

**THE STORY OF THE STORYTELLER:
THE RUINED COTTAGE AND THE ARC OF WORDSWORTH'S POETIC CAREER**

**Scott Sugden
Washington & Lee University
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**Advisor: Laura Brodie
Second Reader: Edward Adams**

Five tedious years;
She lingered in unquiet widowhood,
A wife and widow. Needs must it have been
A sore heart-wasting. I have heard, my friend,
That in that broken arbour she would sit
The idle length of half a sabbath day—
There, where you see the toadstool's lazy head—
And when a dog passed by she still would quit
The shade and look abroad. On this old Bench
For hours she sate, and evermore her eye
Was busy in the distance, shaping things
Which made her heart beat quick. Seest thou that path?
(The green-sward now has broken its grey line)
There to and fro she paced through many a day
Of the warm summer, from a belt of flax
That girt her waist spinning the long-drawn thread
With backward steps.— Yet ever as there passed
A man whose garments shewed the Soldier's red,
Or crippled Mendicant in Sailor's garb,
The little child who sate to turn the wheel
Ceased from his toil, and she with faltering voice,
Expecting still to learn her husband's fate,
Made many a fond inquiry; and when they
Whose presence gave no comfort were gone by,
Her heart was still more sad. And by yon gate
Which bars the traveller's road she often stood
And when a stranger horseman came, the latch
Would lift, and in his face look wistfully,
Most happy if from aught discovered there
Of tender feeling she might dare repeat
The same sad question. 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 lived
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.

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My observations of Wordsworth's unpublished manuscripts inform several of my analyses throughout this thesis. Without the gracious permission of The Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere, I would never have been allowed to see those manuscripts first-hand. In particular I would like to thank Dr. Jeff Cowton, Curator, and Ms. Rebecca Turner, Assistant Curator, for facilitating my visit and pointing me to the appropriate manuscripts. My visit to the Wordsworth Trust was made possible through the Johnson Opportunity Grant program at Washington & Lee.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in parenthetical citations:

<i>BL</i>	<i>Biographia Literaria</i>
<i>Ex</i>	<i>The Excursion</i> (any book except Book 1), 1814 published text
<i>E.Y.</i>	<i>The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years</i> , ed. Ernest de Selincourt
<i>HCR</i>	<i>Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson, Barrister-at-Law, F.S.A.</i> , ed. Thomas Salder (2 vols.)
<i>F</i>	<i>The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth</i> , ed. Jared Curtis
<i>LSTC</i>	<i>Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> , ed. Ernest H. Coleridge (2 vols.)
<i>L.Y.</i>	<i>The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years</i> , ed. Ernest de Selincourt (4 vols.)
<i>M.Y.</i>	<i>The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years</i> , ed. E. de Selincourt (2 vols.)
<i>Pld</i>	<i>The Prelude</i> , 1805 edition
<i>PrW</i>	<i>The Prose Works of William Wordsworth</i> , ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (3 vols.)
<i>RC</i>	<i>The Ruined Cottage</i> , MS. D
<i>S</i>	<i>New Letters of Robert Southey</i> , ed. Kenneth Curry (2 vols.)
<i>W</i>	<i>The Wanderer</i> (Book 1 of <i>The Excursion</i>), 1814 published text
<i>W.45</i>	<i>The Wanderer</i> (Book 1 of <i>The Excursion</i>), 1845 published text

MANUSCRIPT INDEX

The drafts of many of Wordsworth's poems are housed at the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere, UK, adjacent to Wordsworth's longtime home in Dove Cottage. Editors in the early 1900s catalogued these manuscripts and assigned them a "Dove Cottage Manuscript" (DCMS) number. Certain manuscripts of Wordsworth's longer poems, including *The Ruined Cottage*, also received an alphabetical categorization. Below I provide a list of the primary *Ruined Cottage* manuscripts, arranged in chronological order, as well as a description of each and when it was composed. Manuscripts without a DCMS number are housed outside of The Wordsworth Trust.

I. Works referenced in this thesis
MS. A (DCMS 13)

Spring 1797. Wordsworth's original draft, in two columns, of what would become lines 98-136 of MS. D. Included as part of this draft are two fragments that would later be published separately as "Incipient Madness" and "The Baker's Cart."

The Alfoxden Notebook (DCMS 14)

January-March 1798. Several stubs containing lines presumably from *The Ruined Cottage*. There are also a few drafts of lines that would later become part of the Pedlar's biography, and some of the earliest lines written for *The Prelude*.

MS. B (DCMS 17)

March 1798. The first complete copy of *The Ruined Cottage*. The 400-line biography of the Pedlar did not appear in the original draft, but additional leaves of paper containing that biography were later sewn into the notebook so that the reading text, from front to back of this manuscript, includes that biography. This manuscript lacks what has been called Wordsworth's "reconciling addendum" to the poem: it ends with "last human tenant of these ruined walls," and lacks the Pedlar's final moralization.

MS. D (DCMS 16)

February-November 1798. The version of *The Ruined Cottage* Wordsworth sent to his publisher, Joseph Cottle, for potential publication in 1798. This is now the most commonly anthologized version of the poem. It excludes the Pedlar's biography but includes the newly written "reconciling addendum" that softens the poem's conclusion. Revisions were later made to this draft between 1801 and 1802.

MS. E (DCMS 37)

November 1803-March 1804. Wordsworth's first draft of *The Ruined Cottage* that is clearly marked for inclusion within his larger project, *The Excursion*, although no draft work for other books of *The Excursion* appear in this folio. The Pedlar's biography has been added back into the poem, somewhat revised from MS. B, but the text of Margaret's story remains largely unchanged.

The Excursion

August 1814. The first book of this poem, entitled *The Wanderer*, was the first published edition of *The Ruined Cottage*. The text of Margaret's story remains largely unchanged from MS. M, but the Pedlar's biography has been modified to accommodate his role in the later books of *The Excursion*.

MS. 1836/45

1836-1845. A copy of Wordsworth's 1836 edition of *Poetical Works*, in which he has marked revisions for his final two volumes of collected works, published in 1842 and 1845. This is the final, complete volume of Wordsworth's poetry in which revisions for *The Ruined Cottage* are marked, including revisions that make the poem more emphatically Christian.

The Fenwick Notes

1841-1843. Wordsworth dictated his commentary on some 350 of his poems to his friend, Isabella Fenwick, who meticulously transcribed them. By providing these notes, Wordsworth thought he was providing information "relevant to the reader's understanding of the circumstances of composition, the historical context, and the poet's intention" for all of his major poems (Curtis 12).

II. Additional manuscripts**The Racedown Notebook (DCMS 11)**

Spring 1797. A very torn, indecipherable notebook, in which can be discerned the predecessors to lines 463-79 of MS. D, where Wordsworth describes Margaret's kindness to passersby. Written in Dorothy Wordsworth's hand, with revisions also in her hand.

The Christabel Notebook (DCMS 15)

January/February 1798. Inside the notebook is a stub that presumably contained the antepenultimate verse paragraph of MS. D, as well as a few pages of drafts for lines 60-7 and 88-107, describing the well the Pedlar drinks from and the spider's web he sees. Written, with revisions, in Wordsworth's hand.

MS. M (DCMS 44)

March 1804. Another draft towards Book 1 of *The Excursion*, in Wordsworth's hand. Very few changes were made between the MS. E reading text and MS. M. This is the last manuscript in which *The Ruined Cottage* appears separate from other *Excursion* work.

MS. 1814/27

1814-1827. Wordsworth's copy of the first edition of *The Excursion*, in which he marked changes for subsequent editions, until 1827. Very little work was done on *The Ruined Cottage* proper in this manuscript; most of his revisions during this time were directed towards other books of *The Excursion*.

MS. 1827/32C

1827-1832. Wordsworth's copy of the 1827 edition of *The Excursion*, with minor revisions marked throughout.

MS. 1832/36

1832-1836. Wordsworth's copy of the 1832 edition of *The Excursion*, with minor revisions marked throughout.

INTRODUCTION

“Offered a job as book critic for *Time* magazine as a young man, Bellow had been interviewed by Chambers and asked to give his opinion about William Wordsworth. Replying perhaps too quickly that Wordsworth had been a Romantic poet, he had been brusquely informed by Chambers that there was no place for him at the magazine. Bellow had often wondered, he told us, what he ought to have said. I suggested that he might have got the job if he’d replied that Wordsworth was a once-revolutionary poet who later became a conservative and was denounced by Browning and others as a turncoat. This seemed to Bellow to be probably right.”

Christopher Hitchens, *Hitch-22: A Memoir*

According to Christopher Hitchens in the above-quoted excerpt from his memoir, Saul Bellow never got the job at *Time* because his shallow and succinct description of William Wordsworth as “a Romantic poet” lacked any of the complexities that mark Wordsworth’s career. Hitchens’s suggestion for a more appropriate response outlines the accepted orthodoxy surrounding a poet more often studied and more well-known than most any other Romantic writer: that Wordsworth was a great poet who, about halfway through his career, transitioned towards conservatism, buried himself in his own poetic philosophies, and thereafter produced poetry that only disappointed his contemporaries and failed to live up to the promise of his early work. In his response, Hitchens implies that Bellow would have gotten the job if only he had acknowledged this dichotomous view of Wordsworth’s career, as if it was the only true statement about Wordsworth to be made. Modern Wordsworth scholarship correspondingly divides his career into an early period of fruitfulness and a later “decline” in his poetic power, with the latter phase beginning as early as 1814, when Wordsworth published *The Excursion*. That Wordsworth declined in power is itself hardly deniable, but the story of that decline, and the question of when it began, is much more complex.

Of all the major poems Wordsworth ever wrote, *The Excursion* generally receives the least critical attention and is least often read. The catalog of vignettes exchanged between the Pedlar, Solitary, Vicar, and the poem’s speaker, all with the predefined purpose of dispelling the Solitary’s “disappointment and disgust” with society and restoring him to his former faith in the

inherent goodness of mankind, itself seems to fail when, at the poem's conclusion, the Solitary returns home alone and unconvinced. Critical aversion to the organization of *The Excursion* also does not go unjustified: it is long, repetitive, at times unbearably abstract, and full of "heavy prosing and unconscionable prolixity." Wordsworth's friend, Henry Crabb Robinson, lamented the "uninteresting interlocutory matter" and wished some of the interpolated tales would have been "curtailed" (*HCR* I, 300). Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the foremost advocates for Wordsworth even writing the poem, was forced to admit that it "had disappointed [his] expectations" and revealed a "flagging of the writer's own genius" (*LSTC* II, 645). Every mention of *The Excursion* in modern scholarship invariably cites the first damning line of Francis Jeffrey's review of the poem in *The Edinburgh Review*: "this will never do!"

At the front of *The Excursion*, however, lies one of the seminal stories of Wordsworth's career, the story of a young country woman, Margaret, whose husband Richard leaves to enlist in the military when poor harvests leave their family hungry and impoverished. Margaret spends the final decade of her life hoping in vain for her husband's return, letting her cottage slowly fall to ruin as year after year her hope remains unfulfilled. Her story is narrated, well after her death, by an itinerant Pedlar who visited her several times during those "long years" of despondency (*W* 792). Although 1814 was the first time this story ever appeared in print, it was written almost twenty years beforehand, in 1796-1797, while Wordsworth was in Racedown working with Coleridge on the soon-to-be-published *Lyrical Ballads*. This stand-alone story was originally titled *The Ruined Cottage* before Wordsworth incorporated it into *The Excursion* under the title of *The Wanderer*, and studies of Wordsworth's extensive manuscript history have revealed that *The Wanderer* was, in fact, a much-altered version of the original *Ruined Cottage*.

Wordsworth's obsession with revising his poems even after their publication is well-documented, and many modern critical editions of Wordsworth's poetry, especially of his *Prelude*, include reading texts from multiple published versions. Those that include a single text almost unfailingly choose the earlier version, implicitly agreeing with the accepted orthodoxy that Wordsworth's later poems are somehow marred by his "decline" in poetic power. Less than a decade after Wordsworth's death, his publishers had extracted the first two books of *The Excursion* and re-printed them as a stand-alone poem called *The Deserted Cottage*, agreeing with the late Coleridge that the verbosity of *The Excursion*'s later books detracted from the poignancy of its opening story. A century later, Jonathan Wordsworth, the great-great-great nephew of the Romantic poet, published one of the first comprehensive manuscript-based studies of *The Ruined Cottage*. In it, he argued that the 1798 manuscript of *The Ruined Cottage*, which contains only the first book of *The Excursion* and omits the 400-line biography of Wordsworth's Pedlar, is "the best balanced and most coherent surviving version of *The Ruined Cottage*" (31). Since then, the 1798 manuscript and the 1814 copy of *The Excursion* have been, with few exceptions, the only published variants of *The Ruined Cottage*. Later editions of *The Excursion*, in which the opening book has been further revised, are almost unilaterally omitted from modern publications.

The unfortunate consequence of this streamlined presentation of one of Wordsworth's finest poems has been the wrongful perpetuation of the accepted orthodoxy surrounding Wordsworth's career. With only two editions of the poem to consider, it becomes easy to subscribe to the dichotomy presented by Hitchens and modern critics: read both poems, evaluate the earlier poem as "better" than the later, and attribute the lower quality of the later to some "decline" in poetic power that occurred preceding it. The 1798 manuscript was anthologized because it tells Margaret's story more succinctly, and more poignantly, than any of the

subsequent editions; *The Wanderer* gets disparaged because Margaret's tragic story becomes subsumed by Wordsworth's new 400-line description of his Pedlar. In the context of only these two editions, Margaret's poetic subordination logically indicates some failure or shortcoming on Wordsworth's part.

A complete consideration of the extensive manuscript history of *The Ruined Cottage* reveals a much more complicated story hidden behind the inadequate simplification of Wordsworth's career into two separate periods of greatness and decay. In the fifty-year history of *The Ruined Cottage* we see the full evolution of Wordsworth's theory of poetry, with carefully-made revisions reflecting Wordsworth's changing poetic goals at each stage of his career. The earliest drafts of the poem use "the real language of men" to feelingly describe Margaret's silent suffering in the absence of her soldiering husband, presenting a tale originating from the "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion" being retold from a later perspective of "emotion recollected in tranquility;" Wordsworth espouses these three ideals in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. By the time *The Ruined Cottage* becomes *The Wanderer*, it contains a 400-line biography of the Pedlar, emphasizing the "spots of time in [his] existence" that have shaped his character (*Pld* 12.257). This transition runs parallel to Wordsworth's growing sense of his own autobiographical development as expressed in his concurrently written *Prelude*. In the years after *The Excursion*, Wordsworth more explicitly addresses how he receives the inspiration for his poetry, from a mental faculty he calls the "imagination," and at the end of his life that same "imagination" becomes a tool with which Wordsworth attempts to find a sense of religious immortality and "transcendence."

The reasons for choosing *The Ruined Cottage* as an exhibition of Wordsworth's evolution, rather than any of his other poems, are compelling. Wordsworth and Coleridge's

Lyrical Ballads is considered one of the founding publications of Romanticism, but it is rarely noted that Wordsworth sent manuscripts of both *The Ruined Cottage* and *Lyrical Ballads* to his publisher, Joseph Cottle, in 1798, suggesting that Wordsworth thought very highly of the former poem. It was planned as a central piece to Wordsworth's unfinished epic *The Recluse*, in which he intended to portray "Nature, Man, and Society" as he perceived them (*E.Y.* 212). Had Cottle decided to publish the *The Ruined Cottage* instead of *Lyrical Ballads*, English Romanticism may have taken an entirely different direction. Only *The Prelude* was revised as extensively, for as long a period of time, as *The Ruined Cottage*, but the first drafts of *The Ruined Cottage* predate any *Prelude* manuscripts, making it temporally the most comprehensive of any of Wordsworth's work. When Wordsworth returned to revise his poetry for the last time in 1845, he did not touch *Lyrical Ballads*, but he did change *The Ruined Cottage*.

It is not my intention here to parse which lines from *The Ruined Cottage* belong to which manuscript, when each manuscript was written, or how each manuscript was assembled and dated. Nor is my intention, even in an analysis of the changes made to *The Ruined Cottage*, to report what lines were changed between editions. Those records have been meticulously made by earlier Wordsworth scholars, and were synthesized in the twenty-one volumes of the Cornell Wordsworth project in the 1970s and 1980s. What the Cornell volumes and contemporary scholarship fail to do, however, is consider why many of the changes were made, and how those changes affect our reading of the poem and its titular story. In the subsequent chapters I present a complete textual history of *The Ruined Cottage* that addresses those two questions, examining how the various manuscript copies of *The Ruined Cottage* reveal Wordsworth's evolving poetic theories over the course of his career. Particular emphasis is given to how Wordsworth's

“decline” appears in the more detailed manuscript history and how faithful Wordsworth remains to the poetic ideals that first inspired the poem.

I begin my analysis in chapter one with the two most well-known manuscripts of *The Ruined Cottage*: the now-anthologized 1798 edition, which is the text Wordsworth sent to Cottle for potential publication, and the first book of *The Excursion*, which was the first published form of the text in Wordsworth’s lifetime. The first chapter primarily addresses Wordsworth’s addition of the 400-line Pedlar biography to what his friends already admired as an exceptional and moving poem. In that chapter I address how that 400-line addition recolors our reading of Margaret’s tale as it was presented to Cottle in 1798. I argue that the inclusion of the Pedlar’s biography is consistent with Wordsworth’s emerging desire to showcase the “spots of time” responsible for the Pedlar’s character development, a desire reflected most strongly in his contemporaneous composition of his semiautobiographical *Prelude*. Wordsworth was often criticized for marginalizing Margaret’s tale in favor of his Pedlar, but his inclusion of the Pedlar’s biography makes the poem an appropriate foreground for *The Excursion*.

Chapter two then looks back on the manuscripts that predate the 1798 text and on the other poetic sources for *The Ruined Cottage*, with the goal of separating aspects of *The Ruined Cottage* that are unique to Wordsworth’s theories from aspects that are borrowed lineages. I consider *The Ruined Cottage* in relation to poems that are similar either thematically or stylistically, including Goethe’s *Der Wanderer* and Southey’s identically named “The Ruined Cottage.” As I elucidate the aspects of Wordsworth’s poetic theory that appear in his earliest editions of *The Ruined Cottage*, before he even wrote the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, I ask the question: would the direction of English Romanticism had been different had Cottle published *The Ruined Cottage* instead of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798?

In chapter three, I look at the revisions Wordsworth made to *The Ruined Cottage* in the two decades after the publication of *The Excursion*. Although Wordsworth's "decline" is most often recognized in the earliest part of these two decades, I argue that an analysis of Wordsworth's treatment of *The Ruined Cottage*, with respect to his new theory of the "imagination," suggests that his decline more accurately begins in the mid-1830s. Concurrent to the publication of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth's stated goal is to express the organic operation of his "imagination" on natural scenes, and *The Ruined Cottage* in 1814 does just that, in ways not antithetical to the theories of his earlier work. Only when Wordsworth turns his imagination towards divinity and the promise of immortality does he begin to sacrifice those earlier theories and make deleterious revisions to *The Ruined Cottage*.

Chapter four brings us to the end of Wordsworth's career, when he was denounced as a "turncoat" by Browning and his poetry became emphatically more religious. By focusing more exclusively on religious immortality, and the promise of eternality for his soul and eternal recognition for his work, Wordsworth becomes unfaithful to some of the poetic theories expressed most emphatically in the first manuscripts of *The Ruined Cottage*, particularly the ideal of using "the real language of men" to express "emotion recollected in tranquility." In this regard, the late Wordsworth has declined from his original grandeur. However, I argue that his new Christian tone does not reflect a complete severance from his early theory, for two reasons: first, Wordsworth's descriptions of the spiritual and immortal in his late poetry are anticipated by some of his earliest writings, if only obliquely, and second, Wordsworth's Christian coloration of Margaret's tale seems half-hearted, the result of peer pressure and social obligation rather than of piety and religious fervor.

Throughout these chapters I refer to unpublished manuscripts by their alphabetic designations; descriptions of each of these manuscripts are provided in the manuscript index. Select transcriptions and photographic reproductions of these manuscripts are available in the Cornell Wordsworth series. Complete copies are held at The Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere. For simplicity, I refer to the poem, at any stage of its composition, as *The Ruined Cottage*, although occasionally the title *The Wanderer* is given to refer specifically to the poem as it appears in book 1 of *The Excursion*. Although these chapters are divided according to particular poetic theories and time periods in Wordsworth's life, it should be noted that Wordsworth's career truly "evolved" in the sense that his poetic emphasis during any one period of his life was anticipated by his writings in the former. Wordsworth was certainly writing semiautobiographical poetry before 1800, for example, and his praise of the "imagination" appears in the 1814 text of *The Excursion* and in drafts for *The Prelude*. The story I tell in the following chapters is the story of Wordsworth's evolution as it appears in the manuscript history of *The Ruined Cottage*—a story too often slighted and egregiously simplified by modern criticism.

CHAPTER 1
“SPOTS OF TIME”: READING WORDSWORTH IN HIS PEDLAR, 1800-1814

“It was one of the most daring experiments in modern poetry, to make a *quondam* Pedlar the hero of ‘a literary work, that might live;’ and we will venture to say it has been one of the most successful.”

The Eclectic Review, 1815

In January 1824, William Hazlitt wrote the first of a series of twenty-five character sketches that were published collectively in 1825 in *The Spirit of the Age*. Covering writers from Chaucer to the contemporary poets of what Francis Jeffrey called “the Lake School,” *The Spirit of the Age*, considered “the crowning ornament of Hazlitt’s career,” described the lives, strengths, and shortcomings of mostly British writers who Hazlitt believed had influenced England’s philosophical and literary culture (Kinnaird 301). Of Wordsworth, Hazlitt wrote:

He is... the most original poet now living, and the one whose writings could the least be spared, for they have no substitute elsewhere. The vulgar do not read them, the learned, who see all things through books, do not understand them, the great despise, the fashionable may ridicule them: but the author has created for himself an interest in the heart of the retired and lonely student of nature, which can never die. (255)

If Wordsworth’s poetry truly had “no substitute elsewhere,” something about it must have distinguished it from the writings of all his predecessors and contemporaries, from Milton or Pope just as much as from Coleridge and Southey. What exactly that quality was, however, appears to have eluded the grasp of the “vulgar,” the “learned,” the “great,” and the “fashionable.” Henry Crabb Robinson wrote that Wordsworth’s poems “are excellent, but I believe I do not understand in what their excellence consists” (*HCR* I, 309), and Coleridge’s “brilliant and suggestive analysis of the characteristic features of Wordsworth’s style” in his *Biographia Literaria*, as Marjorie Greenbie notes, “is, after all, rather fragmentary” (ix-x).

Later attempts to explain why Wordsworth has “no substitute elsewhere” revolve around the poetic doctrine Wordsworth first formally espoused in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. For the student of Romanticism, the year 1798 “is engraved on our minds” as the year in which *Lyrical Ballads* was first published, and in many cases 1798 is given as the beginning of the Romantic movement in England for that same reason (Martin 472, Cronin 9). Wordsworth’s Preface, written two years later, was intended as “a systematic defense of the theory upon which [*Lyrical Ballads*] were written (*PrW* I, 120), and has consequently been viewed as the formal statement of the tenets of Romantic theories that had been slowly emerging in the publications of young liberal writers (Cronin 1-7). George Harper describes the Preface as “the most eloquent, as it is without rival the most weighty, treatise on [poetry] in our language” (335), and Stephen Parrish claims the Preface inaugurated a “poetic revolution” (vii). Peter Hofstee calls it “paradigm-changing” (1). The Preface is in fact the only one of Wordsworth’s works that appeared in every edition of collected poetry he ever published in his lifetime. His earlier writings—*Descriptive Sketches* and *An Evening Walk*—were omitted from several editions, but the Preface was always given a place. Because of the seminal role of his Preface in articulating the literary goals of contemporary poets, Wordsworth has been considered the founder of English Romanticism (Cronin 17, Parrish viii).

Although contemporary praise of Wordsworth’s originality centers on his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Hazlitt’s praise comes over two decades after that Preface was written, and in his essay Hazlitt discusses Wordsworth’s more recent publication, *The Excursion* (1814), in far greater detail than the seemingly outdated Preface. Because the poetic theories underlying *The Excursion* had evolved from theories underlying the poems from the *Lyrical Ballads*, the Wordsworth being praised by Hazlitt was a more evolved Wordsworth than the author of the

Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. To see what made Wordsworth so unique in Hazlitt's eyes, and to introduce Wordsworth's poetic theories, I start my historical analysis of *The Ruined Cottage* with the same text of *The Ruined Cottage* that Hazlitt had read: the 998-line version comprising book 1 of *The Excursion*. This text also marked the first time the words of *The Ruined Cottage* were available to the general public; the poem previously had been exchanged only between Wordsworth and his close friends.

