19

OF CABBAGES AND RADICALS

Racedown Lodge, 1795–1797

Let us suppose a young Man of great intellectual powers, yet without any solid principles of genuine benevolence. His master passions are pride and the love of distinction. He has deeply imbibed the spirit of enterprize in a tumultuous age. He goes into the world and is betrayed into a great crime.

The influence on which all his happiness is built immediately deserts him. His talents are robbed of their weight; his exertions are unavailing, and he quits the world in disgust, with strong misanthropic feelings. In his retirement, he is impelled to examine the reasonableness of established opinions and the force of his mind exhausts itself in constant efforts to separate the elements of virtue and vice.

(preface to *The Borderers*, 1797)

Wordsworth left London so hastily that Godwin was not aware of it; he called on August 18, but Wordsworth was already gone. The prospect of exciting remunerative work had brought him rushing to town in February, but a much more leisured prospect now beckoned him out of it, made all the more attractive by the dangers and anxieties he was leaving behind.

There had been a vague plan that Dorothy would join him in London, to help earn money by writing and translating. But now, rather than wait for her, Wordsworth departed immediately for Bristol as the houseguest of the Pinneys' father. John Pretor Pinney was delighted to entertain a tenant who (he thought) was finally going to start producing some return on the considerable investment he had made in his country seat, Racedown Lodge. The town house that Wordsworth arrived at in Bristol was built on an equally grand scale. It still stands in Great George Street, in the elegant Clifton section of town, commodious enough to house the city's museum of furniture from this era of mercantile opulence. It was a symbol of John Pinney's advancing fortunes, built in 1788 following his return from Nevis in 1784. His success as a sugar trader was even greater than the success he had enjoyed as a plantation owner.[1] He now ran the Bristol West Indies Trading Company in partnership with John Tobin, "one of the most prominent and intelligent adversaries of the abolition movement" and father of two sons, John and James, who both became close friends of Wordsworth.[2]

To the senior Pinney, Wordsworth appeared a gentlemen of some means,

if he could afford Racedown. Pinney, a complete arriviste himself, was ready to do the genteel thing by entertaining Wordsworth until his sister arrived with young Basil Montagu. That the boy's father was connected to the earl of Sandwich was not lost on Pinney; though disinherited by his father, Montagu was on good terms with his half brother, the fifth earl.

John Pinney had just completed an extensive four-year renovation of his country house; he elegantly renamed it Racedown, rather than Pylemarsh Lodge, the homely local designation.[3] He had originally intended to use it as a safe haven from Nevis, if slave uprisings or a French invasion made it expedient to do so.[4] (He also had secret passages and money caches in his Bristol house for the latter purpose.) He was looking for tenants for the newly renovated house but, not finding any takers, had put it at the disposal of his sons, naturally assuming that the tenant they had found for it was paying rent, since he was charging them £50 a year for the use of it.[5]

John Pinney Sr. did not participate in the generous feeling of giving things for nothing that Hazlitt later recalled as "the spirit of the age." Like Richard Wordsworth and Christopher Crackanthorpe, he made a religion of his accounts and spoke in self-help copybook maxims like Benjamin Franklin's.[6] Nervous, irritable, and energetic, he was a mercantile version of Sir James Lowther. He had not been born rich, but he had been lucky, and he knew how to capitalize on his luck. In 1764 he had been named heir to the Pinney fortune by two aging, childless cousins. He was the son of one of their female cousins; his father, Michael Pretor, was reported to be "worse than a footman," a reference to his way of gaining access to his lady's favors. When they made him their heir, he promptly changed his name to John Pretor Pinney, just as Christopher Cookson had changed his to Crackanthorpe. He "danced attendance" so assiduously on his old cousins that they finally complained that "a continual repetition of expressions rather bordering on flattery are by no means agreeable."[7] He went out to Nevis in 1764 and returned in 1784, with a profit of £35,000. He never intended to stay longer than was necessary to raise a fortune that would allow him to set up independently in England. "My greatest pride is to be considered as a private country gentleman . . . . [I] shall avoid even the name of a West-Indian."

He wanted to avoid the name of West Indian because fortunes gained there were, as everyone knew, built on the backs of slaves. When Wordsworth stayed at Pinney's house, Pinney was the owner of over two hundred slaves, working three different plantations in Nevis: the largest single holding on the smallest of Britain's West Indian possessions. For liberal young men like the Pinney brothers, tutored by even more liberal Cambridge graduates like Montagu and Wrangham, at a time of fundamental social upheaval and nonstop talk about revolutionary virtue and the rights of man, this background was an unspeakable embarrassment. Matthew ("Monk") Lewis was another

young man in the same bind, as was Charles Douglas, Montagu's friend.[8] John Frederick Pinney, "a rabid Whig," wanted to get rid of their plantations as soon as possible.[9] (They finally did so in 1807: conveniently, the year before Wilberforce's bill against the slave trade finally passed through Parliament, after a fifteen-year struggle.) Pinney had been shocked by the sight of slavery when he first went out to Nevis, but quickly made his peace with it: "surely God ordained 'em for the use and benefit of us: otherwise his Divine Will would have been made manifest by some particular sign or token." No sign or token appearing, he undertook to care for his human stock in the best way he knew how, providing them the same fodder he gave his animals. Unusual among his neighbors, he always laid in enough corn to keep them fed, because the idea of any slave's being without the usual day's allowance made him, he said, "unhappy."

He was also a shrewd manipulator of other people's perceptions of how West Indians earned their fortunes. When young Tom Wedgwood, heir to the pottery fortune, went out to Nevis in 1801 for his health, Pinney gave the following instructions to his overseer:

> Do not suffer a negro to be corrected in his presence, or so near for him to hear the whip—and if you could allowance the gang at the lower work, during his residence in the house, it would be advisable—point out the comforts the negroes enjoy beyond the poor in this country, drawing a comparison between the climates—show him the property they possess in goats, hogs, and poultry, and their negro-ground. By this means he will leave the island possessed of favorable sentiments.[10]

Pinney did not put any worse face on the source of his fortune if he was asked about it by the young Wordsworth—who was, however, in no position to inquire very closely into the largesse he was about to receive from a landlord who was unaware he was giving it. Wordsworth was something of an honored guest, but he certainly understood the Pinney boys' subterfuge on their father, and knew better than to thank John Pinney for letting him have Racedown for nothing.

