry and the importance it plays in our understanding of his canon should be considered.

## Melancholia's Visionary Gleam

*The word 'history' stands written on the countenance  
of nature in the characters of transience.*

-Walter Benjamin, *The Origin  
of German Tragic Drama*

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The ruin is ever present in Wordsworth's poetry, consistently rescuing him from a captivating solipsism. One of the earliest and most important ruins of Wordsworth's is the bower of 'Lines Left Upon A Seat In A Yew Tree' (1798). Though it is often overlooked, the poem is set among a ruin, as the yew-tree rests in a bower that was created by a human, for someone had 'piled these stones and with mossy sod / First covered, and here taught this aged Tree / With its dark arms to form a circling bower' (9-11). The -yew's allegorical significance is as a death-head, and yet the purpose of this yew-tree is to revivify the spirits of the passing reader. In Wordsworth's description in his poem 'Yew Trees' (1815), the tree, while remaining a domain for death, also becomes a *temple* in which ghosts eerily personified converge:

—ghostly Shapes  
May meet at noontide: Fear and trembling Hope,  
Silence and Foresight, Death the Skeleton  
And Time the Shadow; there to celebrate,  
As in a natural temple scattered o'er  
With altars undisturbed of mossy stone,  
United worship.

(25-31)

Wordsworth makes the yew a place where Hope, Silence, and Time, all yearnings of the human spirit, are able to 'celebrate' their worship with Death. The yew then becomes Wordsworth's first paradox-incarnate of the reconciled dialectic through its simultaneous representation of life and death. The lines left in the yew-tree redouble this allegorical significance by representing a

decaying presence of humanity literally integrated with nature as they've been physically carved into the wood.<sup>15</sup> The lines compel the reader to attempt to resolve the desire to sustain the soul in solitude and become a lover of humankind instead. Like the man who had carved the words, the contradictory message warns the reader to avoid the regression into the egotistical sublime where the 'eye / Is ever on himself' (55-6), which leads to an early death.<sup>16</sup> In an adept nod to the relationship between the aesthete and the processes of allegorical composition and reading, the reader here is 'saved from [mental] vacancy' by the very fact that the yew asserts the presence of the human through language: 'Nay, Traveller! rest' (1).<sup>17</sup>

Wordsworth states that the poem's setting was in one of his favorite places to walk. The poem was then likely very personal for Wordsworth, a reminder of the (sometimes physical) danger of mental 'vacancy' in the prolonged digression into nature.<sup>18</sup> The poem is not only a warning against this digression, but also a reminder that the aesthete-poet must learn to navigate

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<sup>15</sup> That the writing itself is in ruin signifies the important relationship between the perceiver, or aesthete, and the processes of allegorical poetic composition and reading.

<sup>16</sup> 'The individual whose habits and character are here given, was a gentleman of the neighborhood, a man of talent and learning, who had been educated at one of our Universities, and returned to pass his time in seclusion on his own estate. He died a bachelor in middle age' (Wordsworth's note).

<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth writes, 'Many tender similitudes must these objects have presented to the mind of the traveller leaning upon one of the tombs, or reposing in the coolness of its shade, whether he had halted from weariness or in compliance with the invitation, 'Pause, Traveller!' so often found upon the monuments. And to its epitaph also must have been supplied strong appeals to visible appearances or immediate impressions, lively and affecting analogies of life as a journey—death as a sleep overcoming the tired wayfarer—of misfortune as a storm that falls suddenly upon him—of beauty as a flower that passeth away, or of innocent pleasure as one that may be gathered—of virtue that standeth firm as a rock against the beating waves' ('Essay Upon Epitaphs' 563). Here the traveller is clearly the Paternian aesthete, who attempted to bring the word back to its original Greek *aisthetes*, meaning 'one who perceives.'

<sup>18</sup> Walking vast distances was in some ways a rite of passage for the Romantics, however Wordsworth was unmatched in this regard. At twenty-one he began a two-thousand-mile walking excursion and would often walk over 20 miles a day with his sister Dorothy and Coleridge (Solnit 104-118).

the sublimity of the position between solitude and humanity in order to survive. The ability to navigate this liminal position is understood through the expression of transcendence in temporal things accomplished by an inward vision (or egotistical sublime) considered to be most powerful in the melancholic.

The nature of the melancholic humor follows the quality of earth, which is never dispersed like the other elements, *but concentrated more strictly in itself*. . . such is also the nature of Mercury and Saturn, in virtue of which the spirits, *gathering themselves at the center* bring back the apex of the soul from what is foreign to it to what is proper to it, fix it in contemplation, *and allow it to penetrate to the center of all things*.<sup>19</sup>

Burton writes: ‘I will only now point at the wonderful effects and power of [Imaginaton]; which, as it is eminent in all, so most especially *it rageth in the melancholy person*, in keeping the species of objects so long, mistaking, *amplifying them by continual and strong meditation, until at length it produceth in some parties reall effects,*’ (250 [italics added]). This ability in

Wordsworth is made clear by Pater’s own recapitulation of the egotistical sublime:

Sometimes as [Wordsworth] dwelt upon those moments of profound, imaginative power, in which the outward object appears to take colour and expression, a new nature almost, from the prompting of the observant mind, the actual world would, as it were, dissolve and detach itself, flake by flake, and he himself seemed to be the creator, and when he would the destroyer, of the world in which he lived—that old isolating thought of many a brain-sick mystic of ancient and modern times. (135)

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<sup>19</sup> Qtd. in Agamben, pg. 13.

In texts on the signs and symptoms of melancholia, ‘gazing’ becomes a primary mode of contemplating one’s own finitude in relation to an infinite space. Very often, the subject is looking out onto an infinite seascape; that the subject here is on the shore of a lake is of importance, stressing further the failure of gaze and his inability to achieve sublimity. The Hermit’s poetic sensibility is not as pronounced as Wordsworth’s because as he begins to penetrate to the center of all things through the contemplative gaze rendering the distant scene ‘Far lovelier’<sup>20</sup> in his imagination, his heart is overwhelmed by the crushing awareness of his mournful lack, disrupting the gaze and the sustainment of the melancholic disposition.

*Fixing his downcast eye, he many an hour  
A morbid pleasure nourished, tracing here  
An emblem of his own unfruitful life:  
And, lifting up his head, he then would gaze  
On the more distant scene,—how lovely ‘tis  
Thou seest,—and he would gaze till it became  
Far lovelier, and his heart could not sustain  
The beauty, still more beauteous!*<sup>21</sup>  
(30-37 [italics mine])

It is the overwhelming memory of this lack that leads to the Hermit’s early death.<sup>22</sup>

and so, lost Man!  
On visionary views would fancy feed,  
Till his eye streamed with tears. In this deep vale  
He died, —this seat his only monument.  
(44-47)

Wordsworth, the greater of the two visionaries due to his intense melancholia, uses memory in the opposite way of the Hermit. The Hermit is pulled from both the inward gaze on the self *and*

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<sup>20</sup> Burton writes: ‘I will only now point at the wonderful effects and power of [Imagination]; which, as it is eminent in all, so most especially *it rageth in the melancholy person*, in keeping the species of objects so long, mistaking, *amplifying them by continual and strong meditation, until at length it produceth in some parties real effects,*’ (250 [italics added]).

<sup>21</sup> See note 11.