The text the public read and Hazlitt praised was far different from the text Wordsworth had sent to Cottle for potential publication in 1798. By the time of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth's poetic theory had shifted from the "emotion recollected in tranquility" described in his Preface to a semiautobiographical emphasis on the "spots of time" that produce poets capable of feeling and expressing those powerful emotions, and correspondingly, his primary change to *The Ruined Cottage* during those years was the addition of an almost 450-line biography for his Pedlar. Scholars debate whether Wordsworth originally planned this biography as a stand-alone poem or for placement within *The Ruined Cottage*, and with good reason: several times during the composition of *The Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth inserted and then removed these lines from Margaret's tale. Drafts of the Pedlar's biography appear as early as 1797 in the Alfoxden Notebook, but in MS. A we find no background material for the Pedlar. MS. B contains the biography in full, but the pages on which it was written come from a separate notebook that was sewn into the manuscript, as if the addition of these lines was an afterthought (Butler 130-1). Even so, these inserted pages in MS. B contain clear instructions in Wordsworth's hand regarding how they could be elided, and they are once again absent in the manuscript he sent to

Cottle. Wordsworth's early plans for his Pedlar are hypothesized elsewhere,¹ but we know with certainty that by 1806 Wordsworth had permanently fused the Pedlar's biography with Margaret's tale, titled the ensemble *The Wanderer*, and made it the frontispiece of *The Excursion*.

The Excursion itself was intended as only one part of Wordsworth's largely and ultimately unsuccessful endeavor to write *The Recluse*, and was the only part of that projected magnum opus to be published during Wordsworth's lifetime. But before Wordsworth even began writing any of the three formal parts of *The Recluse*—and therefore before he ever conclusively decided to keep the Pedlar's biography in Margaret's tale—he felt it incumbent on himself to write his poem on the growth of a poet's mind, intended as a prefatory chapter to *The Recluse*. “It is not self-conceit,” Wordsworth wrote in 1805 in reference to his *Prelude*, “that has induced me to do this, but real humility. I began the work because I was unprepared to treat any more arduous subject, and diffident of my own powers” (*E.Y.* 586). In order to undertake a task as grandiose as *The Recluse*, it would seem that Wordsworth, who was slightly less self-confident after the lukewarm response to this seminal *Lyrical Ballads* and the several defenses he was persuaded to write for it,² needed to first justify his poetic ability to do so.

The Prelude is consequently treated as Wordsworth's poetic autobiography, a narration of the life events that shaped him into the poet he was and a “self-examination of how far Nature and Education have qualified him for his task” (de Selincourt xxv). Despite the overwhelming amount of scholarship comparing Wordsworth to his poetic representation of himself in what

¹ Judson Stanley Lyon's *The Excursion* and James Butler's introduction to the Cornell Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage and the Pedlar* speculate when, exactly, the Pedlar's biography became part of *The Ruined Cottage* and when *The Ruined Cottage* became part of *The Excursion*.

² That Wordsworth even needed to write defenses of *Lyrical Ballads* testifies to their mixed response from the public. Wordsworth's many letters to his publisher demanding information on sales of *Lyrical Ballads*, as well as information provided in Dorothy's journals, likewise suggest that Wordsworth, despite his outward assurance that “the poems would sooner or later make their way” (*HCR* I, 246), was at times unsettled by his lack of success. Mary Jacobus, in her introduction to *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads*, summarizes the contemporary critical reviews of *Lyrical Ballads*.

was at the time an unprecedented style of poetic autobiography, *The Prelude* was not Wordsworth's only autobiographical poem, nor was it his first. According to Paul Jay, what unifies the genre of autobiography across the several stylistic forms it can take, from epic poems to memoirs, is "a factual and more or less objective life history of its author that includes details about personality and emotional, spiritual, and social development" (15). Under this definition, some of Wordsworth's more openly philosophic poems, like "Tintern Abbey" or "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality," are autobiographical, insofar as they represent Wordsworth's own personal development. Even minor poems such as "Old Man Travelling" and "Simon Lee" take scenes from Wordsworth's personal observations, giving them an autobiographical bend. In his outline for *The Recluse*, Wordsworth plans for first and third parts that are grounded in personal philosophy—parts that are themselves "essentially autobiographical"—and considers only the second part, *The Excursion*, to be "dramatic" (de Selincourt xxvii).

Yet even *The Excursion* was shaped heavily by personal experience. The Solitary's loss of both a son and a daughter in book II, for example, was added after the deaths of two of Wordsworth's children in 1812 (Bushell 14), and the funeral of the young volunteer soldier in book VII was modeled after a similar funeral Wordsworth attended in 1807 (Lyon 51). James Butler believes that by writing *The Prelude* Wordsworth "freed" *The Excursion* from "the more autobiographical details" incorporated in the former poem (35), but this couldn't be further from the truth. The driving thrust behind *The Excursion* is the restoration of the Solitary, whose "life, faith, and philosophy have been destroyed by historical events," to his former self (Bushell 10). This is no small feat, and the character who does so must exhibit the "virtue of Mankind" that the Solitary "from [his] Fellow-beings... require[s] / But cannot find" (*Ex* 3.967-8). Wordsworth nominates his Pedlar for this task, and so just as Wordsworth's *Prelude* justifies his qualification

to write *The Recluse*, the biography he creates for his Pedlar justifies the Pedlar's ability to "save" the Solitary. By inserting the Pedlar's biography into *The Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth transforms the poem about Margaret's suffering into a semiautobiographical poem, like *The Prelude*, about the creation of a poet.

This chapter begins with an analysis of how Wordsworth's Pedlar can be glossed as an autobiographical figure, addressing both how the Pedlar's factual life history closely aligns with that of Wordsworth and how the Pedlar's character matches that of the true "poet" Wordsworth describes in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. I distinguish the Pedlar as a character modeled for Wordsworth, not after him, recognizing that the Pedlar more closely resembles what Wordsworth wanted to be, and intended to be, after writing *The Prelude*, and not who Wordsworth actually was. I then turn to the compositional history of the Pedlar's biography, which reveals how a character Wordsworth originally thought of as separate from himself slowly evolved into an autobiographical figure and ultimately into a glorified version of a poet. As part of the compositional history I consider why Wordsworth would choose to omit the Pedlar's biography from the poem he sent to Cottle in 1798, and why he would then return it to *The Ruined Cottage* by 1806. I conclude by discussing how our reading of Margaret's tale changes between *The Ruined Cottage* and *The Wanderer*, focusing on how Margaret's tale vies with the Pedlar's for supremacy in the poem. *The Wanderer* reads not as the Pedlar's narration of "emotion recollected in tranquility," like *The Ruined Cottage* does, but rather as the story of the Pedlar's personal experiences, famously called "spots of time" in *The Prelude*, that enable him to so poignantly recollect the emotions of Margaret's tale.

I. Reading Wordsworth in his Pedlar

In the Fenwick note to *The Excursion*, Wordsworth explicitly acknowledges an autobiographical intent in his depiction of the Pedlar: “Had I been born in a class which would have deprived me of what is called a liberal education, it is not unlikely that... I should have taken to a way of life such as that in which my Pedlar passed the greatest part of his days” (F 195). Of note in this acknowledgement, however, is Wordsworth’s admission that his Pedlar is an example of what Wordsworth himself might have been, not what Wordsworth was. Two appropriate lines of analysis thus present themselves when considering the autobiographical qualities of Wordsworth’s Pedlar: first, the relationship between the Pedlar and Wordsworth’s factual life experiences, and second, the relationship between the Pedlar and the man Wordsworth envisioned himself as. Jay identifies these as the “factual” and “figurative” subjects, respectively, of any autobiography (91). To address the former, I use our biographical knowledge of Wordsworth and the experiences he describes in *The Prelude* to compare shared “spots of time” between Wordsworth and his Pedlar. For the latter, I assume that Wordsworth envisioned himself as a great poet and turn to his description of such a poet in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to evaluate how the Pedlar meets the several criteria Wordsworth establishes there.³

The vast majority of the Pedlar’s autobiography describes his education, both in and outside the schoolhouse, making it the most amenable point of comparison to Wordsworth’s life. Reflecting on his education, Wordsworth in *The Prelude* identifies his two principal instructors, neither of which are human schoolteachers: “the speaking face of earth and heaven” and “the consecrated works of bard and sage” (5.12, 41). Even though books 1-3 of *The Prelude* are titled

³ Later in his career Wordsworth asserted that “there was some foundation in fact, however slight, for every poem he had written,” justifying the assumption that *The Prelude* is at least a loosely accurate autobiography (Heffernan 11). Wordsworth’s opinion of himself as a great poet is even less debatable: several times in his journals Robinson describes how Wordsworth continues to think of himself as great even the face of poor reviews.

for his education at Hawkshead and Cambridge, the word “Hawkshead” never appears in any of the books and “Cambridge” only in the title of book 3. These books instead focus on Wordsworth’s experiences with nature and country folk that happened to occur while he was at school, such as when “he walk[ed] alone / In storm and tempest” (2.321-2) or “gallop[ed] through the country with blind zeal” (3.255).

In the Pedlar’s biography, Wordsworth similarly puts little stock in the school his Pedlar attended, focusing instead on his Pedlar’s experiences with nature. A meager four lines of this biography are devoted to “his Step-father’s School” (W 138-41), which is never mentioned again anywhere in *The Excursion*. Succeeding those lines is a passage, almost ten times longer, expounding on the Pedlar’s evening walk home from school, and in this passage, rather than in the lines about the schoolhouse, Wordsworth reaches the unambiguous conclusion “so the foundations of his mind were laid” (W 148). Just as nature “peopled [Wordsworth’s] mind with beauteous forms” in *The Prelude* (1.573), “Nature... has taught” Wordsworth’s Pedlar “to feel intensely” (W 214-5).

Of the natural scenes that “educate” these two characters, mountains are given the highest priority. Formative “spots of time” in Wordsworth’s life are sprinkled throughout *The Prelude*, but the two that predominate and shape the poem are those that “occur at the middle and end of the poem,” when, according to Leon Waldoff, Wordsworth achieves “a new awareness” in two of his most famous soliloquys (37). These two scenes—Wordsworth crossing the Alps in book 6 and ascending Mount Snowdon in book 13—are the climactic moments when Wordsworth recognizes that “our destiny, our nature, and our home / Is with infinitude” (6.538-9). The Pedlar’s schoolhouse sits “on a mountain’s dreary edge,” and the description of the Pedlar beholding “the sun / Rise up” and “the ocean... beneath him” from a mountain summit (W 220-

3) closely matches the description of Wordsworth “over this still ocean” while ascending Snowdon (*Pld* 13.46). On the “lonely mountain tops,” the Pedlar feels the same sense of infinitude and “immortality” Wordsworth felt in the Alps (*W* 240, 250-3). For both characters, then, the mountains are nature’s representative educator.

The second instructor Wordsworth identifies for himself, the “consecrated works of bard and sage” preserved in books and written words, is likewise shared by his Pedlar. Wordsworth devotes the entire fifth book of *The Prelude* to the formative role of books, the “adamantine holds of truth” for man (5.38). Correspondingly, his Pedlar “eagerly... read, and read again, / Whate’er the Minister’s old shelf supplied” (*W* 188-9). Even Wordsworth’s love of Milton carries over to his Pedlar: “the divine Milton” Wordsworth praises in *The Prelude* and *Artegal and Elidure* is the only writer in the Pedlar’s biography to receive special recognition as an author whose work “most tempted [the Pedlar’s] desires” (*W* 268-71). Wordsworth and his Pedlar thus share near-identical educations in their youth.

Both Wordsworth and his Pedlar also lived largely peripatetic lifestyles in their later years. More importantly, both used extended walks as their opportunity for philosophic discussion and for solitary contemplation. Wordsworth composed several of his poems, or was struck with ideas for them, as he walked (Harper 302). When Southey, Coleridge, or Robinson visited Wordsworth in Grasmere, their visits would invariably include a walk through the nearby fells as Wordsworth relayed his thoughts on poetry, contemporary politics, or religion. On his tour through Italy with Robinson in 1836, Wordsworth preferred a full day’s hike to the Papigno waterfall over a tour of the Coliseum (*HCR* II, 244-7), and he ultimately died from pleurisy he presumably acquired while out walking (Harper 609-10). The opening segment of the Pedlar’s biography emphasizes how the Pedlar and the poem’s speaker “wandered through the woods”

together as they discussed “abstrusest matter [and] reasonings of the mind” (*W* 65-9), effectively reenacting Wordsworth’s leisure activity of choice.

In addition to these larger similarities, minor parallels abound, further suggesting that the Pedlar and Wordsworth are one and the same. When writing of the Pedlar that “strongest minds / Are often those of whom the noisy world / Hears least” (95-7), Wordsworth may very well be thinking of himself; Robinson writes that Wordsworth had a “sense of his own excellence” (*HCR* I, 246), making him one of the so-called “strongest minds,” but the unenthusiastic response to *Lyrical Ballads* and again to *Poems in Two Volumes* in 1807 made Wordsworth feel marginalized by the “noisy world.” Both Wordsworth and the Pedlar are bereaved of their fathers while they are still young (*W* 115-7), and, after finishing school, both “wandered far” from their home, Wordsworth to France and the Pedlar to unspecified country settings (*W* 370). Both also lost their fathers while they are still young (*W* 115-7). It thus appears that Wordsworth and his Pedlar share a considerable amount of factual background.

Despite their shared background, the dissimilarities between Wordsworth and his Pedlar are too great to allow us to read the Pedlar only as Wordsworth’s strictly factual literary self. Wordsworth’s mother never remarried and in fact died before Wordsworth’s father; Wordsworth never had a long daily walk between school and home; he was raised in the bustling town of Cockermouth rather than the countryside; he was never employed as a shepherd; and, most conspicuously, he was never a peddler. Waldoff, in his analysis of Wordsworth’s autobiographical work, acknowledges that the “experiences and states of mind” of Wordsworth’s autobiographical figures “accord closely, but not exactly, with the poet” (2). However, their experiences accord closely enough to convincingly achieve what Waldoff identifies as Wordsworth’s primary goal in literary self-representation: not a presentation of himself, but

rather a presentation of “the person he... wants to be” (19). All the qualities Wordsworth thought belonged in a true poet, the qualities he searches for in himself in *The Prelude* that would qualify him to write *The Recluse*, are embodied in his Pedlar, making that Pedlar’s biography more of a figurative autobiography describing who Wordsworth wanted to be.⁴

In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth provides his only direct answer to the question “what is a poet,” an answer which cannot be discerned from his poems alone. His answer, albeit long, provides invaluable insight into his Pedlar:

[A poet] is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul... a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him... To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet... do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than anything which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves. (*PrWI*,138).

This poet, according to Wordsworth’s conclusion to *The Prelude*, has the power to “instruct [others] how the mind of man becomes / A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells” (*Pld* 13.446-8). At the end of *The Prelude*, the speaker, Wordsworth-turned-

⁴ Waldoff’s definition of Wordsworth’s autobiographical self is particularly appropriate: “The speaker or ‘I’ of a major lyric is a dramatized, transitional self of the poet that enables him to experience a special mode of being in which he can explore certain potentialities of the self and attempt a transformation of self. The experience typically takes place in the presence of an important addressee or object” (29).

poet, has the power to write at least *The Excursion*, and in *The Excursion* the peddler-turned-poet has the “knowledge of human nature” and “spirit of life” needed to restore the Solitary.

Wordsworth’s first criterion, that a poet is “a man speaking to men,” is met solely by the framework of *The Wanderer*: his Pedlar narrates Margaret’s tale for the speaker, and both characters, based on their vocations, are plain, unadorned men. Similarly, the Pedlar exhibits the requisite “disposition to be affected... by absent things as if they were present” by sharing “one sadness” with the water no longer disturbed by the touch of Margaret’s absent hand and by narrating Margaret’s tale so that “the things of which he spake / Seemed present” (W 518, 647-8). He goes so far as to explicitly tell the poem’s speaker “I see around me here... / Things which you cannot see” (W 501-2). All of these characteristics are established outside of the Pedlar’s biography. His “lively sensibility” and his “enthusiasm and tenderness” might be discerned from his paternal love for Margaret and the “easy cheerfulness” with which he relates her tale (W 646) but are better addressed in his biography, and perhaps the most ambiguous qualities Wordsworth finds in a poet, a “knowledge of humankind” and a “comprehensive soul,” likewise emerge in the newly added lines.

In the Pedlar’s biography we learn enough to justify Wordsworth making the Pedlar what the *Eclectic Review* called “the hero of a literary work” (Ames 544). His young Pedlar becomes “sublime and comprehensive” on the mountains, capable of seeing greatness even in “the least of things” (W 251-55), and in an earlier manuscript the Pedlar also has “comprehensive views” (*MS B 15^R*). During his wanderings he acquires the “knowledge of humankind” Wordsworth requires:

He had observed the progress and decay
Of many minds, of minds and bodies too,
The History of many Families;

How they had prospered, how they were o'erthrown

By passion or mischance. (*W* 404-8)

This “knowledge” thus encapsulates individuals and families, minds and bodies, and successes and failures; its comprehensiveness gives authority to the Pedlar’s commentary on Margaret’s decline and to the subsequent stories of *The Excursion*. The power of observation by which the Pedlar acquires this knowledge parallels the same power so often praised as the source of Wordsworth’s poetry. In his communion with nature, fondness for children, and acquired wisdom, the Pedlar exemplifies the poet of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Given that Wordsworth created his Pedlar before he wrote *The Prelude*, the Pedlar in this light can be read as “a trial run for the autobiographical verse of *The Prelude*” (Radcliffe 101).

The Pedlar’s biography also contains the three formative stages Jay identifies in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*—“a boy’s ‘original,’ ‘natural’ power, his loss of that power in the growing rationality of manhood, and his return to the original sources of his power” (50)—making him the complete poet Wordsworth designed him to be. From age six, Wordsworth’s Pedlar has “an active power to fasten images / Upon his brain... / ... till they acquired / The liveliness of dreams” (*W* 163-6), paralleling the power *The Prelude*’s young speaker exhibits to feel “huge and mighty forms” when he steals a rowboat and paddles beneath “the summit of a craggy ridge” (*Pld* 1.357-400). “Before his eighteenth year was told,” Wordsworth’s Pedlar was “by... turbulence subdued of his own mind” and demanded repose “from his intellect” (*W* 302-24), just as the speaker of *The Prelude* experiences the temporary impairment of his imagination when nature “had fallen back / Into a second place” in his life (12.238-9). Just as that same speaker experiences the subsequent restoration of his imagination in the climactic ascent of Mount Snowdon, so, too, Wordsworth’s Pedlar once again becomes “happy, and quiet in his

cheerfulness” when he chooses his way-wandering lifestyle (W 336). In his similarities with the speaker of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s Pedlar becomes the same poet Wordsworth himself was, or thought he was, after writing *The Prelude*—the poet enshrined in Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

Wordsworth’s presentation of his two semiautobiographical poets in *The Prelude* and *The Wanderer* does differ insofar as the ideal poet is the speaker in the former but not in the latter. At the extreme end of speculation lies the hypothesis that Wordsworth’s autobiographical figure in *The Wanderer* is the speaker, not the Pedlar. However, given Wordsworth’s own admission in the Fenwick note, and the contemporaneous drafting of *The Wanderer* and *The Prelude*, this case is difficult to make. Judson Stanley Lyon acknowledges that “in some cases [the speaker] is a... mouthpiece for the sentiments of Wordsworth, but so are all the other characters,” conflating any attempts to identify the autobiographical figure based on his expressed opinions (46). Moreover, the speaker in *The Excursion* does little in the poem’s nine books: he passively follows the Pedlar to the Solitary’s grove and relays the dialogue between the Pedlar, Solitary, and the Pastor. He rarely interjects his own voice and, when he does, he spouts only the philosophies the Pedlar has already expressed (Lyon 46). Wordsworth wrote *The Wanderer* at the height of his poetic power and in the fervor of his grand dream for *The Recluse*; the poet in whom Keats criticized what he called the “egotistical sublime” would have had no reason to marginalize his own self-representation. *The Excursion*, we must remember, was designed as a dramatic poem, not a personal one; it reads more as a Socratic dialogue where Wordsworth, in the character of his Pedlar, instructs the unlearned, his speaker, “on man, on nature, and on human life.”

Underlying this entire analysis lies the question of why Wordsworth would choose a peddler, of all possible occupations, to be the model for himself, spokesperson for his poetic ideals, and protagonist of *The Excursion*. Wordsworth himself acknowledges that he would never

have been a peddler, and the poem itself rarely refers to the Pedlar by his trade. Coleridge cites Wordsworth's use of a peddler as the token example of a fault he calls Wordsworth's "minuteness": "is there one word, for instance, attributed to the Pedlar in *The Excursion*, characteristic of a pedlar?... Need the rank have been at all particularized, where nothing follows which the knowledge of that rank is to explain or illustrate?" (BL 219). Francis Jeffrey's review of *The Excursion* slandered the "wretched and provoking perversity of taste and judgment" that induced Wordsworth to make a "superannuated Pedlar" his "advocate of wisdom and virtue" (Ames 543). Even Lamb's defense of Wordsworth's Pedlar conveys dissatisfaction, as Lamb suggests "Palmer, or Pilgrim, or any less offensive designation" might be substituted for the word Pedlar (Ames 544). What makes the Pedlar's occupation important, however, are the qualities that separate him from the Palmers and Pilgrims that Lamb takes largely from romance: he is peripatetic and, moreover, he is realistic. Throughout *The Prelude* "Wordsworth often refers to the process of its writing," and of the self-realization that accompanied it, "as a journey" (Jay 59). By making his exemplar poet a wandering peddler, Wordsworth only extends the metaphor, presenting a man made from the "spots of time" he has physically travelled between. The Pedlar who arrives at Margaret's ruined cottage in 1814 is a true Wordsworthian poet, qualified to direct the speaker's sympathy for Margaret's suffering and, moreover, to direct the Solitary's thoughts towards a regained faith in mankind.

II. Creating the Pedlar: The Growth of a Poet's Mind

Wordsworth did not originally think of himself, or his idealized self, when he first wrote *The Wanderer*. The autobiographical qualities of the Pedlar instead emerged slowly through a series of drafts written between 1798 and 1814. In this series of drafts, Wordsworth's poetic theory evolved from "the emotion recollected in tranquility" showcased in *The Ruined Cottage*

to the semiautobiographical emphasis on the “spots of time” narrated in *The Wanderer*.

Corresponding to this development in theory is the slow transition of the Pedlar from a character distinctly separate from Wordsworth, to Wordsworth himself, and finally to Wordsworth’s idealized poet. Drafts in the Alfoxden Notebook give Wordsworth’s Pedlar a name, “Patrick Drummond,” and model him after the “James Patrick” Wordsworth describes in his Fenwick note (Butler 26): “an individual named Patrick, by birth and education a Scotchman, [who] followed this humble occupation for many years” (*F* 196). When Wordsworth writes a complete biography for MS. B, the Pedlar loses his name and his background more closely aligns with Wordsworth’s. For *The Excursion*, Wordsworth adds three passages “affecting the Pedlar’s role as commentator on Margaret’s story by improving his philosophic standing” (Butler 35). Only then does the Pedlar become the poet Wordsworth describes in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

The passages from the Alfoxden Notebook that Wordsworth discards in subsequent drafts accordingly do not align with the philosophic and moralizing function of the Pedlar in *The Excursion*. An extensive passage in the Alfoxden Notebook describes “a little girl” who would visit the old Pedlar when he was home, asking him “to tell her stories of his early life” and “sing to her / Scotch songs” (31^R). Wordsworth shortened this passage in MS. E, curtailed it again in MS. M, and eliminated it entirely from *The Wanderer*, presumably because the image of an old man singing songs and “weep[ing] over” the innocence of a little girl was more appropriate to Wordsworth’s characterization of James Patrick than to his developing portrait of a true poet (Butler 35). In a shorter passage, Wordsworth compares his Pedlar to “some men... who like insects / Dart and dart against the mighty stream of tendency” (15^V), but such a devaluing simile would be out of place in the characterization of a poet trying to share his “passions and volitions” with those same “insects.” Other sketches in the Alfoxden Notebook emphasize the role of

nature in the Pedlar's life, giving "simple grandeur to his mind" and "the power miraculous" (16^V, 21^R); these are the passages that are preserved, thematically if not verbatim, through all the subsequent portraits of the Pedlar, because these are the qualities that Wordsworth himself shared and that befit his exemplar poet attuned to the relationship between man and nature.

In exchange for the lines Wordsworth drops from the Alfoxden Notebook, he adds all the material, discussed above, that link his life to his Pedlar's. The briefly mentioned schoolhouse, the implication that the Pedlar and the speaker are long-established friends who often went on long walks together, and the extended description of the Pedlar's "natural" education and his indebtedness to books, were all added as new lines in MS. B. Curiously, the lines about books appear far later in the MS. B text than they do in subsequent manuscripts, as if reading was less important to Wordsworth in 1798 than in 1804. Dorothy's journals and letters validate this assumption: several times in 1800-1806 she describes Wordsworth reading prolifically before he undertakes *The Recluse*, but in 1798-1799, she comments almost daily on Wordsworth's walks and never on his reading. In MS. B Wordsworth also replaces "Drummond," a name referring to his peddling friend, with "the venerable Armytage," a name which has no known source in his life (Butler 102), making it more plausible for his Pedlar to be Wordsworth himself.