Wordsworth's visit lasted five weeks, during which time he observed the active Bristol political scene as well as its bustling commercial aspect. It was England's second-largest city, though at sixty thousand souls a far distant second. With its broad channel estuary, it was more obviously a seaport than London, and opposition to the war with France was more openly and widely expressed, not only because political opinion was more liberal there but because the costs of the ill-advised war bore more heavily, proportionately, on Bristol's import-export economy. Wordsworth was particularly eager to see two young men frequently mentioned by Mathews, Dyer, and Godwin and

others in his London set: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey. Wordsworth reported back to Mathews, "Coleridge was at Bristol part of the time I was there. I saw but little of him. I wished indeed to have seen more—his talent appears to me very great. I met with Southey also, his manners pleased me exceedingly and I have every reason to think very highly of his powers of mind."[11] Wordsworth speaks of both men as persons he and Mathews already know about: there was no miraculous first vision of his future soul mate and collaborator. Coleridge anticipated the chance to meet Wordsworth with almost equal enthusiasm. He had been a friend of Christopher Wordsworth during his time at Cambridge, and had defended his admiration of *Descriptive Sketches* in their little literary group there; he alludes to *An Evening Walk* in his manuscripts and magazine poems from as early as October 1793.[12] They might have met at Pinney's house, for though the elder Pinney himself would not entertain anyone as "democratical" as Coleridge, he could have gained entrée as an acquaintance of Pinney's indulged sons.[13]

Coleridge was already "a noticeable man," as was Southey, a well-connected local boy who had published a volume of poetry, following a promising career at Oxford.[14] Coleridge, it is not too much to say, was to Bristol what Thelwall was to London, and that, in late 1795, was very much indeed.[15] He and Southey and their friends (Charles Lloyd, Robert Lovell, and the Fricker sisters, Edith and Sara) were notorious in the region for their plans to found a utopian community, "Pantisocracy," on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. The location was near where Joseph Priestley, the famous scientist and radical, had fled in 1794, when events subsequent to the destruction of his laboratory by a Birmingham mob in 1791 made it clear that he could no longer live and work in England. The Pantisocracy plan (government by all) had involved strenuous local efforts to recruit like-minded communalists, but it had just fallen through, to bitter recriminations among its principals—not unlike the cooling of relations between Wordsworth and Mathews following the wreck of their "philanthropic" work in London. This occasioned great glee and wise I-told-you-so's among their Bristol elders, and became a permanent point of satiric reference throughout Coleridge's and Southey's career. Wordsworth was frequently drawn into these satiric pictures by virtue of their later association in the Lake District, which had similar communal overtones of "plain living and high thinking." George Dyer, for example, linked them all together in a footnote in *The Poet's Fate* (1797), advising young poets to "join Pantisocracy's harmonious train . . . [where] freedom digs, and ploughs, and laughs, and sings." The note singles out Southey and Coleridge, but adds the names of "three young men, who have given early proofs, that they can strike the true chords of poesy": Wordsworth, Charles Lloyd, and Charles Lamb.[16]

Dorothy arrived in mid-September, and she and William set out almost immediately for Racedown, fifty miles to the south. They arrived at midnight on September 26, rousing up Joseph Gill, a "ruined and unhappy" cousin of John Pinney's who served as Racedown's family caretaker and custodian, broken down from years of drink and dissipation on Nevis.[17] The house they entered was splendid, three stories high, glistening with the new improvements detailed in Pinney's advertisement for it:

> To be let furnished or unfurnished. Race-down lodge consisting of two Parlors, a Kitchen with a scullery and pantry. Servant's hall and Butler's pantry on the ground floor. Four excellent Bed-chambers with Closets and a large light Closet on the Chamber floor. Four excellent Bed-chambers with a long wide Passage out of which a small Chamber may be taken, if wanted, on the Attic floor: also two exceeding good arched Cellars. Milkhouse and Coal Cellar, with a place, at the foot of the Cellar stairs, for a Larder. A complete wash and brewhouse with a Coach-house adjoining and Rooms over for a Laundry etc. Stabling for four Horses with a Harness-room and a woodhouse the whole length formerly used as a Cart-house Stables, in which there remains a good hay rack and therefore may be easily converted into a Stable again if wanted. Two Necessaries and the following Lands and Cottages . . . . Garden and pleasure ground before the house plus two meadows = *c.* 14 acres. Rent £ 42 p.a.[18]

Dorothy, ever the keen estimator of domestic arrangements, wrote to Jane Pollard Marshall, "We found every thing at Racedown much more complete with respect to household conveniences than I could have expected. You may judge of this when I tell you we have not had to lay out ten shillings for the use of the house."[19]

Racedown is now twice as big as it was then, from a nineteenth-century addition, but it was a very spacious house in 1795, as Coleridge rightly pegged it after his first visit: "the mansion of our friend Wordsworth."[20] It had a beautiful long parlor running from front to back on the left as one entered, with a pretty view of the croquet ground on the south side and of the formal pleasure garden to the rear (west), decorated with gilded busts on stone columns—the "images," as Joseph Gill queerly called them. It boasted a pianoforte, mahagony furniture, two glass-front bookcases on either side of the fireplace, and a library of over four hundred books.[21]

It may have been the model for Sir Walter Elliot's Kellynch Hall in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818), set just over the border in Somerset. The region is dotted with places and houses named Pinney, Pinhay, or Pinny, the name of the village Austen's characters visit near Lyme Regis, eight miles away on the coast: "Pinny, with its green chasms between romantic rocks, where the scattered forest trees and orchards of luxuriant growth declare that many a generation must have passed away [here]."[22] Much of Wordsworth's life in

