

Wordsworth's "The Baker's Cart"*

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In its rendering of human suffering, William Wordsworth's "The Baker's Cart," a fragment composed between late 1796 and early 1797, foreshadows his concern with the struggles of the rural poor that would characterize his later works. This tale of an unnamed woman's want and grief connects with several issues raised in some of Wordsworth's subsequent poems, such as "The Thorn" (1798), "The Mad Mother" (1798), and "Ruth" (1800), which depict the disintegration of the human mind caused by unrelieved suffering. Written "[o]n the leaf preceding" (Butler 461) the first version of *The Ruined Cottage* (1798), "The Baker's Cart" contains motifs that would emerge in that poem, such as the protagonist's poverty, her "low and fearful voice" (l. 15), and her "[s]ick and extravagant" mind (l. 21). The nameless woman in "The Baker's Cart" could be Margaret or the Female Vagrant, or someone facing a similar plight. Wordsworth acknowledges that *Salisbury Plain* and *The Ruined Cottage* share a historical background: "the state in wh[ich] I represent Robert's mind to be I had frequent opportunities of observing at the commencement of our rupture with France in 93, opportunities of which I availed myself in the Story of the Female Vagrant" (*The Fenwick Notes* 82).

Although some literary critics, such as Heather Glen, Simon Jarvis and Nicholas Roe, refer to "The Baker's Cart" as a study for broader subjects, this paper is the first attempt to explain the significance of this fragment in Wordsworth's early career as a poet of social critique

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/debate/wordsworth-baker's-cart>.

who drew on the mental condition of the suffering lower orders, appealing to his readers' sympathy and implicitly demanding reform. Noting that Wordsworth "might have used" the situation described in "The Baker's Cart" for "protest" (136) but did not do so, Roe maintains that in this poem Wordsworth has already moved towards abandoning the genre of protest poetry and becoming a "poet of human suffering" (137). I modify this view by arguing that, although social and political criticism in "The Baker's Cart" is levelled down in comparison with the overt protest agenda of *Salisbury Plain* written to "expose the vices of the penal law and the calamities of war as they affect individuals" ("W. W. to Francis Wrangham" 145), traces of protest poetry are still detectable in it, namely in the shape of the author's preoccupation with the economics of war, the despotism of the government and the influence of the turbulent political situation on the lower classes. Through the critique of the figure of the baker, the poem makes a social reformer's bid for a just distribution of wealth.

However, in its shift inward to a psychological analysis of the protagonist's mental disposition, which attests to Wordsworth's emerging absorption in his characters' inner lives, "The Baker's Cart" differs from protest poems. The latter derive topics of invective from images of human wretchedness but neither delve into the states of mind of the oppressed people that they portray nor aim at a compassionate understanding of their misery.

Contextualizing "The Baker's Cart" and examining its continuities with and deviations from some late eighteenth-century literary conventions, I will show that this poem combines Wordsworth's interest in social and political protest with his concern for human experience and the influence of suffering on the mind. The woman's ordeal, which conveys the predicament of the rural poor in eighteenth-century England, "is [...] metamorphosed within the aesthetic which takes madness as the figure capable of representing this extreme suffering" (Martin 60). Her impaired mental and emotional state is a result of a corrupt governing system and a malevolent social order.

This paper also examines the influence of the concept of sympathy on the composition of "The Baker's Cart," and Wordsworth's use of it for developing his exploration of human nature. After the poet's disappointment with Godwinian rationalism, trusting the permanence and the communicability of human passions, he returns to the valorisation of emotions, grounds his philosophy in emotivist principles and incorporates sympathy into his aesthetic and ethical theories. In "The Baker's Cart," stirring his readers' emotions, he makes them sympathize with the suffering woman.

"The Baker's Cart," never titled or published by Wordsworth, is, to some extent, an editorial creation. It is not clear whether Wordsworth considered it a separate poem. The text edited by James Butler in *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar* "represent[s] the fragment in [its] most advanced state[...]" (Butler 461). Butler remarks that, since "it is uncertain how Wordsworth intended to use incomplete passages of revision [...] they are excluded from the reading text" (461). Ernest de Selincourt, on the other hand, incorporates parts of this material into his edition of "The Baker's Cart"¹ ("Incipient Madness"), though his ordering of lines must be based on surmise. Moreover, Simon Jarvis draws attention to "the only part of the existing manuscript material which has not made it into any printed reading text of the poem as a whole" ("Wordsworth and Idolatry" 4). I relate to the lines printed by de Selincourt and Jarvis, examining their choices and interpretations.