<sup>22</sup> See note 13.

nature by mournfully remembering his failed time among society. Wordsworth on the other hand can only contemplate the full power of Nature when he is at a distance from its influence, a power exacerbated by his own strength of Imagination.<sup>23</sup> Wordsworth understands that he is subject to the subduing quality of nature; this dying into nature would in fact be regarded with optimism for ‘one whose heart the holy forms / Of young imagination have kept pure’ (47-9), for death is regarded not as an end but as a convalescence with nature and therefore an infinite continuance.<sup>24</sup> Wordsworth cannot pull himself from the natural object when he initiates this type of dying involved in giving wholly into Nature. And so the ruin, a consequence of society, is Wordsworth’s saving grace, an external presence that disrupts ekstasis, asserting the power that nature and time have over humanity through the awakening proximity to the mystery of death.

In order for the ruin to initiate this capacity to seize the subject from an overpowering nature, it must operate as an allegorical mode of negative capability. Keats’s theory of negative capability becomes important here as it allows for the possibility of the ruin to open up a space for the poet to endure—through the poetic gaze—‘in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’ (KL 93). Negative capability is found in the moments of static gaze in which the method of inter-subjectivity initiates a form of pleasurable absolution that ‘takes place before any determinate judge can fix the experience with reference to either ethics or epistemology’ and so ‘it occurs as a moment of freedom before the imposition of an

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<sup>23</sup> ‘These beauteous forms, / Through a long absence, have been to me / As is a landscape to blind man’s eye: / But oft, in lonely rooms, and ‘mid the din / Of towns and cities, I have owed to them / In hours of weariness, sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood and along the heart’ (*Tintern Abbey* 23-28).

<sup>24</sup> This concept is consistently expressed in Wordsworth’s early lyrical ballads, particularly ‘We are Seven’ and ‘The Thorn’. The reversal of this ideal will be considered in the final chapter in regard to Wordsworth’s allusion to Thomas Chatterton.

ethical or epistemological code and allows the space for a different form of vision to emerge' (Terada 18). Ruins represent this 'moment of freedom' and the liminal zone between reality and the mysteries of the transcendent because they are symbols of continuance in the temporal plane despite their simultaneous significance as a death's-head. In the presence of the ruin, negative capability ensues and Wordsworth's melancholia is momentarily abolished; because there is no 'irritable [need for] reaching after fact & reason' the poet is able to imagine modes of being outside of the epistemological burdens that oppress the spirit. Surviving this confrontation with death results in what Lacan termed in his lectures on ethics, 'absolute disarray', which involves 'a psychical state that willingly engages a liminal space between the economy of the symbolic and the alterity of the Real' (Castellano 24). Absolute disarray is comparable to negative capability in that both assert an inextricable connection between living and death. In suffering the confrontation with the negative (death), capability (being) not only ensues but is also heightened through that very death-link, positioning the witness into a realm of a new form of living, a living that is always mediated by the desire to live coupled with the realization that death is not an end, often evinced when in extremis.

Lacan lends no theory to eternity that bolsters his ethical theories; however Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy continues the concept of the 'absolute disarray' into the eternal through his concept of *il y a* (there is). In Levinas's philosophical text *Time and the Other* (1947), he attempts to dispel the negativity that surrounds the mystery of death by positing that death elicits the termination of solitary existence through its inevitable relationship with time and the Other. '[Suffering] is the fact of being directly exposed to being.... The whole acuity of suffering lies in [the] impossibility of retreat. It is the fact of being backed up against life and being. In this sense suffering is the impossibility of nothingness [the *il y a*]' (69). This revelation is reached in

suffering which, through its kinship with death, manifests a subsequent clarity of perception of the self and the understanding of the Other. '[O]nly a being whose solitude has reached a crispation through suffering, and in relation with death, takes its place on a ground where the relationship with the other becomes possible' (76). Death maintains negative capability as death is the very relationship with the future; nothingness is impossible because in nothingness there is always the *il y a* and so being-toward-death results in the fruition of ethical relationships with transcendent modes of being, which is also classified as the Other.

In Wordsworth's poems that have human suffering as their subject, the action (or inaction) of mourning is supplanted onto an object 'till the low walls, the green mounds, the half-obliterated epitaphs [seem] full of voices' (Pater 132). This is due to Wordsworth's belief that forms of English community are linked and bolstered by their relationship to the dead. Of course, when the physical has passed it is through monuments and artifacts that we honor and remember the dead, a graveyard 'in the stillness of the country, is a visible centre of a community of the living and the dead; a point to which are habitually referred the nearest concerns of both' ('Essays Upon Epitaphs' 563). In *The Ruined Cottage* (1798), Wordsworth outlines the way in which the relationship with an other is made ethic through the bond of suffering the alterity of death and how the resultant melancholia is affected by the presence of ruins.

*The Ruined Cottage* begins at midday and the narrator is walking across a 'Common', thereby literally occupying a liminal place between civilization and a 'deep wood,' or total isolation where he might 'shun the haunts of human kind'.<sup>25</sup> Remote from society, the speaker nears the negative, inward ekstasis of the egotistical sublime, alerting readers to the socio-political and moral crises of the poem. As the subject settles and is 'elevated and solemnized in

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<sup>25</sup> *Prelude X*, 578.

proportion as his daily life and occupations [bring] him into companionship with permanent natural objects' (Pater 132), the gaze renders the natural world more beautiful. However in the actuality of the moment, the speaker states:

Other lot was mine.  
Across a bare wide Common I had toiled  
With languid feet which by the slipp'ry ground  
Were baffled still, and when I stretched myself  
On the brown earth my limbs from very heat  
Could find no rest nor my weak arm disperse  
The insect host which gathered round my face  
And joined their murmurs to the tedious noise  
Of seeds of bursting gorse that crackled round.  
(18-26)

In the physical toil under the 'noonday demon'<sup>26</sup> the subject is unable to appreciate the virtue of nature. The pleasantry of the warbling wren is supplanted by the 'tedious noise / Of seeds of

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<sup>26</sup> 'Our sixth combat is with what the Greeks call *acedia*, which we may term spiritual weariness or distress of heart. This is akin to dejection, and is especially trying to solitaires, and a dangerous and common enemy to dwellers of the desert; and *especially disturbing to a monk about the sixth hour (midday)*, like some fever which seizes him at stated times, bringing the burning heat of its attacks on the sick man at usual and regular hours. *Lastly, there are some of the elders who declare that this is the "noonday demon"* spoken of in the ninetieth Psalm' (Cassian X.I., 219). Acedia was treated as the only inexcusable capital sin: 'in the popular representations of the seven capital sins, an ancient hermeneutic tradition considered it the most lethal of the vices, the only one for which no pardon was possible' (Agamben 3). During the middle ages, *acedia* became fused with *tristitia*, or sorrow, which was originally an eighth sin. This then lead to *acedia* being merged with melancholia. While *acedia*, unlike melancholia, generally maintained a severely negative connotation, St. Thomas Aquinas states, 'Sloth [Acedia] is not a mental withdraw from any spiritual good, but from the divine good, to which it behooves the mind to cleave out of necessity' (Agamben 9 n.8). Acedia then 'is precisely the vertiginous and frightened withdrawal (*recessus*) when faced with the task implied by the place of man before God.' In *The Ruined Cottage*, the speaker withdraws from Nature, Wordsworth's God and the God of the humble and rustic people. I have yet to find a satisfactory explanation of why this *acedia*, or withdrawal, was deemed the 'noonday demon;' considering what I have mentioned above I would state that it is because at midday the subject inhabits a liminal space-time, whereby they are left to contemplate both the hours that preceded noon and the hours that will follow. In the liminality, the monastic subject (to whom the phrase was given) is 'faced with the task implied by the place of man before God' (Agamben 6); the monastic then questions his or her own purpose and allegiance to the Divine.

