

The Ruined Cottage

MARY MOORMAN

TO EXPLORE a long poem in depth is perhaps an undertaking which many of us would like to pursue if we had the knowledge and all the imaginative sympathy necessary for such a task. In this study¹ Mr Jonathan Wordsworth, by tracing in detail the origins, the history, the vicissitudes (to use a word that Wordsworth favoured) and the poetic quality of Wordsworth's first long blank verse poem, vividly illuminates the thinking, and still more the feeling, of William Wordsworth between the ages of 27 and 30. His poetry passed in the course of one year (1796-7) from the sensationalism and gloom of *The Borderers*, through the still gloomy but less sensational *Lines left upon the Seat of a Yew-Tree*, to *The Ruined Cottage* — the 'Story of Margaret', which is not gloomy at all, but sad with a tender and almost silent sadness — and its curiously different sequel or second part, which the Wordsworths always called *The Pedlar*, although no MS. gives it that title.

The Ruined Cottage has never before been printed in full from the MS. which Mr Wordsworth uses, though a similar, slightly earlier text was printed by Helen Darbishire in an Appendix to her edition of *The Excursion* in 1949. The present text, fair-copied by Dorothy in 1799 or perhaps early 1800, is given because, says Mr Wordsworth, it is 'the best balanced and most coherent surviving version'. This is the version of which a good deal was read to Coleridge on his arrival at Racedown in June 1797, and a good deal more to Lamb a month later at Stowey. It was completed in the following January/March 1798, at Alfoxden, and the sequel *The Pedlar* was written then also. But between *The*

¹ *The Music of Humanity. A Critical Study of Wordsworth's Ruined Cottage, incorporating texts from a manuscript of 1799-1800.* By Jonathan Wordsworth. Nelson. 70s. od.

Ruined Cottage and *The Pedlar* Wordsworth had entered an entirely different poetic mood — the mood in which his own responses to Nature, and particularly the memories of his childhood experiences became all-important to him, and he began to use them as material for his poetry. *The Pedlar* is thus a poem utterly different in spirit from *The Ruined Cottage*; it is full of joy and ecstasy, while the *Cottage* is a study of sorrow. *The Pedlar* is, in effect, an early version of the first books of *The Prelude*, and it is not therefore surprising that Wordsworth later transferred whole passages to that poem. Mr Wordsworth shows how the influence of Coleridge at this point helped Wordsworth to explore his own spiritual experience, although, having once '[seen] One Life and felt that it was Joy', he did not need, as Coleridge did, to philosophize about it.

The Ruined Cottage, read with Mr Wordsworth's wise expert guidance, is seen to be a great and tender poem in its own right — we are too apt to think of it as *The Excursion*, Book 1. Perhaps the most interesting and moving part of his study is the section called 'Symbols and Relationships', in which he shows how Margaret's gradual deterioration through sorrow and disappointment is beautifully and subtly symbolized by the slow decay of her cottage and her garden. These are described by the Pedlar in each account he gives the narrator of his five successive visits to the spot, until the last one, after Margaret's death, calls forth the wonderful conclusion, in which the beauty of the silent, derelict place makes 'ruin and change' appear 'an idle dream that could not live / Where meditation was', and he, turning away, 'walked along [his] road in happiness'. In its own idiom, Mr Wordsworth thinks, *The Ruined Cottage* is perhaps as great as are *The Prelude* and the *Ode* in theirs. And it harmonizes perfectly with the other poetry of that amazing spring of 1798, which Mr Wordsworth characterizes as 'a total vision of love'. *The Idiot Boy*, *The Ruined Cottage*, *We are Seven*, *The Last of the Flock*, are all poems whose concern is human love — of mother for child, wife for husband, sister for brother, shepherd for sheep. It is a pity that Wordsworth did not leave *The Ruined Cottage* alone, as he left his shorter poems. It is a story of sadness quite untempered, as Mr Wordsworth shows, by any religious hope. The hope is there, but it is a human one; the hope of her husband's return. But in the first book of

The Excursion we find an entirely different slant given to Margaret's sorrow. She is there

One

Who, in her worst distress, had ofttimes felt
The unbounded might of prayer.

Wordsworth made that emendation only in 1845. But long before that — as early as the spring of 1802 — he had begun to spoil the original simplicity and restraint of the poem by introducing elaborations and explanations. There were times when Wordsworth suffered from an excessive desire to make his meaning clearer at the expense both of his finer feelings and of his poetic ear.

Landscape and Unseen Rider

Where a cartwheel props a listing gate
I pause to listen, but little moves.
Am I the only expectant watcher?
By coppice backing chock-a-block cottages
fretful shadows are tethered in clumps.
Inopportune thoughts engage my gaze
like straw caught in grinning sprockets.
Not a lot of smoking chimney-pots.
The clock spire topping a corner shop
seems forgotten, or never looked at.
What's to occupy a sleepy populace?
No exotic rider appears. Copybook
sheep keep cropping clover. Cocked ears
detect inconstant echoes. I ought
to get back, but pick up and pocket
a worn chunk of mock luck as I walk on.

W. PRICE TURNER