Social Criticism

"The Baker's Cart" shares some features with contemporary magazine poems. Robert Mayo points out that "[b]ereaved mothers and deserted females were almost a rage in the poetry departments of the 1790's" (496) and classifies these suffering women into stereotypical categories. The nameless protagonist in "The Baker's Cart" belongs to the category of women who "have been rendered destitute by death, war, exile, and other kinds of misfortune" (496). Since in this poem the

husband is absent, she could also belong to the class of women who “have been abandoned by their lovers or husbands” (496)—the husbands of Margaret and the Female Vagrant join the army in a time of economic crisis to help provide for their families. However, Wordsworth deviates from most magazine poets in his “attention to particular localities in which events were supposed to occur” (497). “The Baker’s Cart” demonstrates the same particularity that Mayo finds in *Lyrical Ballads*. This poem is grounded in “aberrant and traumatic empirical phenomena” (Faflak 80). The suffering of the protagonist is “the consequence of a specific set of historical circumstances” (Martin 87), her belonging to a specific social class at a specific time and place.

“The Baker’s Cart” is also one of the first “drafts of Margaret’s story” (Magnuson 105), which Wordsworth contextualizes in the Fenwick Note to *The Excursion*: “for several passages describing the employment & demeanour of Margaret during her affliction I was indebted to observations made in Dorsetshire & afterwards at Alfoxden in Somersetshire where I resided in 97. & 98” (*The Fenwick Notes* 78). He adds: “[a]ll that relates to Margaret & the ruined cottage &c was taken from observations made in the South West of England” (199). “The Baker’s Cart” is Wordsworth’s testimony of the plight of the lower orders in late eighteenth-century rural England.

That in “The Baker’s Cart” the baker’s wain is “loaded” (l. 3) does not necessarily indicate, as Roe claims, that “the land is evidently one of plenty” (136) and that it is exclusively this woman who is deprived of bread. Rather, the word “loaded” conveys the friction between the rich and the poor: the opening lines of “The Baker’s Cart” foreground “the extent and greatness of that oppression, whose effects have rendered it possible for the few to afford so much, and have shown us that such a multitude of our brothers exist in even helpless indigence” (“A Letter to the Bishop” 93).

In “A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff” (1793) Wordsworth condemns the ills of social hierarchy, drawing attention to “the baleful influence of aristocracy and nobility upon human happiness and virtue” (96). The gap between the rich and the poor is also pointed out

in Coleridge's protest lecture "On the Present War" (1795): a "Feast for the rich, and their usual scanty Morsel to the poor" (66). In *Salisbury Plain*, the disillusioned poet reflects on the privations of the hungry savage who has known no "happier days" (l. 12) since the outbreak of the war with France. Whereas the "war-song's peal" (l. 15), which shakes the valley, lulls the indigent to sleep among boars, wolves, and bears in "the rushing rains" (l. 7), the upper classes "on the couch of Affluence rest / By laughing Fortune's sparkling cup elate" (ll. 24-25). The famished man in this poem is one of the many who of "his hard lot partake, / [and who] Repose in the same fear, to the same toil awake" (ll. 17-18). The anonymous protagonist in "The Baker's Cart" belongs to this class of people. Her namelessness suggests that her fate is serial, shared by many.

While in the magazine poems, as in the opening lines of *Salisbury Plain*, "suffering is rendered in terms of a kind of generalized human nature" (Mayo 497), "generalized poverty [and] hardship" (505), one of the novelties of *Lyrical Ballads* is Wordsworth's "imaginative use of concrete detail, which give[s] the poem[s] some of [their] feeling of intensity" (498). The generalized depiction of the conventional social barriers that divide the rich and the poor, which is the focus of *Salisbury Plain's* opening stanzas, is replaced by a specific incident in "The Baker's Cart": a baker's refusal to give a mother and her five children bread. Bread represents basic human needs: this family is not only denied "[t]he common food of hope" (l. 20) but is literally deprived of elementary nutrition. That the horse is "accustomed" (l. 2) to stopping at the woman's door implies that her family, like that of Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*, has been impoverished recently; a short while ago, she was able to afford bread.