Additional evidence for Wordsworth's growing autobiographical intent in creating his Pedlar comes from his use of several lines from these early manuscripts in his explicitly autobiographical *Prelude*. Although no lines ever written for *The Prelude* were placed in the Pedlar's biography, several *Prelude* attempts placed elsewhere in *The Excursion* to describe the Pedlar are equally indicative of a poetic-autobiographical goal. Of the two pieces of *Excursion* draft material ultimately redirected for *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's famous and well-studied acknowledgement of the "one life" he sees "in all things" (2.416-34) comes verbatim from MS.

B, and his lengthy discussion of “the world” which “only lived to [him]” also comes from MS. B but was revised before being incorporated (*Pld* 3.141-67).⁵

Perhaps the most obvious change Wordsworth makes to all three excerpts before placing them in *The Prelude*, but nonetheless a significant one, is the replacement of all third-person pronouns with first-person. Given that the majority of the transferred lines were transferred verbatim between 1798 and 1800, when Wordsworth first began *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s free exchange of the “he” of the Pedlar for the autobiographical “I” of *The Prelude* suggests that Wordsworth saw himself in both characters. With respect to the change in content, Butler argues that MS. B was “diminished by the transfer of two of its most impressive sections to *The Prelude*.” However, by moving the “one life” passage to *The Prelude*, Wordsworth improves both poems: *The Wanderer* loses its indebtedness to Coleridge, making the Pedlar a more self-created poet rather than a Wordsworth/Coleridge blend, and *The Prelude*, which was at times called “the poem to Coleridge,” now contains a gratuitous nod to its audience. Losing the self-made world passage admittedly removes a valuable portrait of the Pedlar power of observation—he no longer has the “eye which... / Looked deep into the shades of difference”—but it also removes the accompanying claim that “some called [that power] madness, and such it might have been” (*MS. B* 17^R). Writing about his literal self in *The Prelude* with no intent of publication, Wordsworth can afford to acknowledge his critics, but to insinuate in *The Excursion* that the Pedlar was mad would diminish the Pedlar’s authority as a poet capable of saving the Solitary. When he revised *The Prelude* in his later years, Wordsworth must have recognized the potentially negative connotation in this passage, because he added “it was no madness” shortly after the transferred line (*Pld* 3.158).

⁵ Wordsworth’s description of the “one life” is actually a philosophy originally suggested to him by Coleridge.

The first twenty-five lines of book 2 in *The Excursion* were originally intended for *The Prelude* but were struck from the latter before Wordsworth wrote any of the now-anthologized drafts (Lyon 19). Wordsworth's reasons for moving these lines are discernable from the lines themselves: the description of

The minstrel! Wandering on from hall to hall...
 Now meeting on his road an armed Knight,
 Now resting with a Pilgrim by the side
 Of a clear brook;--beneath an Abbey's roof
 One evening sumptuously lodged; the next
 Humbly, in a religious Hospital... (*Ex* 2.2-9)

belongs more to his way-wandering Pedlar than to his own more settled life. Immediately after these lines Wordsworth describes how the Pedlar's harp, symbol of his poetry, "protected him from the sword of war" (*Ex* 2.13). Such a bold claim could only be true of a fully developed poet—something Wordsworth was not when he first began *The Prelude* and something the Pedlar was not at his young age in *The Wanderer*. Consequently, these lines belong neither in *The Prelude* or *The Wanderer*, where both poet figures are still developing; Wordsworth places them at the opening of *The Excursion*'s second book to reintroduce the man who, based on the "spots of time" described in the previous book and his demonstrated skill at describing Margaret's cottage, is qualified to direct the poem's philosophical discourse.

After exchanging these several passages with *The Prelude* and reworking some of the excerpts from MS. B, Wordsworth had a complete working draft of *The Ruined Cottage*, containing the biography of a Pedlar he personally identified with, by 1798. Although Wordsworth would extensively revise this biography again in the 1803-1804 MS. E text, and

again before it was published in *The Excursion*, he first chose to remove it from the text he sent to Cottle for publication in 1798. Before considering the later revisions, two essential questions arise. First, if both this biography and *The Ruined Cottage* were composed at the same time and Wordsworth so closely identified with his Pedlar, what compelled him to omit the biography from the final manuscript of *The Ruined Cottage*? And, correspondingly, what in 1804 compelled him to replace the text he had deliberately removed?

Philip Cohen argues that Wordsworth's omission of the biography is a mistake, diminishing the credibility of *The Ruined Cottage*; without the Pedlar's biography, *The Ruined Cottage* "does not show us how the Pedlar attained his natural perspective on life" (189). The moralization provided by the Pedlar is questionable, according to Cohen, because the brevity with which it is presented is not substantiated by any indication of what led the Pedlar "to see human actions," like Robert's departure and Margaret's decline, "from the natural perspective" that represents their story as the story of the cottage itself (192). Cohen would seem to prefer that Wordsworth explain how the Pedlar developed the qualities of a poet defined in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The underlying premise behind Cohen's argument, which he fails to explicitly identify, is that Wordsworth's goal in *The Ruined Cottage* is to show how a poet interacts with the story he narrates, which would first require an understanding of how the Pedlar's character was shaped into that of a poet.

However, this does not seem to be Wordsworth's objective in 1799, though it would become so by the time of *The Excursion*. John Rieder suggests instead that by omitting the Pedlar's biography, Wordsworth "make[s] Armytage's character emerge directly from his response to the scene and his grief over Margaret, rather than from his description of his youth and his profession" (163). Without his biography, the Pedlar's character is shaped by his

interaction with the story he narrates. Thus, without the supporting text of his biography, Armytage's experience with Margaret and his conversation with the speaker of *The Ruined Cottage* constitute one of the "spots of time" that create his character. In *The Ruined Cottage*, seeing "those weeds, and the high spear-grass on the wall" of the cottage, "conveys" to Armytage's heart "an image of tranquility," making him a passive receiver of a poetically powerful image (RC 514-7). If Armytage's background is provided, Margaret's story would no longer be the formative experience of his poetic ability, and instead the peddler-poet would actively recognize the image of tranquility in the weeds and spear-grass. In contrast with Cohen's assumption, Wordsworth at the beginning of his poetic career is more interested in showing a single, emotionally powerful "spot of time" in a poet's development than he is in showing the skills of an established poet, and he consequently excludes the Pedlar's biography from his final reading text of *The Ruined Cottage*.

When Wordsworth approached Margaret's tale again in 1804 as *The Wanderer*, he intended it as part of *The Excursion*, and his primary change was to reinsert the peddler's biography in *The Ruined Cottage*. His reason for doing so was straightforward: to narrate *The Excursion*, Wordsworth needed a dramatic figure who has the experience and depth of character necessary to restore the Solitary's spirit and faith. Margaret's story is no longer one of the "spots of time" in the Pedlar's character development; those formative "spots of time" appear instead in the Pedlar addition, and by the time he encounters Margaret, the Pedlar already is a poet. In *The Ruined Cottage*, as Cohen notes, the Pedlar may provide a touching narration, but he lacks the poetic prowess that at the beginning of *The Excursion*, book 2, protects him "from the sword of war" (Ex 2.13). His unsupported figure exemplifies how powerful emotion can be recollected in a state of emotional tranquility; with the Pedlar lines added, he becomes a display of how the

“spots of time” in his life have enabled him to perform that recollection.

Three lengthy additions to the Pedlar’s biography, made shortly after its reincorporation, show Wordsworth turning his Pedlar into the established poet of his Preface. Wordsworth now introduces the Pedlar’s biography with the telling passage beginning “many are the Poets that are sown / By nature,” implying that the succeeding narration describes the creation of a poet, not just a peddler (*W* 81-2). The section describing the Pedlar’s temporary loss of his poetic power is likewise new, presumably inspired by the parallel scene Wordsworth had by now written for his *Prelude* (*W* 302-24). Finally, Wordsworth expands the conclusion of the Pedlar’s biography to mention that even after the Pedlar obtains “due provision for his modest wants” he still delights in “pac[ing] the public roads / And the wild paths,” preserving the wandering spirit that first led the Pedlar to communion with nature (*W* 412-65).

Minor changes between *The Ruined Cottage* and *The Wanderer* further suggest that the Pedlar of *The Wanderer* is already developed as a Wordsworthian poet. The Pedlar prefaces part of his narration with “recalling former days” (*W* 527), where he did not before, and he remarks on how the speaker “can scarcely . . . bear now in mind” the “two blighting seasons” of “twenty years ago” (*W* 535-7), where in *The Ruined Cottage* the “scarcely” clause is absent and the seasons are only “ten years” previous (*RC* 113). This added separation from the narrated scene implies that the Armytage of *The Wanderer* has come further temporally, and the content of *The Wanderer* would imply psychologically, from the Armytage of *The Ruined Cottage*. In *The Wanderer* Margaret lingers “in quiet widowhood” for “nine tedious years,” rather than the “five” of *The Ruined Cottage*, but the Pedlar visits her cottage the same number of times. If Margaret’s decline takes longer, the Pedlar’s visits are presumably less frequent. The decreased frequency of these visits in turn reflects the peddler’s independently defined character, as his biography now

identifies him for effectively than does his involvement in Margaret's tale. Wordsworth's new "Wanderer" thus has the skill necessary to help the Solitary before *The Excursion* even begins.

Several other changes to the Pedlar's biography between MS. E and *The Wanderer* show Wordsworth reducing the specificity of his Pedlar, making him a more generalized "poet" rather than the model of a single individual. Between MS. B and MS. E Wordsworth had added several lines that strongly linked his Pedlar with the Lake District and with Wordsworth himself, but for *The Wanderer* all these geographically identifying features of the Pedlar in MS. E—his "Cumbrian" origins, home in "Furness Fells," and life in "Hawkshead" (MS. E 41-2)—become generic titles of "market-village" and "town obscure" (W 54-5). The Pedlar who before been called "Drummond" or "Armytage" is now introduced only as "a man of reverend age" (W 33). Without these identifying features, the Pedlar becomes disassociated from Wordsworth, the man, and instead becomes Wordsworth, the poet that the entire *Prelude* leads towards creating.

III. *The Ruined Cottage* in *The Excursion*

Through the course of Wordsworth's many drafts of his biography, the Pedlar developed into the poet figure capable of credibly expressing the virtue and wisdom found throughout the nine books of *The Excursion*, analogous to the speaker at the end of *The Prelude*. To accommodate that transformation, Wordsworth's Pedlar loses the biographical details that identify him first with James Patrick and later with the Lake District. In the course of this textual evolution in the Pedlar's biography, Wordsworth's poetic philosophy shifted from the poignant expression of human suffering recollected in tranquil hindsight, one of the defining tenets of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, to a focus on the "spots of time" in an individual's life that give him poetic ability. That change in poetic philosophy was achieved by the massive expansion of the Pedlar's role in *The Ruined Cottage*, from the simple narrator of an emotionally powerful event

to the central figure for whom Margaret's tale is only a display of pre-established talent. What remains to be seen is how the expansion of the Pedlar's role changes our reading of Margaret's tale, the centerpiece around which *The Ruined Cottage* was first constructed.

By expanding the Pedlar's role in *The Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth sacrifices the strong political criticism and poignant display of suffering found in Margaret's standalone tale. Margaret's decline in *The Ruined Cottage* has been interpreted as a criticism of "war's consequences for the poor family" and of how "the military's opportunistic purchase of manpower destroys the very basis of a healthy community" (Rieder 152; Collings 76). The Pedlar's role in the original narration, mentioned in the previous chapter, is solely to create emotional distance from the scene and provide a reconciling moral; his presence does not dilute the sociopolitical commentary or emotional immediacy of Margaret's story. Of the 538 lines in *The Ruined Cottage*, just over 100 are devoted to the framing tale, distributed evenly throughout the poem. Most of those lines emphasize the Pedlar's sympathetic response to Margaret's decline, reminiscent of the cult of sensibility, and their even distribution ensures the Pedlar's commentary does not overbalance his narration. However, when 600 lines of *The Wanderer* represent the frame tale, 250 of which are consecutive biographic material, *The Ruined Cottage* becomes the story of the Pedlar, not of Margaret. Wordsworth's new choice of title for the poem reflects this new protagonist.

The changes Wordsworth makes to Margaret's tale when he returns the Pedlar's biography to its place in 1803 intentionally shape the poem more around the Pedlar than Margaret, overbalancing his role in *The Wanderer* to prepare his role in the subsequent books of *The Excursion*. In MS. E, the lengthy description of Margaret's corpse and dilapidated cottage, with the morbid lines "the worm is on her cheek" and "nettles rot and adders sun themselves,"

are removed, as are the animals who now “find shelter” within the cottage (*RC* 104-19). Instead, the Pedlar provides what could be considered a eulogy, lamenting the “woman of steady mind / Tender and deep in her excess of joy” who lay “forgotten in the quiet grave” (*W* 539-50). Margaret’s cottage is no longer “cheerless” (*RC* 60) and the Pedlar no longer calls the famine “a sad time of sorrow and distress” (*RC* 138). When he creates *The Wanderer*, Wordsworth effectively purifies *The Ruined Cottage* of some of its strongest sentiments. He tells us that the Pedlar “could afford to suffer / with those whom he saw suffer” (*W* 400), and so no longer needs to use images of suffering elsewhere in the poem to establish his character. To reduce the number of dominant characters, Robert’s tale collapses into Margaret’s: the six lines in *MS. B* describing Robert “working with his small hammer” are removed (25^R), and he is introduced in terms of his relationship to Margaret, as “her wedded partner” who “satisfied her heat,” rather than for his own agency (*W* 551-4).

In the antepenultimate verse paragraph the ruin of the cottage becomes more distant and generalized, allowing the original emphasis on the scene to instead be directed at the Pedlar. Wordsworth omits the Pedlar pointing “there, where you see the toadstool’s lazy head” (*RC* 452), removing some of the physical immediacy of the scene. Similarly, the question “seest thou that path” becomes “you see that path” (*RC* 457, *W* 917), a change which reduces the agency of the reader in relation to the scene by implying that the path is clearly visible and does not need to be actively seen. In *The Ruined Cottage*, the Pedlar speaks of “when a dog passed by” (*RC* 453), whereas in *The Excursion* this becomes “if” (*W* 913), transforming the definite into a hypothetical and thereby reducing the specificity of this particular image. Working at the spinning wheel, the child’s “toil” becomes his “task” (*RC* 466, *W* 926), lightening the scene’s emotional burden and connotation of laboriousness. Both the adjectives “broken” and “reft” are

removed from the Pedlar's description of the cottage (*RC* 450, 482), and he no longer describes Margaret as "expecting still to learn her husband's fate" (*RC* 467), abating the emotional poignancy of the poem's eponymous scene. To accommodate his "superannuated Pedlar," Wordsworth dampened Margaret's tragedy.

Margaret's story seems curiously out of place in the context of the entire *Excursion*, yet of the twenty-two short stories Lyon identifies within the poem, Margaret's comes first and is by far the longest. All critical treatments of *The Excursion* acknowledge that book 1 was written separately as *The Ruined Cottage* well before Wordsworth ever planned *The Excursion* and only adopted *ex post facto* for that later work. However, the question of why *The Ruined Cottage*, rather than any of Wordsworth's other poems or an entirely new piece, receives the coveted role as *The Excursion*'s commencement has been poorly addressed. The enlightened speakers of "Tintern Abbey" or "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality," if adapted into the third person, have had the same mystical experiences as Wordsworth's Pedlar and could feasibly direct *The Excursion*. Given the amount of labor devoted to the Pedlar's biography but not *The Ruined Cottage* in advance of *The Excursion*, I believe Wordsworth purposefully adopted his Pedlar for *The Excursion*, and that Margaret's tale came along as baggage. In his Pedlar Wordsworth already had a third-person semiautobiographical character with "an ideal relationship to nature" and the habit of wandering Wordsworth regarded so highly. Margaret's tale, when read as one more moment of character development, fits in *The Excursion* more seamlessly than when read for itself. Wordsworth's letters and manuscripts, unfortunately, provide no clues to his rationale.

Regardless of Wordsworth's reasoning, his placement of Margaret at the beginning of *The Excursion* brought her out of unpublished manuscripts and into the public spotlight. During Wordsworth's lifetime, Margaret's tale never saw the printed page without being linked with the

Pedlar's complete biography, but in the history of that biography we can now see the evolution of Wordsworth's poetic theory. Evan Radcliffe writes of *The Ruined Cottage* that "the poem is not just the story of Margaret; it is also the story of how nature and Margaret's tragedy formed the Pedlar, and of how the Pedlar and Margaret's tale educated the narrator" (119). Margaret's tragedy is the sole "spot of time" in the Pedlar's life, and the poem focuses on his ability to tranquilly relay her tragedy, a key tenet in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. If used to refer to *The Wanderer*, Radcliffe's statement might benefit from the following reformulation: *The Wanderer* is the story of how nature formed the Pedlar, of how the fully-formed Pedlar relates to stories of human suffering, and of how the Pedlar's poetic ability, displayed in his narration of Margaret's tale, prepares him for his conversations with the Solitary. Margaret's tale becomes only one of many "spots of time" in the Pedlar's life, and the poem takes the shape of Wordsworth's autobiographical *Prelude* in its focus on the creation of a poet.

CHAPTER 2
DEFINING WORDSWORTH'S EARLY THEORY: *THE RUINED COTTAGE*, 1795-1800

“‘But he looked surprised,’ said Taylor, ‘when I told him that I considered Southey the greatest poet and the greatest historian living.’ – ‘No great matter of surprise,’ I answered, ‘that Wordsworth should think himself a greater poet than Southey.’”

Henry Crabb Robinson, 1815

Wordsworth’s autobiographical mode may have characterized the first version of *The Ruined Cottage* the English public ever read, but that was not the first version Wordsworth wrote, nor is it the version most commonly remembered today. Today we remember and anthologize the manuscript of *The Ruined Cottage* that was almost published in 1798 instead of the *Lyrical Ballads*, a manuscript devoid of the Pedlar’s biography and focused instead on Margaret’s tale. Critical tradition often looks at this now-anthologized manuscript through the lens of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, assuming that since both works were ready to be published at the same time, the poetic theories underlying the *Lyrical Ballads* are equally supportive of *The Ruined Cottage*. In the modern tradition, the *Lyrical Ballads* and the theories espoused in its Preface, not the story told in *The Ruined Cottage* or *The Excursion*, have earned Wordsworth Hazlitt’s praise of “originality.” Given the central place Wordsworth’s Preface has taken in studies not only of his own poetry but of all English Romanticism, it is important to step back and consider how the first, unpublished drafts of *The Ruined Cottage* reveal Wordsworth’s earliest theories and thus tell the first chapter in the story of Wordsworth’s poetic career.

Reading *The Ruined Cottage* through the lens of Wordsworth’s Preface, however, can be a problematic methodology for defining Wordsworth’s earliest theories and demonstrating what makes those theories original. In a copy of *Lyrical Ballads* that Robinson sent to James Mottrom, Robinson included the note “I would not recommend you to begin with the Preface, wise and convincing as it is; I would wait a little before entering on the controversy” (*HCR* II, 461). The “controversy” he cites, between proponents and critics of Romantic poetry in the style of *Lyrical*

Ballads, emerged more from the Preface than it did from the poems themselves. “What in and for themselves would have been either forgotten or forgiven as imperfections,” Coleridge wrote in *Biographia Literaria*, “provoked direct hostility when announced as intentional, as the result of choice after full deliberation” (*BL* 36). Robinson’s and Coleridge’s opinions of the Preface still hold merit today, insofar as the Preface has been dangerously overused as the *sine qua non* of Wordsworth’s poetic theory.

There are three major shortcomings to using the Preface to define Wordsworth’s characteristics qualities. First, doing so assumes that the poetic theory Wordsworth describes in the Preface is a theory that makes his poetry, to borrow Hazlitt’s word, “original,” when the theories of imaginative expression and powerful emotion, and the motivation to write using the “real language of men,” were not as new as Wordsworth implies.¹ Second, any analysis of Wordsworth’s work in light of his Preface assumes that his prose defense of his poetic theory unambiguously delineates distinct tenets against which his poetry can be evaluated, when in fact many of Wordsworth’s phraseologies are questionable at best and his definitions of terms like “imagination” and “nature” are equally obscure. Underlying the entire Preface is a not-so-subtle discrepancy between Wordsworth’s descriptions of poetry as produced by the “spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions” and by “emotion recollected in tranquility,” two mental states which seemingly could not coexist while writing a poem. While several authors have tried to reconcile the two—James Heffernan describes a “disciplined spontaneity” (43)—the fact that the Preface requires internal reconciliation at all suggests a central weakness to the work.

¹ W. J. B. Owen’s *Wordsworth as Critic* provides the most comprehensive discussion of the discrepancies and inadequacies in, and the antecedents to, the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth’s emphasis on “emotion recollected in tranquility” is anticipated by Denis Diderot and Friedrich Schiller, among others, and many of Wordsworth’s predecessors—Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, Marlowe—all celebrated the “rustic” life.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, focusing exclusively on the Preface overlooks the fact that Wordsworth wrote the Preface to defend one series of poems, the *Lyrical Ballads*, not to defend every poem he had written by 1800. The advertisement to the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* identifies the poems as “experiments... written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure” (*PrWI*, 116), and Coleridge later acknowledges that Wordsworth’s “experiment” was restricted to “a comparatively small number of poems” which the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* was designed to defend (*BL* 210). In later editions of his poetry Wordsworth goes so far as to acknowledge that the observations in his Preface “have... little of special application to the greater part... of the collection” (*PrW* III, 26). But if the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* was written only to defend the poems Cottle chose to publish in 1798, we are left with one compelling question: would the founding philosophies of Romantic poetry be different if Cottle had published *The Ruined Cottage* instead of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and Wordsworth had been persuaded to write a defense of the former?

In this chapter I attempt to answer that question by following the advice Robinson gave to Mottrom, and use Wordsworth’s poetry rather than his Preface to define the characteristic qualities of *The Ruined Cottage* when it was first written. By doing so I acknowledge that the Preface, important as it is to Wordsworth’s career and to the Romantic movement, does not provide a compelling account of the qualities that Coleridge claimed “cannot be imitated without being at once recognized as originating in Mr. Wordsworth” (*BL* 199). I begin by comparing Margaret’s tale in the 1798 *The Ruined Cottage* to Goethe’s nearly identical tale in *Der Wandrer*, and to two similarly-themed pastoral elegies, in order to separate which features of Wordsworth’s poetry are borrowed lineages and which are uniquely his. I posit that

Wordsworth's "original" qualities in *The Ruined Cottage* are comparable to the qualities that are mentioned, albeit obliquely, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, but are more easily discernable in his poetry than his prose. Wordsworth most clearly differentiates himself from his pastoralist forebears by abandoning "poetic diction"; rather than use one style of language to typify one class and a different style to typify another, which often resulted in a presentation of the pastoral that read as more satirical than serious, Wordsworth moves towards Erich Auerbach's idea of "mimesis," using "the real language of men" to create sincere and realistic character sketches. In the second half of this chapter, I study Wordsworth's early drafts of *The Ruined Cottage*, which reveal these "original" qualities emerging slowly in the years preceding the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem Cottle read in 1798 thus represents one of Wordsworth's first complete syntheses of the poetic theories that have come to define English Romanticism.

I. Wordsworth's Literary Precedent

Although Wordsworth in his letters and essays cites only his personal observations of "agricultural laborers and their families" in the West Country as the inspiration for *The Ruined Cottage*, the tale of a woman living in a pastoral cottage was not unprecedented when Wordsworth first wrote it during his time at Racedown, nor was Wordsworth the only poet to be moved by such tales. "Insofar as *The Ruined Cottage* has a specific literary source," writes Jonathan Wordsworth, "it is Goethe's *Der Wandrer*, which Wordsworth presumably knew in the translation of William Taylor of Norwich" (3).² Southey regarded *Der Wandrer* as "a genre new to English poetry, in which the objects of common life could be placed in their true perspective," and J. Wordsworth believes that "for Wordsworth as well as Southey it must have seemed a model" (263). Goethe's tale, like Wordsworth's, narrates a peddler's visit to the home of a "kind

² Taylor's translation of *Der Wandrer* is provided in full in the appendix, page 106.

woman” who offers him rest from his journey (*Der Wanderer* 80). While at her cottage, the peddler notices “the ruins of a temple” adjacent to the cottage (29), prompting an apostrophe to “all bounteous nature” (70). The core tale and characters in *The Ruined Cottage* almost exactly replicate *Der Wanderer*, making the content of the tale less indicative of any particular distinction in Wordsworth’s style than Wordsworth’s framing of it.