bursting gorse that crackled round.’<sup>27</sup> Because the speaker fails to ‘look upon the scene’ and consider himself as a part of nature, he recedes into a state that the lines on the yew-tree had warned the traveller of: ‘The man whose eye / Is ever on himself doth look on one, / The least of Nature’s works’ (55-7). The melancholic is able to sustain his self in the egotistical sublime because the power of melancholia implies action; he never releases the imaginative power-practice of egotistical sublimity rendered through the gaze. Here however, the vision of the traveller stricken with acedia is completely inactive, he cannot even lift his arms to swat the flies. He is slowly transgressing beyond the egotistical sublime into a state where he is completely *blind*<sup>28</sup> and becomes a Narcissus or hubristic daemon, for he who ‘has neither eyes nor ears; / Himself his world, [becomes] his own God.’<sup>29</sup> But he is relieved of this drastic hubris and isolated egotism by stumbling upon a ‘ruined house’ and a Pedlar (an ‘aged Man’) who initiates the progressive change from isolation to communion and a deeper understanding of his own life that the traveller experiences through the Pedlar’s story.

The story of Margaret—that is both the *act* of telling and what is told—has been the primary focus of scholarship on *The Ruined Cottage*. The presence of mourning, whether acted out by the narrator or not, is considered to be the primary impetus for the traveller’s change. In this reading, mourning Margaret and Margaret’s mourning become the symbol of the ‘bond of brotherhood’ that forms the community between the two men. This tends to place the actual

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<sup>27</sup> The OED defines ‘tedious’ as ‘Wearisome by continuance’; long and tiresome: *said of anything occupying time, as a task, or a journey.* The word has a direct connection to time, and so the ‘tedious noise’ seems to the weary traveler (concerned only with his corporeality) to notch out his own transience; the traveler’s only thoughts are on himself and his mortality.

<sup>28</sup> In ‘Elegaic Stanzas’ (itself an ekphrasis on a painting of a ruin), Wordsworth writes, ‘Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone, / Housed in a dream, at distance from the [human] Kind! / Such happiness, wherever it be know, / Is to be pitied, for ‘tis surely blind’ (53-56).

<sup>29</sup> ‘A Poet’s Epitaph’, 27-8.

ruined cottage as secondary to the poem's realization, thereby dampening the primary mode of the characters' connections to the dead, which, as I've stated, Wordsworth found integral to society.

According to Freud, the psychological understanding of mourning would in fact tend to *disrupt* community, not bring it together, as the process of mourning involves 'a turning away from reality...and a clinging to the [lost] object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis' (Freud 244). Melancholia does not involve this turning away from reality; rather Freud believes it would bring us closer to reality, especially in regard to the awareness of the self in relation to others.<sup>30</sup> What the ruined cottage grants is the ability for the traveller to skip the process of mourning and view her Margaret's death with a melancholic eye. As Freud states, the melancholic subject cannot mourn because according to them there is nothing lost to mourn.<sup>31</sup> The ruin then symbolizes to the melancholic subject a tangible and external object loss, allowing a subsequent projection out of denial and self-loathing in order to initiate a type of negative capability and grasp the now less-mysterious (because tangible) collective history of death, or Otherness. Only by skipping mourning can the newly melancholic traveller form his bond with the melancholic Pedlar who has already surpassed deep mourning with the help of time. We see the melancholic allegorical transition whereby 'an object of knowledge...has settled in the consciously constructed ruins' (Benjamin 182) in the Pedlar's desire to project Margaret's suffering not on the abstractions of the loss of Margaret but on the physical presence of the

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<sup>30</sup> '[The melancholic] has a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic' (Freud 246).

<sup>31</sup> For Freud, Melancholia is an action of the pleasure principle; the subject, in lusting after a locus for their cathexis, is only able to find it within his or her self—as it does not exist externally—and subsequently initiates a cathexis toward the self. 'The narcissistic identification with the object then becomes a substitute for the erotic cathexis, the result of which is that in spite of the conflict with the loved person the love-relation need not be given up' (Freud 249).

ruined cottage and its strewn vestiges of her life, often represented as tools. This preoccupation with the ruined tools of domestic labor is important in *The Ruined Cottage* because the very thing that initiates Margaret's spiral to an early death is the loss of domestic bliss found in marriage and maintained in labor.

In Milton's Eden, labor represents not only the proper alliance with Natural order but an ethical one as well. For Milton, it is the act of reaping and gardening, as mandated by God, that both keeps us alive and makes us human.

Other creatures all day long  
Rove idle unemployed and less need rest.  
Man hath his daily work of body or mind  
Appointed, which declares his dignity,  
And the regard of Heav'n on all his ways;  
While other Animals unactive range,  
And of their doings God takes no account.  
(*Paradise Lost* IV, 616-22)

Milton's discussion on labor and gardening merges seamlessly into Adam and Eve's 'rites / Mysterious of connubial love' (743-44) as domestic relations become associated with the deserved rest following labor.<sup>32</sup> Labor, then, becomes not only symbolic of but also inextricable from the labor of love and the value of the rewards of human union. Of course, when the ethical relationship between Adam and Eve is broken through the transgression against Natural order, they are exiled and Paradise grows unburdened by the hand of labor. Wordsworth's continuous referral to failed labor as evinced in ruin rephrases the Edenic trope, reminding the reader that ruination is the inevitable result of failed ethical relationships. In *The Ruined Cottage*, connubial

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<sup>32</sup> Milton's suggestion that Adam and Eve have sex was anathema within the religious community, however Milton justifies it by claiming it falls under God's decree: 'Our Maker bids increase' (IV, 748).

rites also seamlessly follow acts of labor in the implicit space between ‘peace and comfort’ and the resultant ‘two pretty babes’:

They who pass’d  
At evening, from behind the garden-fence  
Might hear his busy spade, which he would ply  
After his daily work till the day-light  
Was gone and every leaf and flower were lost  
In the dark hedges. So they pass’d their days  
In peace and comfort, and two pretty babes  
Were their best hope next to the God in Heaven.  
(125-132)

As Alan Liu writes, ‘If humanity were a Saussurean sign, the care a person takes with a tool would be the signifier, or articulation, and the signified would be the care persons express for each other’ (319). In the Pedlar’s poetic telling, the loss of marital union and the death that followed is represented allegorically through the tools in ruin:

For them a bond  
Of brotherhood is broken: time has been  
When every day the touch of human hand  
Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered  
To human comfort. When I stooped to drink,  
A spider’s web hung to the water’s edge,  
And on the wet and slimy foot-stone lay  
The useless fragment of a wooden bowl;  
It moved my very heart.  
(84-92)

The tools of labor that are dispersed across the landscape represent the lost ideal of the cottage in which domestic activity had asserted a humanity that staved off nature’s march of ruination through the act of reaping. It is this integral connection between nature and domesticity that leads to both a reciprocal communion between life, ruins, and nature: ‘Strange sympathy thus allies the tranquil spear-grass to the ‘sleeping’ Margaret, while strange convenience...joins the spear-grass to the ruined wall. Person and ruin commune beneath the weed that is their living monument,

icon, or image' (Liu 319). The lesson of this strange sympathy in turn leads to the renewal of 'the bond of brotherhood' between the two men.