Roe notes that "[u]p to line 10, the poem describes a routine inexplicably upset as the wain moves off" (136). In fact, however, an explanation is available. "The Baker's Cart" was written at a time of rising bread prices. The ten years following 1791 were characterized by an unusual scarcity. Following the upheaval caused by the French Revolution, a series of misfortunes, combined with the expenses of war and

poor legislative decisions, led to food shortages: the government's policy of taking over "the foreign corn trade with the avowed intention of starving France [...] came nearer to starving England" (Barnes 76). Moreover, in 1793 "it was [...] found that the machinery for determining the prices regulating importation and exportation [of grain] was not functioning properly" (71). The hot dry summer of 1794 was followed by "one of the three memorable cold [winters] of the eighteenth century, and a very meagre crop was the result" (72). Because there was no surplus of wheat from earlier years, prices began to rise dramatically, and "the suffering experienced by the lower classes was almost unprecedented" (72). Coleridge observes that the repercussions of economic and political instability always "fall [...] heaviest on the unprotected innocent": "the cottage of the poor Man is stripped of every Comfort" ("On the Present War" 65), while dearth "enlarge[s] its terrible features into the threatening face of Famine" (74). In *The Ruined Cottage*, "the plague of war" (l. 136), aggravated by "[t]wo blighting seasons when the fields were left / With half a harvest" (ll. 134-35), has adverse effects on all social classes, but it is the poor who are wiped out: "many rich / Sunk down as in a dream among the poor, / And of the poor did many cease to be" (ll. 141-43).²

The rise in the price of grain resulted in riots throughout the country.³ In an attempt to relieve the nation-wide misery, "a law was passed ordering the payment of bounties on wheat [...] imported into Great Britain," while a bill "made it a criminal offence to hinder the transportation of grain" (Barnes 74). The government also tried to "fix [...] the amount of bread each man, woman and child was to be allowed a week" (75), and the House of Commons "took up the plan to secure a voluntary pledge to decrease the consumption of wheaten bread [...] by at least a third: either by cutting down the amount of wheaten bread used, or by eating bread containing substitutes" (74). Consequently, an act was passed permitting the bakers to make and sell certain kinds of mixed bread. However, such legislative measures were met by opposition not only from the common folk but also from "the baker and miller" (75). These are the backgrounds for Words-

worth's choice of bread, or lack of it, to communicate the impoverished woman's suffering in "The Baker's Cart."

As soon as the horse stops (as it is used to doing), "o'er his head / Smack [goes] the whip" (ll. 3-4). What leads to the cracking of the whip are "human actions—grotesquely, yet from [the woman's] perspective accurately enough, perceived as a single malevolent impersonal process" (Glen 232). The sense of cruelty is intensified by the brutality of the invisible wagoner, who urges the horse to proceed. This invisibility of human agency recurs in the poem in the sole statement the woman makes: "that waggon does not care for us" (l. 16). Roe reads the woman's words as "irrationally attributing her own desolation to the wain's desertion of routine" (137). However, the personified wagon can also be read as a metonymical representation of the unjust governing system; its hostility is that of society. The woman's privations are inscribed within a social order that does not prevent such incidents. Her words emerge as severe social criticism.

In his 1801 letter to Charles James Fox, Wordsworth is grieved by the "decay of domestic affections among the lower orders of society" (260). Sixteen years later, in his letter to Daniel Stuart, urging the restoration of affections among people even when it comes to such impersonal issues as business and trade, he laments the disappearance of that mutuality of respect and concern which is fundamental to social unity: "I see clearly that the principal ties which kept the different classes of society in a vital and harmonious dependence upon each other have, within these 30 years, either been greatly impaired or wholly dissolved" (783-84). In the manuscript of the 1835 "Postscript," the poet calls the attention of the elite to their contribution to the deteriorating condition of their abject countrymen: "it is an easy thing for men in the upper ranks of society, who have not duly considered the misery" of the lower ranks, to blame the law "when in fact that mischief has mainly arisen from their own fault" (263). Although in "The Baker's Cart" the baker does not belong to the upper classes, he too exempts himself from responsibility towards his suffering countrymen.