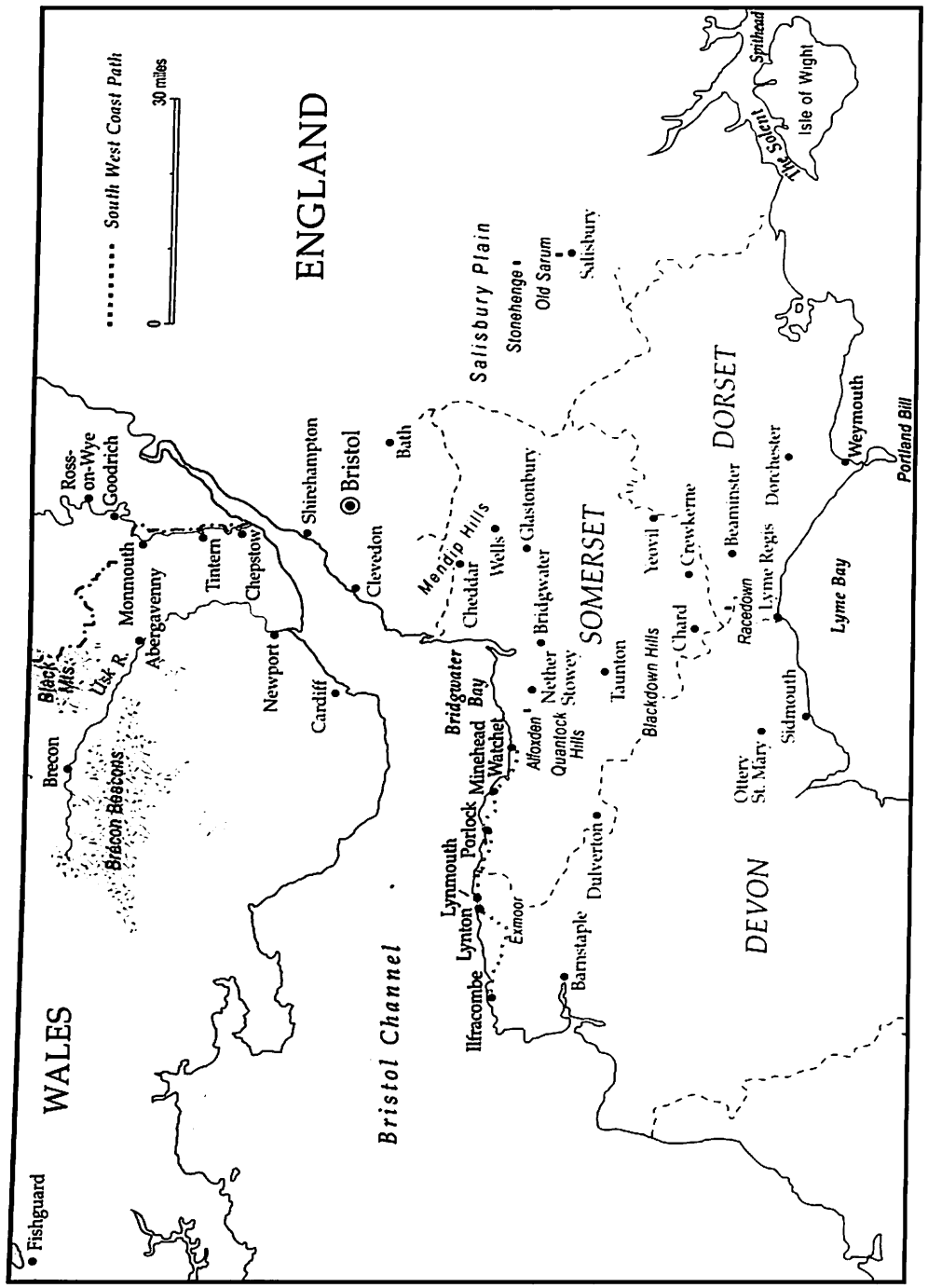
the 1790s reads as if he were an errant son or brother in an Austen novel, whose goings-on are heard of, but not seen, in her books' narrowly domestic focus. *Sense and Sensibility* has seemed the closest parallel till now (and it too is set in the same region), but his move to Racedown brings *Persuasion* into the picture. The initial motive for its action is Sir Walter's realization that he must rent Kellynch Hall in order to economize, and like John Pinney he is concerned that it might be taken by unworthy tenants. The Pinneys were certainly well enough known in the region to make their misadventures with the strange radical poet legendary (Wordsworth's nocturnal wanderings and mutterings were still local gossip in the early twentieth century),[23] and Austen may have been drawing on more recent memories of John Pinney's outlandish tenant.

Racedown lies nestled in a region of burly hills crowded together in a remote corner of Dorset that thrusts out between Devon and Somerset: "a secluded no man's land" that even today seems as well suited to hobbits as to humans.[24] The roads are narrow and unimproved, twisting and turning around the base of the hills, the inhabitants more intent on their privacy than on providing rapid transit for strangers. Forde Abbey, eerily untouched by time, lies a few miles to the west, and the Devonshire border lay only a wide field and a narrow stream away from the Wordsworths' new home. Coleridge's birthplace at Ottery St. Mary is twenty-four miles farther west.

The house is only eight miles from the sea, but it is hard to imagine that anything as wide open as a sea is nearby; even sea "haar," a fog which descends frequently, only deepens its atmosphere of obscurity. But a short walk up any hill gives a brilliant sight of the ocean on a clear day, when the countryside shines like an emerald. William and Dorothy could see the Channel from their upper floors in winter, through openings between the hills.

Directly across the road, Pilsdon Pen rises steeply nine hundred feet above the vale of Marshwood, the highest hill in Dorset. A mile east is Lewesdon Hill, upon which William Crowe wrote a hill-by-hill Whiggish survey poem in 1788 that Azariah Pinney presented to the Wordsworths for the pleasure of placing themselves in their literary landscape.[25] Crowe's vista of English beauty-cum-prosperity celebrates the unbroken views on all sides, "save only where the head / Of Pillesdon rises, Pillesdon's lofty Pen." Crowe held the common contemporary idea of nature's visionary possibilities ("on this height I feel the mind / Expand itself in wider liberty"), but had no radical courage about his convictions: "our better mind / Is as a Sunday's garment, then put on / When we have nought to do . . . To-morrow for severer thought; but now / To breakfast, and keep festival today."[26] Wordsworth's convictions when he arrived in 1795 were not much stronger; his main interest was Crowe's starting point: to be "sequester'd from the noisy world."

On November 15 William saw from the top of Pilsdon the West India



Wordsworth's and Coleridge's West Country, showing their favorite coastal walk.

fleet setting out "in all its glory." Two days later he and Dorothy learned that it had run into a hurricane; many ships had gone down, and for two weeks thereafter the coast was littered with corpses.[27] Crowe's survey poem had included these risks of empire, referring to another famous local loss, of the *Halfwell* off Portland Bill. Ten years later these moments flashed through William's and Dorothy's minds when they learned that John's first command, the *Earl of Abergavenny*, had gone down along the same stretch of coast.

Their first days and weeks were taken up with arrangements for delivery of eggs and butter from the little farms associated with Racedown, and with paying courtesy visits to the local gentry. They called first on the Pinneys of Blackdown, just up the road, relatives of their landlords whom they found polite but uninteresting. Farther up the road, past Crewkerne, they visited Hinton House, the seat of Earl Poulett, and admired its "very fine view."[28] Their domestic arrangements required care because their original plans soon fell through, leaving them considerably worse off than they had expected to be, house rich but cash poor. Dorothy had calculated that their annual income would be a tidy £180 per year, from the yield of Wordsworth's loans to Montagu and Douglas, plus £50 a year for young Montagu and a similar amount for taking care of the illegitimate daughter their cousin Tom Myers had recently sent back from India.* On top of Dorothy's estimate was the possibility that they would be given the care of John Pinney's latest and rather unexpected child, Charles, born in 1793. If the elder Pinney paid for him at the rate he paid Montagu and Wrangham for tutoring his older sons, they might expect another £200 a year. Dorothy imagined that she and William would be as comfortably situated as their childhood friends the Hutchinsons, whom she had visited near Durham in April. These brothers and sisters, also orphans, had recently inherited £1,800 from their uncle and were now "quite independent and have not a wish ungratified, . . . situated exactly as [their] imaginations and wishes used to represent" their hopes for their adult lives. Wistfully, she added in another letter to Jane Pollard, "You know the pleasure which I have always attached to the idea of home."[29]

But the last two of these rosy prospects never materialized, and the first two, Montagu's and Douglas's repayments, soon fell in arrears, so they were left with only the £50 per year for Basil Jr. Even that lasted only two years; by the time they moved to Somerset in mid-1797, they were maintaining lit-

*Tom knew better than William how to avoid mistakes with illegitimate children in the high-stakes marriage game. When he returned from the colonies, he married a distant cousin, Lady Mary Nevill, John Robinson's granddaughter and daughter of the earl of Abergavenny, twenty years his junior. He was awarded Robinson's Harwich seat when the old politico died in 1802. This was another life story Wordsworth could have had, if he'd accepted Robinson's offer of the Harwich curacy four years earlier and made other arrangements for Caroline.

tle Basil at their own expense.[30] It turned out to be a very good thing they didn't have to pay rent. Far from living a leisured country life as master and mistress of an elegant preschool nursery for rich colonials and demi-aristocrats, at an income surpassing that of a decent church living, they found themselves instead eking out an existence with barely enough cash to cover their basic expenses. The "plain living and high thinking" that Wordsworth would later idealize was thrust upon them as a rude shock at Racedown.