Liu goes on to state that humanity maintains its 'signifier' after the tranquil usurpation of Nature through crawling 'vegetation.' It is hard to avoid seeing Liu's reading as a misreading of Pater's essay in which Pater writes, 'And so it came about that this sense of a life in natural objects, which in most poetry is but a rhetorical artifice, is with Wordsworth the assertion of what for him is almost literal fact. To him every natural object seemed to possess more or less of a spiritual life' (130). Pater's spiritual life is in regard to nature as religion, not nature as inherently signifying the presence of humanity. Nature can possess *associations* to 'the great events of life' but those events can only be *expressed* through the use of 'low walls, the green mounds, the half obliterated epitaphs' (Pater 132). In *The Ruined Cottage*, it is not nature that signifies the presence of humanity but the man-made ruin. The only manner in which the burgeoning spear-grass signifies humanity is in its attempt to conceal mortality, not express it, as vegetation enacts indifferent erasure. 'The bonds of human care scatter like fragments of a broken bowl' (Liu 319) but 'the signifier' of humanity does not survive, as Liu contends, in vegetation, as it is not spear-grass but the cottage's fragments that become the bricolage of the Pedlar's story. Benjamin writes,

Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head....

This is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual.' (166)

In some cases, the death-head can be Liu's 'primordial landscape' though not in the case of mourning or melancholia as 'in the case of *Trauerspiel*, history becomes part of the setting, it does so as script... The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin' (177). As I've stated, it is the ruin that provides 'the strange combination of nature and history [in which] the allegorical mode of expression is born' (Benjamin 167). The Pedlar's allegory of Margaret's death is felt as simultaneous suffering and joy, which can only be experienced by the genuinely melancholic.<sup>33</sup>

The Pedlar represents the genuine melancholic poet among the ruin whose poetic gaze remains intact. Early on, the Pedlar undergoes a phenomenological trance characteristic of Wordsworth, whose poetic gaze was so intense that he could imbue inanimate objects with a 'soul' thereby 'raising nature to the level of human thought [giving] it power and expression' (Pater 131).

The Poets in their elegies and songs  
Lamenting the departed call the groves,  
They call upon the hills and streams to mourn,  
And senseless rocks, nor idly; *for they speak*  
*In these their invocations with a voice*  
*Obedient to the strong creative power*  
*Of human passion.* Sympathies there are  
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,  
That steal upon the meditative mind  
And grow with thought. Beside yon spring I stood  
And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel  
One sadness, they and I.

(75-84 [italics mine])

Unlike the Hermit at the yew and the traveller in the opening lines, the Pedlar finds proper union with nature because he is able to sustain the gaze. The Pedlar's vision is not marred by 'restless

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<sup>33</sup> In Miriam Allot's commentary on Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy', she states that 'True melancholy' is only felt in the dialectics of joy and sorrow (538).

thoughts'; instead, he keeps his eye on the 'calm of Nature', even when susceptible to acedia, the noonday demon.

‘Tis now the hour of deepest noon.  
At this still season of repose and peace,  
This hour when all things which are not at rest  
Are chearful, while this multitude of flies  
Fills all the air with happy melody,  
Why should a tear be in an old man's eye?<sup>34</sup>  
Why should we thus with an untoward mind  
And in the weakness of humanity  
From natural wisdom turn our hearts away,  
To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears,  
And feeding on disquiet thus disturb  
The calm of Nature with our restless thoughts?’  
(187-98)

This correction of the traveller's initial physical and mental discomfort allows a proper union to take place between the Pedlar and the traveller. The traveller in the opening lines wrestles with his own interiority, which is manifested completely in the corporeal: 'languid feet', 'my limbs', 'my weak arm', 'my face'. This egotism lacks any form of transcendence. When the Imagination that demarks the unity between all things is not obscured, the vision can transcend into a realm of ethics in the face-to-face encounter with (the relics of) death and restore the traveller's sense of belonging to the order of things. In the beginning, the traveller is bereft of the 'sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused' in nature and 'in the mind of man'<sup>35</sup> that is found in the Pedlar. The Pedlar evokes 'instantaneous joy' as he is simultaneously 'The pride of nature and of...life' (37). The flies that were 'tedious' for the traveller fill the Pedlar's air with a 'happy melody'. The Pedlar has 'no thought of his way-wandering life'; rather he contemplates with a

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<sup>34</sup> The vision of the Hermit at the yew is marred and suspended by tears: 'lost Man! / On visionary views would fancy feed/ Till his eye streamed with tears' (44-6).

<sup>35</sup> *Tintern Abbey*, 96-99.

poetic sensibility the significance the ruin has through its history:

I see around me here  
Things which you cannot see: we die, my Friend,  
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved  
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth  
Dies with him or is changed, and very soon  
Even of the good is no memorial left.  
(67-72)

This is the enactment of negative capability; instead of the gaze rendering nature a violent beauty, something that might consume the heart (as it had at the yew tree), the Pedlar reverses nature's deadly power by at once humanizing it and naturalizing the self.

Beside yon spring I stood  
And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel  
One sadness, they and I. For them a bond  
Of brotherhood is broken: time has been  
When every day the touch of human hand  
Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered  
To human comfort.  
(82-88)

The passage of time is felt as an understanding of the disjunction between his temporality and the infinity of nature symbolized in the act of the human hand being dipped into the stream of eternity. Coming to terms with the dialectic of our existence in time (that is, coming face-to-face with nature) without allowing it to consume the heart represents negative capability through a Lacanian *being-toward-death* and he is rendered not 'blind,' as the traveller was, but rather fully conscious as a result of it. One of the 'weaknesses of humanity' is that we are conscious of death; but this is a 'natural wisdom'. Unlike the traveller in the opening lines who could not stand the gorse's 'tedium' or the flies that had once 'joined their murmurs to the tedious noise' of nature sounding off the transience of his existence, the Pedlar is unaffected by time because

through his suffering he has fully accepted that death is inevitable.<sup>36</sup>

The Pedlar's story is told with the philosophic mind<sup>37</sup> and in this way he is transformed into the poet: 'in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time' (*MW* 660). For Wordsworth, the poet's ability to bind human society is due to and contingent upon the gaze, which at the end of *The Ruined Cottage* the traveller is finally able to enact:

I stood, and leaning o'er the garden-gate  
Reviewed that Woman's sufferings, and it seemed  
To comfort me while with a brother's love  
I blessed her in the impotence of grief.  
*At length upon the hut I fix'd my eyes  
Fondly, and traced with milder interest  
That secret spirit of humanity  
Which, 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies  
Of nature, 'mid her plants, her weeds, and flowers,  
And silent overgrowings, still survived.*  
(497-506 [italics mine])

'Seeing this' the poet-Pedlar understands that the substance of his story has been understood, and awards the traveller with corrected vision.