Wordsworth’s two major characters, Armytage and Margaret, are recreations of Goethe’s “wanderer” and “woman,” to the extent that they could be read as the same characters between both tales. Both Wordsworth and Goethe identify their peddler only loosely by his profession: Goethe calls his character “wanderer” rather than “peddler,” as Wordsworth will do by the time of *The Excursion*, and this character at the poem’s conclusion self-identifies as Nature’s “wanderer” (89). The word “peddler” never appears in *Der Wanderer*; it is only when the woman asks him “have you brought toys, / Or other ware, from town to sell i’th’country?” that we can infer his profession (6-7). His reply, however—“I bring no city-wares about for sale” (9)—suggests that Goethe does not place him in the tale because he is “an itinerant trader or dealer in small goods” (OED), but rather for some other purpose. In *The Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth likewise never uses the word “peddler” to describe Armytage; the speaker observes a “pack of rustic merchandise” pillowing Armytage’s head, implying a profession that Armytage himself never admits to. Both peddlers make only oblique references to their knapsacks, Armytage mentioning “this my weary load” (290) and the wanderer expressing a desire to “lay down the burden that has wearied me” (4), that neither prove they are packs of merchandise nor convey what that merchandise may be. What does seem to matter to both Goethe and Wordsworth, more than the true occupation of their wanderers, is that they are, by title, peripatetic, roaming across the countryside and episodically observing the scenes of country life. Thus Wordsworth’s

articulated desire to focus on “incidents and situations from common life” and “the manners of rural life” was not a desire that was uniquely his in 1798 (*PrW I*, 122-4).

The physical description of Margaret’s cottage shares several similarities with Goethe’s cottage, which serve further to develop the similarity of the peddler character and show that Wordsworth’s cottage is also nothing new. Goethe’s wanderer first asks the “good woman” to show him “where [she] draws [her] water,” and she takes him to a spring adjacent to her cottage (11). In *The Ruined Cottage*, the speaker drinks from “a well / Half-choked with willow flowers and with weeds,” which Armytage calls “a spring” that once was disturbed “every day” by “the touch of human hand” (62-3, 86). The speaker drinking from the spring prompts Armytage’s recollection of “she / Who lived within these walls,” as if he himself had been the one who drank from the same spring in Goethe’s tale. In *Der Wanderer*, Goethe places the cottage at the foot of an elm tree, and Wordsworth’s speaker finds the ruined cottage “beneath a shade / Of clustering elms” (29-30). Wordsworth mentions these elms four more times throughout *The Ruined Cottage* (47, 186, 243, 531); of particular note is the fact that Armytage, like Goethe’s peddler, rests from his travels in “the shadows of the breezy elms” (3-4). With the character of the peddler and the scene of a cottage, then, we find that Wordsworth was not writing groundbreaking poetry.

The moralizations or soliloquys provided by the peddlers in both poems mutually emphasize the wondrousness of nature, almost to the point of deifying it, showing that Wordsworth’s reputation as a “nature poet” also did not distinguish him as a new poetic force in 1798. Referring to the ruined pillars of the temple in *Der Wanderer*, the wanderer praises “the tall grass waving o’er their prostrate forms,” celebrating nature’s ability to “sow with thistles [her] own sanctuary” over the ruins of man (42-5). He later refers to nature as the “ever teeming mother,” provider of the woman’s cottage and “conductress of [his] way” (70, 85). Wordsworth

in *The Ruined Cottage* intentionally describes the elements of nature around Margaret's cottage, pointing to "the high spear-grass" and "the green-sward" overgrowing it, the "tender green" of hay outside the cottage, and the "green-grown thatch" (514, 458, 302, 480). Were it not for the sadness in Margaret's tale, the interjection from Goethe's wanderer—"how green and lively look the plants about us" (61)—could be heard just as easily from the wanderer's mouth as from Armytage. The "converses with general nature" that Wordsworth's representative "Poet" has in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* can thus be just as easily applied to Goethe's wanderer as to Wordsworth's; natural scenery can be discounted as not a distinctly Wordsworthian theme.

Where Wordsworth does differ from Goethe, however, is his chronological placement of his tale, allowing us to read *The Ruined Cottage* as the conclusion of Goethe's tale, situated years if not decades after the events of *Der Wandrer*. Jonathan Wordsworth notes that *Der Wandrer* "reminds one of... not so much *The Ruined Cottage* itself as the situation that lies behind it, the period of happiness before the Pedlar's story begins," although he does not consider the two tales to actually be linked (4). In *Der Wandrer* we see the woman living her life of pastoral bliss—her husband "ere long... will return from labor," her family is well-fed, her child sleeps in "heavenly health," and her cottage remains well-kept (49, 62). Sometime between the events of *Der Wandrer* and *The Ruined Cottage*, "two blighting seasons" and "the plague of war" strike the countryside (RC 134-6), and by the time of *The Ruined Cottage* the woman's pastoral bliss has ended, due to the removal of the family dynamic. Because Margaret's husband will not be returning soon from labor, Margaret becomes despondent, letting the cottage dilapidate while the children become victims of hunger and neglect.

Wordsworth's decision to resituate the peddler's tale to a point after the ruin of the cottage evidences one of the first distinctive features of his poetry: a focus on what James Averill

calls “the compassionate, benevolent response to human suffering” (11). Rather than celebrate the pastoral happiness of Margaret with her family, Wordsworth contemplates the despondency of Margaret alone. More specifically, Wordsworth contemplates what his peddler has learned from Margaret’s decline, and how the peddler responds to a melancholic scene. As Armytage rhetorically asks the speaker, “why should a tear be in an old man’s eye? Why should we / ... / disturb / The calm of Nature with our restless thoughts?” (192-8). Coleridge, in his *Table Talk*, claims that Wordsworth exhibits a “peculiarity of utter non-sympathy with the subjects of [his] poetry,” acting as a “spectator *ab extra*” who feels “*for*, but never *with*, [his] characters” (181). In the case of *The Ruined Cottage*, Coleridge is unquestionably correct: Wordsworth’s intention is not to generate sympathy for Margaret, though he certainly does so. Instead, Wordsworth generates sympathy for the peddler who watches Margaret’s cottage fall to ruin and the speaker who hears the story, preferring the response to an emotional scene rather than the scene itself. In this respect Wordsworth echoes the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “cult of sensibility,” an echo he wrote into the Pedlar’s biography in the scene, omitted from *The Excursion*, where Drummond tells stories to the little girl.

Wordsworth also focuses on Margaret far more than on her cottage, using the cottage only as a prompt for Armytage’s recollection of her tale and a symbol for Margaret’s decline, whereas Goethe’s wanderer focuses on nature and the cottage at the expense of the woman. The wanderer does not directly reply to many of the woman’s statements, but rather continues his moralizations on nature with the words the woman says. The woman mentions that “the spring beside [the cottage] furnishes [her] water,” and the wanderer, instead of replying to her, continues his apostrophe to the cottage and to “Immortal Genius” (30-2). When the woman offers to “fetch a cup,” the wanderer continues his apostrophe without offering thanks, and when

they drink, instead of solicitously inquiring about the woman's well-being, he makes tangential observations about the nearby plants (61). Once he concludes his moralization, he abruptly says "farewell, kind woman," as if the primary function of his visit to the cottage had been to see and reflect on the cottage and the natural scene around it, not to visit the woman.

Armytage, in contrast, focuses on Margaret, using her cottage to reflect her condition. His praise of nature, rather than completely disregarding the human scene in front of him, inextricably links the human scene to the natural. When he returned to the cottage seasons after his first visit, he sat and "awaited her return," where we would expect Goethe's wanderer to either sit and rest for his own benefit or continue on his way. Always Armytage's narration connects the overgrowth of Margaret's cottage to her state of mind: a large portion of his narration is devoted to either quoting Margaret directly or to describing her despondency, "her eyes... downward cast" and "her body... subdued" (377, 380). Rather than blankly praising nature, Wordsworth praises its relationship to the people who live alongside it, and vice versa. Nature in *Der Wanderer* overgrows the temple because nature's inherent tendency is to do so; nature in *The Ruined Cottage* overgrows the cottage because Margaret is too hopeless to prevent it. This intimate connection between nature and its inhabitants, where the condition of one reflects the other, is a Wordsworthian quality not found in Goethe. Where Goethe's spotlight falls almost exclusively on nature, Wordsworth's spotlight shines equally on both nature and the woman living in it, sincerely portraying an individual life rather than generally praising nature.

A final difference between *The Ruined Cottage* and *Der Wanderer*, evidencing a uniquely Wordsworthian style, is Wordsworth's addition of an intercessory speaker as a narrator. *Der Wanderer* is entirely dialogue between the peddler and the woman—no physical actions are externally narrated. Margaret's story instead emerges from a conversation between Armytage,

the story's witness, and a man who passes him on the road. Consequently, the reader of *Der Wanderer* sits in the cottage alongside the wanderer and the woman, whereas the reader of *The Ruined Cottage* hears Margaret's tale only from a position of temporal distance. Rather than focus the poem on the peddler, having the peddler's final visit to Margaret's cottage also be the reader's, Wordsworth's inclusion of the speaker allows him and his peddler to ruminate on the story with five years of retrospection. Retrospection—which might be identified in the Preface as Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquility"—distinguishes Wordsworth from his source tale even if the action itself was venerated by other writers.

Although *Der Wanderer* may be the most direct source of *The Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth borrowed and adjusted themes from several other authors with whom he was well-versed. The pastoral qualities shared by *The Ruined Cottage* and *Der Wanderer* are also found in Milton's *Lycidas* (1637), for example, which, unlike *Der Wanderer*, is an elegy, mourning the loss of Milton's college friend Edward King. Although Southey disdained Milton even as he praised Goethe, believing that "they who imitate Milton succeed in writing something very stiff, very pedantic and anti-English" (*S* II, 105), Wordsworth thought very highly of Milton's poetry and at one point "consciously tried to take up the work of Milton, and to carry out some of his plans for relating the best and sagest things among his own citizens" (Greenbie 18).

Wordsworth's praise for Milton pervades his poems: in *The Wanderer* the young Pedlar "gazed upon that mighty Orb of Song / The divine Milton" (*W* 270-1), in book 1 of *The Prelude* Wordsworth's "ambitious Power" settles on "some old / Romantic tale by Milton left unsung" (1.166, 170), and in the preface to *Artegal and Elidure* Wordsworth ranks Milton alongside Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Arthurian legend (49-56). Milton's *Lycidas* provides an

appropriate comparison for *The Ruined Cottage* insofar as it shares the elegiac lamentation found in *The Ruined Cottage* but absent from *Der Wandrer*.

In *Lycidas* we find the same generalized pastoral qualities that pervade both *The Ruined Cottage* and *Der Wandrer*: the scene is rustic, tracing all the natural images associated with Lycidas, and the speaker, as described in the concluding verse paragraph, lives a peripatetic lifestyle, allowing him to move on to “fresh woods, and pastures new” after eulogizing Lycidas. Wordsworth does, however, abandon Milton’s concluding espousal of Lycidas’s afterlife, choosing to have his Pedlar focus on the speaker instead of Margaret at the end of *The Ruined Cottage*. The penultimate paragraph of *Lycidas* sings praises of Lycidas’s afterlife: resting in heaven “through the dear might of him that walk’d the waves,” Lycidas “with Nectar pure” laves “his oozy locks... / And hears the unexpressive nuptial Song, / In the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love” (173-7); the sweet companionship of the angels “wipe[s] the tears for ever from his eyes” (181). *Lycidas*, the poem, follows Lycidas, the man, to his blissful afterlife. In *The Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth lets Margaret go, emphasizing not so much her afterlife as what remains behind after her passing. The Pedlar tells us of Margaret only that “she sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here,” where the “here” applies that “peace” to the scene of the still-living (512). Rather than promote acceptance of death and command the audience to “weep no more,” as *Lycidas*’s speaker does three times (165, 182), the Pedlar guides the speaker to recognize “that secret spirit of humanity / Which, ‘mid the calm oblivious tendencies / Of nature... / ...still survived” (503-6). Enabled by his retrospective narrative situation, Wordsworth thus turns Margaret’s tale of suffering from a eulogy into a lesson for the surviving speaker, showing him how the memory of Margaret is preserved in the hearts of those who pause to reflect on it.

The thoughtful and moralizing tone created by the Pedlar's quiet contemplation of Margaret's temporally distant tale also distinguishes *The Ruined Cottage* from Milton's precedent, as Milton expects both active grief for Lycidas's death and praise for Lycidas's life, whereas Wordsworth only asks for tranquil remembrance. In his exposition Milton asks rhetorically "who would not sing for Lycidas?", as if Lycidas's death cannot but be mourned (10). Later Milton demands the Vales to "hither cast / Their Bels, and Flourets of a thousand hues" and the valleys to "throw hither all [their] quaint emerald eyes" as gestures of their grief (134-9). Neither Wordsworth nor his Pedlar ever asks for or expects grief; when the speaker blesses Margaret "in the impotence of grief" he does so of his own volition, and his thoughts are subsequently redirected to the "surviving spirit of humanity" (500). Thus for Wordsworth the death and suffering in Margaret's tale, which reflect his deviation from the happy cottage scene created by Goethe, become the object of retrospection and moral development, which reflect his deviation from the mournful and afterlife-oriented pastoral elegiac mode exemplified by Milton.

The Ruined Cottage thirdly distinguishes Wordsworth from the writings of his contemporaries, Southey and Coleridge, even though the three of them are often categorized into the same school of poets. Coleridge's poetic career in 1797 was largely nonexistent, his only non-prose publication to date was *The Fall of Robespierre: An Historic Drama*, of which he had written only part. The fact that Coleridge was not apprised of Wordsworth's work on *The Ruined Cottage* until after what is now the antepenultimate paragraph was read to him at Racedown in June 1797 further suggests that Coleridge's influence on *The Ruined Cottage*, or at least the core of it, was comparatively small (*E.Y.* 189). Southey, however, had already published two volumes of his collected works along with an epic poem, *Joan of Arc*, which Wordsworth had read in 1796 (*E.Y.* 163). In a letter to Grosvenor Bedford, Southey claimed that "you will see in the

Preface and Postscript [to *Lyrical Ballads*] my critical creed” (S I, 418), and later called Wordsworth’s Preface “the quintessence of the philosophy of poetry” (*HCR* I, 250), and so it is to Southey’s work that I compare *The Ruined Cottage*.

Southey’s sixth English Eclogue shares its title with Wordsworth’s poem, and not by coincidence.³ Having read *Der Wandrer* and heard of Wordsworth’s work on *The Ruined Cottage*, Southey intended to write a poem “sketching features peculiar to England” and not, like Goethe and Wordsworth, one “which would suit any country with Roman ruins” (S I, 176). However, he shared Wordsworth’s and Goethe’s concern with “the place of human structures in the natural landscape,” leading to another cottage poem (Bailey 151). His poem clearly derives from the model of Wordsworth and Goethe: a peddler or “wanderer” visits a cottage that was once home of an unnamed woman, and while there narrates that woman’s history to an addressee named “Charles.” Southey’s cottage-dweller falls into a despondency identical to Margaret’s, allowing her cottage to be overgrown, but her daughter’s promiscuity and lawlessness trigger her decline rather than an absent husband. Southey’s peddler even shares Armytage’s moral, trusting that “the feelings... / That ever with these recollections rise / ... will not pass away” (111-3).

There are essential differences between Southey’s and Wordsworth’s interpretation of Goethe that separate Wordsworth’s early theory from that of Southey. Southey’s peddler actively and intentionally brings Charles to the cottage—“I led thee here / Charles, not without design” (19-20)—where Wordsworth’s speaker passively arrives at the cottage to find Armytage, who then narrates Margaret’s story. Southey also restricts his perspective to only that of the peddler; Charles has no physical role or dialogue within the poem. Although Southey retains the retrospective quality created by Wordsworth’s speaker, his elision of that speaker removes the

³ The text of Southey’s English Eclogue VI is provided in full in the appendix, page 110.

reception of any moral lesson. His peddler may conclude his tale with implications that Charles should “identify the enjoyment... in tales of transient sadness” or be “reminded... of childhood pre-occupations,” but we never see how those lessons are received, or if they even are received, by the third party (Bailey 155). Wordsworth’s extensive inclusion of the third party thus incorporates in his cottage tale a stronger emphasis on what Rieder identifies as the development of community between the speaker and the Pedlar (158). Southey’s interpretation of Goethe lacks this camaraderie among country folk; his peddler’s agency in bringing Charles to the cottage implies that a moral lesson is intended, not organically created, as if the peddler is not so much Charles’s friend as an impartial instructor.

A final, general comparison could be made between Wordsworth and his immediate Neoclassical predecessors, Pope and Dryden. Wordsworth’s fundamental disagreement with the Neoclassical style was its prolific use of seemingly contrived “poetic diction,” but when he wrote in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that he intentionally avoided the use of poetic diction, his phraseology was ambiguous enough that the third edition of *Lyrical Ballads* included an almost equally unhelpful “Appendix to the Preface” to explain “what is usually called poetic diction” (*PrWI*, 160). In several of his works Wordsworth criticizes Pope’s prolific use of the heroic couplet and “the heroic couplet and all the periphrastic elegances associated therewith” (Greenbie 63); However, Wordsworth cannot be differentiated from the Neoclassical poets solely based on the heroic couplet, because Wordsworth wrote several rhyming ballads and both Pope and Dryden wrote works in blank verse. Nor does Wordsworth’s abandonment of the heroic couplet cause him to lose the ideal that first instigated its widespread use: the heroic couplet originated from “the desire to avoid careless workmanship” (Greenbie 26), yet Wordsworth claims he took “as much pains” to write his blank verse as the Neoclassicists did their couplets

(*PrW* I, 130), and *The Ruined Cottage* could not easily be accused of sloppy workmanship.

Both Wordsworth and the Neoclassicists use many of the same pastoral language in their work—phrases like “dew upon the ground,” “the boast of nature,” and “gathering rain” could just as easily belong in a poem by Pope or Dryden—but Wordsworth, unlike the Neoclassicists, does not use that language to condescend towards his subjects. Auerbach, in an essay on *Madame Bovary*, admires how Flaubert presents scenes “not... simply as a picture... or a simple representation of the content of [a character’s] consciousness,” but rather through the lens of the character, in words used by the author but appropriate to that character (385). This difference, between diegesis and mimesis, divides Wordsworth from the Neoclassicists. Thus, while Wordsworth and Dryden might both write about a soul, Wordsworth would not have a soul “cleave the liquid air” as it ascends to heaven, because such a phrase lacks verisimilitude and the country folk about whom he writes would not use those words (Dryden 70).

Wordsworth’s serious and intentional preservation of the “real language of men” in *The Ruined Cottage* allows Margaret to retain her individuality even as the protagonists of pastoral poems by Pope and Dryden lose theirs. In “Ode on the Death of Amyntas,” Dryden sacrifices his treatment of his subject for linguistic flourishes, using generalizations such as “too well the envy of the gods he knew” or “heaven gave him all at once” to introduce his protagonist (25, 39).

Wordsworth uses Dryden’s same words more plainly to develop Margaret’s character through her own thoughts and actions: he describes Margaret’s children as her “best hope next to God in Heaven,” showing her as a compassionate mother, and rather than know some abstract “envy,” Margaret knows “it was [Robert’s] hand” that placed a purse of gold on her windowsill (25, *RC* 265). By avoiding syntactical arrangements that create abstractions, Wordsworth distinguished his focal “living creature” from the Neoclassical “portrait of a character” (*PrW* II, 77).

From this albeit limited analysis of Wordsworth's literary heritage in his creation of *The Ruined Cottage*, we can draw several conclusions with respect to what made Wordsworth "original" even at the beginning of his career and where Wordsworth was only borrowing from a well-established precedent. In his treatment of a pastoral scene, focusing on the interactions between a country woman and a peddler, and in his elegiac description of Margaret's slow demise, Wordsworth was doing nothing new. Goethe had established the peddler framework and had written of scenes from common life. Milton and countless others had celebrated nature in pastoral poetry. But in his treatment of human suffering, showing how the tranquil and retrospective contemplation of suffering leads to moral lessons relevant to the living, and how an individual's interactions with his community develop his character and foster inner strength, Wordsworth was breaking new ground. Although Cottle chose to publish *Lyrical Ballads* instead of *The Ruined Cottage* in 1798, *The Ruined Cottage* may fairly represent Wordsworth's poetic ingenuity far better than his prose attempt to defend *Lyrical Ballads*.

II. The Compositional History of *The Ruined Cottage*

Just as *The Ruined Cottage* emerged from a series of literary forebears, so, too, did the poem slowly grow in Wordsworth's mind, undergoing several revisions, additions, and excisions from its original form until it became the now-anthologized 1798 version. Wordsworth's meticulous revisions to Margaret's tale well before it was ever published represent "his most complex and demanding act of revisiting," with the exception of *The Prelude* (Gill 48). In the Fenwick Note to *The Excursion*, Wordsworth admits that the first lines he wrote for *The Ruined Cottage*, which he "composed in 1795 at Racedown," were "the lines... beginning 'Nine tedious years' & ending 'last human tenant of these ruined walls'" (F 194). These lines are now the antepenultimate paragraph of the anthologized manuscript, known as MS. D. Historical studies

argue that Wordsworth likely did not compose these lines until 1797,⁴ but Margaret's tale still has its origins as early as 1795, when Wordsworth first began observing "agricultural laborers and their families" while he was living in England's West Country (Gill 49). It was during this time that Wordsworth and Coleridge also began composing *Lyrical Ballads*, marking a period in Wordsworth's life when he was deeply considering the poetic philosophy he remains known for, the philosophy that, as described above, sets him apart from his peers. The evolution of this philosophy can be seen in the series of manuscripts leading up to MS. D.

In the antepenultimate paragraph, Wordsworth provides the moving story of a woman slowly dying as her cottage falls to ruin—a story without the peddler, exposition, and narrative framework that differentiated him from Goethe, Milton, and Southey. These lines certainly provide the major subject of the poem, introducing Robert and Margaret and rendering "quite poignantly the cottage weavers' vulnerability to economic disorders" (Rieder 152). However, as a standalone poem these lines lack the interaction between an individual and their community, and the moralization instigated by quiet contemplation of suffering, and that characterize MS. D. Stephen Gill interprets *The Ruined Cottage* as begging the question "what is the proper response to a fate such as Margaret's;" Quentin Bailey argues that these original 47 lines pose the question "in its starkest, most unresolvable form" (154). Wordsworth himself was apparently unsatisfied with this early rendition of Margaret's tale, or at least saw greater potential in it, because within a year he began reshaping the tale into a longer narrative poem, adding the pieces central to his early poetic theories.

⁴ For discussions of the textual origins of *The Ruined Cottage*, see James Butler's introduction to *The Ruined Cottage and the Pedlar*. In summary, Wordsworth didn't move to Racedown until September 1795, and his first few months there were occupied by moving in and meeting local residents. Scholars debate whether Wordsworth would have had the time in the last three months of the year to fully draft the antepenultimate paragraph. Dorothy also describes *The Ruined Cottage* as "new" in a letter dated March 1798, which it would certainly not have been if Wordsworth had written it almost two years previously.

One of the first new scenes to appear was Margaret's discovery of the money left by Robert on her casement. In the Racedown notebook, this scene is entirely in third person—"she found / [a purse of gold] and trembled at the sight and grew pale" (5^V). Looking at the purse, "no proof she needed, for well she knew / From whence the treasure came / As if she saw the hand that placed it there (8^R). In subsequent manuscripts, this passage was revised to first-person narration, with Margaret telling the Pedlar "*I* trembled at the sight" because "*I* knew it was his hand / That placed it there" (RC 264-6, emphasis mine). By including this scene, Wordsworth develops the character in his original fragment through her own actions and agency in a specific situation; he does not imprint generalized or abstract traits on her, the way Neoclassicists treated the pastoral. Moreover, Margaret retains this agency even though the Pedlar and the speaker are retelling her story years after her death, testifying to Wordsworth's emphasis on the story of one individual. Individualizing Margaret in turn facilitates Wordsworth's presumed goal to make his treatment of human suffering—one of his unique poetic qualities—all the more poignant.

MS. A, the first full manuscript available of Wordsworth's attempts to sketch backstory for *The Ruined Cottage*, shows Wordsworth struggling with lines that he eventually excised from the poem and published separately as "Incipient Madness."⁵ His excision of these lines preserves the weight *The Ruined Cottage* places on Margaret's positivity and kindness, making her decline all the more impactful and, consequently, more instructive—and therefore showing how Wordsworth uniquely chose to emphasize the moral lesson provided by Margaret's tale rather than the tragedy of it. These draft lines slowly degenerate into a narration of the Pedlar's "night trip to a gloomy ruin, echoing with eerie noise within" (Butler 9). Wordsworth's descriptions of "the iron links with which [a poor man's] feet are clogged" and the "melancholy thing / To any

⁵ The full text of "Incipient Madness" is provided in the appendix, page 113.

man who has a heart to feel” fall away from the positive evaluation of Margaret established in the first two lines of MS. A., “many a passenger / Has blessed Margaret for her gentle looks” (RC 98-9). Rieder very straightforwardly calls “Incipient Madness” a poem “about grief” (155). Although *The Ruined Cottage* tells a story of human suffering, Wordsworth’s goal is not to dwell on the suffering but rather to use it for character development and quiet contemplation. The downward trend of “Incipient Madness” would have made a fine Miltonic eulogy, not unlike *Lycidas*, but it had no place in the “calm, straightforward tale of Margaret” Wordsworth wanted to tell, and therefore had no place in *The Ruined Cottage* (155).