Their "system" for educating young Basil was as Dorothy said "a very simple one," but not as unaffected by "this age of systems" as she claimed.[31] It followed the tenets of one of the century's archsystematizers, Rousseau: an apparently nondirective method that allowed the child to follow the evidence of his senses rather than book learning. Since he was not yet three years old, this was good common sense as well. Little Basil Caroline explored his new rural surroundings along with them, and they answered all his questions about "the sky, the fields, trees, shrubs, corn, the making of tools, carts, &c &c &c." Since their "grand study ha[d] been to make him *happy*," they were not disappointed of success.[32] In discipline, however, they stressed consequences more than explanations. If he cried, he was sent to his room (his "apartment of tears") and not allowed to return until he had stopped. The methods were well adapted to the child, and he soon got the point. He had been very much in the way in Montagu's lodgings in London, "extremely petted from indulgence and weakness of body." Now, out of doors in fresh air, with no regimen but what struck his fancy, he became a much better-tempered boy. But he never lost his habit of lying.

They were soon forced to turn to gardening for their diet. By the beginning of the new year, Wordsworth was outside helping Joseph Gill, as Dorothy smilingly noted: "My brother handles the spade with great dexterity."[33] This was largely because of Gill's inability to get the regular gardener, John Hitchcock, to do anything: talking to him was "as useless as it would be to sing Psalms to a dead horse." Gill and the Wordsworths suffered a certain amount of insubordination from the rest of the Racedown staff, because though friends or relations of the Pinney family, they clearly had no money to spare and hence no basis for authority. Since they arrived late in the year, their own first crops would not be ready until the next spring, so they had a long, hard winter of it. The expense of coal was one of the first things Dorothy remarked: "You would be surprized to see what a small cart full we get for three or four and twenty shillings [about 10 percent of their tutoring income], but we have such a habit of attention and frugality with respect to the management of our coals that they last much longer than I could have supposed possible."[34] Wordsworth knew whereof he spoke when he cast

back to Dorset for the setting of "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" two years later:

> This woman dwelt in Dorsetshire,
> Her hut was on a cold hill-side,
> And in that country coals are dear,
> For they come far by wind and tide.[35]

The poem's setting, Goody's actions, and Harry's surname all derive immediately from Racedown. Poverty was so widespread that desperate people had no compunction about stealing from gardens. Once Joseph Gill and Wordsworth had, with difficulty, got their garden in, they prevailed on Hitchcock to build a protective fence around it, only to discover that bypassing wanderers tore out the boards for firewood. Laws passed earlier in the decade restricting tenants' gleaning rights had made it much more difficult to gather fuel.[36] Thus William partly occupied the position of Harry Gill in the poem, and some of his attitudes toward the poor were not unlike Harry's, though he foisted Joseph Gill's surname on him. When Wordsworth joked to Wrangham in February of 1797, "I have lately been living upon air and the essence of carrots cabbages turnips and other esculent vegetables, not excluding parsley the produce of my garden," he was trying to put a witty face on the reality of their situation.[37]

William and Dorothy also had difficulties with Gill arising from the dependent status of both parties. He began presenting them with inventories to be signed, attesting that "Mr. Wordsworth has taken call over all the things in the house and certified it on the inventory—therefore, as he says, he is now answerable for the whole."[38] Gill was not about to take the blame for any Wordsworthian accidents. But Wordsworth was also an adept student of family accounts, after many years of being charged for every shirt his aunts washed for him. He went over Gill's inventories with a fine-tooth comb, noting which queen's ware dishes were cracked, where wine glasses were missing from the set, that two butter pots had been sent to Bristol, that the tin-tinderbox candlestick was not "compleat" but "want[ed] a steel," and the fact that one of the towels had been "brought by Miss Wordsworth from Bristol." If he was not sure, he wrote, "Not well understood. W.W." Gradually they worked out a working relationship, but anytime guests came and more dishes or silverware were needed, Gill had to be asked to unlock cabinets and dole out the carefully inventoried supplies.

Gill had done well as an overseer and shopkeeper on Nevis, but he failed dismally as Pinney's first manager in the 1770s and had to be sent home. Like Wordsworth (though one doubts they ever shared the fact), he had left a lover behind him in another country, a mulatto woman named Penny Mark-

ham whose freedom he bought for £100. He had no more money than the Wordsworths, and once had to resort to eating the flesh of a cow that had died in calving, noting in his diary that is was "cruel hard to be starved to death in a Christian country."[39]

Wordsworth soon felt the truth of this from the walks he took around the neighborhood. Prices were rising everywhere because of the war, soon doubling the average cost of living. Between 1790 and 1795 the price of oats rose 75 percent, that of a loaf of bread doubled in the country and tripled in London, and that of a pound of potatoes quadrupled.[40] Dorothy complained, "Every thing has been very dear for house-keeping this season; we can get no meat under 6d. and Tea and Sugar, our only luxuries, are rising."[41] These two luxuries, the main imports of the British East Indian and West Indian imperial trade, respectively—and of John Wordsworth and John Pinney in their immediate acquaintance—were increasing in price also because of the number of ships being commandeered for the war effort. One of these was the *Earl of Abergavenny* itself, but another, larger and more profitable, was soon built by the Robinson-Wordsworth shipping interest to replace it.

These economic factors bore hard on Joseph Gill and the Wordsworths, but they were catastrophic for the rural poor, as Wordsworth soon saw: "many rich / Sunk down as in a dream among the poor, / And of the poor did many cease to be, / And their place knew them not."[42] Poverty was bad all over England, but it was worst in the West Country, which suffered more from the war's impact on trade and shipping. Wordsworth's first letter back to Mathews in October conveyed the ambivalence of their situation: "We are now at Racedown and both as happy as people can be who live in perfect solitude. We do not see a soul. Now and then we meet a miserable peasant in the road or an accidental traveller. The country people here are wretchedly poor; ignorant and overwhelmed with every vice that usually attends ignorance in that class, viz—lying and picking and stealing &c &c."[43] Solitude and happiness, poverty and viciousness: the two extremes lay close together. To "not see a soul" technically meant they received no visitors, but at Racedown Wordsworth learned to see the "soul" in wretchedly poor country people like Goody Blake, who had to pick and steal to keep themselves alive. Dorothy too, amid details of their house's splendid furnishings and situation, allotted one sentence to the same contrast: "The peasants are miserably poor; their cottages are shapeless structures (I may almost say) of wood and clay—indeed they are not at all beyond what might be expected in savage life."[44] Reactions to these realities could differ widely: plantation owners and sugar factors like Pinney and Tobin used them to justify owning slaves, maintaining not inaccurately that they sometimes got better care than the poor in England.