The old man, seeing this, resumed and said,  
'My Friend, enough to sorrow have you given,  
The purposes of wisdom ask no more;

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<sup>36</sup> This acceptance is akin to Wordsworth's child in 'We are Seven' (1798). The Child remains face-to-face with his dead siblings through the belief that death is not an end and while the corporeal is absent, the transcendent remains. The Pedlar's awareness of the realities of death is more pronounced because of his old age;<sup>36</sup> however through memory (the closest thing the aged have to the immortal aspect of the child) as well the tangible remnants of the memories that remain in ruin, the Pedlar takes on the aspect of the Child, an ability recognized in *Intimations Ode*: We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind; / In the primal sympathy which must ever be; / *In the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering; / In the faith that looks through death, / In the years that bring the philosophic mind* (180-81).

<sup>37</sup> See n. 40.

Be wise and chearful, and no longer read  
The forms of things with an unworthy eye.  
(497-511)

The poet-Pedlar's sensibility, which is part and parcel of this gaze, is carried over into the traveller, allowing him to progress beyond both his acedia and his mourning through negative capability into positive melancholia that initiates a proper ethics between the two men. In a swift transition, we progress from the midday of acedia to the 'sweet hour' (530) of the melancholic.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The 'sweet hour' is dusk, just 'ere the stars are visible' (537). Twilight or dusk is often associated with melancholia, further representing both its dialectics and the importance of liminality. Panofsky et. al. write, "This highly fantastic and literal "twilight" of the whole picture is not so much based on the natural conditions of a certain time of day: it denotes the uncanny twilight of the mind, which can neither cast its thoughts away into the darkness nor "bring them to the light"" (320).

## The Human Ruin

*By melancholy saith [Aristotle], some men are  
made as it were divine, foretelling things  
to come, and some men are made poets.*

- Agrippa, *Three Books of  
Occult Philosophy*

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In *The Ruined Cottage*, the reader witnesses the transition from a failed ethics to a properly ordered one, figured poetically in the traveller's inability to gaze and socially in the ruins of Margaret's story, culminating in the 'bond of brotherhood' formed by the men. This poem, along with many of the poems in *The Lyrical Ballads*, is didactic, and while they undoubtedly contain sentiments and convictions that Wordsworth harbored, they do not exhibit the distinctive intimacy of Wordsworth's later work. This personal turn in Wordsworth's poetry came as a result of what Thomas McFarland deems 'the special tension that maintained at once his sense of isolation and his need for human relationship' (148). McFarland's sees this tension as specifically arising in Wordsworth's stoicism and political conservatism; but in the later years, and explicitly in 'Resolution and Independence' (perhaps his most personal poem), this tension is between his calling to poetry, which was how Wordsworth exhibited his stoic stance, and the economic strain associated with maintaining human relationships. 'In the Latin literature of Stoicism, with which we know Wordsworth to have been acquainted with, to live as a Stoic is to live in accordance with nature' (McFarland 159). In the Burtonian vein, Wordsworth would have it that society's actions are, or should be, in harmony with the laws of nature. The motif is present in the opening stanza of *Tintern Abbey* where the elements of the human world commingle unnoticed with the natural one. Though what strikes the interlocutor about the scene in *Tintern Abbey* is that there is little change; both humanity and nature had remained static

during the five years he was away. This permanence is the stoic ideal: when life is unchanging the stoic pose is made simple, it need not be forced, and the practice dissolves into natural disposition. In *Tintern Abbey* this static Nature becomes a saving grace perpetually stored in the mind to act as the bane against ‘The dreary intercourse of daily life’ whenever culled. His earlier work tended to assert this sense of a permanent nature through ruins like Tintern Abbey and the cottage.

What these examples have in common, apart from showing Wordsworth in Coleridge’s phrase, ‘clinging to the palpable’, is that in each case poetry is being consciously used to give permanence to what would otherwise be transient. Wordsworth hoped that his work might achieve the timelessness of natural forms—become ‘A power like one of Nature’s’—and ‘vestiges of human hands’ [ruins] surviving in a landscape offered not only permanent Nature and transient life, but the opportunity to make transience permanent as tragedy.’ (J. Wordsworth 89).

But when this sense of tragedy that he often felt in the socio-economic or political turmoil of the humble rustic is turned toward the self, it is not nature or the (edificial) ruin that proffers an ideal permanence but, in a deeply personal turn, God, figured wholly in the human.

As Wordsworth ages, his desire for stoicism becomes more and more difficult to reconcile with his need to live comfortably. When he writes ‘Resolution and Independence’ youth and its dreams of political revolution are gone, replaced by a marriage, children, dead friends, and all the weight and responsibilities of maturity. What is left is the question of how one survives:

My whole life I have lived in pleasant thought,  
As if life's business were a summer mood;  
As if all needful things would come unsought  
To genial faith, still rich in genial good;  
But how can He expect that others should  
Build for him, sow for him, and at his call  
Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all?  
(36-42)

While this pertains partly to Coleridge's opium addiction and subsequent reliance on the Wordsworth family, Wordsworth is mainly concerned with how he will support his estranged nine-year-old daughter in France, who he has just promised to aid monetarily, as well as his new fiancé (North 575). Speaking to his sister Dorothy at the end of *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth prescribes the banks of the Wye river for *her* 'If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief, / Should be [her] portion' (143-44); now, walking through the moor land, Wordsworth presages the descent of his own suffering:

But there may come another day to me—  
Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty.  
(34-35)

With this, nature is no longer enough to cure his once remediable brooding. Nature's permanence had once been able to sustain the heart in solitude or among the city's din, but nature on the moorland is transient and this transience is made apparent in Wordsworth's protean verse.<sup>39</sup> His view of the scene and the 'pleasant season' turns into the self-reproaching statement that he views 'life's business' as 'a summer mood'; the sounds of the sky-lark and thoughts of the playful hare, which is now gone from sight in an unprecedented fleetingness for the writer of the

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<sup>39</sup> His view of the scene and the 'pleasant season' turns into his self-reproaching statement that he views 'life's business' as 'a summer mood'; the sounds of the sky-lark and thoughts of the playful hare, which is now gone from sight in an unprecedented transience for the writer of the poetic gaze, turns to the awareness of the potential of future misery resulting in present melancholia.

poetic gaze, turns to the awareness of the potential of future misery resulting in strong feelings of melancholic irresolution. This melancholia is derived from his inability to reconcile his desires to subsist and support his family monetary while simultaneously remaining the man, the poet, who has refused that vanity of men. He is torn by the naïve belief that there are only two paths in life to choose from and that they are poles apart. The first is of men ‘so vain and melancholy’ that they are controlled by self-interest, and the other is the Stoic or natural life that is moved by instinct and while always free ‘from all care’ has a new codicil, time, which will strip spontaneity from the aged heart. Wordsworth’s Stoicism is not so near to the ‘scholars of Zeno, whose wild enthusiastic virtue pretended to an exemption from the sensibilities of unenlightened mortals’ that ‘removed pain poverty, loss of friends, exile, and violent death from the catalogues of evils’ (Johnson, 186), but rather the more modern definition that, while painfully aware of the laws of nature and the inevitabilities of life, uses reason to anesthetize pain:

The cure for the greatest part of human miseries is not radical, but palliative. Infelicity is involved in corporeal nature, and interwoven with our being; all attempts therefore to decline it wholly are useless and vain: the armies of pain send their arrows against us on every side, the choice is only between those which are more or less sharp, or tinged with poison of greater or less malignity, and the strongest armour which reason can supply will only blunt their points, but cannot repel them. (Johnson 187)