Within a year of MS. A, Wordsworth added all of the major elements of the anthologized version of *The Ruined Cottage*. In this manuscript, MS. B., Wordsworth establishes the frame for Margaret’s tale, complete with the Pedlar, the speaker, and the lengthy exposition. The speaker/Pedlar frame provides emotional distance from Margaret’s suffering without sacrificing the intensity of the story, allowing Wordsworth to turn a scene of suffering into one of tranquil reflection on suffering; its addition thus represents the moment when Wordsworth chose “emotion recollected in tranquility” for his doctrine rather than the “spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion.” A pure narration of Robert and Margaret’s tragic history in an unspecified past must have been too emotionally vivid and unresolved for Wordsworth; by adding Armytage and the speaker to frame the tale, Wordsworth more effectively posits the story as a past event that is now being peacefully retold. The Pedlar’s quaint commentary, with its “easy cheerfulness” (RC 201), develops a sense of reflection and closure to the overall experience, which would be absent if the poem followed only Margaret’s demise. However, this frame is not expansive enough to compromise Margaret’s story in favor of the Pedlar’s relation to it: of the approximately 500 lines in MS. B, just over one hundred are devoted to the speaker and the

Pedlar, with the other four hundred—by far the majority of the poem—focused upon Margaret and her cottage. Wordsworth’s goal is not yet to tell the story of his Pedlar, but he needs the Pedlar in Margaret’s story to tell Margaret’s story with the appropriate emotional distance.

Between MS. B and MS. D, Wordsworth added the 46-line conclusion after the line “last human tenant of these ruined walls” (492), which had formerly been the admittedly grim end of the poem, in order to reconcile the otherwise devastating conclusion with the positive moral that sets *The Ruined Cottage* apart from its peers. Wordsworth wrote several drafts of this conclusion before settling on the now-established version,⁶ in the most elaborate of these drafts, the Pedlar discourses for over 100 lines on the subordination of senses to moral intuition and the “peculiar powers” of the mind, and in the simplest version, used in the poem, the Pedlar in a short paragraph provides his moral, that “sorrow and despair” cannot live “where meditation [is]” (520, 524), before the speaker emotionally responds to Margaret’s tale and blesses her (500). The conclusion Wordsworth keeps for MS. D favors the speaker’s response, and by ending with the speaker rather than the Pedlar, Wordsworth places the emphasis not on what the Pedlar has gained from a tale he has known for years, but on what the speaker has learned from the tale. Wordsworth creates the sense of rustic community that Southey’s poem lacked by ending with the Pedlar/speaker relationship; that the Pedlar and the speaker leave the scene “together” testifies to their growing friendship (535). Elsewhere in the poem the Pedlar elaborates on his deep connection to Margaret and how her “story linger[s] in [his] heart” (363-76), echoing this same unique emphasis on community between country folk.

By MS. D Wordsworth also reduces the scope of MS. B back to the essential elements of the scene he hopes to display—a suffering woman, a sympathetic Pedlar, and the lesson the latter

⁶ Jonathan Wordsworth’s *The Music of Humanity* provides transcripts of Wordsworth’s alternative conclusions.

receives and imparts upon quiet contemplation of the former—by omitting superfluous elements of MS. B. He removes a description of the cottage’s location as “a spot / The wandering gypsy in a stormy night / Would pass with his moveables” (3^R) and a passage describing Robert’s labor:

The passenger might see him at the door
 With his small hammer on the threshold stone
 Pointing lame buckle-tongues and rusty nails,
 The treasured store of an old household box,
 Or braiding cords or weaving bells and caps
 Or rushes play-things for his babes. (25^R)

Both of these omissions serve Wordsworth’s presumed goal of focusing almost exclusively on Margaret’s tale. By removing the “gypsy” lines, Wordsworth eliminates an otherwise extraneous character from his narration, putting more focus on the remaining characters. Marginalizing Robert’s activity in the poem in turn focuses the Pedlar’s narration on Margaret, who is undoubtedly the main subject of the Pedlar’s contemplation.

Wordsworth, as we saw in the previous chapter and will continue to see, would revise *The Ruined Cottage* for the next fifty years, but through all that time the basic narrative framework that he had established in MS. D was not altered. The antepenultimate paragraph in particular, comprising the first lines Wordsworth ever wrote for the poem, appears in 1845 almost exactly as it did in 1800, indicating some consistency in the poetic considerations that first created *The Ruined Cottage* and made Wordsworth “original” two decades before Hazlitt ever described him as such. Some of Wordsworth’s new theories are obliquely mentioned in the seminal Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*—Wordsworth does avoid some form of “poetic diction” in his description of “rustic life”—but where the Preface fails to define these terms accurately

across Wordsworth's career, *The Ruined Cottage* provides concrete examples. Other considerations, including the reflection on suffering and the development of community, are not mentioned in the Preface at all but are evident in *The Ruined Cottage*, and still others, like the presentation of "emotion recollected in the tranquility," are strongly associated with Wordsworth even if they are not unique to him. All of these qualities were preserved when Wordsworth rewrote *The Ruined Cottage* as *The Wanderer*, but in the years following the publication of the latter, when the orthodox view of Wordsworth's career notices the first "decline" in his power, his faithfulness to his original theories would be subject to doubt.

CHAPTER 3
WORDSWORTH'S IMAGINATION AND DECLINE IN POETIC POWER, 1815-1836

“The imagination is never governed, it is always the ruling and divine power.”
 John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (1851)

Critics who subscribe to the orthodox view of Wordsworth's career praise the pre-1800 versions of *The Ruined Cottage* for their plain and moving treatment of a country woman's tragedy, and first begin identifying the “decline” in Wordsworth's power when *The Ruined Cottage* became repurposed as the more autobiographical *The Wanderer* in the clunky and verbose *Excursion*. Many of these critics, Carson Hamilton and Seymour Lainoff among them, claim that in *The Excursion* the beautifully simple versification of Wordsworth's early years becomes swamped with his philosophical discourse on the imagination and poetic transcendence, obfuscating the rustic themes celebrated by the *Lyrical Ballads* and their Preface.¹ They, like the critics of Wordsworth's time, point to Wordsworth's growing distance from the theories of his own manifesto as evidence of his failure to live up to the standards of what many still considered the cornerstone of Romantic poetic philosophy. However, Wordsworth's theories, like his poetry, had evolved in the fourteen years since his original statement in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, and his reputedly new emphasis on the “imagination” in *The Excursion* reflects merely a more articulate, refined form of his earlier poetic doctrine.

Wordsworth's new poetic theories in 1815 are evident in the two-volume *Poems of William Wordsworth* (1815), a collection of shorter poems including the contents of both *Lyrical Ballads* and *Poems in Two Volumes*. Writing the poems actually proved less arduous for Wordsworth than choosing how to arrange and categorize them. As early as 1809, Wordsworth wrote to Coleridge anticipating an organizational scheme under the broad headings “Childhood,” “Naming of Places,” and “Old Age” (*M.Y.* I, 334-6), but in 1812, Wordsworth remarked to

¹ See Hamilton's *Wordsworth's Decline in Poetic Power* or Lainoff's “Wordsworth's Final Phase.”

Robinson that he envisioned “Fancy,” “Imagination,” and “Sentiment and Reflection” as the categories for his new volume (*PrW* III, 23). Wordsworth’s decision to eventually adopt the latter scheme indicated a shift in poetic emphasis beginning in the early 1810s: Wordsworth transitioned from his strictly semiautobiographical bent, still evident in the proposed 1809 scheme as the arc from “childhood” to “old age,” to a celebration of the abstract “imagination” and “fancy” that Romantics and their predecessors had referenced for decades yet had only loosely defined.

Recognizing his own reliance on abstract terminology for the governing structure of his new volumes, Wordsworth wrote an entirely new preface to accompany them, defining “imagination” for his readers and explaining his organizational scheme. This new “Preface of 1815” is devoted “entirely... to the imagination and the central role it plays in the creation of poetry” (Heffernan 2). Indeed, aside from a seven-paragraph exposition on the types and qualities of poetry, the entire document discusses the “imagination” and its associated “processes of creation” (*PrW* III, 30-1). Nowhere in the Preface of 1815 do any of the defining features of Wordsworth’s earlier poetry appear—the “real language of men,” “spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion,” and “emotion recollected in tranquility” from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* are all absent, and the full text of that earlier preface, though still included in the collection, is “relegate[d]... to the end of the last volume,” suggesting that Wordsworth’s poetic philosophy had evolved to the point where his early Preface no longer did them justice (Scoggins 23).

In the early years of this new “imaginative” mode, Wordsworth’s imagination provides the source, rather than the subject, of his poetry. Wordsworth categorized the poems in his 1815 collection based on the faculty they are “of,” suggesting “the thing, place, or direction from which something goes, comes, or is driven or moved,” not the faculty they are “about,” meaning

“concerning” or “regarding” (OED). For example, he relegates the sonnet “Weak is the will of man” to the nondescript category “Miscellaneous Sonnets,” despite its resonating lines “Imagination is that sacred power / Imagination lofty and refined,” presumably because the poem did not originate with his imagination (9-10). Only two other poems in the 1815 volumes even contain the word “imagination”—“Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree,” which Wordsworth called a “poem of sentiment and reflection,” and “Yarrow Visited,” which, though considered a “poem of the imagination,” uses the word as a direct object rather than a subject. The function of the imagination in this phase of the imaginative mode is inherently passive: Wordsworth finds inspiration in his mind’s perception of an external scene, whatever that perception may be. Poetry produced in this mode is the natural outgrowth of, and remains consistent with, Wordsworth’s earlier theories, exempting it from the label of a “decline” in poetic power.

Only when the imagination becomes the *subject* of Wordsworth’s poetry, a transition that happens closer to 1830, does Wordsworth lose sight of his earliest theories and thus truly begin his “decline.” Rather than find inspiration in his imaginative perception of rustic scenes, regardless of what he perceives in them, Wordsworth begins to bend his imagination towards what he wants it to perceive. Where the free action of his imagination once inspired his poetry, Wordsworth actively directs his imagination at specific scenes in which he wants to find inspiration for specific ideas. This repurposed “imagination” becomes the means by which the older Wordsworth attempts to find immortality for both his poetry and his soul, a shift towards what Lainoff calls Wordsworth’s “quest for transcendence beyond nature” (78). In the pursuit of this transcendence, Wordsworth sacrifices the ideals from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, including “the real language of men” and “emotion recollected in tranquility,” as well as his earlier version of a passive imagination.

In this chapter I focus on these two phases of Wordsworth's imaginative mode, arguing that Wordsworth's "decline" begins with the version of the imagination that develops in the 1830s, and not in 1815 where it is more commonly placed. The chapter begins with an analysis of Wordsworth's original definition of the imagination, considering both its historical precedents and what differentiates it from the theories of his contemporaries. "Yew-trees," one of Wordsworth's "poems of the imagination" in his 1815 collection, is then presented as an example of how the imagination passively inspires a poem without being described or referenced within it. To defend how this version of the imagination is consistent with Wordsworth's poetic philosophies in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and in no way marks a diminution of his talent, I note how the Pedlar's biography in *The Wanderer* showcases an imagination that operates passively on observed natural scenes rather than the actively directed imagination that becomes indicative of Wordsworth's decline. Following this discussion of the "imagination" as it was formally defined in 1815, I consider revisions Wordsworth made to *The Ruined Cottage* and *The Prelude* in the 1830s alongside his newly composed "Ode on the Power of Sound." These later works reveal a new desire to use the imagination, rather than be inspired by it, in order to find a sense of "transcendence beyond nature." The redirected activity of the imagination results in the abandonment of Wordsworth's early theories and, therefore, the "decline" in his poetic power. A complete discussion of Wordsworth's quest for immortality is reserved for the next chapter.

I. Wordsworth's "Imagination"

Although Wordsworth's emphasis on the imagination was new, at least formally, in 1815, Wordsworth drew from a long lineage of Romantic and pre-Romantic conceptualizations of what the "imagination" and its counterpart "fancy" truly are. Joseph Addison's *The Spectator* series on "The Pleasures of the Imagination" (1712) is frequently cited as the seminal influence on the

Romantic “imagination” (Barbauld 2); Martin Kallich goes so far as to call Addison’s papers “the first complete statement of an esthetic theory in England” (308). Rather than distinguish “imagination” and “fancy,” Addison distinguishes “primary” and “secondary” pleasures of the imagination; the former derives from visible objects, the latter from “the ideas of visible objects, when the objects are not actually before the eye” (61). These “ideas,” according to Addison, could include “a statue, picture, description, or sound” (79). Of particular note is Addison’s claim, with respect to the secondary imagination, that “words... have so great a force in them... that a description often gives us more lively ideas than the sight of things themselves” (84). From Addison, Wordsworth takes the emphasis on visual observation—the “primary imagination”—and applies it to natural scenes; he makes no distinction between “primary” and “secondary” imagination in his 1815 preface, and most all his poems from this time are accordingly inspired by an imagination that Addison would have considered “primary.”

Three decades after Addison’s series in *The Spectator*, Mark Akenside wrote a didactic blank verse poem using Addison’s title, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, to posit a definition of the imagination almost identical to Addison’s. Like Addison, Akenside acknowledged how the pleasures of the imagination derive from what is “great, uncommon, or beautiful” (Addison 64), but he then expanded Addison’s description by stating the “final causes” or outcomes of the three sources of pleasure. Greatness, or “the sublime,” leads us “to the contemplation of the Supreme Being;” uncommonness, or “novelty,” awakens us “to constant activity;” and beauty “mark[s] out to us the objects most perfect in their kind” (12). Anna Barbauld identifies one key respect in which Akenside “judiciously varie[s] from his master,” noting how Addison “expressly confines the pleasures of the imagination to ‘such as arise from visible objects only,’” whereas Akenside allows the imagination to act “through any of our senses or perceptions” (9).

While not entirely accurate—Addison acknowledges that “sound” may stimulate the secondary imagination, even as he denies its function in the primary (79)—Barbauld’s observation appropriately notes the expansion of Addison’s imagination to include sensory perceptions, aside from strictly visual observation, on which Wordsworth’s imagination also operates.

Both Addison and Akenside make claims, on which Wordsworth’s opinion varies during his career, regarding the place of the imagination alongside other human faculties. Addison claims that “the pleasures of the imagination... are not so gross as those of sense, nor so refined as those of understanding,” with the last of the three being “more preferable” (63). Akenside similarly places the imagination “between the organs of bodily sense and the faculties of moral perception,” thus subordinating the imagination to morality while raising it above plain physical sense (115). The imagination Wordsworth espouses in the Preface of 1815 fits this hierarchy, insofar as it is subservient to reason and thought but superior to pure description or observation. Later in his life, as we shall see at the end of this chapter, Wordsworth believes instead that imagination is man’s highest faculty, through which Addison’s “understanding” and Akenside’s “moral perception” may be achieved.

Certainly the most ubiquitous definition of the imagination relevant to a study of Wordsworth is that of Coleridge, who, despite his growing distance from Wordsworth at this time, was still closely associated with Wordsworth’s work. Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* provides the most commonly used definitions of “imagination” and “fancy” in Romantic studies (*BL* 41-3), their fame deriving primarily from Coleridge’s reputation as an imaginative poet, as seen through the creativity and mysticism in “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner” or “Kubla Khan.” Given the near-continuous exchange of ideas between Wordsworth and Coleridge in the first decade of the 1800s, critics often use Coleridge, “the great theorist of the imagination,” as a

lens to study Wordsworth, “its supreme practitioner” (Barth 1-2). However, such analysis overlooks the fact that Wordsworth’s Preface of 1815 appears two years before Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, and, moreover, that Wordsworth chose to publish his own defense of the imagination even though he knew of and was at the time providing feedback on drafts of Coleridge’s discursive autobiography. Although Wordsworth’s concept of the imagination may have been heavily influenced by Coleridge—the two certainly share many common themes²—Wordsworth was dissatisfied enough to believe his imagination required an independent defense. Coleridge himself acknowledges that Wordsworth’s imagination is “of a kind perfectly unborrowed and entirely his own” (*BL* 232).

It is from Addison’s and Akenside’s precedent, and Coleridge’s influence, that Wordsworth’s definition of the “imagination” emerges, expressed formally for the first time in the Preface of 1815. “Few subjects in Wordsworthian criticism,” writes James Scoggins, “have received more consideration than the distinction between fancy and imagination, and few have produced... less agreement” (56). Attempts to rewrite Wordsworth’s definitions of the two faculties have produced only a wide range of statements using terms almost equally undefinable: Geoffrey Hartman claims imagination is “consciousness of self raised to apocalyptic pitch” (17); Heffernan calls it the fusion of “the fresh wonder of the child with the mature perception of the adult” (3); for Jean Hall it is “incessant self-transcendence” (15); J. Robert Barth defines it circuitously as “the power than enables the poet to create a poem” (4). While Wordsworth invited much of this disagreement upon himself, using several equally undefinable abstractions in his Preface, all of these critical rewritings of Wordsworth’s definition stray from the examples

² J. Robert Barth’s *Romanticism and Transcendence: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Religious Imagination* provides an exhaustive comparison of the two poets’ separate theories of the imagination, as expressed in the Preface of 1815 and the *Biographia Literaria*, respectively.

Wordsworth himself provided in 1815, which make of the imagination nothing so lofty as these commentaries would have us believe. Critics use these lofty interpretations of the imagination to defend Wordsworth's "decline" in the 1810s, arguing that an elevated imagination overshadows Wordsworth's previously rustic themes, but these arguments hold little weight when considered alongside Wordsworth's own definition of the imagination in 1815.

Wordsworth never offers a thematic definition in his Preface saying "I believe the imagination is..." but instead provides a series of examples that effectively finish such a statement with "judicious use of figurative language inspired by observation." Virgil's and Shakespeare's respective descriptions of a goat and a samphire-gatherer "hanging" are presented as the first pair of examples: Virgil's shepherd proclaims "No more... / shall I e'er see my goats... / Lean down the precipice, and hang in the air," and Shakespeare describes how at the cliffs of Dover "hangs one who gathers samphire." "Neither the goats nor the samphire-gatherer do literally hang," observes Wordsworth, "but... the mind in its activity, for its own gratification, contemplates them as hanging" (*PrW* III, 31). Wordsworth subsequently praises synecdoche and metaphor in Milton and onomatopoeia and metaphor in his own poetry, insofar as they present images "endowed by the mind with properties that do not inhere in them, upon an incitement from properties and qualities the existence of which is inherent and obvious" (*PrW* III, 32). This quality distinguishes Wordsworth's early imagination as an inherently passive response, the application of figurative language prompted by the "incitement" found in the obvious features of an observed scene.

Wordsworth's imagination is also a synthetic power, capable of unifying seemingly disparate images into one cogent idea. As his second example of the imagination, Wordsworth cites Milton's representation of Satan's "fleet, an aggregate of many ships... as one mighty

person,” adding how the imagination delights in “consolidating numbers into unity” (*PrW* III, 31, 33). In this same passage, Wordsworth lauds how Milton recombines “the multitude of ships”—a material entity—into a symbol for “the flying Fiend”—a human persona (34). The imagination thus not only consolidates numerical quantities but also unifies physical objects and human figures into a single image. Of particular importance to Wordsworth is the connection between “the Poet’s own heart and mind, [and] external life and nature,” which he introduces as the appropriate medium for the imagination (26). W. J. B. Owen calls this “impression of continuity in nature and in the human experience of nature” the “most impressive” facet of Wordsworth’s imagination, and notes how in *The Wanderer* “the encroachment of weeds and sheep and the decline of garden and cottage,” an observed physical event, “symbolize the decay of a human spirit” (165-6). By using simple objects like Milton’s ships or Wordsworth’s weeds as symbols to evoke larger ideas, the imagination makes those simple objects more poetically compelling.

Some of Wordsworth’s most succinct definitions of the imagination, which illuminate the examples in his Preface, come from outside the formal definition he provides in that Preface. In an 1816 letter to Francis Wrangham defending *The White Doe of Rylstone*—also published in 1815—Wordsworth describes how “throughout [his poem], objects... derive their influence not from properties inherent in them, not from what they are actually in themselves, but from such as are bestowed upon them by the minds of those who are... affected by those objects (*M.Y.* II, 276). An explanatory note written for the “The Thorn” in 1800, absent from later editions, reads “superstitious men have a reasonable share of the imagination, by which word I mean the faculty which produces impressive effects out of simple events” (59). As with the examples Wordsworth discusses in his Preface, both these formulations require the poet to first observe something, reflect on it, and then describe those observations in verse. Nowhere in his concurrent writing

does Wordsworth describe imagination as transcendence or immortality, themes which, though they may have been developing at this time in *The Prelude* and the “Ode on the Intimations of Immortality,” do not yet overwhelm his oeuvre.

We gather from these examples that the imaginative experiences Wordsworth associates with poetry in 1815 do not provide the subject of his poems, as they may have for Coleridge in “Kubla Khan,” nor do they attempt to “dominate, manipulate, [or] overcome everything” being observed (Hall 15). Instead, the imagination operates passively on pre-existent attributes of scenes the poet has observed to make those scenes more poetic, typically by introducing figurative language, and therefore to inspire a poem. Most often these scenes are observed visually, but they can include auditory observations as well. The imagination fits hierarchically, as it does for Addison and Akenside, exactly where Wordsworth places it among the “six powers governing poetry” introduced at the opening of the 1815 Preface (*PrW* III, 26). “Observation and description” come first, providing the topic for a poet with enough “sensibility,” and only after the sensible poet has amply “reflected” on his observations does his fourth power, “imagination,” inspire him to versify the scene.

II. The Imagination in Wordsworth’s “Yew-trees”

To best see how Wordsworth’s imagination inspires his poetry, and therefore what the imagination was to him in 1815, it seems appropriate to consider a poem that Wordsworth himself categorized as a “poem of the imagination” in 1815. There are several quality studies of the accuracy, or lack thereof, of Wordsworth’s categorizations,³ but Wordsworth was ultimately the highest authority on his own poetry and I therefore do not question his decision. Like Wordsworth, we need to briefly step away from *The Ruined Cottage*, which was not included in

³ In particular, see W. J. B. Owen’s *Wordsworth as Critic*.

the 1815 *Poems* nor was it modified for almost two decades following publication of *The Excursion*. I take as an example Wordsworth's "Yew-trees," which Coleridge placed first in a selection of poems most representative of the imagination (*BL* 232). First written in 1803, "Yew-trees" was not published in Wordsworth's 1807 *Poems*; he instead saved it and revised it extensively for publication in 1815. Wordsworth never altered the text after his 1815 *Poems*, suggesting that that he was content with the 1815 edition. Contemporary scholarship largely ignores the early manuscript, but the changes made between the early manuscript and published copy are more fully illustrative of Wordsworth's imagination than a study of the 1815 text alone and so both texts are considered here.⁴

The opening line of the poem, "There is a Yew-tree," is an observation, immediately indicating how Wordsworth's imaginative power derives first from "observation and description." Rather than speaking to an abstraction or idea, Wordsworth opens with a physical object; more specifically, he opens with an object from nature, suggesting that nature has inspired this poem. Gene Ruoff notes how Wordsworth uses "there is" in many of his poems to herald "a thing or idea of decided importance," emphasizing in "Yew-trees" the importance of a natural image (150). When preparing the poem for publication, Wordsworth changes the opening from "that vast eugh-tree," a referential or directional statement situating the speaker in some direct relationship to the tree, to the declarative yet more abstract "there is," a statement that does not situate the speaker and instead simply identifies existence. This latter phrase better represents Wordsworth's imagination, because the imaginative experience can thus be derived from a natural image regardless of the imaginer's relation to it. Such a position echoes Addison's primary and secondary imaginations: the pleasures of the imagination come from a natural object

⁴ Both texts are provided in full in the appendix, page 115.

or a representation of it. Wordsworth's "poem of the imagination" does not situate the speaker because the speaker's position relative to the tree should not affect his imagination.

In his description of the yew of Lorton Vale, Wordsworth exhibits how the imagination operates passively on simple scenes to inspire impressive poetic effects. A single yew tree, by itself, is unremarkable, but Wordsworth's vision of the old yew tree inspires him to imagine historical battles to which this yew bore witness (5-9). By listing making those battles temporally distant events—the battle of Agincourt occurred four centuries before "this day" that the speaker references (2)—Wordsworth emphasizes the longevity of the Lorton yew, making it much more impressive in the poem. Similarly, the yew's personified willingness to "furnish weapons for the Bands / Of Umfraville or Percy" animate it with the figurative language Wordsworth praises in the Preface of 1815 (4-5). No descriptive material accompanies the Lorton yew in Wordsworth's manuscript, making "that vast eugh-tree" less awe-inspiring and Wordsworth's presentation of it less compelling. Michael Riffaterre adds that we need not be familiar with the place or battle names "to understand the allusions" (232); simply reading the long catalog, and recognizing the imagery of wars in "bows" and "bands," suffices to make noteworthy the otherwise normal yew. Perhaps most importantly, Wordsworth's mention of the tree's history emerges naturally from his original observation of it: the present-tense observation of how the tree "stands single" leads fluidly into the past-tense observation of how it stands "as it stood of yore," which then anticipates the catalogued events of "yore" of which the tree was part. Only after Wordsworth originally sees the tree does his imagination produce the image of timelessness.