Wordsworth was in an anomalous position to observe all this. On the one

hand, he was to all appearances the lord of the manor, living in a splendor based on the profits of slave labor. Like the Pedlar in his soon-to-be-composed "Ruined Cottage," he "could afford to suffer with those whom he saw suffer." The point is not simply that Wordsworth was privileged and the poor were not, or that he was somehow hypocritical in his way-wandering walks on "lonely roads [which] were schools to me."[45] On the contrary, his precarious situation gave him a motive to empathize with "souls that appear to have no depth at all / To vulgar eyes." He was well aware that he stood blessedly but precariously outside their suffering. The uneasiness of their situation helped redefine his poetry in a fundamental way over the next two years: How does one write poetry about poverty? What is the perspective from which telling stories about it can be seen as part of a solution, rather than part of the problem? Wordsworth had low powers of invention, but at Racedown he began to develop a kind of human inventiveness, the ability to project himself into the minds and bodies of the poor, the old, the senile, and the sick.

During his two years at Racedown, Wordsworth wrote nearly a dozen poems or fragmentary pieces which show these issues working their way haltingly into his major works of this period, *The Borderers* and "The Ruined Cottage." Their focus is so narrow that the light they shed on his poetic development is particularly sharp. Their subjects, beggars, convicts, deserted mothers and children, are pencil sketches in the genre of Wordsworthian solitude, anticipating the great solitary set pieces of his mature period: the Discharged Veteran, the Blind Beggar, the Leech Gatherer, and the Solitary Reaper.

The fragments do not lack for verbal power—quite the contrary. What is missing is any explanatory framework in which the suffering they depict might be interpreted. When he made an effort to supply an explanation, it was manifestly inadequate to the emotional force with which he represented the suffering itself. Questions are raised and discomfort created, but no resolution is achieved. When he described these experiences in *Prelude* XII, he boldly concluded that such subjects were fit for prophetic poetry: "the genius of the poet hence / May boldly take his way among mankind / Wherever Nature leads." But no such confidence is discernible in the manuscripts of 1796–97. These vignettes, taken as a group, cry out for some larger understanding: What are you going to do about us? They represent human suffering, very specifically in terms of social conditions in England ca. 1796, stubbornly persisting independent of any attempt to explain it, or relieve it, or even sympathize with it.

"The Ruined Cottage" is the first of Wordsworth's poems that can be called "major" without qualification. But it was never published by him in its greatest form, nor is it possible to say definitively what its best version is, for its textual status is highly problematic.[39] Yet it is one of the essential Wordsworthian texts, and his struggles with it—for seventeen years before publication, and in every republication of *The Excursion* thereafter, to 1845—

*He was considerably distracted by the formal claim finally lodged from Robinson Wordsworth in May, for payment of at least £250 of the money the Wordsworth estate owed to the Wordsworths of Whitehaven. These Wordsworths had held off as long as they could, exercising considerable restraint toward their wayward nephew. But now Robinson was about to be married, and he desperately needed the kind of nest egg that Wordsworth had in the meantime got from Raisley Calvert and the Pinney brothers.

show that, like *The Prelude*, "The Ruined Cottage" is a poem whose creation was inextricably bound up with his self-creation.

Its story is quickly told. Margaret and Robert live in a Dorset cottage where he does piecework weaving. They have been fast-forwarded, Stoppard style, from cameo roles in *The Borderers* as terrified peasants in the remote barons' wars, to helpless, unemployed small artisans of Dorsetshire, displaced by the "Minister's War" with France, ca. March 1797. They have two children and are happy. Then wartime dislocations throw him out of work, and bad harvests raise the price of bread. He works around the cottage for a while, making small repairs, but finally the sight of his hungry wife and children becomes too much for him. (Wordsworth applied the same phrase to Robert's despondency he had used for Jenny: "Ill fared it now with Robert.") He secretly enlists for the government's bounty of ten guineas and slips away one morning, leaving the money in a bag on the windowsill. Margaret waits years for his return, neglecting her house, her children, and herself. One child is taken away to an apprenticeship by the parish authorities, the other dies; finally Margaret dies too. End of story. It is another version of the story of an abandoned woman that is Wordsworth's main plot throughout the 1790s. His problem, again, is what to make of such a story. How should it be told? Even harder, How should it be heard?

In its earliest form the poem does not appear to be something very new in Wordsworth's development. It looks like yet another of the free-standing images of unexplained suffering which he produced steadily throughout 1796–97: indeed, it is the apotheosis of this form. As with many of his poems, he said he composed its conclusion first. This contains the full force of Margaret's tale without a word of explanation, forty-six forbidding lines which compress the essence of her experience into a sustained dirge. It begins, "Five tedious years / She lingered in unquiet widowhood, / A wife, and widow. Needs must it have been / A sore heart-wasting." And it ends, after detailing with remorseless pathos her waiting and watching and putting her "same sad question" about Robert to every passerby,

> Meanwhile her poor hut
> Sunk to decay, for he was gone whose hand,
> At the first nippings of October frost,
> Closed up each chink and with fresh bands of straw
> Chequered the green-grown thatch. And so she sate
> Through the long winter, reckless and alone,
> Till this reft house by frost, and thaw, and rain
> Was sapped; and when she slept the nightly damps
> Did chill her breast, and in the stormy day
> Her tattered clothes were ruffled by the wind

Even at the side of her own fire.—Yet still
She loved this wretched spot, nor would for worlds
Have parted hence; and still that length of road
And this rude bench one torturing hope endeared,
Fast rooted at her heart, and here, my friend,
In sickness she remained, and here she died,
Last human tenant of these ruined walls.

(MS B, 512–28)[40]

A child can read this, but what ancient wisdom is necessary to understand it? The simple repetitions and specific indications ("this rude bench," "that path," "yon gate"), relentlessly underscored by adverbs of time and place (here, here; still, still), build to a climax of almost unbearable power: she stayed here, she kept waiting and hoping, and finally she died doing it. This is "A Dorsetshire Tragedy" to match his equally unanswerable "Somersetshire Tragedy."

No one who heard these lines ever forgot them. They were the first thing Wordsworth read to Coleridge when he came for his visit in early June. Coleridge asked Dorothy to copy them out for him to send to his friend John Estlin, a Unitarian minister, and many years later he could still recall the impact of "The Ruined Cottage" on him, and express the regret that Wordsworth had not published it by itself in its original form. Mary Hutchinson, who departed the day Coleridge arrived, left with a copy of these lines in her baggage, and Lamb, Hazlitt, Southey, and others who heard versions of the poem over the next six months similarly attest to its enduring power.

