Chapter 5

Relations of Scarcity: Ecology and Eschatology in The Ruined Cottage

I

“[O]ne of the most beautiful poems of the language” is how Coleridge in 1832 remembered Wordsworth’s The Ruined Cottage as he had first known it, long before The Excursion (TT I 306). Modern readers agree, and a number of ecocritics find Wordsworth’s 1798 poem of striking relevance. It remains unclear, however, whether romanticism is a local strain within ecocriticism, or whether the former is the inevitable, if problematic, kernel of the latter. It is possible to see romantic ecology as pivotal, able either to affirm how proto-ecological the romantic poets were, or to recognize contemporary ecology as a uniquely romantic offspring.1 British romantic nature poetry does not simply claim kinship with ecotheory, however: here is a poetics liable to probe the resilience of contemporary ecological insights, even while confirming their general stance. Romantic poetry may yet prove a difficult ally when it comes to any modern turn toward self-sufficient naturality, one shorn of eschatological horizons.

Wordsworth’s The Ruined Cottage is a case in point, a poetic narrative by turns unconsolatory or serene as the poet worked over versions of the text between the spring of 1797 and 1798, taking up the work again the following year but never publishing it in that form, holding it back until it could source the very different ethos of The Excursion in 1814. Wordsworth critics have had to judge whether his chastening of the romantic imagination by recalling it to nature is audacious or pedestrian, or whether a subtle poetic idealization adequate to both
imagination and nature is achieved at too great a displacement of human issues. *The Ruined Cottage* appears to confront these questions head-on, and represents a vital provocation for romanticists emerging as ecocritics. Instructed by their readings, I assess the relevance of the poem to our cultural experience today in the light of a key issue within ecological thinking: the question and standing of scarcity.  

II

*The Ruined Cottage*, like “The Ancient Mariner,” is as much about the narrating of a tale as the tale itself. As Geoffrey Hartman notes, the more theatrical aspects of human extremity are displaced from voyeurism to make us think about how tragic incidents affect the outcome of human character as it sympathizes with such incidents. An itinerant Pedlar tells the young Narrator the story of Margaret. The two men have encountered each other at the site of the cottage ruins where Margaret’s history was lived out. Reduced by economic hardship, her husband had joined the army, leaving her his enlistment pay in an ineffectual attempt to ward off indigence, but as much to escape the demoralizing disintegration of his family. He does not return, and Margaret passes the years importuning passersby for news of him. Every time he calls, the Pedlar observes the progress of neglect, both in the cottage and the children, while Margaret herself, though rooted to where she last saw her husband, grows disheartened. The Pedlar’s returns are irregular but partake of an implied seasonal rhythm, one that witnesses but scarcely intervenes in Margaret’s decline into isolation and death, her children having already preceded her. Wordsworth’s first attempts at this narrative were appropriately bleak, but in March 1798, he added a reflective passage spoken by the Pedlar. This has become known as the “reconciling addendum,” in which the Pedlar schools the young Narrator, who has suffered disquiet, to temper his emotions by a renewed sympathy with a mutely witnessing natural world, the very nature whose harshness Wordsworth has been at pains to implicate in Margaret’s desolation. For a number of critics this addendum has proved unacceptable, a moral sleight of hand or a false universalizing of the historical predicament out of which the poem is built.

From an ecocritical perspective, the passage requires careful handling, for if ecocriticism has anything to say it must do so here, where nature is brought to the fore, but where its capacity to play a meaningful role in any moral resolution is most in dispute. Jonathan Bate