Wordsworth believed that both the state and the individual had a responsibility to relieve and sustain the poor. He agrees with William Godwin, whose *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) influenced his philosophical and political principles during 1794 and 1795, that “[e]very man is entitled [...] not only to the means of being, but of well being” (Godwin 415-16). However, whereas Godwin sees in charity “a very indirect and ineffectual way” of arriving at a social system in which “all men [...] receive the supply of their wants” (419),⁴ Wordsworth considers charity a necessary palliative, if not a solution, for the plight of the poor. “The Baker’s Cart,” in which the nameless woman is “a victim of a society that has no charity to offer” (Magnuson 105) and of individuals who are indifferent to her suffering, reflects the poet’s outrage at the lack of charity, both private and public.⁵

Advocating a system of benevolent paternalism, Wordsworth holds that it is “the duty of a Christian government, standing in loco parentis towards all its subjects, to make such effectual provision, that no one shall be in danger of perishing either through the neglect or harshness of its legislation” (“Postscript 1835” 242). Thus, denying the needy relief “infringe[s] upon one of the most precious rights of the English people,” namely, the indispensable and even natural right of “self-preservation” (241). In the “Postscript” of 1835 Wordsworth reiterates the idea that “all persons who cannot find employment, or procure wages sufficient to support the body in health and strength, are entitled to a maintenance by law” (240). This would reduce or even preclude the occurrence of such situations as that of the Female Vagrant, who “homeless near a thousand homes [...] stood, / And near a thousand tables pined and wanted food” (*Salisbury Plain* ll. 386-87), or that of starving children who stare at a loaded wagon craving bread. Like Ruth, who “begs at one steep place, / Where up and down with easy pace / The horseman-travellers ride” (“Ruth” ll. 208-10), the family in “The Baker’s Cart” should have the opportunity of relying on public or private altruism.

The Psyche of the Deprived

Wordsworth claimed to see "into the depths of human souls—/ Souls that appear to have no depth at all / To vulgar eyes" ("The Prelude of 1805" Book XII, ll. 166-68); he came to believe that his works "may in some small degree enlarge [...] our knowledge of human nature" ("W. W. to Charles James Fox" 262). Through his characters the poet probes "our elementary feelings" and explores how "the human mind act[s] and react[s]" ("Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)" 124, 120). "The Baker's Cart" describes the influence of a malevolent world on a character whose human consciousness he recognizes. Offering new insights into the nature of suffering, Wordsworth represents the response of the protagonist's mind to abjection.

In *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, pointing to the government's role in generating criminals, which was part of the oppositionist platform in the political debate of the 1790s,⁶ Wordsworth focuses on a series of external circumstances that drive the Sailor to crime and the Female Vagrant to destitution. By contrast, in "The Baker's Cart" he mediates the socio-economic crisis of the unnamed protagonist through the rendering of her experience and the exploration of her mental condition. Unlike the Pedlar in *The Ruined Cottage*, who philosophizes Margaret's suffering with the purpose of coming to terms with it or at least situating it in the human life cycle, the speaker in this poem examines the woman's traumatic experience from a psychological perspective.

"The Baker's Cart" was written in a turbulent post-revolutionary period of skepticism which unsettled traditional values; the high hopes raised by the French Revolution had been shattered, and the English people were subjected to various forms of political and social oppression. In *The Prelude* Wordsworth characterizes the 1790s as the times of "utter loss of hope itself / And things to hope for" (Book XI, ll. 6-7). "The Baker's Cart" reflects this climate of hopelessness: the impoverished woman's physical appearance and "low and fearful voice" (l. 15) convey the impression that she has long been "denied /

The common food of hope" (ll. 19-20). Her destitute children watch the cart with longing, but "ere the grove of birch / Conceal[s] the wain, into their wretched hut / They all return" (ll. 8-10). This description conveys a state of helplessness and a submissive acceptance of misery.

Whereas Margaret's suffering results in her neglect of her children and the death of the younger one, the mother in "The Baker's Cart" is concerned about her children's well-being, which is suggested in the use of the collective pronoun "us" (l. 16) instead of the singular "me" in her only statement. Watching her children yearn for bread and the knowledge that nobody cares about her family's strife intensify her hopelessness and misery. In contrast to her children, the woman's reaction to excessive suffering transcends passive acceptance and results in the disintegration of her mind. She creates an alternative reality: her "rebellious heart to its own will / Fashions the laws of nature" (ll. 24-25). The fact that, in his edition, de Selincourt presents "The Baker's Cart" as part of the larger fragment "Incipient Madness" suggests his perception of the former as a case study of derangement.