These lines are the summa of the descriptions of human suffering that Wordsworth began with the female beggar of *An Evening Walk* and the Grison gypsy of *Descriptive Sketches*. Symbolic details of the beggar woman—her husband died in war and she also had two children—are made literal in Margaret's tale. In the earlier poem Wordsworth's questions are rhetorical and allusive: "For hope's deserted well why wistful look? / Chok'd is the pathway, and the pitcher broke."★[41] But the well in Margaret's overgrown garden, from which she kindly drew water for thirsty passersby, is literal and was functional: "half choaked with willow flowers and weeds," covered by spiderwebs, "And on the wet and slimy foot-stone lay / The useless fragment of a wooden bowl." In the dirge of "The Ruined Cottage" almost all the characters of Wordsworth's recent work are reprised: not only the abandoned woman but the returning soldier and sailor, "the crippled Mendicant," and the nameless wanderer who encounters them all—and must tell their tales.

★The soiled spring and the broken pitcher, favorite images of Wordsworth's, are from Ecclesiastes: "the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well" (12:6).

The version that Wordsworth had completed by the time Coleridge arrived was no more than three hundred lines long, barely a third the length it would reach six months later, and much shorter than its nearly one thousand lines by the time of its publication in 1814. But it contained most of the essentials: hard times, Robert's departure, the Pedlar's recurring seasonal visits to Margaret's cottage, her death, and the final dirge.[42] The poem grew so long, and over so long a time, because Wordsworth had set himself a daunting double challenge: to write a full narrative of how Margaret had come to this end, and to place that narrative in a framework that would comprehend the terrible force of its ending, making it both philosophically plausible and aesthetically palatable. He wanted it to be recognized as a poem making a complete statement, and not to leave begging the ferocious questions such an ending provokes: Why do these things happen? Who is responsible? What are we to do in the face of such dying? These were challenges to the very essence of what he felt his poetic *self* to be. Margaret's tale was another of his naked accounts of suffering, but now he was determined to get beyond reportage, no matter how powerful, and achieve some kind of satisfactory conclusion. He was never wholly successful in meeting the aesthetic, philosophical, or political challenges posed by "The Ruined Cottage," but we should not underestimate the force of these challenges to his ambition and self-confidence.

The tale of Margaret is in one sense the story of human suffering under the conditions of (relatively) free individualism. To expect Wordsworth to "solve" her situation, in the sense of explaining it and pointing out preferable alternatives, is to expect too much. Marx and Freud, among others, proposed theoretical answers to situations something like this, but Wordsworth set up the situation as it is found in practice: neither social nor psychological answers will get at the whole truth. What makes the situation especially intractable is that Margaret is not simply a passive, undeserving victim, but contributes much to her own demise by fixating on her husband, thinking more about his return (he never returns) than anything else.

Political critics on both the left and the right have been driven to distraction by this poem and what they see as Wordsworth's unacceptable resolution of it. On the right are readers like Thomas De Quincey, who nearly stamped himself into the ground like Rumpelstiltskin in his annoyance with both Margaret and Wordsworth for failing to take advantage of the several agencies of help and information which existed in communities around her: the local vicar, the magistrate, the war office, the commander of the nearest army post, a store owner, or almost any responsible citizen. "To have overlooked a point of policy so broadly apparent as this vitiates and nullifies the very basis of the story."[43] De Quincey also criticized Margaret severely

for "gadding about" instead of taking care of her house and children. All valid criticisms, but all inadequate to Margaret's tragedy.

On the left, critics in our own time have been very disapproving of Wordsworth's failure to develop the socioeconomic context he established at the beginning of the poem (the war with France) into a thoroughgoing critique of a political system that wages wars at the expense of its own citizens.[44] These critics, unlike De Quincey, see no meaningful help available: the whole social situation is itself so "criminal" as to make revolution almost the necessary consequence.

For both sets of critics, the issues are clear: the status quo or the revolution, which will it be? But Wordsworth's problem is, rather, what to *say* about Margaret's death, in and as a *poem*.

These are questions Wordsworth would try to answer in January 1798. In the first week of June 1797, though, his immediate problem was finding and keeping an audience. The young narrator of "The Ruined Cottage" is trapped into a heightened sense of personal guilt by the Pedlar's artful tale-telling, and Wordsworth used something of the same tactics on Coleridge. He arrived at teatime. As he came up over the hill, he saw William and Dorothy working in the garden and vaulted the fence gate, running down across the field to greet them. This famous vignette, often used to represent the birth moment of British Romanticism, perhaps did not occur where most people think it did: namely, on the road from Crewkerne where a small rise gives a first glimpse of Racedown, its front door less than a hundred diagonal yards away. But William and Dorothy were working in the gardens, which, as Racedown's present owner has pointed out to me, have always been behind the house, to the southwest. If Coleridge had come from Crewkerne, he could not have seen them from that road. But if he was coming via Chard, which lies in a straighter direct line from Nether Stowey (and he was walking the thirty miles), he would have approached the house from the west, the direction of Forde Abbey. From that smaller road he could easily have seen William and Dorothy working in the gardens at the rear, but his famous dash across the fields would have been considerably more demanding: up and down a couple of intervening hillocks, across a bushy stream at the bottom, and up a longish incline to the house, a distance of at least three hundred yards.

Whichever angle Coleridge took, the ordeal that awaited him at teatime was considerably more taxing, reminding us that Romanticism is not simply about running across summer fields to greet friends but also about hearing poems like "The Ruined Cottage" at the end of one's run—and, somehow, connecting the two experiences into one. Making that connection was the task that bound them together over the next four weeks and that finally pulled Wordsworth out of Racedown. "The Ruined Cottage"

was read to Coleridge immediately; after tea he recited for them the first two and a half acts of *Osorio*. High tea indeed! The hiking endurance of these young people, so often remarked on, was nothing compared to their spiritual stamina. It must have been hard to swallow tea and biscuits after hearing "The Ruined Cottage" recited by its author, its dirge-like conclusion hammered down from the height of that craggy, melancholy face in stern Miltonic cadences, with images that came right off the roads Coleridge had just been walking.

Coleridge's visit was intended to be a brief one, but it was extended for week after week as conversations and rereadings of "The Ruined Cottage," *The Borderers,* and *Osorio* preoccupied the two young men, implicating them in each other's work and in each other's lives. All three works turned on the question of remorse for a guilt not personally incurred, but caused by sympathetic feelings of implication in unjust situations involving one's friends or loved ones. The friendship of Wordsworth and Coleridge was one of the most productive in the history of literature, and it had many levels. But in the immediate situation of their shared work, it was the aesthetic and philosophical problems of "The Ruined Cottage" that brought them together.