This Stoicism remains egotism, for it is always the utter power of the ego to temporarily situate itself above life’s misgiving. What palliates the Stoic’s solemn reason is the understanding that misery and death are wrapt in the natural framework and lead to a mindset similar to the Pedlar’s in *The Ruined Cottage*. Though for the materialistic, who attempt to avoid fear and death by

gaining a life devoid of pain, poverty, and natural instinct, their lives result in a diluted spirit and their hearts never leap at the wonders of the natural world. For Wordsworth, he cannot go this way of self-interest for the sole purpose of monetary gain because, being a poet, he is called to delineate the workings of the universe and their relationship to both himself and humankind.<sup>40</sup>

We see the conflation of universe and humanity in the first stanza of 'Resolution and Independence'. In the opening lines, the poet's memory is haunted by a storm from the previous night and the storm maintains throughout as metonymy for Wordsworth's 'Dim sadness'; the 'roaring in the wind all night' is merely the trope of the dark winds of change. But the present day is beautiful and so, for the first time, the dialectic that continues throughout the poem in several forms is first figured as the vacillating contrast between the beauty of nature and Wordsworth's melancholia. When we are introduced to the Traveller in stanza III, Wordsworth makes it clear that he is equivocating in his resolve to be a poet; he cannot maintain the gaze and so untoward 'blind thoughts' come upon him.<sup>41</sup> Nature is able to mollify Wordsworth's despondent spirit, though only briefly. In the lack of gaze, the mind grows protean.

The pleasant season did my heart employ:  
My old remembrances went from me wholly;

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<sup>40</sup> Wordsworth writes, [The poet] is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them (*MW* 603).

<sup>41</sup> The Pedlar in *The Ruined Cottage* rescues the traveller from his blind thoughts that are the result of his inability to gaze on nature: 'Why should we thus with an untoward mind / And in the weakness of humanity / From natural wisdom turn our hearts away, / To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears,' (193-96). Later Wordsworth in 'Resolution and Independence' will also be rescued from 'untoward thoughts' (53).

And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.<sup>42</sup>

But as it sometimes chanceth, from the might  
Of joy in minds that can no further go,  
As high as we have mounted in delight  
In our dejection do we sink as low;  
To me that morning did it happen so;  
And fears and fancies thick upon me came;  
Dim sadness—and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could name.  
(20-29)

This mentality is either projected onto or created by Wordsworth's newfangled nature of transience.<sup>43</sup> The beauty Wordsworth experiences is entirely dependent upon the sun, itself a grand metaphor for the cycles of nature.

All things that love the sun are out of doors,  
The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;  
The grass is bright with rain-drops;—on the moors  
The hare is running races in her mirth  
And with her feet she from the plashy earth  
Raises a mist, that' glittering in the sun,  
Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run.  
(8-14)

Here, present in 'morning's birth', Wordsworth inhabits that liminal Shellyan realm of dawn, represented as the place between temporality and transcendence; the sun wakes 'all things that in them wear / The form & character of mortal mould' (*The Triumph of Life* 16-17) but also lays the stars to rest. Wordsworth is more aware than ever that soon the sun will dissipate the bright rain-drops and subsequently the hare's trail of mist. This viewing is not the Romantic, melancholic gaze that arrests both subject and object to enhance poetic intensity until nature is harnessed and assimilated into the center of the self. Rather it is a forced attempt to situate nature as not just

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<sup>42</sup> 'Following *Ecclesiastes*, the melancholic views all human endeavor as vanity and vexation of spirit, a fallen state redeemable only through the rejection of the wordly and the perception of the divine' (Gidal 25).

<sup>43</sup> 'Such as is the air, such be our spirits; and as our spirits, such are our humours' (Burton 149).

separate from man but an entity subject to humankind's *employ*. The entire poem and the context surrounding it are contingent upon this word. But to willfully employ nature for the purpose of the heart's ease is to replace natural instincts with contrivances and enact a vanity that becomes hubris and is worse than the vanity of the men of cities. This hubris, or excessive pride, is reflected in Chatterton, the Romantic who, instead of succumbing to the materialism of his time, commits suicide.

[Chatterton] was famous as the youthful, impoverished suicide whose fatally dismissive treatment at the hands of the literary marketplace was emblematic of the 'miseries of literature.' This neglect and Chatterton's consequent penury and suicidal despondence worked on the imaginations and anxieties of the late-eighteenth-century-poets poets and typified for them the perils of the literary career. (Goldberg 682)

Wordsworth himself was susceptible to this form of neglect as well, though with Chatterton as example he comes to understand that he must concede to the 'literary marketplace' else face 'despondency and madness': 'My aversion from publication increases everyday, so much so, that no motives whatever, nothing but pecuniary necessity, will, I think, ever prevail upon me to commit myself to the press again' (*WFL* 121). One would think that Burns and Chatterton would be models to *learn* by, not to *live* by. But he succumbs to artistic hubris and admits 'By our own spirits are we [poets] deified' (47). Wordsworth wrote entirely for himself and was aware of his eminence. As we see in his letters he avoided publication when he could though he was, for the most part, dependent upon it. Regarding his hubris (this self-deifying) and his aversion to publication but obvious need for compensation, Wordsworth writes, 'He [Robert Southey] knew that I published those poems for money and money alone. He knew that money was of

importance to me.... I care little for the praise of any other professional critic, but as it may help me to pudding' (*WFL* 122). Here, with Chatterton and Burns as his precursors, Wordsworth comes to his first (though only momentary) resolution: he is a poet and 'We poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof come in the end to despondency and madness' (48-49).<sup>44</sup> It is a type of death-knell; the poet gives in to his calling and succumbs to the path of intense Imagination that will undoubtedly result in a failed vision as his youth fades behind him ushering in the death of natural instinct. In choosing the Stoic pose, he situates his desire to commune with nature by dying into it because nature is inherently above the 'ways of men, so vain and melancholy.' Going the path of the Stoic, he reinitiates the resolution of the poetic, self-deifying descent into the egotistical sublime. But he is saved.

Aged, poverty-stricken men inhabit Wordsworth's entire canon, serving as examples of humanism and the democratic leveling he sought since his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. These paradigms that Wordsworth uses as a means to portray the anguish associated with the human condition, are generally archetypes for the melancholic:

In medieval humoral cosmology, melancholy is traditionally associated with...*old age (or maturity)*; its planet is Saturn, among whose children the melancholic finds himself with the hanged man, *the cripple, the peasant, the gambler, the monk, and the swineherd [or herder, generally]*. (Agamben 11 [italics mine])

The majority of these figures are means to a didactic poetry that perpetually tropes itself. With some exceptions, Wordsworth's early poetry was, in the vein of his naturalistic humanism, concerned entirely with secular people and events. It is not until 'Resolution and Independence'

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<sup>44</sup> Burns's position was much less dire compared to Chatterton's; he somehow represents the possibility of 'an honest maintenance' but certainly not a life of 'comfort'.

that Wordsworth moves away from his 'religion' of naturalistic humanism, to embrace more fully the Christianity that will come to bear throughout a majority of his late poetry.