In 1798, while he was composing some of the poems of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth "sent off to Bristol for a copy of Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia*, a lengthy medical treatise [with] case-histories of extreme mental states" (Glen 227). This attests to his interest in the workings of the deranged mind. In many of his poems, such as "The Thorn," "The Mad Mother," and "Ruth," the theme of madness is linked to abandonment, homelessness and vagrancy. This combination of concerns started as early as 1793 in *Salisbury Plain* even before the composition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Mental disorder can be a source of creativity: it has been explored by artists "to demonstrate its proliferating fantasy aspects and its flamboyant dislocation of normal thought processes as an artistically innovative stance" (Mitchell 5). Grouped together, Wordsworth's poems that deal with mental disturbance, of which "The Baker's Cart" is a precursor, could be viewed as a collection of case-studies of suffering individuals, anticipating the case-study

research methodology which would be later developed in the fields of science and psychology.

What in the eighteenth century, long before psychoanalysis, was labelled as madness might correspond in some cases to later diagnoses of hysteria, melancholia or traumatic neurosis. In the twentieth century, hysteria, a universal and cross-cultural phenomenon, was recognized as a psychological condition, and other terms for it came into use. Although the symptoms of this mental disorder depend on the cultural or social context in which they appear, there are many commonalities between them. Some of these symptoms are captured in the mental condition of the protagonist in "The Baker's Cart." Later studies of mental disorder can shed light on their representation in the poem.

The precipitating causes of traumatic neurosis are psychical traumas. Any experience which provokes "fear, helplessness, or horror" (Yehuda 108), "fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain" (Breuer and Freud 6) can cause trauma. The woman in "The Baker's Cart" has undergone a traumatic experience which triggers mental disorder. In de Selincourt's edition, her condition is associated with "rumination deep" (l. 54). Here the verb "ruminate" means "[t]o muse, meditate, ponder" but its literal meaning is "[t]o chew, turn over in the mouth again" (*OED*, "ruminate" *v.* 2.a, 4.b). Evoking the imagery of the consumption of food, Wordsworth shows that privation, grief and pain have the power to drain or consume the sufferer, both physically and mentally. This corresponds to Edmund Burke's observation that "it is the nature of grief to keep its object perpetually in its eye" (84). In "The Baker's Cart," the word "rumination" enhances the reader's sense of the protagonist's strife: suffering not only gnaws but doubly consumes her; she is herself like the cud of a ruminant.

Max Byrd defines madness as "withdrawal from reality" (117). In "The Baker's Cart," the protagonist's refashioning of the laws of nature can be perceived as such. Disconnection from reality caused by intense suffering resurfaces in many of Wordsworth's poems of the period. In *Salisbury Plain*, for instance, crumbling beneath the weight

of her misfortunes, the Female Vagrant feels as if she were “transported to another world” (l. 371) characterized by alienation from humankind. In *The Ruined Cottage*, unable to resume her life after the departure of her husband, Margaret “develop[s] severe disorientation” (Magnuson 100). On his later visits to the cottage the Pedlar notices that her behaviour is mechanical, and that she is non-communicative.

Unrelieved agony dehumanizes the sufferer. In de Selincourt’s version of “The Baker’s Cart,” the voice of the woman, who has no emotional outbursts, is “[t]ied to dead things” (“Incipient Madness” l. 55). Her simple words convey her harsh circumstances as if they were ordinary features of everyday life. This lack of emotional display is a manifestation of mental disturbance (Mitchell 2). Repressed feelings, especially negative ones, such as fear and anxiety, resurface in the shape of hallucinations, deliria and trances—“pathological expressions” (5) of human emotions. The tattered and “[s]ick” (“The Baker’s Cart” l. 21) mind of the woman is described as “extravagant” (l. 21); exceeding the bounds of reason; “creat[ing] fictions” (Magnuson 107); delusive or prone to illusions.

As if studying the progression of this woman’s mental condition, Wordsworth observes that she is driven by “strong access / Of momentary pangs” (ll. 21-22) which culminate in “that state / In which all past experience melts away” (ll. 22-23). As her distress erases her past, she plunges into a state of timelessness which characterizes mental instability: “the confusion of past and present may be the prime means of indicating derangement” (Martin 22). Her near-speechlessness demonstrates “an inability to make sense of things,” which “becomes inseparable from trauma itself” (Faflak 81). Indeed, aphasia and paraphasia are phenomena that accompany hysterical attacks (see Breuer and Freud 22).