As June turned into July, and the time came for Coleridge to return home, neither he nor the Wordsworths could bear the thought of separation. Their acquaintance and friendship, kindling slowly over two years, had blazed into love: the kind of passion one would sacrifice almost anything to prolong. Coleridge, ever the entrepreneur, soon thought of ways to maintain it. He returned home to Nether Stowey, but for one reason only: to tell Sara that William and Dorothy Wordsworth were coming for a visit.

But, close as William and Dorothy were in their writing this winter, the next two or three months were the period of the closest literary collaboration between Wordsworth and Coleridge, as they helped each other complete "The Ruined Cottage" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Their joint work on these poems is much closer than either their collaboration on *Lyrical Ballads* (mostly composed by Wordsworth between March and May) or their work in parallel on their two dramas. Between February 11, when Coleridge came over to Alfoxden after his return from Shrewsbury, and March 23, when he showed up with a completed version of "The Rime," the two poets were in almost daily contact.[8] Their hopes for stage success dashed, they turned, in the dead of winter, to the narrative trunks of two poems, one naturalistic, the other Gothic.[9] "The Ruined Cottage" at this time consisted of approximately two hundred lines which gave the outline of the tale of Margaret: she is now dead, and her story is told by someone

like a peddler ("A wanderer among the cottages") to someone else, who doesn't know her. Wordsworth now expanded his spare narrative first to over five hundred lines, then to more than nine hundred.[10] Coleridge's poem consisted of about three hundred lines, covering mainly the Mariner's voyage, the shooting of the albatross, and the ship's subsequent becalming in the South Seas. The intertwined stories of Margaret and the Mariner beautifully represent the imaginative bond between Wordsworth and Coleridge at this time, but the close connection between these two poems has been obscured by the fact that "The Ancient Mariner" appeared in *Lyrical Ballads*, while "The Ruined Cottage" did not see light until 1814, as the first book of *The Excursion*. If they had been published together, as seemed possible for a brief moment in the spring, they would have given a twist to the beginnings of English Romanticism much different from that provided by *Lyrical Ballads*.*

The similarities between "The Ruined Cottage" and "The Ancient Mariner" become clear immediately if the two poems are set side by side. In both we have a narrative of intense suffering, told by an old and uneducated man to a young man, evidently better educated and of higher class, the effect of which is to fundamentally shatter the young man's immediate preoccupations and which seems likely to change his life forever after. The Wedding Guest, stunned, turns *from* the bridegroom's door and rises the morrow morn, "A sadder and a wiser man." Similarly, the young narrator of "The Ruined Cottage" "turn[s] aside in weakness" from the Pedlar, almost unmanned by grief after hearing the tale of Margaret's decline and death, and must be rescued from despair by the Pedlar's calm words of wisdom. In two early attempts at a conclusion, Wordsworth had his young narrator reflect on the story's meaning—"and to myself / I seem'd a better and a wiser man"—or thank the Pedlar for it: "And for the tale which you have told I think / I am a better and a wiser man." These phrases draw the ending of "The Ancient Mariner" directly into the picture, but we cannot be entirely sure which poet took them from which.[11] The Pedlar's wisdom about nature's "calm oblivious tendencies" parallels, in function if not in doctrine, the Mariner's moral to his tale: "He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small." Both morals are appropriate to their unlettered speakers, but seem very inadequate to the devastating effect of the tales they've told, and in both poems the wise old narrators are portrayed as notably *un*wise during the course of the main action they relate to their young auditors.

Beyond these narrative parallels, there are others: (1) a derelict structure

**Peter Bell*, begun in late April, is often taken to be Wordsworth's counterpart to the "Ancient Mariner," but it is less a full partner than a junior one. It is an interesting poem, but no match for the "Ancient Mariner," as "The Ruined Cottage" abundantly is.

(cottage or ship) set in the midst of (2) a wide, bare natural expanse (common or ocean), which becomes (3) a scene of moral instruction in which (4) ugly or grotesque natural objects (weeds or water snakes) function symbolically as signs of the narrators' agony, but also become the focus of their redemption: the Mariner blesses the water snakes "unawares" and finds that he can pray at last; the Pedlar, passing the dead Margaret's cottage with troubled thoughts, suddenly sees, in the weeds and spear grass "silver'd o'er" with mist, an "image of tranquillity" so strong that he can "walk along [his] road in happiness."

Of course the poems are also different. Coleridge's is a stylized imitation of a ballad romance, which arouses readerly expectations very different from those of Wordsworth's clear, elevated blank verse. Coleridge's archaic diction is more appropriate to its subject, in contemporary terms. Wordsworth's blank verse and chaste diction would have led contemporary audiences to expect a serious poem; they would have expected lower-class characters like a weaver's wife and a peddler to be treated balladically, if not comically. Wordsworth consistently did cast such characters into ballad form in his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, which he began composing immediately after bringing "The Ruined Cottage" to a close. But the challenge to readerly expectations created by his use of a modernized Miltonic blank verse for common subjects was a major part of his now emerging revolutionary program for the course of English poetry.

In expanding their poems, the two poets articulated the sufferings of their protagonists—spread them out, diversified their time and details, and developed the character of their narrators, as well as their effect on their young auditors. Margaret's sufferings are now drawn out over the course of five years, as stages in an excruciatingly painful decline, which are marked by the Pedlar's seasonal rounds. These additions increase our sense of Margaret's pain both by prolonging it and by projecting it—the poem's master touch—onto the ruination of her cottage. The Pedlar comes back, winter, summer, spring, and fall, notes signs of decay in Margaret's house and garden, then meets her and has his suspicions confirmed by similar signs of decay in her. It is a cruelly effective strategy for representing a process that would otherwise be almost too painful to read: the slow death of a human being. It depends for its effect on the obtuseness of the Pedlar, who, like the Mariner in the action of his rime, is not wise *yet*. It is also a potentially pornographic or sadomasochistic strategy, as Wordsworth recognized, for he has the Pedlar address exactly this point when he resumes Margaret's story at the urging of his young auditor.

> I begg'd of the old man that for my sake
> He would resume his story. He replied,

"It were a *wantonness,* and would demand
Severe reproof, if we were men whose hearts
Could hold vain dalliance with the misery
Even of the dead, *contented thence to draw*
A momentary pleasure never marked
By reason, *barren* of all future good."
(MS B.278–85; italics added)

The shocking idea that recounting the sufferings of a dying woman could be a kind of necrophilia is unconsciously censored by most readers of these lines, who interpret them in the perspective of the establishment Wordsworth. But Wordsworth's diction suggests it, line by line, especially his reference to the erotic literary fashion of Cavalier dalliance. The lines respond, self-censoriously, to the Pedlar's first announcement that Margaret, whom he "loved . . . as my own child," is dead. Both she and her cottage are represented as flirtatious demon lovers of the disaster which befell them:

She is dead,
The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,
Stripped of its outward garb of household flowers,
Of rose and jasmine, *offers to the wind*
A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked
With weeds and the rank spear-grass. She is dead,
And nettles rot and adders sun themselves
Where we have sat together *while she nursed*
Her infant at her bosom.
(MS B.157–65; italics added)

Immediately, the Pedlar asks forgiveness—"I feel I play the truant with my tale"—and he rights the moral balance by introducing Margaret's husband, Robert, "an industrious man, sober and steady." But it is clear that his relations with Margaret were deeply passionate (though not sexual) and that he uses this kind of quasi-erotic language to manipulate his young listener's interest in her. This is very much the sort of thing we saw Wordsworth doing in his descriptions and proposed revisions of the relations between the Sailor and the Female Vagrant on Salisbury Plain, or between the Alpine wanderer and the dancing girls in *Descriptive Sketches.*

Wordsworth further articulated Margaret's sufferings by giving them moral significance. He did this through the character of the Pedlar, who has a simple but not uneducated rural background among the "grave livers" of Scottish Presbyterianism. This boyhood biography closely resembles Wordsworth's, and many passages describing the Pedlar were taken over wholesale

into the first drafts of "the poem on the growth of my own mind" which he began writing in Germany at the end of this year.