Wordsworth was born a Christian, and remained a soft practitioner throughout his life. Generally, the manner in which he sought union with his God was through the gaze on the natural, which almost perpetually seeks to create an Eden. Wordsworth's manifestation of this form of religion always deals with the transcendence of the present. 'Ordinary perception is then a mode of salvation for Wordsworth, provided we are awake fully to what we see. The common earth is to be hallowed by the human heart's and mind's holy union with it, and by that union the heart and mind in concert are to receive their bride's gift of phenomenal beauty, a glory in the grass, a splendor in the flower' (Bloom, *The Visionary Company* 128). Of course, Wordsworth's greatest fear is to lose this 'mode of salvation' in his old age, stated most succinctly in 'My heart leaps up when I behold' (1807).<sup>45</sup> In light of his recent responsibilities mentioned above and the subsequent realization of his crossing the threshold into adulthood, nature's once permanent piety is witnessed as transient. Because Wordsworth's cannot become a Chatterton and sustain his resolution to end in despondency and madness, the method of salvation must alter from the Imagination's self-deifying to something outside of the mind's ability to imbue meaning. 'Wordsworth celebrates the *given*—what we already possess' (Bloom, *The Visionary Company* 127), which is nature, the 'bride's gift of phenomenal beauty'; but when the given is stripped away in the realization that all is flux, what can remain? What can truly be *given*? Wordsworth must turn away from the earth and its sad, diurnal course and also from temporal ruins to somehow situate the answer to his melancholia within the eternal.

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<sup>45</sup> 'My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky: / So was it when my life began, / So is it now I am a man, / So be it when I shall grow old / Or let me die!' (1-6).

The presence of the leech gatherer is utterly original for Wordsworth. He comes in a flash that Wordsworth wants us to know is nothing short of divine intervention. In a letter regarding the poem he writes:

I consider the manner in which I was rescued from my dejection and despair almost as an interposition of Providence.... This feeling of spirituality or supernaturalness is again referred to as being strong in my mind in this passage. How came he here? thought I, or what can he be doing? I cannot conceive a figure more impressive than that of an old man like this, the survivor of a wife and ten children, travelling alone among the mountains and all lonely places, carrying with him his own fortitude and the necessities which an unjust state of society has laid upon him. (*WFL* 375)

For the first time, Wordsworth makes it clear that he wants it to be known that the manifestation of this character of melancholia (the aged man) is something beyond the human. In the poem itself Wordsworth puts forth four redundant assertions that the man's presence was the result of the initial, unmistakably Christian, 'peculiar grace' (50).

Now, whether it were by *peculiar grace*,  
A *leading from above*, a *something given*,  
Yet *it befell*, that, in this lonely place,  
When I with these untoward thought had striven,  
Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven  
I saw a man before me unawares:  
The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs.  
(50-57)

Grace is defined 'As a quality of God: benevolence towards humanity, bestowed freely and without regard to merit, and which manifests in the giving of blessings and granting of salvation' ('grace'). The theological sense is inescapable, as the grace is a 'something given' a 'leading

from above' to where there is 'a pool bare to the eye of heaven.' The conception of the man as a providential spirit is continued in Wordsworth's descriptions of him.

Until now, Wordsworth has also seen divine objects as natural ones and so in order for Wordsworth to justify the leech gatherer's providence, he must first transform him into a static object of the natural world before he can assert his divinity. The leech gatherer initially presents himself as human, however his humanity is already somewhat preternatural, as he is 'The oldest man...that ever wore grey hairs' (57). Immediately he becomes the paradigm for the melancholic old men that have populated Wordsworth's canon. Here Wordsworth's sensibility is greater and more pronounced than the travellers affected by the melancholic old men in his didactic poetry; and so because it has been established that while oftentimes it is Wordsworth who speaks in his poems, this is one of his most personal moments, so Wordsworth must continue to deify the leech gatherer if he is going to be affected by him. Unmoving, he is transformed into a natural object (a huge stone), whose position in nature is organic; he is not visiting, or passing through, he is merely *there*, convolved with the natural world.

A person reading the poem with feelings like mine will have been awed and controlled, expecting something spiritual or supernatural. What is brought forward? A lonely place, 'a pond, by which an old man *was*, far from all house or home:' not *stood*, nor *sat*, but *was*—the figure presented in the most naked simplicity possible. (*WFL* 375)<sup>46</sup>

By naturalizing the man, Wordsworth places him in the cyclical time of nature that, while still

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<sup>46</sup> This letter was written while the poem was still in manuscript; when the poem is published the 'was' actually does become 'stood,' but the intention remains.

transient, comes closer to the infinity of the Absolute that melancholics desire *because* they cannot attain it:

[T]he melancholic disorder presents itself as that which would possess and touch what ought merely to be the object of contemplation, and the tragic insanity of the saturnine temperament thus finds its roots in the intimate contradiction of a gesture that would embrace the unobtainable.... This is not, as some have claimed, merely a static limit in the mental structure of melancholics that excludes them from the metaphysical sphere, but rather of a dialectical limit tied to the erotic impulse to transgress.... (Agamben 18)

Because of the melancholic inability to ‘conceive the incorporeal’, Wordsworth must give the divine leech gatherer the temporal aspect of something natural so that he is better able to grasp the connection of an uninhabitable, transcendent time to the present inhabited one. Unmoving, the Leech-gatherer is transformed from a divine being, to a Man, then into an object whose position in nature is organic though still perplexing, and then into a daemon that inhabits a liminal position between temporality and transcendence that allows for the embrace with the metaphysical. Benjamin's understanding of the artistic symbol is integral to understanding the importance of the leech gatherer's progression of change. He writes,

The artistic symbol is plastic.... ‘What is dominant here is the inexpressible [the divine] which, in seeking expression, will ultimately burst the too fragile vessel of earthly form by the infinite power of its being. But herewith the clarity of vision is itself immediately destroyed, and all that remains is speechless wonder.’ In the plastic symbol ‘the essence does not strive for the extravagant but, obedient to nature, *adapts itself into natural forms, penetrates and animates them. The*

*conflict between the infinite and the finite is therefore resolved by the former becoming limited and so human.'* (Benjamin 164 [italics mine])

The resolution of the finite with the infinite is the way in which the dialectics of melancholia, the simultaneous 'erotic impulse to transgress' and obsession with earth and the temporal, is not reconciled but, more importantly, *witnessed*. This commingling of the infinite with the finite represents the process of Incarnation, which Wordsworth accomplishes in his poetic transitioning of the Leech-gatherer's plastic symbolism, turning his once inexpressible divine nature into that of the allegorical Human Ruin.

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie  
Couched on the bald top of an eminence;  
Wonder to all who do the same espy,  
By what comes it could thither come, and whence;  
So that it seems a thing endued with sense:  
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf  
Of rock or sand repositeth, there to sun itself;

Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead.  
(57-64)

In undergoing this change and inhabiting this liminal position, the leech gather becomes melancholia's dialectic Incarnate in the form of the Human Ruin. He represents stasis, not death but perpetual dying, with one foot in the temporal and one in the eternal. This liminal position, as well as his status as melancholia's dialectic Incarnate is then exacerbated by his occupation.