Personification, one of the figurative devices Wordsworth praises in his 1815 Preface, pervades Wordsworth's description of the Borrowdale yew in the second half of "Yew-trees," which Coleridge considered the more imaginative half (*BL* 232). His judicious use of

personification in this scene demonstrates the passive role of the imagination, acting *after* a physical observation. Wordsworth introduces a series of personified visitors to the Borrowdale yew grave—"Fear," "Hope," "Silence," "Foresight," "Death," and "Time" (26-8). His catalog of personified abstractions recalls the similar catalog in Thomas Gray's "Ode on a Distance Prospect of Eton College" (1742). Wordsworth in 1816 described how "Gray failed as a poet, not because he... extinguished his animation, but because he had little of that fiery quality to begin with" (*M.Y.* II, 301). "Animation" here can be read synonymously with "imagination." Before he provides his catalog, Gray prefaces it as a list of "the ministers of human fate" to be discovered by youth soon to graduate (56, 61-80), making his catalog nothing more than intentional representation of a predetermined idea. Wordsworth's assembly of abstractions has no such prefatory label, because Wordsworth's description does not derive from a predetermined goal. Rather, Wordsworth views the grove and is inspired by his passing vision of "ghostly Shapes" who "may meet" there "at noontide" (25-6). The conditional "may" emphasizes how this is an imagined scene, not a dictated one, and stands in stark contrast to Gray's use of the unconditional "these shall" to introduce his own personifications. For Gray, the "imaginative" personifications follow a defined goal; for Wordsworth, the personifications are the goal in themselves, showcasing his mind's ability to perceive "properties not inherent" in the tree.

Wordsworth's descriptions of both the Lorton and Borrowdale yews exhibit the sense of unity between nature and mankind that in the Preface of 1815 he identifies as the appropriate substrate for the imagination. Despite appearing alone, the Lorton yew exists in relation to "things external to itself" by engaging with key aspects of English history (Ruoff 150), and four yews of Borrowdale are unified into "one solemn and capacious grove" that later becomes a "natural temple" ("Yew-trees" 15). Individual trees at Borrowdale likewise exhibit unity in their

“growth / Of intertwined fibers... / ...inveterately convolved,” Wordsworth’s diction here relying on words of togetherness (16-8). Cleanth Brooks summarizes the poem’s symbolism as connections between nature and humanity: Wordsworth associates the Lorton yew with human history and the Borrowdale yews with human religion (275). By simply describing both yews within the same poem, Wordsworth unites two independent observations into one continuous experience, further showcasing how his imaginative experiences unify to inspire poems which, in turn, unify nature-based observation and human experiences.

Sometime between the manuscript and published text, Wordsworth removed eight lines from the conclusion of “Yew-trees,” resulting in a published poem concluding with his catalog of personifications listening to “the mountain flood / Murmuring from Glaramara’s inmost caves” (32-3). This new conclusion strongly echoes the imaginative contemplation scene from his first Essay on Epitaphs, published in 1810 in Coleridge’s *The Friend* and again in 1814 as an accompaniment to *The Excursion*. In that essay, Wordsworth envisions “a child stand[ing] by the side of a running stream, pondering within himself what power was the feeder of the perpetual current, from what sources the body of water was supplied” (*PrW* II, 51). Thus the child’s simple observation of a river leads him to contemplate more impressive or poetic ideas, in the same way Wordsworth’s imagination, triggered by his observation of the yews, inspires a poem contemplating their timelessness and unity. Again, the child’s observation produces the imaginative response: the child does not have a preconceived notion of what “power” feeds the river, but rather the river leads him to imagine that power. Ending on the Glaramara scene, rather than burying it within other verse as Wordsworth does in the manuscript, makes the allusion more resonant. The conclusion that Wordsworth removes to favor the Glaramara scene lacks the same imaginative power: the image of Earth having “sustain’d / The decaying pile” that will be

“forever spared by man” proudly echoes the timeless quality of the Lorton yew without evoking the “murmuring” mood that leads to contemplation of that timeliness (“Yew-trees” 25-6, 29).

III. Criticism of Wordsworth’s Imagination

When Wordsworth started introducing the imagination into his poetry in 1815 it was solely this stated emphasis on allusive figurative language and the unity between nature and humanity, resulting from the passive observation of physical scenes. With this definition in mind, we can assess the validity of arguments censuring, for various reasons, that early imagination as herald of Wordsworth’s decline. Wordsworth’s contemporary Leigh Hunt, honored by Anthony Holden as “the last of the romantics,” provides perhaps the most illuminating critique of Wordsworth’s imagination, given that he had not read any of Wordsworth’s then-unpublished philosophical works, including *The Prelude*, when he leveled his complaints. George Stout traces Hunt’s opinion of Wordsworth over time to conclude that Hunt, like modern critics, acknowledged the decline in Wordsworth’s poetry and associated it with Wordsworth’s theory. “Wordsworth rises very quickly to a peak of admiration” in Hunt’s estimation, Stout writes, “from which he slowly declines through the long later years of his (and Hunt’s) life” (73).

In *The Feast of the Poets* Hunt offers his foremost complaint against Wordsworth’s imagination, which expects too much from trivial things:

The consequence of [Wordsworth’s imagination] if carried into a system would be, that we could make anything or nothing important, just as diseased or healthy impulses told us;--a straw might awaken in us as many profound, but certainly not as useful reflections, as the fellow-creature that lay upon it; till at last, perplexed between the importance which every thing had obtained in our imaginations, and the little use of this new system of equality to the action and government of life,

we might turn from elevating to depreciating,--from thinking trifling things important, to thinking important things trifling. (99-100)

Hunt finds fault not with Wordsworth's emphasis on "transcendence" or "infinitude," nor with the role of the imagination in elevating its subject material, but with the actual subject material Wordsworth chooses. Where Hunt was writing poems about more formal subjects, recreating Dante's scene of Paolo and Francesco in his own *Story of Rimini* and retelling old Greek myths in "Hero and Leander" or "Bacchus and Ariadne," Wordsworth was writing about natural images, like straw or yew trees, which Hunt found mundane. But Wordsworth had always been writing about natural images, since as early as *Descriptive Sketches* (1793), making it difficult to claim that something about his imagination now indicated a "decline" in poetic ability.

In perhaps his strongest gesture of distaste, Hunt excluded Wordsworth from his 1844 anthology *Imagination and Fancy*, intended to showcase "some of the finest passages in English poetry" in which "the imagination and fancy [are] in a state of predominance, undisputed by interests of another sort" (§3). Holden argues that this is Hunt's most telling condemnation of Wordsworth (272-3), and in Holden's defense Hunt's anthology ironically includes the same excerpts from *Paradise Lost* that Wordsworth uses to exemplify the imagination in the Preface of 1815. Hunt's implicit criticism here, however, reveals a disregard for Wordsworth's own theory. Wordsworth in his Preface classifies his poetry based on "the powers of mind predominant in the production of them" (*PrW* III, 28, emphasis mine), not based on the powers predominant in them, as Hunt does. Wordsworth's description of two plain yew trees may not be as explicitly imaginative in Hunt's eyes as Milton's recreation of the battle between Satan and God, for example, but "Yew-trees" was inspired nonetheless by other images Wordsworth imagined when he saw those yew trees. Stout suggests that Hunt withheld Wordsworth from *Imagination and*

Fancy because some time after Wordsworth died Hunt planned to include Wordsworth in a new anthology, *Poetry of Contemplation* (67). The difference between “contemplation” and “imagination” is again more a question of Hunt’s semantics than actual faculties, insofar as for Wordsworth, the “imagination” was the power that contemplated the larger ideas in smaller scenes. Again, nothing in Hunt’s criticism indicates that Wordsworth was doing anything dramatically different in his early “imaginative” mode than he had in the past.

Modern criticism of Wordsworth’s imagination follows two distinct approaches; the first, taken by Heffernan and Barth, argues that Wordsworth’s poems of the imagination slowly drifted away from the ideals espoused in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and thus denote Wordsworth’s decline. Heffernan critiques a theory which, in 1815, “denigrates the conscious, creative control of the poet and disproportionately exaggerates the role of natural, undirected response,” describing how Wordsworth expects poets to respond, passively, to scenes that strike them imaginatively, rather than actively describing scenes of poetic value on which the poet has reflected in tranquility (49). This “natural, undirected” response, however, was exactly what Wordsworth wanted from his imagination in 1815, and was not antithetical to the ideals of his Preface; Wordsworth himself, in 1816, wrote to his friend R. P. Gillies defending “a sentiment... announced 15 years ago... as being the fundamental principle of my own style,” suggesting that even if he relegated the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to the end of his 1815 *Poems*, he did not believe it obsolete, only inadequate (*M.Y.* II, 300). Indeed, even though Wordsworth moves the early Preface in his volumes, he does not remove it entirely.

The second modern critical approach, taken by Lainoff and Hamilton, points to Wordsworth’s deification of the imagination as herald of his decline, his “search for infinitude” leading him to separate physical nature from its symbolic implications and favor the latter

(Lainoff 67). Many critics from this school cite Wordsworth's hymn to the imagination after he crosses the Alps in *The Prelude*, in which he describes how imagination leads us to the knowledge that "our destiny, our nature, and our home, / Is with infinitude," and subjugates even a physical description of the Alps to a celebration of his mental journey (5.537-8). Hall references the ascent of Snowdon, where Wordsworth remarks how "imagination... / Is but another name for absolute strength / And clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And reason in her exalted mood" (13.170). This approach relies on the fact that Wordsworth actively uses his imagination to search for infinitude, rather than being passively inspired by it.

The above passages from *The Prelude* may reflect the "theory of transcendence" or "celebration of the... self's enactment of infinity" that becomes problematic in Wordsworth's later work, which I discuss at the end of this chapter (Lainoff 67, Hall 15); however, Wordsworth chose *not* to publish this passage when he wrote it in 1805, and in fact never published it during his lifetime. Where Cottle, not Wordsworth, kept *The Ruined Cottage* off of the press in 1798, Wordsworth was choosing to keep his *Prelude*, replete with these imaginative scenes, off the press in 1814. Facing pressure in the 1810s to publish at least one portion of *The Recluse*, Wordsworth chose to publish *The Excursion* instead, suggesting that at this time he was more pleased with the ideals expressed there than in the Preface. It could also be that Wordsworth saw more potential in *The Prelude* and was waiting until that potential had been realized, but even so, any fair evaluation of Wordsworth's decline should be done in the context of his published presence, and in the eye of the 1815 public, Wordsworth had not yet lost his power.

IV. Tracing the Imagination in *The Ruined Cottage*

Much as Wordsworth's concept of the imagination evolved from a lineage of thinkers before him, so, too, does his concept of the imagination evolve within his own poetry, and at the

time of *The Excursion* it had not yet evolved to the celebration of transcendence that Lainoff cites as the source of Wordsworth's decline. It similarly had not evolved to the point of clear disjunction with the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* or with Wordsworth's own emphasis on nature. The Pedlar's biography in the 1814 *Excursion*, which in the first chapter I argued was indicative of Wordsworth's semiautobiographical bend, also reflects Wordsworth's early imaginative emphasis, complicating Lainoff's claim that Wordsworth's "quest for transcendence" spoils his poetry in 1815. Before the speaker even begins the Pedlar's biography, the Pedlar waits "beneath the shelter of... clustering elms;" the adjective "clustering" connotes togetherness or unity, reflecting both the principle of numerical unity highlighted in the Preface of 1815 and the Borrowdale yews forming a grove in "Yew-trees" (52). By placing his Pedlar "beneath" those elms Wordsworth implies that his Pedlar is subservient to that ideal of unity. An imaginative image grounded in nature, not thoughts of infinitude, thus introduces the Pedlar.

As the Pedlar's biography develops, Wordsworth continually describes how the Pedlar finds inspiration in his observations of nature and rustic scenes, an emphasis on observation appropriate to both the ideals of Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and an understanding of imagination in the Preface of 1815 as the derivative of observation. The speaker describes how the Pedlar's "sweet discourse / Of things which he had seen... often touch'd / Abstrusest matter, reasonings of the mind / Turned inward" (W 67-70). Here, the "things" the Pedlar has seen lead his discourse to the higher "reasonings of the mind," his visual observations prompting his imaginative response. "The doings [and] observations which [the Pedlar's] mind / Had dealt with" shape his character, again implying that mental response comes second to physical perceptions or experience (105-6). In lines that echo the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, the Pedlar "intensely brooded" over things he has seen and felt "till they acquired / The liveliness of

dreams,” thus recollecting his former emotions in a state of present tranquility (165-6). All the Pedlar’s “deep feelings,” the workings of his imagination, are inspired by “great objects,” similar to how Addison’s imagination responds to the sight of physical grandiosity (152-3). For the Pedlar, observation again precedes imagination, a fact Wordsworth signifies by giving the objects and feelings the peddler has “perceived” the verbal agency to “impress / ... on his mind,” rather than giving the peddler verbal control of his imagination and allowing him to determine what scenes so affect him (151-2). Perhaps most importantly, it is “Nature... [who] has taught” the peddler “to feel” this way (214-5), much like the poet who learns from nature in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Later in his life, the peddler is inspired by his interactions with “Men” who live “mid the simpler forms of rural life” and speak in a “plainer language” reminiscent of the poetic diction espoused by that same preface (370-1, 376).

One time during the Pedlar’s biography Wordsworth mentions infinitude directly, stating, in lines amenable to Hunt’s critique of miniaturization, how “the least of things / Seemed infinite” to the Pedlar “on the lonely mountain tops” (251-2, 240). In this passage, the Pedlar’s lack of agency separates his passive experience with infinitude from the active search for infinitude that Lainoff, Hamilton, and Hall find distasteful in Wordsworth. After ascending Snowdon in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth reflects on his vision of the “ocean” of “vapors” (45-6), prefacing it with a rhetorical “it appeared to me” to signify a conclusion he himself was reaching: “It appeared to me / The perfect image of a mighty mind / Of one that feeds upon infinity” (13.68-70). Some degree of egotism could be extrapolated by emphasizing “me,” as if Wordsworth, but no one else, received this “perfect image,” an interpretation that further highlights Wordsworth’s agency in extracting an image of infinity from his experience. On the mountaintop in *The Excursion*, the Pedlar passively recognizes how “all things there / Breathed

immortality” (*W* 248-9); this image lacks the specificity applied to the “vapors” on top of Snowdon, and the recognition is of the passive activity of breathing immortality rather than the purposeful activity of feeding on it. Similarly, things on the mountain “seemed infinite” *to* him—he does not impose infinity *on* them (252).

Wordsworth also directly addresses the imagination once during the Pedlar’s biography, much like he does in *The Prelude*, but the address, quoted below, lacks the intimations of immortality and the active conclusion-making role of the imaginer found in *The Prelude*:

... for many a Tale
 Traditionary, round the mountains hung,
 And many a Legend, peopling the dark woods,
 Nourished Imagination in her growth,
 And gave the Mind that apprehensive power
 By which she is made quick to recognize
 The moral properties and scope of things. (*W* 181-7)

Here, the tales and legends “nourished imagination,” imagination operating only on objects first observed by the young Pedlar (184). Imagination is further described as an “apprehensive” power, connoting hesitation or tentativeness, “*by* which” the mind “*is made... to recognize*,” Wordsworth’s choice of the preposition “*by*” indicating that the imagination organically inspires recognition of “the scope of things” rather than the observer actively or mechanically concluding it. The mind, in this passage, has no agency: it is the direct object *of* the imagination, which is itself presented as a separate entity. The Pedlar’s mind does not *use* the imagination, nor is the imagination inherent *in* it. While this scene may anticipate Wordsworth’s later “quest for transcendence” and associated decline, insofar as it foreshadows a great degree of power in the

imagination, the imagination here functions as an organically inspiring power triggered by passive observation. This imagination remains consistent with the tenets of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, particularly the emphasis on rustic scenes described in plain language, suggesting that Wordsworth in 1815 has not actually taken the first step down his imminent downward slope.

V. Wordsworth's Decline and the Imagination of 1830

It is only when Wordsworth takes the imagination beyond the figurative language, unity, and nature-based symbolism found in “Yew-trees” and the 1814 *Excursion* that his published self truly begins to decline in power, succumbing to many of the faults Hamilton, Lainoff, and Hall wrongly place in the 1810s. Wordsworth becomes “distrustful of the senses and passions” that inspire his earlier poetry, diminishing the value of his personal observations of natural scenes in favor of images that are more abstract or of “divine origin” (Lainoff 67, 69). Barth comments on how these new images lack the rustic quality Wordsworth celebrates in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (19). Wordsworth's imagination also becomes a more active and transcendent power which he uses to “reveal... what is eternal” or “infinite,” moving beyond the inspired poetic representation of rustic life and natural scenes, even those scenes relevant to his present life experiences, to instead establish a lasting poetic presence. Poetic inspiration becomes secondary to an older Wordsworth's search for meaning and permanence, as his inspiration from imaginative experiences in nature is subsumed by inspiration from the Christian God.

Wordsworth considered his 1835 poem “Ode on the Power of Sound” a “keystone” in his later poetry, giving it the coveted position as the last of the “Poems of the Imagination” in his 1835 collected works (Chandler 8), and a comparison of “On the Power of Sound” to “Yew-trees” reveals how Wordsworth's imagination, late in his career, has evolved from using figurative language to make natural objects more impressive to attempting to transcend natural

limits. The Lorton yew's longevity, revealed through its association with long-past historical events, "transcends the life of the individual in the way that history, the record of the lives of many men, transcends the life of the one" (Ruoff 156). Wordsworth's 1815 imagination thus makes the otherwise plain tree poetically impressive. However, Wordsworth still perceives the tree "in terms of beginnings and endings" (156)—he considers its "decay" and destruction ("Yew-trees" 11, 13)—grounding it in earthly limits. In "On the Power of Sound," Wordsworth's imaginative interpretation of various sounds leads him to recognize "God," the "Voice [who] to Light gave Being" and for which "Man's noisy years" are "no more than moments" (208-9, 216-7), bringing the imagination well beyond any earthly limit. The poem concludes resoundingly with the statement that "though Earth be dust / And vanish, though the Heavens dissolve... / ... the Word shall not pass away" (222-4). Where Wordsworth's imagination in "Yew-trees" does not obscure consideration of mortality, in "On the Power of Sound" it usurps mortality in favor of immortalizing Wordsworth's poetic self. Surrounded by such Biblical imagery, "Word" readily connotes "Word of God" or "Bible," making this immortality explicitly Christian.

"On the Power of Sound" also showcases a more active imagination, used by Wordsworth to find a higher meaning where the early imagination passively produced visions of that meaning in observed natural scenes. Several times in the poem Wordsworth describes an unidentified "Spirit," which the casual reader quickly associates with God. James Chandler aptly notes, however, that Wordsworth openly refers to "God" as a character differentiated from the earlier "Spirit" (§17), and in his outline of the poem's argument Wordsworth describes how "imagination" unify the cacophony of sounds into a hymn of praise to the "Creator." Reading this anonymous spirit as Wordsworth's imagination—synonymous to his source of inspiration—we see how the imagination "informs the cell of hearing" and is served by "Streams and

Fountains” (4, 17). Both of these statements place imagination superior to observation: the imagination no longer operates, retrospectively, on observed scenes, but rather becomes the mechanism by which those scenes are observed. Instead of hearing a sound and *then* having an imaginative reinterpretation of it, Wordsworth’s new imagination delivers the sound to him, removing the all-important role of direct observation. Later in the poem, Wordsworth describes the “one pervading Spirit” by whom “all things are controlled” (177-8), giving the imagination an explicitly active role. The word “control” especially signifies a newfound power that the imagination lacked in 1814, a power that is no longer “apprehensive.”

Wordsworth’s imagery similarly shifts away from plain natural scenes described in the “real language of men,” like those that so inspired the Pedlar and the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, towards aggrandizing descriptions of intellections designed to celebrate the imagination. Surrounding the passages mentioned above, Wordsworth incorporates images of an “intricate labyrinth,” “oracular cave,” “desert wide,” and “frozen zone,” all of which are more complex and unnatural than the yew-trees or Margaret’s cottage, their abstractness emphasized by the accompanying adjectives “intricate,” “oracular,” or “wide,” that all imply an unquantifiable scope (5-6, 22, 26). Lainoff criticizes the declining Wordsworth for depicting nature as “divided into two parts: the material, which... is spatial and temporal... and the symbolic” (64). By abstracting his imagery, Wordsworth transitions directly to the symbolic undertones behind the nature he depicts, avoiding their material presence. Also of note is how “On the Power of Sounds” begins directly with an address to the anonymous spirit, where “Yew-trees” begins by stating the presence of the Lorton yew. Wordsworth thus glosses over the role of any material, natural inspiration for his poem, turning immediately to apostrophe and theoretical discussion.

Returning to *The Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth revised several passages between 1832 and 1836 in a manner consistent with the drift away from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and the celebration of a more active imagination seen in “On the Power of Sound.” Wordsworth excises thirteen lines comprising the only full description of the Pedlar’s parents and their poverty (*W* 115-27). Curtis believes Wordsworth removes the lines in response to Coleridge’s criticism in *Biographia Literaria* that the lines exhibit an excessive “matter-of-factness” (19, *BL* 215). However, Curtis’s conclusion fails to justify why Wordsworth would wait more than a decade to remove those lines from his manuscript. An examination of MS. 1832/36 reveals that Wordsworth’s conviction to remove these lines was apparently strong, as he scribbled out the entire passage, rather than following his more typical style of placing a gentle “X” over an undesired passage. Wordsworth was accustomed to Coleridge’s criticisms and responded to many of them with less violent revisions, suggesting that these lines were particularly troublesome to him. If we read Wordsworth as seeking the immortality in his own life and works, the deleted lines become an unwanted connection of the Pedlar’s life to his parent’s background. Wordsworth wants his Pedlar to be “nourished” by his imagination and preserved through his work, not contextualized by his family (*W* 184), and in *The Prelude* the imagination is introduced, not coincidentally, as an “unfathered vapor” (*Pld* 6.22). The “egotistical sublime” that infused Wordsworth’s semiautobiographical work thus reappears as a desire to reach “infinitude” independently, much like how Wordsworth clarifies that the “vapors” on Mount Snowdon appeared “to me” and not to any general observer.

The passage in which Wordsworth describes the Pedlar’s perceptions of greatness (*W* 135-40) was also revised in the 1830s, removing the passage’s earlier emphasis on sensory perception of nature. Although “deep feelings” are still given the verbal agency to impress those

images of greatness, no longer are they based on “portraiture / And color” (152-4); instead, there is no indication of a sensory source for those feelings. In 1814, those feelings “haunt the bodily sense,” whereas in 1835 Wordsworth substitutes “perplexed” for “haunt” (W. 45 139, W 156). “Perplexed” implies something confusing or baffling, as if the Pedlar’s visions of “great objects” no longer deeply affect or “haunt” his “bodily” senses but rather bewilder them—as if they are more appropriate to a spiritual or transcendent mental power. As Wordsworth changes the word, so, too, does he change the tense, from present tense in “haunt” to past tense in “perplexed.” Images that “haunt” do so for extended periods of time, having an enduring effect on the haunted; the Pedlar is appropriately affected, in the present tense, by his imaginative interpretations of past natural scenes. When those natural scenes lose their import, as they do in the later Wordsworth, they become relegated to the past, reflecting Lainoff’s distinction between temporal, material nature and its symbolic implications.

At the end of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth makes one single-word substitution that epitomizes the altered role of his later imagination. In 1814, Wordsworth’s Pedlar ends his dialogue by reminding the Solitary of the importance of “reason and imagination” (Curtis 22), referencing immortality only when he says “death to be / Foretasted, immortality presumed” (9.281). “Presumed” suggests only the assumption of eternity, which Wordsworth hypothesizes for himself in 1814, like his Pedlar on the mountaintop. In Wordsworth’s 1836 revisions the Pedlar extends those presumptions of immortality in Book 9 to claim that “blissful immortality” is “assured” to those who act holily on earth (W.45 226-8). Not only does the addition of the adjective “blissful” indicate an inflated opinion of immortality, but the shift from “presumed” to “assured” reads as a shift from casual supposition to guaranteed certainty. The Pedlar in 1814

could only conceive immortality, and even then only when he saw a particularly poignant scene; by 1836, the Pedlar is sufficiently assured of immortality to promise it to the Solitary.

Imagination in Wordsworth's later career thus becomes closely tied to a developing belief in the soul's immortality, an emphasis rarely seen in his earlier poems of the imagination. As Wordsworth becomes more concerned with immortality, he writes new poems and revises old ones to replace nature-based scenes with abstract or heavenly imagery, transforming his Pedlar into a spokesperson for immortality rather than for nature. This transition leads Wordsworth away from the ideals of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and inundates his poetry with philosophic discourse about an active imagination, two features considered indicative of his decline. Yet the imagination Wordsworth espouses in the Preface of 1815 only operates passively on his observations of rustic life and natural scenes to make them more poetic and invest them with figurative language, and his concurrent poetry reflects that more pastoral version of imagination. The "decline" so often cited in Wordsworth's poetry thus begins far later in Wordsworth's career than the scholarly orthodoxy traditionally claims. Wordsworth's discussion of the soul's immortality, however, does pave the way for the increasingly overt Christian theology that enters *The Ruined Cottage* and permeates his poems during the last decade of his life.