Robin Downie remarks that, whereas in many works of creative writing mental derangement is used as a literary device which provides no understanding of the phenomenon, some creative artists have succeeded in capturing instances of mental disorder in a way

that complements scientific psychiatry (see 49). Although in the eighteenth century the field of psychology was unknown, in "The Baker's Cart" Wordsworth's brief analysis of the woman's mental disposition exemplifies his preoccupation with the human psyche and anticipates modern psychological theories. He provides the reader with what Joel Faflak deems an "incipient psychoanalysis" (81). In this respect, Wordsworth was ahead of his time.

Wordsworth's delving into this woman's psychological condition indicates that he is concerned with not only the physical aspects of suffering but also its emotional repercussions. His shift to her inner experience, rather than signalling a departure from social criticism, enhances it since her hopelessness and misery, which disturb her mind, are induced by a corrupt social order and human negligence. The content of the woman's words, her characterization of the attitude of society, contradicts the poet's claim that her statement is a product of a sick mind as well as his interpretation of her mental state as disconnected from reality. This contradiction might stem from Wordsworth's "divergent purposes" in 1797: "[h]e wants to write telling social criticism, which prompts his giving her those words, and he wants to demonstrate that the effects of injustice are sicknesses that she suffers" (Magnuson 107).

Sympathy

The 1790s "saw an alteration in the structure of feeling for the poor and disenfranchised among articulate liberals, radicals, and dissenters" (Roe 129). Accordingly, the popular poetry of the last years of the eighteenth century drew on the destitution, pain and distress of the lower orders with the purpose of "mak[ing] blunt appeals to sympathy" for them (Mayo 500-01). Such miserable characters as the woman in "The Baker's Cart" were typically viewed by the readers of the time as "objects of sympathy and [...] of humanitarian feeling" (496). Through the depiction of her physical and mental distress, Words-

worth stirs the emotions of his readers and prompts them to identify with her.

Wordsworth, who in the aftermath of the French Revolution and under the influence of Godwinian rationalism was “enflamed / With thirst of a secure intelligence, / And sick of other passion” (“The Prelude of 1805” Book X, ll. 832-34), comes to anchor benevolence in emotions, which hitherto he deemed unstable and inadequate. His trust in the universality of human sentiments is articulated in the 1800 “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” when he speaks of “durable” (124) truths in human nature and of “certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind” (130). The poet moves from rationalism to emotivism not only in his ethical but also in his aesthetic stance. His belief in the communicability of “the essential passions of the heart” (124) becomes the basis of his poetics.

Traces of this attitude are already detectable in the “The Baker’s Cart.” In de Selincourt’s edition, the woman’s voice betrays that she is “seeking sympathy” (l. 55). Edmund Burke observes that “sympathy must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected” (91). Adam Smith likewise comments that our feelings of sympathy for another person are produced by imaginatively placing ourselves in his (or her) situation. Thus we “become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations” (14). These accounts of our inserting ourselves into another person’s situation are echoed by Wordsworth in the 1802 “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” when he talks about “the wish of the poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time, perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs” (1443).⁷

Simon Jarvis notes that, before quoting the woman’s words and after stating that she craves sympathy, Wordsworth intended to insert the phrase “in stocks and stones” (“Wordsworth and Idolatry” 3). In his reading, “the woman’s pitiable search for sympathy in stocks and

stones risks idolatry" (4). However, her appeal for sympathy to stones and to the stocks that make up the wagon points to the stone-heartedness of the people who have denied her and her children bread. Rather than indicating "active impiety" (4), the metonymic displacement of the baker's emotionlessness onto his cart and her subsequent seeking sympathy in inanimate objects illustrates the consequences of extreme suffering encountered by harshness and neglect.