The use of leeches in medicinal bloodletting practices is one of the oldest documented medical procedures in the history of medicine (Michalsen 4). It maintained its popularity through antiquity and only began to wane (after an unprecedented interest only years prior) in the years following 'Resolution and Independence'. The belief of its efficacy came as a result of the

widespread practice of humoral pathology, which contended that the underlying cause for most illnesses was an imbalance (plethora) of bodily fluids, or humors, classified as: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Because melancholia was a humoral imbalance of black bile, bloodletting became the primary method to cure it: ‘Where the melancholy blood possesseth the whole body with the brain, it is best to begin with bloodletting’ (Burton 415), and the preferred method was leeching. In medieval Europe, leeching was so popular that ‘leech’ became a non-derogatory alternative to ‘doctor’<sup>47</sup> and millions of leeches were used each year to try and cure myriad illnesses. By the nineteenth century, leeching had gained again a prominent place in medicine and the leech market grew promising for gatherers. But soon the ‘rural’ gatherers could not meet the needs of a growing market.

Traditionally, the leech economy rested on the local knowledge of the rural ‘leech gatherer’, who used their bare legs as a lure to capture wild leeches. As the ‘leech craze’ took hold, this practice grew to greater scales, with old horses, cut so they bled, driven through leech ponds so that ever more numbers of leeches could be found to supply the growing trade.... So-called ‘leecheries’ consisting of specially built ponds for the express purpose of mass producing leeches were built in urban areas that were a far cry from the natural habitats of the leech. (Kirk and Pemberton 356)

It is likely the result of this over-leeching and leech farms that leads the Leech-gatherer to state ‘Once I could meet with them on every side; / But they have dwindled long by slow decay; / Yet still I persevere’ (124-26). His melancholy is not the result of his lack, for unlike Chatterton and

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<sup>47</sup> In Old-English, ‘leech,’ from the Germanic ‘laece’ meant *to heal* (Kirk and Pemberton 9).

Burns he perseveres. In this manner, his position as the completed melancholic Incarnate is in no way the result of dejection or any woe; rather it manifests in several very important ways.

As I have stated, climate was considered a primary factor for not only melancholia, but also society's disposition as a whole. Due to his occupation, the leech gatherer is constantly subject to a climate that, according to climatology, would bring about a melancholic disposition. Wordsworth states that 'gathering leeches far and wide / He travelled', standing in cool ponds to attract them. Later, Wordsworth envisions him 'About the weary moors continually, / Wandering about alone and silently (130-31). In the early nineteenth century, it was believed that this constant exposure would bring about melancholia and a number of other illnesses.

The worst of the three [type of melancholia] is a thick, cloudy, misty, foggy air, or such as come from fens, *moorish grounds*, lakes, muck-hills, draughts, sinks, where any carcasses, or carrion lies, or from whence any stinking fulsome smell comes: Galen, Avicenna, Mercurialis, new and old physicians, hold that such air is unwholesome, and engenders melancholy. (Burton 150 [italics mine])

The leech gatherer also continues to represent the many themes of melancholia discussed physically. He is bent double, and so like the 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' (1800) (who survives by grace) keeps his eyes on the earth wherever he travels.<sup>48</sup> He has also mastered the gaze in order to spot leeches through cloudy waters: 'he the pond / Stirred with his staff, *and fixedly did look* / Upon the muddy water, which he conned, / As if he had been reading a book'

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<sup>48</sup> 'On the ground / His eyes are turned, and as he moves along / *They* move along the ground' ('The Old Cumberland Beggar' 45-7).

(78-81).<sup>49</sup> Like Wordsworth, the gaze becomes a necessary aspect of his career, though the Leech-gatherer's gaze provides tangible sustenance provided by nature, whereas the nature given to Wordsworth only sustains the spirit. Oftentimes, nature will grow up through a ruin, dragging down what is in its way but in the end it will fortify what is left of the human monument and will subsequently be fortified by it: in ruins, the human and natural world can come to reach a symbiosis. Similarly, the Leech-gatherer, wading in pools of leech-infested water and baiting them with his legs, is perpetually exposed to the primary cure for melancholia. With this reciprocity, the Leech-gatherer becomes the Incarnate reconciliation of Wordsworth's dialectical melancholia, who through 'apt admonishment' allows Wordsworth to turn from the egotistical sublime that would perish in its pride, to God.

In stanza XVI, the Leech-gatherer's speech takes on the aspect of what I will venture to call Pentecostal Apostolicism, and the theme of his incarnation is continued.

So great also they say the power of melancholy is, that by its force, celestial spirits also are sometimes drawn into men's bodies' and 'There are also some prognostics, which are in the middle, betwixt natural and supernatural divination, as in those who are near to death, and being weakened with old age...easily perceive the light of divine revelation. (Agrippa 188-89)

In 'Resolution and Independence', the language of the Leech-gatherer slips into a transcendent speech reminiscent of the one God initiates in Pentecost via some humble vessel as a temporary

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<sup>49</sup> There are many connections between the act of reading and melancholia through history. 'Burton suggests that the recital or reading of his "lines" will have incantatory effects against melancholy, as if they were a spell....Burton does not represent his text as convincing the reader out of the excessive passions of melancholy through reason; instead, he imagines a more direct curative effect' (Lund 2).

abrogation of the affects of Nimrod's Tower of Babel. Like the transcendent Word, The Leech-gatherer's speech is 'Scarce heard' but still revelatory.

The old Man still stood talking by my side;  
But now his voice to me was like a stream  
Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;  
And the whole body of the man did seem  
Like one whom I had met with in a dream;  
Or like a man from some far region sent,  
To give me human strength, by apt admonishment.

(106-13)

In the moment of his speech, the Leech-gatherer transcends to the summit of the liminal place: as the man 'not alive nor dead', the daemon 'from some far region sent' (111), he rescues Wordsworth from the egotistical sublime. Wordsworth, who had been slipping in and out of untoward, melancholic thoughts as a result of his preoccupations with the possibility of 'Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty' in old age, finds solace in the Human Ruin who represents both physical and mental perseverance even in the direst circumstances:

I could have laughed my self to scorn to find  
In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.

(137-38)

In coming face-to-face with the Human Ruin, who had a 'more than human weight upon his frame', Wordsworth witnesses the ability to live in accordance with nature without having to sacrifice either his poetic vocation or his need for humanity. This awareness of the liminality is discovered in the transition from a religion of nature, to self-deifying, and finally to the worship of an Absolutely transcendent God. The transcendent, which the melancholic perpetually strives for, is no longer inaccessible. And so for the first time he looks away from (transient) nature, away from earth, and up from the 'pool bare to eye of heaven' to call on God, accessible through

the Leech-gatherer:

‘God,’ said I, ‘be my help and stay secure;  
I’ll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!’  
(139-40)

Wordsworth, unable to consign his belief entirely over to God (perhaps for fear of losing the abilities of the egotistical sublime) situates the Human Ruin as metonymy for God, completing—through language—the confluence of man with the eternal.

While forcing these lines into any conception of completion would be to ignore the complexities of Wordsworth's life and poetry, this calling on God is an intense transfiguration of Wordsworth's generally temporal supplications, representing an apogee in the reconciliation of his melancholia. Wordsworth's love of the natural world was itself a primary impetus for his melancholia, as he constantly lamented the future in which his vision could not draw upon the beauty from a daffodil or rainbow, and so nature could not be the salve. Wordsworth's canon provides readers with a topographical map of the search for that balm of his torment, and in that journey he rendered his poetry a simulacrum of the English landscape, complete with its lasting ruins to mark his passing.

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