CHAPTER 4
WORDSWORTH AND THE QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY, 1836-1850

“Do not be deterred by the fear of any obligations which the appointment may be supposed to imply. I will undertake that you shall have nothing required from you.”
 British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel

After the publication of *The Excursion* in 1814 and *Poems in Two Volumes* in 1815, Wordsworth wrote little new poetry, and published even less. Even his *Poems in Two Volumes* did not contain enough new poetry, according to Harper, “to fill a very slender volume,” relying instead on Wordsworth’s previous work (535). *Peter Bell* had been written fifteen years before Wordsworth actually published it in 1819. Wordsworth’s *Ecclesiastical Sketches* in 1822 were his last entirely new work; he prepared his collected works for publication again in 1827, 1836, 1842, and 1845, but few of the works included therein were new in those editions. Of the works that were freshly composed, none compared in magnitude to *The Excursion* and the unpublished *Prelude*, and none have received the critical attention awarded to the poems from *Lyrical Ballads*. In February 1815, Dorothy assured Sara Hutchinson that Wordsworth “must read many books before he will fairly set to labor again” on *The Recluse* (*M.Y.* II, 200); *The Recluse* is never mentioned again anywhere in the letters of William and Dorothy. Either Wordsworth did not read enough books in the remaining 35 years of his life, or, more likely, he capitulated to the widespread criticism of *The Excursion*, from which even Coleridge did not exempt him, and lacked the motivation to try again. Only twenty years after the groundbreaking publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, and decades before his death, Wordsworth’s creative output had dried up.

Wordsworth’s circle of fellow poets and thinkers in the Lake District dwindled in these later years, leaving Wordsworth the lonely inhabitant of Rydal Mount, his home from 1813 until his death in 1850 (Harper 503). After Wordsworth’s famous disagreement with Coleridge in 1810, and especially following Coleridge’s disappointment with *The Excursion*, Wordsworth never again enjoyed the frequent and intimate exchange of ideas with his once-closest friend. By

the 1820s “the arrival of a letter from [Coleridge] had become a rare event at Rydal Mount” (581). Sir George Beaumont, Wordsworth’s patron since 1803, died early in 1827. Hazlitt died in 1830, Coleridge and Lamb in 1834, and Southey in 1843. All of the Romantic poets with whom Wordsworth affiliated or was at least familiar—Scott, Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Blake—were dead by 1832. “Of that knot of great men,” wrote Robinson in 1847, “only Wordsworth lingers, and he will not attempt to write any more” (*HCR* II, 357).

Wordsworth also outlasted many of his family and friends. His sister-in-law and faithful amanuensis Sara Hutchinson died in 1835, as did his friends Robert Jones, Felicia Hemans, and James Hogg. James Losh preceded them in 1834. Wordsworth’s beloved sister Dorothy became a chronic invalid following a severe illness in the fall of 1832, a fact which weighed heavily on his mind for the remainder of his life (Harper 584). He had already lost two of his five children in 1812, and in 1847, his adult daughter Dora died of tuberculosis. Wordsworth had written elegies for several of his late friends, most notably his *Extempore Effusion* in 1835, and he attempted an elegy for Coleridge but was unable to complete it, but after Dora’s death Wordsworth never again took his pen to a blank page. In his final years, Wordsworth truly was a “lonely figure” (598), and indeed, when Wordsworth died in 1850, only Robinson was left to lament the loss of “the greatest man [he] ever had the honor of calling friend” (*HCR* II, 397).

Despite his flagging output and the mixed reviews of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth had still earned himself the respect of the English public. As a gesture of respect for the elderly Wordsworth, British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel offered Wordsworth the post of Poet Laureate in 1843, following the death of then-Laureate Southey, who had held the title since 1813. Wordsworth, recognizing his declining poetic ability and, in light of his recent losses, his fading motivation to produce new work at all, accepted the post under the unprecedented

condition that he not be required to write anything commissioned by the state. Freed of that obligation, Wordsworth instead focused his efforts, often half-heartedly but occasionally with the fervor of his younger days, on once again revising his previous works, many of which had already been reworked for publication in each of his successive collected editions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Wordsworth devoted the vast majority of his final labor to the two epics destined for the failed *Recluse: The Prelude*, which remained unpublished until after his death, and *The Excursion*, in its seventh edition by 1843.

The revisions that characterize Wordsworth's final decade can summarily be described as "Christian." In his old age, Wordsworth became "a stern defender of the church," where in 1814 Wordsworth "knew not when he had been in a church in his own country" (*HCR* I, 250) and in 1798 Coleridge had called him a "semi-atheist" (*LSTC* I, 216). Wordsworth at least believed in a God for the majority of his life—in his 1805 *Prelude* manuscript he hails "the one / Surpassing life" which "hath the name of God" (6.154-7), and when his son died in 1812, Wordsworth writes "the sweet Innocent yielded up his soul to God" (*M.Y.* II, 51)—but in his early years "the Bible, the church, the Christian conception of God, the personality of Jesus and His death on the cross... exerted very little direct influence upon him" (Havens 180). Young Wordsworth lacked the religious orthodoxy that led him in the final stanza of "Ode on the Power of Sound" to so emphatically praise the supremacy of God.

By the 1840s, Wordsworth had "become a much more devout Christian and was more willing to be viewed... as a 'Christian' poet" (Bushell 21). Of particular importance to the Christian Wordsworth was the promise of immortality, the "eternal life" celebrated in Christian theology, for both his soul and his poetry. Writing of Dorothy and Coleridge in 1832, Wordsworth laments that "the two beings to whom my intellect is most indebted... are now

proceeding... along the path of sickness—I will not say towards the grave, but I trust towards a blessed immortality” (*L.Y.* II, 536). Geoffrey Meldahl observes in the late Wordsworth’s poetry “an extreme devaluation of mortal life and... a corresponding exaltation of heavenly existence for the soul outside the material world,” which manifest as “fortitude in the face of suffering and a dispassionate contemplation of mortal things” (1). Critical tradition reads Wordsworth in his final years shifting his poetic focus, which had always been an evolving concern with “emotion recollected in tranquility,” towards a search for immortality. In the previous chapter I argued that Wordsworth’s decline in poetic power begins when his imagination is redirected for this purpose.

In this final chapter I consider the religious influences on Wordsworth’s poetry, focusing on the emphatically Christian themes he adds to *The Ruined Cottage* in the last decade of his life. I begin by evaluating the religious undertones or “spirits” present in the *Lyrical Ballads* and early manuscripts of *The Ruined Cottage* in the context of the many criticisms that were raised against Wordsworth for not making his early poems sufficiently religious. I then consider the idea of immortality, which was the central theme of Wordsworth’s decidedly Christian years and certainly of his final poems, and how Wordsworth’s quest for immortality was the natural outgrowth of his earlier poetic philosophies, particularly of the imagination. I conclude by returning once again to *The Ruined Cottage*, now fifty years after it was first composed, to examine the revisions Wordsworth made prior to its publication in 1845. Although Wordsworth himself may have become more Christian in his final years, and these late revisions are almost universally glossed as compelling evidence of his late Christianity, I argue in this chapter that the religious revisions to the final drafts of *The Ruined Cottage* lack conviction, as if Wordsworth was only succumbing to criticism and the pressure of his new office but in his heart preserved the same beliefs he had espoused thirty years previously.

I. The 'Spirit' in Wordsworth's Early Poems

The first several manuscripts of *The Ruined Cottage*, including the text Wordsworth sent to Cottle for publication in 1798, could hardly be considered the seed of a Christian poem. Without the frame tale of the narrator and the Pedlar, *The Ruined Cottage* before MS. B "had been the straightforward narrative of Robert's desertion and Margaret's subsequent tragedy of hope" (Averill 117). 'God' appears, but only as an afterthought: Wordsworth describes how "two pretty babes / Were their best hope, next to the God in Heaven" (RC 132). His combined use of the definite article "*the* God" with the prepositional phrase "*in* Heaven" curiously implies a pantheistic theology, as if there are other gods who may exist outside of heaven (emphasis mine). Margaret's suffering in these drafts goes unreconciled: she suffers and dies almost purposelessly, and in the face of her suffering she hardly demonstrates the "fortitude" Meldahl finds in the poems of the Christian Wordsworth. When Wordsworth added the narrator and the Pedlar to MS. B, "we become nearly as interested in their responses [to Margaret] as in Margaret [herself]" (Averill 117), but Margaret's suffering in the face of her fruitless hope still serves little purpose; it is simply related with more narrative distance. Nowhere in that framework does Wordsworth refute his pantheistic implication or reference God.

With the addition of the reconciliatory 46-line conclusion in MS. D, Wordsworth gave Margaret's tale a moral, but not a religious one, and he exaggerated his implied pantheism. In the conclusion, the Pedlar conveys a sense of tranquility that resolves his relentless depiction of Margaret's suffering into an acknowledgement that the "secret spirit of humanity" underlying Margaret's endless compassion "still survived" after her death (RC 503-6). That same spirit is what allows the Pedlar and the speaker to respond sympathetically to her tale, feel sorrow for her, and despite that "sorrow and despair," continue on "in happiness" (RC 520-6). While

certainly appropriate to Wordsworth's early theories in its depiction of how emotion can be recollected in tranquility, this conclusion adds nothing Christian to the tale, and Wordsworth's implication that Margaret's "secret spirit" outlived her would in later years be taken as a heretical statement of divinity outside of God.¹

Similar "spirits" populate Wordsworth's other major lyrics aside from *The Ruined Cottage*, guiding his moral or poetic self, but these "spirits" are never associated with Christian imagery. Every explicit mention of "God" in the original *Lyrical Ballads* is either an interjection or an attribution of *deus ex machina* agency, never a declaration of piety: the shepherd in "The Last of the Flock" explains his misfortunes by lamenting "God cursed me"; the mother in "The Idiot Boy" bewails Johnny's theorized death by screaming "God forbid"; and when in "We are Seven" Wordsworth's little maid tells the speaker "God released her of her pain," she uses God to explain death, but never praises him. Nothing in the *Lyrical Ballads* would suggest that their author was a devout Christian.

In some of his more critically acclaimed lyrics, Wordsworth again refers to an outside "spirit," but still denies it a religious connotation. Regretting his "merciless ravage" of the previously untouched hazelnut grove in "Nutting," Wordsworth cautions his audience to "move along these shades / In gentleness of heart... / ... for there is a spirit in the woods" (45, 54-6). What this spirit is, Wordsworth does not say, but the Christian God of his later orthodoxy, the "Voice [who] to Light gave Being" in "On the Power of Sound," would likely be untroubled by the loss of a few hazelnuts and would certainly not be geographically confined to "these shades" (54). Above Tintern Abbey Wordsworth submits to a more omnipresent "motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things" (100-2). His

¹ Robinson relays Washington Irving's condemnation of Wordsworth's 'spirit': "the poet... creates gods for himself" (*HCR* I, 490).

anaphoric use of “all” encapsulates some pervasive power of this “spirit,” but nowhere in the poem does he suggest this spirit is God. Immediately after introducing this spirit Wordsworth instead praises “nature and the language of the sense” as “the anchor of my purest thoughts, / the nurse, / the guide, the guardian of my heart, / and soul of all my moral being” (108-10). Nature, not God, is Wordsworth’s religion in “Tintern Abbey.”

When Wordsworth first began drafting his Pedlar’s biography, he made nature, rather than the Christian God, the formative power behind the Pedlar. In MS. B Wordsworth admits that his Pedlar read books about “the life and death of martyrs,” but MS. B doesn’t yet praise martyrs as those “who sustained, / With will inflexible, those fearful pangs / ... / Of Persecution and the Covenant” (W 190-3). Those lines, which contribute little to the characterization of the Pedlar but present a favorable opinion of Christianity, wouldn’t appear until 1814. Also in MS. B Wordsworth makes sure to clarify that the young Pedlar sitting on mountaintops “did not feel the God, he felt his works,” distinctly favoring nature over God himself (9^R). That moment is “by prayer and praise unprofaned,” suggesting that prayer, a quintessential component of Christianity, could taint the Pedlar’s experience. *The Wanderer* omits the distinction between God and his work and instead suggests only that prayer would be “imperfect,” removing Wordsworth’s questionably heretical lines (W 237). Wordsworth added to MS. E the short paragraph about how “the Scottish church... / ... had watched” his Pedlar; however, immediately after those lines Wordsworth marginalizes the role of the church by starting his next characterization with “*but* by the native vigor of his mind,” the contradictory conjunction “but” suggesting that the Pedlar’s “native vigor” surpasses the Scottish church (W 427-52).

Of all the poems Wordsworth published before 1815, *The Excursion* was by far the most openly Christian—aided by the slight changes to the Pedlar’s biography just discussed—but even

so its Christianity was tempered by the repeated diminution of God in favor of nature. The Solitary openly disregards the creation story: “Our origin, what matters it?” demands the Solitary of the Pedlar. “Say at once / ... / ...that certain Men / Leapt out together from a rocky Cave / And these were the first Parents of Mankind!” (3.244-8). The Pedlar never reproaches this impiety. On one occasion Wordsworth makes his Pedlar an unquestionably religious figure: “lifting up his eyes / To Heaven,” the Pedlar says “Me didst thou constitute a Priest of thine” (4.33-4, 43). However, the rest of *The Excursion* does little to demonstrate the Pedlar’s piety the way it demonstrates his origins in nature in *The Wanderer*, and elsewhere in *The Excursion* Wordsworth makes clear that it is the “intellectual Power” of nature and the “spirit of humanity” that go “sounding on,” not the might of God (3.708-10).

Wordsworth’s emphasis on nature alongside his Christian verses in *The Excursion* earned him a great deal of contemporary rebukes. Curiously, even though criticism of *The Excursion* was emphatic and immediate, exemplified by Francis Jeffrey’s review, there were few religious complaints against the poem until over a decade after its publication. James Montgomery had been quick to find faults, writing in 1815 that Wordsworth should have dealt more with “Sin and Redemption through the Blood of Christ,” but not until 1825 did readers lament that Wordsworth’s universe was “ruled by a spiritual Person” rather than an unmistakable God and find heresy in Wordsworth’s emphasis on “communion with nature” rather than unyielding faith as the “source of divine knowledge” (Harper 515-7). William Blake took issue with *The Excursion*’s opening Prospectus, where Wordsworth suggests that his poetic ability allows him to “breathe in worlds / To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil” and to pass “Jehovah—with his thunder, and the choir / Of shouting angels, and the empyreal thrones / ... *unalarmed*” (29-30, 33-5, emphasis mine). Blake was particularly concerned with Wordsworth’s implication that

the presence of God was not frightening to him, and in response to this line, Blake demanded of Robinson “does Mr. Wordsworth think his mind can surpass Jehovah?” (*HCR* II, 27). Despite Robinson’s attempt to convince Blake otherwise, Blake denounced Wordsworth as a “Pagan” who happened to be “the greatest poet of the age” (*HCR* II, 27). Perhaps more tellingly, Blake later tells Robinson “I fear Wordsworth loves nature, and nature is the work of the devil,” thus recognizing even in the more openly Christian *Excursion* the same proclivity to deifying nature instead of God in Wordsworth’s earlier poetry (*HCR* II, 30).

John Wilson, writing in 1828 under the pseudonym Christopher North, acknowledged that “in *The Excursion* [Wordsworth’s] religion is brought forward, predominantly and conspicuously... and a very high religion it often is. But is it Christianity? – No, it is not” (189). In 1842, Wilson singled out *The Wanderer* for its “utter absence of Revealed Religion, where it ought to have been all-in-all” (J. Wordsworth 26). Thinking along a similar vein as Blake, Wilson thought Wordsworth failed to distinguish nature as “the work of God and God himself” and instead presented the two on an unjustifiably equal footing, perpetuating his seeming pantheism and creating what de Selincourt calls the “heresy” that he in his final years attempted to dispel (lix). The explicit Christian references in *The Excursion* in 1814 were undoubtedly a step forward from Wordsworth’s “spirits” in earlier poems, but, in the eyes of Wordsworth’s contemporaries, they were not sufficient to make it a Christian poem, only a religious one.

II. From ‘Spirits’ to ‘God’: The Quest for Immortality

Three decades after writing his lyrics full of natural “spirits” and his obliquely Christian *Excursion*, Wordsworth had “a cedar cross nailed above his bedroom window... so that his eye could rest on it as soon as he awoke” (Gill 417). From a biographical perspective, the events that led Wordsworth to that degree of piety are many and complex, the least of which was the deaths

of most all his friends.² But from the standpoint of poetic theory, Wordsworth's leap to what has variably been called the "theory of transcendence" (Lainoff 63), "quest for permanence," and "enactment of infinity" present in his later poems (Hall 15)—his religious hope in the immortality of the human soul—was not a long one. Contrary to the beliefs of many critics, it does not reflect a complete severance from the theories espoused so long ago in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and early drafts of *The Prelude*, but rather a shift in emphasis away from the dominant ideals of the Preface—including "the real language of men" and "emotion recollected in tranquility"—towards the briefly mentioned ideal of "permanence." This transition away from the dominant philosophies in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* marks Wordsworth's true decline.

As early as the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth was concerned with the idea of poetic "permanence." Among all the theories Wordsworth expresses in the associated Preface, Owen distills "the most important element in these passages" to "the notion of permanence" (12). Wordsworth claims that his goal in the *Lyrical Ballads* was to create "a class of Poetry... well adapted to interest mankind permanently," and to do so he uses the "more permanent and... far more philosophical" language of "real men" in descriptions of "the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (*PrWI*, 120). Even though the Preface of 1815 omitted all the defining tenets espoused in the earlier Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, the goal of permanence was preserved in Wordsworth's declared effort "to give the universality and permanence of abstractions to his human beings" (*PrW III*, 35). Coleridge later defends Wordsworth on this point, writing that "rural life" was the appropriate subject of poetry because "in that condition the passions of men

² Although biographers almost universally agree that Wordsworth became more orthodox and more Christian in his later years, there is no consensus on the instigating factors behind that change. Among the cited causes include the deaths of his friends, his ever-increasing temporal distance from the liberal ideals that had incited him in pre-Revolution France, his fading relationship with the more liberal Coleridge, and the negative reviews of *The Excursion*. For more on these, and other, causes, see the biographies by Gill and Harper.

are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (*BL* 163).

The “spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion” seen in the plain retelling of Margaret’s suffering, the Pedlar’s ability to recollect that emotion from a state of tranquil hindsight, and the formative role of Margaret’s tale in his personal development—the three greatest demonstrations of poetic philosophy in *The Ruined Cottage*—are all unified under this umbrella of permanence. In the antepenultimate paragraph of *The Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth carefully preserves the quiet sorrow of Margaret’s story in her physical environment rather than in her person: Margaret’s “torturing hope” belongs to the “length of road / And... rude bench” where she waited for news from passerby (488-9) and syntactically she becomes the direct object in passive sentences where agency is given to the “wind” and “nightly damps” (483-5). When the Pedlar uses the adjective “human” to modify “tenant” in his characterization of Margaret as the “last *human* tenant of these ruined walls,” he implicitly suggests that some non-human tenant remains at the cottage. That tenant is the same “spirit of humanity” that the Pedlar steers the speaker towards an awareness of. Without this non-human tenant, there would be no story to tell about the cottage. By preserving Margaret’s decline in the “weeds, and the high spear-grass” on her cottage wall, Wordsworth gives her suffering “the quality of permanence” he praises.

In the infancy of *The Ruined Cottage*, this quality of permanence superseded Christianity as Wordsworth’s form of immortality. “Christianity had no special message for him,” writes de Selincourt; “with Coleridge’s attempt to fuse philosophy and religion he was wholly unconcerned. His philosophy, as far as he was a philosopher, *was* his religion” (lvii). The young Wordsworth wished to write poetry with a permanent appeal, poetry that would, like Margaret’s tale, be read long after his death. The theories of poetry outlined in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* were adopted as the most effective techniques for achieving poetic immortality. When

Wordsworth becomes the semiautobiographical poet in *The Prelude* and *The Wanderer*, the drive for poetic immortality remains unchanged: his “spots of time” denote the moments when he recognized the immortality in nature, and are conspicuously devoid of or marginalize the Christian God. “The Wordsworth of 1798-1804,” continues de Selincourt, “was the exultant champion of ‘man’s unconquerable mind,’” celebrating the powers and experiences that shaped a poet capable of writing this “permanent” poetry (lviii).

Wordsworth’s quest for poetic immortality was derailed when his poems, which he perceived as great, were poorly received. He published *The Excursion* in advance of *The Recluse* with the goal of earning enough money to support the continuation of the larger project, but sales were slow and criticism abounded. In 1812 Wordsworth was “convinced that he never [could] derive emolument from” his poems, but still believed they “would sooner or later make their way” (*HCR* I, 246). By 1816 that assurance of widespread respect became an expectation only of “posthumous renown” (*HCR* I, 339), and as his own creative output began to dry up, by 1826 he was neither “flattered” nor “alarmed” by his critics and admirers, having removed himself almost entirely from the question of tangible fame (*HCR* II, 39). The “theory of permanence” that undergirded his original poetic doctrine and motivated him during his years of greatest productivity no longer seemed to hold true.

Lacking the assurance of immortality or permanence for his poetry, Wordsworth’s concern in his old age became immortality for his soul, a concern that Christian theology, with its promise of eternal life, seamlessly alleviates. To find this new immortality, Wordsworth repurposed his greatest power—his imagination—and diluted the qualities that he originally believed would make his poetry permanent by adding verbose and often tangential descriptions of how God’s promise of immortality can be seen in nature. As discussed in the previous chapter,

he revises the Pedlar's biography to emphasize the visions of immortality and sideline the role of his upbringing, he loses the "real language of men" in his later poems like "On the Power of Sound," and he sacrifices his careful portrayal of physical details in favor of their symbolic implications, but in exchange he finds in Christianity the immortality his poetry no longer provided.

III. Wordsworth's Lack of Conviction in *The Ruined Cottage*, 1845

With his new desire for Christian immortality and the honor of his new office, Wordsworth in 1845 returned to *The Ruined Cottage* for a final series of revisions. Compared to his extensive reworking of *The Ruined Cottage* and his Pedlar's biography between 1797 and 1814, Wordsworth made very few changes in 1845. Most of those revisions are aesthetic, rewording or shortening sentences to ameliorate "halting lines, and... tame or diffuse expressions" that de Selincourt finds problematic in the early drafts of many of Wordsworth's poems (xliv). Thus the verbose "the / Youth, who of this service made a short essay, found that the wanderings of his thought were then / A misery to him" (W 339-42) becomes "he essayed to teach / A village-school, but wandering thoughts were then / A misery to him" (W.45 312-4). As discussed in the previous chapter, Wordsworth by 1836 had already removed his description of the Pedlar's impoverished parents and modified his descriptions of "great objects" and "observers" to lighten his emphasis on purely sensory perceptions.

If we disregard the revisions made in previous editions and minor improvements to diction and syntax, Wordsworth only made two changes to *The Wanderer* between 1814 and 1845: he reduced the specificity of the Pedlar's autobiography, as he did between the 1800 and 1814 readings of that biography, and he added an explicitly Christian focus to Margaret's tale.

The former changes are comparatively minor,³ but the six new lines in the Pedlar's reconciling conclusion significantly alter his retrospective moralization on Margaret's life:

Nor more would she have craved as due to One
 Who, in her worst distress, had ofttimes felt
 The unbounded might of prayer, and learned, with soul
 Fixed on the Cross, that consolation springs,
 From sources deeper far than deepest pain,
 For the meek Sufferer. (*W.45* 934-9)

Where before Wordsworth's Pedlar encouraged the speaker to see the "image of tranquility" that came with the suffering Margaret peacefully "sleep[ing] in the calm earth" (*W* 971-6), he now shows Margaret finding strength and solace in her God.

These lines are often read as an orthodox Christian Wordsworth rereading his older poem and, displeased with its irreconcilable focus on Margaret's seemingly purposeless and drawn-out suffering, choosing to make her anguish purposeful. However, given that these lines are the only Christian revision to *The Ruined Cottage*, and given where Wordsworth chooses to insert them, this becomes a difficult argument to justify. If Wordsworth were wholeheartedly trying to make Margaret a devout Christian whose suffering brought her closer to her God, why would he add only six lines, spoken not by or to Margaret but to the poem's speaker, and only at the end of Margaret's tale? Wordsworth chooses not to alter his characterization of Margaret: when describing the woman "who by adding love to peace / Might live on earth a life of happiness" (518-9), Wordsworth could have added a Christian quality to great effect—something as simple

³ The revisions to the Pedlar's biography do not thematically alter the importance of nature in his upbringing. Wordsworth only makes the biography less specific to a single person: for example, it is now the "growing youth," rather than the boy in his "sixth year," who departs for a shepherd's life.

as “Faith bore her up,” a line he uses in his 1835 “Epitaph”—but he instead preserves verbatim the lines he wrote fifty years previously. He could have expanded his casual afterthought, that Margaret’s children were her “best hope, next to the God in heaven,” in order to highlight just how much of a hope God was for her, but he does not. Anywhere in the two hundred lines describing Margaret’s slow dishevelment and futile hope for Robert’s return, Wordsworth could have had Margaret pray, or express faith in God, or rationalize her suffering, but he does not. He adds only six lines.