The woman in "The Baker's Cart" also seeks the sympathy of the speaker. At first, she approaches him—"to my side / [she] came" (ll. 12-13), and, after seeing "what way [his] eyes / Were turn'd" (ll. 14-15), she addresses him. The first words of the poem—"I have seen"—indicate that the speaker is involved in her story; the events are filtered through his perspective. Like the Pedlar, who has a first-hand knowledge of the details of Margaret's ordeal, the speaker is not a stranger or a passer-by but knows this woman personally. This is suggested by the fact that the first six lines of "The Baker's Cart" constitute one long sentence in which the speaker, in a sustained apostrophe, directly addresses the suffering woman using the second person "you." Moreover, he is familiar with her routine; he knows that the horse is "accustomed" (l. 2) to stopping at her door. As Adam Smith remarks, intimacy enhances sympathy; by contrast, if we are not familiar with the circumstances of the sufferer, "though we are uneasy both from the vague idea of his misfortune, and still more from torturing ourselves with conjectures about what it may be, yet our fellow-feeling is not very considerable" (16). Accordingly, when the speaker witnesses the inhumanity of the incident, he is stirred to a sympathetic identification with the suffering family. His hyperbolic observation "you were left, as if / You were not born to live, or there had been / No bread in all the land" (ll. 4-6) conveys his frustration on seeing an instance of systematic callousness which transforms into cruelty.

Sometimes the experience of the sufferer and that of the person who sympathizes with him/her are unsharable or incommensurable:

“when we put ourselves in [the sufferer’s place], that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality” (Smith 16). The insane, like the dead, belong to the category of people for whom we have a feeling that they themselves are incapable of understanding. According to Smith, of all the calamities to which a person is likely to be subjected, the loss of reason is “by far the most dreadful” (17). Therefore, people who sympathize with the insane “behold that last stage of human wretchedness with deeper commiseration than any other” (17). And still, the deranged person who suffers might not be aware of the reality of his or her situation. Like stocks and stones, the woman in “The Baker’s Cart” cannot reciprocate the speaker’s feelings.

After the speaker repeats the woman’s words to the reader, he “moves from alignment to meditation” (Glen 231). The “involuntary look” (l. 11) with which he examines the scene suggests that, unlike Wordsworth’s 1814 Pedlar who has “observed the progress and decay / Of many minds, of minds and bodies too” (*The Excursion*, Book I, ll. 404-05), and who can “afford to suffer / With those whom he s[ees] suffer” (ll. 399-400), the speaker cannot do so. His unintentional turning away from the woman’s misery is marked by the switch of the pronouns from “you” to “she”: instead of addressing her personally, he reports her actions and mental condition in third person.

The closing stanza of *Salisbury Plain* urges those who believe in justice to rebel against their despotic rulers and free the people from oppression. By contrast, the speaker in “The Baker’s Cart,” though embittered and frustrated, avoids homiletic declamations and overt “moral commentary” (Jarvis, “William Wordsworth” 294). However, rather than indicating “blank confusion” (Roe 136-37) or “bafflement” (Glen 229), his silence can be perceived as conveying protest, scorn and pity. Some late eighteenth-century poets leaned towards representing the suffering of “miserable, grief-stricken” characters “with great ‘simplicity’ of manner and sentiment” (Mayo 496) and without “affectation” (494). Instead of effecting detachment or signifying

indifference, the somewhat dispassionate tone of the speaker in "The Baker's Cart" conforms to this literary taste.

Although in "The Baker's Cart" the poet refrains from directly addressing the readers, his detailed description of the scene of the woman's misery and her psychological condition invites them into her predicament, so that they can put themselves in her place, bring their feelings close to hers and share her sorrow. This method is continued in Wordsworth's subsequent poetry. For instance, in the early version of *The Borderers* his "care [is] almost exclusively given to the passions & the characters [...] that the reader [...] might be moved" (*The Fenwick Notes* 77); the poet asserts that the feelings which "The Idiot Boy" communicates are "such as all men may sympathize with" ("W. W. to John Wilson" 298); in the 1800 note to "The Thorn" he states that one of his objectives is "to take care that words, which in [certain characters'] minds are impregnated with passion, should likewise convey passion to readers who are not accustomed to sympathizing with men" (Butler and Green 351). Coleridge concurs with this attitude: for him, one of the cardinal features of poetry is "the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader" (*Biographia Literaria* 5). Gaining his readers' sympathy for his suffering characters, Wordsworth, who believed that his poetry could exercise a beneficial influence, enhances the moral dimension of his works. In his later years, he insisted that people praised him not simply for the "pleasure [his poems] bestowed, but of gratitude for moral and intellectual improvement received" ("W. W. to John Kenyon" 813).