His way of writing about himself is now noticeably different from what it had been earlier in the 1790s, because he gives a new spiritual significance to his outdoor childhood adventures, a method of spiritual heightening he owed largely to the transcendental philosophy of Spirit he was imbibing almost daily in conversations with Coleridge. This was the language of "the One Life within us and abroad" that Coleridge had first tried out in 1795 on a disapproving Sara in "The Aeolian Harp." This philosophy is so often taken as the essence of English Romanticism, especially of the Wordsworthian type, that it tends to be prematurely installed as the meaning of the complicated and fragmentary texts which were being worked out experimentally in situ. What Wordsworth absorbed from Coleridge as "The Ruined Cottage" progressed was a revelation of a spiritual life in all natural things, with which human consciousness could sympathize. More familiar in its lightly catechical form ("One impulse from a vernal wood / May teach you more of man . . . Than all the sages can"), it appears everywhere in the Pedlar's new biography:

He was a chosen son:
To him was given an ear which deeply felt
The voice of Nature in the obscure wind,
The sounding mountain and the running stream.
To every natural form, rock, fruit, and flower,
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,
He gave a moral life; he saw them feel
Or linked them to some feeling.
(MS B76–83)

This was not the rationalized nature of Deism, or a distillation of Unitarianism, but a philosophic transcendentalism with classical analogues from Neoplatonism, given renewed life by Spinoza, which was at this moment gaining a powerful influx of philosophical energy in Germany through the various writings of Kant, Fichte, the Schelling brothers, Schlegel, and Hegel. Their *Naturphilosophie* was an intellectual beachhead established against the morally and emotionally deadening consequences of relentless Enlightenment rationalism. The simplistic application of reason to human affairs seemed, by 1798, to have gone disastrously askew in the French Revolution. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge had lent their minds, hopes, and energies wholeheartedly to this process, and now that Godwin was being quoted in the newspapers to sound like an out-of-office Robespierre, both of them were in full retreat from the chilling religious and political implications they

saw in the thought of their erstwhile London friend and mentor.

The *process* by which the Pedlar became a kind of nature philosopher who can comprehensively interpret Margaret's sufferings is still more radical. In the short form of the poem Wordsworth read to Coleridge and Lamb in June 1797, the Pedlar had much less moral authority. He was scared and superstitious about the ruin of Margaret's cottage: as a character, Wordsworth built him up from a compulsive neighbor who haunted her ruin like a morbid Peeping Tom. This is the character we see in the fragment titled "Incipient Madness," another in the series of "mad songs" that Wordsworth wrote during 1796–97.

Wordsworth's strained mental condition attracted him to the ways in which minds could be overthrown or broken down, suggesting the depth of his own mental crisis. He would never have written *The Prelude* without these preliminary negative researches. In "Incipient Madness" an unnamed narrator returns, night after night, to a ruined cottage, fascinated by "a broken pane which glitter'd in the moon / And seemed akin to life."[12] No indication is given why he does this, but it seems clear that someone associated with the cottage has died and that he assuages his grief for this death by fixating on this lively speck of light. The language also anticipates the sexual diction in "The Ruined Cottage": his "sickly heart" fastened on this speck "like a sucking babe," and "many a long month / Confirm'd *this strange incontinence.*" The speaker's compulsion appears to be a twisted kind of lover's constancy, as his vigils outlast those of a glow worm, a blackbird, and a linnet—the most steadfast of which stayed around for more than three years!

> I alone
> Remained: the winds of heaven remained—with them
> My heart claimed fellowship and with the beams
> Of dawn and of the setting sun that seemed
> To live and linger on the mouldering walls.
>
> (45–49)

This is very close to the "cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked / With weeds and the rank spear-grass" in "The Ruined Cottage," and to the benign sunset image which finally enabled Wordsworth to bring that troubling poem to an end, once he had thoroughly steeped his Pedlar in Coleridge's pantheism:

> Together casting then a farewell look
> Upon those silent walls, we left the shade
> And ere the stars were visible attained
> A rustic inn, our evening resting-place.
>
> (MS D.535–38)

These lines conclude the "reconciling addendum" composed in March of 1798, but Wordsworth did not represent any this-worldly solutions for the sufferings of Margaret, because they are inadequate to those sufferings as he has presented them. Margaret does not need food or money; her problem is a broken heart, and she will not give it up, though she knows full well she should: " 'I am changed, / And to myself . . . have done much wrong, / . . . I have slept / Weeping, and weeping I have waked; my tears / Have flowed as if my body were not such / As others are, and I could never die.' "[13] In her immortal grief Margaret claims kinship with the two female characters Coleridge was creating at the same time: "the Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH" and the demon lover of "Kubla Khan," and her ruined cottage is a Wordsworthian counterpart to the frightening landscape Coleridge imagined at Culbone Church: "A savage place! as holy and enchanted / As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon-lover!"

Not everything in the relations between these two poems was so serious, however, as we see by the similarities between Coleridge's parody of "This Is the House That Jack Built" and the final dirge of "The Ruined Cottage":

> On a Ruined House in a Romantic Country
>
> And this reft house is that the which he built,
> Lamented Jack! And here his malt he pil'd,
> Cautious in vain! These rats that squeak so wild,
> Squeak, not unconscious of their father's guilt.
> Did ye not see her gleaming thro' the glade?
> Belike, 'twas she, the maiden all forlorn.
> What though she milk no cow with crumpled horn,
> Yet *aye* she haunts the dale where *erst* she stray'd;
> And *aye* beside her stalks her amorous knight!
> Still on his thighs their wonted brogues are worn,
> And thro' those brogues, still tatter'd and betorn,
> His hindward charms gleam an unearthly white;
> As when thro' broken clouds at night's high noon
> Peeps in fair fragments forth the full-orb'd harvest-moon![14]

Coleridge was that most un-Germanic creature, a philosopher with a sense of humor, and he sensed that his serious new pupil needed lightening up from time to time. The last simile is good physic for readers who come to Romantic poetry looking only for easy sentimental beauty.