Moreover, Wordsworth places these deeply religious lines immediately after the Pedlar’s pastoral praise of the “secret spirit of humanity” that outlives Margaret. Not only does the juxtaposition of this spirit with the Christian crucifixion create a disharmonious image of two coexistent theological powers, but the tone of the inserted lines contrasts harshly with the surrounding lines, which remain as they were in 1798. Wordsworth introduces the domain of that “spirit of humanity” with images from nature—the “plants, and weeds, and flowers, / And silent overgrowings” of Margaret’s cottage” (*W.45* 930-1)—because nature, not God, was Wordsworth’s early religion. The polysyndeton with “and” in these lines makes nature a fluid and unquantifiable idea, capable of constant change or expansion. These pastoral lines feed directly into the rigid and more uncompromising insertion, where there is only “One” who claims the name of God, for whom worship requires being “fixed” on the very specific image of the Cross (934, 937). “Unbounded might” replaces the pastoral feeling of contentment or peace. Without any satisfactory transition, we return after the insertion to the “calm earth,” “peace,” “weeds,” “spear-grass,” “mist,” and “silent rain-drops” that set the tone at Margaret’s cottage (941-4). Given the awkwardness of Wordsworth’s six-line insertion in the unchanged context of his poem, it is difficult to believe Wordsworth was invested in Margaret’s piety. Instead,

sensitive to longstanding criticism of *The Ruined Cottage* and to his new public office, he does just enough to “lull asleep the watchful eye of the heresy-hunter” (de Selincourt lix).

Even more telling is the absence of several manuscript copies of these lines. Wordsworth wrote and rewrote *The Ruined Cottage* several times between 1797 and 1806, and each of those manuscripts contains countless editorial marks, many of which are observed in later drafts and many of which are not. Some scenes, like Margaret finding the coins Robert leaves for her, are altered in every single draft from 1797 to 1814. In Wordsworth’s extensive manuscript history for *The Ruined Cottage* we find a craftsman “toil[ing] with unremitting patience at every detail of his work” (de Selincourt xliii). No such labor accompanied these six lines: they were absent from the 1836 edition of *The Excursion*, written in the margin of MS. 1836/45 without any contemporaneous corrections or second attempts, and then published as they are in the 1845 edition. Nowhere else in *The Ruined Cottage* in MS. 1836/45 does Wordsworth appear to contemplate inserting religious lines, and his revisions are not described in the journals of any of his contemporaries. His Christian ending for Margaret, as it appears in his manuscripts, seems casually tossed in, consistent with the hypothesis that he was attempting to avoid criticism rather than change the theology underpinning his poem.

Arguments defending Wordsworth’s deepening religious sympathies in *The Excursion* invariably point to Ellen’s tale in book 6, which “vies with that of Margaret for the highest critical approbation of any part of *The Excursion*” (Lyon 50). Ellen’s tale, like Margaret’s, begins in *The Excursion* at the site of her tragedy: the Pastor shows the Pedlar and the Solitary the graves of an “Infant” and his “Mother” before narrating the events that led to the observed outcome. Seduced and impregnated by a man who soon abandons her, “hapless Ellen” chooses to return to her widowed mother’s home to bear and raise her infant son. To earn money Ellen

becomes a foster-mother, but the parents “whose Infant she was bound to nurse / Forbade her all communion with her own” (978-9). While Ellen is thus employed, her infant dies from fever, leaving her to mourn his loss until she, too, is buried in the churchyard. The tales of both Margaret and Ellen, in their focus on the tragic decline of a female character who loses both a lover and a child, are remarkably similar.

What separates Ellen’s tale from Margaret’s in 1845 is its complete perfusion of unquestionably Christian imagery. At the tale’s outset, the Pastor calls the dead infant “a tender Lamb / ... / Screened by its Parent,” using the Biblical image of a pure or innocent lamb for the unfortunate child (6.806-7). Ellen, a “weeping” and later a “rueful Magdalene,” listens to a thrush singing and hears “one of God’s simple children” (6.832, 900, 1008). After her child dies, Ellen declines much like Margaret—her “bodily frame was wasted day by day” (1045)—but her suffering, unlike Margaret’s, has a purpose, leading ultimately to religious consolation. As she wastes away, Ellen “ever raise[s] to Heaven a streaming eye” and “brood[s] feelingly / On her own unworthiness” in the eyes of God (1012, 1049-50). To the Pastor she says “he who afflicts me knows what I can bear / And, when I fail, and can endure no more, / Will mercifully take me to himself” (1066-8). In these lines, which had been a part of Ellen’s tale since its composition in 1814, we see the same mood Wordsworth retroactively inserts into Margaret’s tale in 1845: the sufferer finds consolation for her suffering in her assurance of God’s benevolence. The pious references to God occur throughout Ellen’s tale, however, characterizing her from beginning to end, whereas the pious references to Margaret are added only in one discrete section, well after Margaret has been introduced and characterized.

Given the opportunity to put a Christian spin on Margaret’s tale, why would Wordsworth not change Margaret to make her piety on par with Ellen’s? One of the most telling, and most

often-overlooked, answers to that question lies with the narrators of the two tales. Ellen's story is narrated by a Pastor, the titular character of the fifth book of *The Excursion*. It would seem unsurprising if the character who, by title, represents God, tells stories in which he emphasizes or even exaggerates the more faithful or pious qualities of his subjects. Seventeen of the twenty-two short stories within the framework of *The Excursion* are narrated by this same Pastor (Lyon 46), the vast majority of which obliquely reference God. The setting of one story is "the quarter whence the Lord of light, / Of life, of love, and gladness, doth dispense / His beams" (5.542-4), and the protagonist of another is rebuked for succumbing to the influences of "the Fiend / Who dictates and inspires illusive feats, / For knavish purposes" (6.363-5). Only two of these twenty-two stories are narrated by the Pedlar—Margaret's tale and the Solitary's. In the former, the only powerfully Christian lines are those added in 1845, and in the latter, the Pedlar acknowledges that the Solitary has lost his faith, but does not condemn him for it. If we read the Pedlar as Wordsworth's autobiographical self, an interpretation almost impossible to avoid, the absence of Christianity in Margaret's tale becomes a reflection of Wordsworth's character, just as the Christianity in Ellen's is a reflection of the Pastor's. The six lines so casually, almost carelessly, inserted into the Pedlar's reconciling conclusion placate Wordsworth's contemporaries, but the Pedlar's moral position—and, by association, Wordsworth's—remains otherwise unchanged from the belief in Margaret's surviving "secret spirit" of kindness that Wordsworth left in 1836.

IV. Epilogue: Fifty Years of *The Ruined Cottage*

That Wordsworth considered himself a Christian in his final years is undeniable; his surviving friends attested to this and biographers have no doubts. But given the opportunity to make Margaret, a character who had existed longer in his poetry than his own self in *The Prelude*, as thoroughly a Christian as he was, Wordsworth chose not to. In the more than fifty

years that Wordsworth had spent carefully revising *The Ruined Cottage*, he dramatically changed the role of his Pedlar, first inserting him into a tale from which he was absent in 1797, then adding a 450-line biography that made the poem more about his formative experiences than about Margaret's decline, and later reshaping that biography to display the transcendent power of the imagination to find immortality. Margaret's story, and the tragedy narrated in the poem's oldest lines, barely changed during those fifty years; "five tedious years" became "nine," "when a dog passed by" became "if," "that arbour" became "yon arbour," "seest thou" became "you see," and one line about Robert was removed, but otherwise the 47 lines of the antepenultimate paragraph are the same lines Wordsworth wrote in 1797 and sent to Cottle in 1798. Even at the end of his life, Wordsworth was unwilling to change the character of the woman who had come so far with him.

To do so would have been to renege on the theories he had established in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and carried with him, in some form or another, all the way to 1850. The tenets of the Preface that were closest to his heart changed with time, and his imagination's search for immortality took him away from "the real language of men" in the 1830s, but his desire to portray a sincere response to human suffering was maintained. "Had Margaret been shown from the first as finding religious consolation," observes J. Wordsworth, "there could have been no tragedy. *The Ruined Cottage* would have been just another touching example of faith, like Ellen's story in *Excursion* Book VI" (27). As it was originally told, Margaret's tale was equally amenable to Wordsworth's early theory and to his autobiographical mode: it exemplifies the recollection of poignant emotion in a state of later tranquility, and, with a few minor revisions in 1814 that dampen that poignancy, it becomes a display of how those poignant moments produce a poet capable of capturing them in verse. His hesitation to change Margaret's tale to make her

even slightly more Christian either reveals a lack of desire to make any revisions at all, which is doubtful given the fervor with which he revised other works, or, more likely, it reveals Wordsworth's inability to further separate himself from the poetic doctrines he had championed decades previously. A comprehensive introduction of Christianity into Margaret's character would have required completely reshaping her tale. Wordsworth was unwilling to do so.

Wordsworth's inferred desire to preserve Margaret's story, even while he effectively succumbed to peer pressure and added those six lines, raises difficult questions about the status of his poetic theories when he died. Something about Margaret's tale still held enough poetic allure, even for the seventy-year-old Wordsworth, to not want to change it, even as *The Prelude* was being subjected to a final round of far more exhaustive revisions. Perhaps Wordsworth had come full circle and once again appreciated the tranquil and retrospective contemplation of suffering featured in his earliest drafts of *The Ruined Cottage*, but perhaps he preferred *The Excursion*'s emphasis on how his Pedlar developed into the man capable of narrating that contemplation, or even the later-yet emphasis on how that contemplative power came to assure him, in some capacity, of his immortality.

There is little way of knowing what quality of Margaret's tale Wordsworth was looking back on when he found himself unwilling or able to change it in 1845, but regardless of the qualities he saw, he had a great distance to look back across. De Selincourt captures the arc of Wordsworth's career in his observation that "no man is the same at seventy years of age as he was at thirty-five, and Wordsworth, perhaps, changed more than the most of us; for though, like others, he descended into the vale of years, he descended from far more glorious heights" (li). That the poetry of Wordsworth's final years lacks the unembellished emotional poignancy for which he is known in his earliest years, I do not deny, but to condense the story of his career into

mutually exclusive periods of fruitfulness and decline is to ignore the complexities underscoring that change, and perhaps more egregiously, to ignore implications, like those presented in this chapter, that part of what is called Wordsworth's "decline" was due not to any failure on Wordsworth's part but to outside pressures that were demanding changes that are only today viewed as undesirable. In 1830 Wordsworth wrote to Alexander Dyce "you know what importance I attach to following strictly the last copy of the text of an author" (*L.Y.* II, 236); anthologists in that respect have hardly followed Wordsworth's wishes, and by doing so they have omitted some of the central moments in the career of one of England's best-known poets.

The Ruined Cottage, as we read it in anthologies today, is the tragic story of a young country woman who spends the final decade of her life slowly wasting away, tortured by the enduring hope that one day her husband will return to her. But on a much larger scale *The Ruined Cottage* is the story of its storyteller—more than fifty years of Wordsworth's career preserved in a series of over a dozen meticulously revisited manuscripts. It is a far more complicated story than Wordsworth scholars advertise, because it is far more than the story of a once-revolutionary poet whose theories and goals outpaced his abilities and led to his decline. It is the story of a man whose seminal poetic theories shaped the course of English Romanticism, who would later be condemned, at times rightly and at times wrongly, for verbosity and obliqueness and atheistic tendencies, but who would eventually enjoy the poetic immortality he had once been convinced he would never find.

APPENDIX

I. WILLIAM TAYLOR'S TRANSLATION OF GOETHE, *DER WANDRER*
as provided in Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity*

Wanderer

- 1 God bless you, woman, and the sucking child
Upon your bosom! Here I'll sit awhile
Against the rock, and at the elm-tree's foot
Lay down the burden that has wearied me.

Woman

- 5 What business brings you up these sandy paths
During the heat of day? Have you brought toys,
Or other ware, from town to sell i'th'country?
You seem to smile, good stranger, at my question.

Wanderer

- I bring no city-wares about for sale.
10 The evening's very sultry. I'm athirst.
Show me, good woman, where you draw your water.

Woman

Here, up these steps of rock, athwart the thicket.
Do you go first: you'll soon be at the hut
That I inhabit. We've a spring hard by it.

Wanderer

- 15 Traces of man's arranging hand are these!
Thine--'twas not liberal Nature, to unite
These blocks of marble thus--'

Woman

A little further—

Wanderer

A mossy architrave! Almighty genius!
Even upon stone canst thou imprint thy seal.

Woman

A little higher yet—

Wanderer

- 20 On an inscription
 I've set a daring foot! TO VENUS AND—
 Ye are effac'd, are wander'd hence, companions,
 Who should have witness'd to posterity
 Your master's warm devotion.

Woman

- Do these stones
 25 Surprise you, stranger? Yonder, by my hut,
 Are many more such stones.

Wanderer

 Where, show me where?

Woman

There, to the left-hand, as you quit the coppice.
 See—here they are.

Wanderer

Ye Muses and ye Graces!

Woman

This is my hut.

Wanderer

 The ruins of a temple!

Woman

- 30 The spring beside it furnishes our water.

Wanderer

Thou hover'st, ever-glowing, o'er they grave,
 Immortal Genius—while thy masterpiece
 Crumbles upon thee.

Woman

 Stay, I'll fetch a cup.

Wanderer

- Your slender forms divine the ivy girds,
 35 Ye twin-born columns, who still lift on high
 A sculptur'd front amid surrounding ruin:

And, like thy sisters, thou too, lonely shaft;
 Veiling with dusky moss thy sacred head,
 Look'st down in mournful majesty upon
 40 The broken fall'n companions at thy feet;
 They lie with rubbish soil'd, by briars shaded,
 The tall grass waving o'er their prostrate forms:
 O Nature! canst thou thus appreciate
 Thy masterpiece's masterpiece? destroy,
 45 And sow with thistles thine own sanctuary?

Woman

My boy is fast asleep. Hold him a minute,
 And wait beneath the poplar's cooling shade
 While I fetch water. Slumber on, my darling.

Wanderer

How soft his sleep whom heavenly health imbathes!
 50 Blest infant—born amid antiquity's
 Sacred remains—on thee her spirit rest!
 Whom that environs he in godlike bliss
 Each hour enjoys. Unfold, thou swelling gem,
 Under the mild beam of a vernal sun
 55 Outshining all they fellows; and, whene'er
 The silken husk of blossoms falls, appear
 A blooming fruit, and ripen to the summer.

Woman

God bless him, does he sleep? I have but this,
 A homely crust to offer you to eat
 With the cool draught I bring.

Wanderer

60 I thank you much.
 How green and lively look the plants about us!

Woman

Ere long my husband will return from labor,
 Stay and partake with us our evening loaf.

Wanderer

'Tis here you dwell?

Woman

Yes, in these very walls.

- 65 My father built our cottage up himself,
Of tiles and stones he found among the ruins;
Here we all dwelt. He gave me to a ploughman,
And died within our arms. Hope of my life,
My darling, see how playful 'tis; he smiles.

Wanderer

- 70 All bounteous Nature, ever teeming mother,
Thou hast created all unto enjoyment;
Like a good furnish'd all thy children
With one inheritance--a hut a home.
High on the architrave the swallow builds,
75 Unconscious of the beauties she beclays;
The golden bud with webs the grub surrounds,
To form a winter dwelling for her offspring:
And thou, O Man, between antiquity's
Sublimest remnants patchest up a cot—
80 Art happy among tombs. Farewell, kind woman

Woman

You will not stay?

Wanderer .

God bless you and your child!

Woman

Good journey to you.

Wanderer

Whither leads the road
Across yon mountain?

Woman

That's the way to Cuma.

Wanderer

How far may't be?

Woman

About three miles. Farewell!

Wanderer

- 85 Nature, be thou conductress of my way,
 Guide the unusual path that I have chosen
 Among the hallow'd graves of mighty dead,
 And mouldering monuments of ages gone;
 Then to a home direct thy wanderer's step, so
 90 To some asylum, from the north wind safe,
 And with a platane grove to shade the noon,
 Where, when his evening steps the hut revisit,
 A wife like this may clasp him in her arms,
 The nursling smiling at her happy breast.

II. ROBERT SOUTHEY, ENGLISH ECLOGUE VI: "THE RUINED COTTAGE" (1799)

as printed in the collected works of Robert Southey

- 1 Aye Charles! I knew that this would fix thine eye,
 This woodbine wreathing round the broken porch,
 Its leaves just withering, yet one autumn flower
 Still fresh and fragrant; and yon holly-hock
 5 That thro' the creeping weeds and nettles tall
 Peers taller, and uplifts its column'd stem
 Bright with the broad rose-blossoms. I have seen
 Many a fallen convent reverend in decay,
 And many a time have trod the castle courts
 10 And grass-green halls, yet never did they strike
 Home to the heart such melancholy thoughts
 As this poor cottage. Look, its little hatch
 Fleeced with that grey and wintry moss; the roof
 Part mouldered in, the rest o'ergrown with weeds,
 15 House-leek and long thin grass and greener moss;
 So Nature wars with all the works of man,
 And, like himself, reduces back to earth
 His perishable piles.

I led thee here

- 20 Charles, not without design; for this hath been
 My favourite walk even since I was a boy;
 And I remember Charles, this ruin here,
 The neatest comfortable dwelling place!
 That when I read in those dear books that first
 25 Woke in my heart the love of poesy,
 How with the villagers Erminia dwelt,
 And Calidore for a fair shepherdess

Forgot his quest to learn the shepherd's lore;
 My fancy drew from this the little hut
 30 Where that poor princess wept her hopeless love,
 Or where the gentle Calidore at eve
 Led Pastorella home. There was not then
 A weed where all these nettles overtop
 The garden wall; but sweet-briar, scenting sweet
 35 The morning air, rosemary and marjoram,
 All wholesome herbs; and then, that woodbine wreath'd
 So lavishly around the pillared porch
 Its fragrant flowers, that when I past this way,
 After a truant absence hastening home,
 40 I could not chuse but pass with slacken'd speed
 By that delightful fragrance. Sadly changed
 Is this poor cottage! and its dwellers, Charles!—
 Theirs is a simple melancholy tale,
 There's scarce a village but can fellow it,
 45 And yet methinks it will not weary thee,
 And should not be untold.

A widow woman
 Dwelt with her daughter here; just above want,
 She lived on some small pittance that sufficed,
 50 In better times, the needful calls of life,
 Not without comfort. I remember her
 Sitting at evening in that open door way
 And spinning in the sun; methinks I see her
 Raising her eyes and dark-rimm'd spectacles
 55 To see the passer by, yet ceasing not
 To twirl her lengthening thread. Or in the garden
 On some dry summer evening, walking round
 To view her flowers, and pointing, as she lean'd
 Upon the ivory handle of her stick,
 60 To some carnation whose o'erheavy head
 Needed support, while with the watering-pot
 Joanna followed, and refresh'd and trimm'd
 The drooping plant; Joanna, her dear child,
 As lovely and as happy then as youth
 65 And innocence could make her.

Charles! It seems
 As tho' I were a boy again, and all
 The mediate years with their vicissitudes

A half-forgotten dream. I see the Maid
 70 So comely in her Sunday dress! her hair,
 Her bright brown hair, wreath'd in contracting curls,
 And then her cheek! it was a red and white
 That made the delicate hues of art look loathsome.
 The countrymen who on their way to church
 75 Were leaning o'er the bridge, loitering to hear
 The bell's last summons, and in idleness
 Watching the stream below, would all look up
 When she pass'd by. And her old Mother, Charles!
 When I have heard some erring infidel
 80 Speak of our faith as of a gloomy creed,
 Inspiring fear and boding wretchedness,
 Her figure has recurr'd; for she did love
 The sabbath-day, and many a time has cross'd
 These fields in rain and thro' the winter snows,
 85 When I, a graceless boy, wishing myself
 By the fire-side, have wondered why she came
 Who might have sate at home.

One only care
 Hung on her aged spirit. For herself,
 90 Her path was plain before her, and the close
 Of her long journey near. But then her child
 Soon to be left alone in this bad world,—
 That was a thought that many a winter night
 Had kept her sleepless: and when prudent love
 95 In something better than a servant's state
 Had placed her well at last, it was a pang
 Like parting life to part with her dear girl.

One summer, Charles, when at the holydays
 Return'd from school, I visited again
 100 My old accustomed walks, and found in them
 A joy almost like meeting an old friend,
 I saw the cottage empty, and the weeds
 Already crowding the neglected flowers.
 Joanna by a villain's wiles seduced
 105 Had played the wanton, and that blow had reach'd
 Her mother's heart. She did not suffer long,
 Her age was feeble, and the heavy blow
 Brought her grey hairs with sorrow to the grave.

I pass this ruin'd dwelling oftentimes
 110 And think of other days. It wakes in me
 A transient sadness, but the feelings Charles
 That ever with these recollections rise,
 I trust in God they will not pass away.

III. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, "INCIPIENT MADNESS"

"Incipient Madness" derives from discarded material from *The Ruined Cottage* MS. A. It originally would have been inserted near lines 111-2 of the MS. D reading text, as an expansion on "the wandering heifer and the Potter's ass."

1 I crossed the dreary moor
 In the clear moonlight: when I reached the hut
 I entered in, but all was still and dark,
 Only within the ruin I beheld
 5 At a small distance, on the dusky ground
 A broken pane which glittered in the moon
 And seemed akin to life. There is a mood
 A settled temper of the heart, when grief,
 Become an instinct, fastening on all things
 10 That promise food, doth like a sucking babe
 Create it where it is not. From this time
 I found my sickly heart had tied itself
 Even to this speck of glass. It could produce
 A feeling as of absence []
 15 [] on the moment when my sight
 Should feed on it again. Many a long month
 Confirm'd this strange incontinence; my eye
 Did every evening measure the moon's height
 And forth I went soon as her yellow beams
 20 Could overtop the elm-trees. O'er the heath
 I went, I reach'd the cottage, and I found
 Still undisturb'd and glittering in its place
 That speck of glass more precious to my soul
 Than was the moon in heaven. Another time
 25 The winds of Autumn drove me o'er the heath
 One gloomy evening: by the storm compelled
 The poor man's horse that feeds along the lanes
 Had hither come among these fractured walls
 To weather out the night; and as I passed
 30 While restlessly he turned from the fierce wind
 And from the open sky, I heard, within,
 The iron links with which his feet were clogged
 Mix their dull clanking with the heavy noise

IV. MANUSCRIPT AND PRINT VERSIONS OF "YEW-TREES"

from the Cornell Wordsworth series

Manuscript (1803-7)

--That vast eugh-tree, pride of Lorton Vale
 Which to this day stands single in the midst
 Of its own darkness as it stood of yore;
 Nor those fraternal four in Borrowdale
 Joined in one solemn and capacious grove;
 Huge trunks, and each particular trunk a mass
 Of intertwined fibers serpentine
 Upcoiling and inveterately convolv'd,--
 Nor uninform'd with phantasy, and looks
 That threaten the profane, a pillar'd shade
 On whose [] floor, beneath whose sable roof
 Of boughs, as if for festal purpose, decked
 With unrejoicing berries, ghostly shapes
 May meet at noontide; Fear, and trembling Hope
 Silence, and Foresight, Death the skeleton
 And Time the shadow,--there to celebrate,
 As in a natural temple scattered o'er
 With altars undisturbed of mossy stone,
 United worship; or in mute repose
 To lie, and listen to the mountain flood
 Murmuring from Glaramara's inmost caves--
 Pass not the place unnoticed--ye will say
 That Mona's druid oaks composed a fane
 Less awful than this grove, as Earth so long
 On its unwearied bosom has sustain'd
 The decaying pile, as drouth and frost,
 The fires of heaven, have spared it, and the storms,
 So in its hallowed uses may it stand
 Forever spared by Man!

Published Text (1815)

1 There is a Yew-tree, pride of Lorton Vale,
 Which to this day stands single, in the midst
 Of its own darkness, as it stood of yore,
 Not loth to furnish weapons for the Bands
 5 Of Umfraville or Percy ere they marched
 To Scotland's Heaths; or Those that crossed the sea
 And drew their sounding bows at Azincour,
 Perhaps at earlier Crecy, or Poitiers.
 Of vast circumference and gloom profound
 10 This solitary Tree!--a living thing
 Produced too slowly ever to decay;
 Of form and aspect too magnificent
 To be destroyed. But worthier still of note
 Are those fraternal Four of Borrowdale,
 15 Joined in one solemn and capacious grove;
 Huge trunks!--and each particular trunk a growth
 Of intertwined fibres serpentine
 Up-coiling, and inveterately convolved,--
 Nor uninformed with Phantasy, and looks
 20 That threaten the profane;--a pillared shade,
 Upon whose grassless floor of red-brown hue,
 By sheddings from the pining umbrage tinged
 Perennially--beneath whose sable roof
 Of boughs, as if for festal purpose, decked
 25 With unrejoicing berries, ghostly Shapes
 May meet at noontide--Fear and trembling Hope,
 Silence and Foresight--Death the Skeleton
 And Time the Shadow;--there to celebrate,
 As in a natural temple scattered o'er
 30 With altars undisturbed of mossy stone,
 United worship; or in mute repose
 To lie, and listen to the mountain flood
 Murmuring from Glaramara's inmost caves.

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