According to utilitarian philosophers, such as David Hume and Edmund Burke, feelings of sympathy are translated into acts of kindness: "the pain we feel" when we observe someone's distress "prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer" (Burke 93). In Wordsworth's terms, "men know that emotions [of commiseration] are not given to be indulged for their own sakes" because "sympathy must be followed by action; and if there exist a previous conviction that the power to relieve is utterly inadequate to the demand, the eye shrinks from communication with wretchedness, and pity and

compassion languish, like any other qualities that are deprived of their natural aliment" ("Postscript, 1835" 247). Mere compassion would not ameliorate the woman's condition. Prompting his readers to identify with the lower orders, Wordsworth implicitly urges them to seek change.

Thus, "The Baker's Cart," one of the fragments from which Margaret's story in *The Ruined Cottage* developed, represents Wordsworth's concerns in the oppressive 1790s. The nameless woman's predicament, like that of the Female Vagrant, "is directly linked to an individual history in which specific events in late-eighteenth century England figure" (Martin 59). Among other things, Wordsworth's interest in "the local" (Mayo 497) is what distinguishes his early poetry from contemporary magazine poems.

In "The Baker's Cart," the exploration of the protagonist's inner experience is "not a turn away from the social, but a way of getting to it" (Jarvis, "William Wordsworth" 294). Combining Wordsworth's interest in social and political protest with his interest in human experience, this poem illustrates his early attitudes to the subjects of social sympathy, poverty and public utility. Like the majority of the poems of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, "The Baker's Cart" exhibits "the sentimental humanitarianism" (Mayo 506) of late eighteenth-century popular verse, which portrays human misery with the purpose of eliciting the reader's sympathy. Although some critics, such as Nicholas Roe and Heather Glen, interpret the speaker's silence as confusion, his inability or refusal to comment on the woman's misery can be read as an expression of frustration with the contemporary state of social affairs.

"The Baker's Cart" also attests to Wordsworth's interest in mental processes and "the pathology of the psyche" (Faflak 81). Although the poem shares some features with contemporary protest poetry, its turn inward to discover the disintegration of the human mind caused by misery and hopelessness signals a departure from this genre. Wordsworth's exploration of the influence of suffering on the human mind would become one of the Pedlar's major concerns in *The Ruined Cottage*. However, whereas the Pedlar, through Margaret's ordeal, comes

to terms with human misery, in "The Baker's Cart" the poet has not yet resolved his attitude to suffering. In 1799, Wordsworth adds a consolation to Margaret's tale in *The Ruined Cottage*, but "The Baker's Cart" has no resolution, partly because it is incomplete. This fragment lends support to the poet's stance in *The Borderers*: "suffering is permanent, obscure and dark, / And shares the nature of infinity" (III.v. 64-65).

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NOTES

¹In de Selincourt's edition, the fragment has no separate title and is presented as the last part of "Incipient Madness," another fragment which Wordsworth wrote in 1797 while he was working on the first drafts of *The Ruined Cottage*.

²The line numbers in this paper refer to the 1799 version of *The Ruined Cottage* as it appears in *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, edited by James Butler.

³At the end of October 1795, the people of London and Westminster, who held the war responsible for the distress, attacked the King's carriage, chanting "no Pitt, no war, bread, bread."

⁴According to Godwin, the practice of charity presupposes the existence of social division, which is against the principle of justice: justice and virtue "do not authorize us to accumulate luxuries upon ourselves, while we see others in want of the indispensable means of improvement and happiness" (419).

⁵In 1800, following another wave of famine, a committee appointed by the House of Commons warned "certain individuals" against "deliver[ing] flour and bread to the poor at reduced rates" (Barnes 77).

⁶In "On the Present War," emphasizing the nation's entrapment in the vicious circle of war, destruction, economic decline, hunger, violence, crime and persecution, Coleridge writes: "if in the bitter cravings of hunger the dark tide of passions should swell, and the poor wretch rush from despair into guilt, then the government indeed assumes the right of punishment though it had neglected the duty of instruction, and hangs the victim for crimes, to which its own wide-wasting follies and its own most sinful omissions had supplied the cause and the temptation" (70).

⁷Some of Wordsworth's earlier works are "imbued with Enlightenment values" (Day 77).

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