WORDS WORTH'S
VAGRANT MUSE

Poetry, Poverty and Power

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Wayne State University Press Detroit
The Discourse on Poverty and the Agrarian Idyll in Late Eighteenth-Century England

It was a sweet view—sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive.

Jane Austen, Emma

Economic and social historians generally agree that the rise of population and the massive redistribution of land through private acquisition and enclosure between 1650 and 1800 took a heavy toll on the customary relations of production in the English countryside, largely to the detriment of those at the bottom two tiers of the classical triad of landlord, tenant farmer and landless wage earner making up the social landscape of rural England. Not that such loss was new to the late eighteenth century. According to Alan Armstrong’s Farmworkers in England and Wales, recent research suggests that the major period of decline for tenant farmers in general took place between 1660 and 1760, when agricultural and land prices were low (34). During the reign of George III, when Parliamentary acts of enclosure were extensive (some 3,724 acts of enclosure between 1760–1829), rising prices helped to offset losses so that “dispossessed small farmers probably did not greatly augment the numbers competing for wage-paid employment in the agricultural sector” (35).

While this research usefully tempers the idealized view of early social historians such as the Hammonds, we must not let economic analysis alone serve as a measure of social and cultural perceptions and feelings. Armstrong concedes that wages were down in the latter half of the eighteenth century and that the experience and memory of farm laborers during this time would have led them to compare their lot unfavorably to the comparative “golden age” of their grandfathers (33). The recorded personal observations of those affected by change in rural England often belie the sweeping observations and statistical generalizations of economic history. Thus, as Armstrong observes, Samuel Lewthwaite of Cumberland could blame the enclosure of Skelton Common in 1770 and the consequent “destruction” of the commoners for a lack of
increase in population; and Arthur Young, one of the foremost observers of agricultural life in England during this period, would complain in a letter of 12 June 1786 that "in many cases the poor had unquestionably been injured" (qtd. in Armstrong 37). As Dorothy Marshall observes in Industrial England, even the simplest changes could have considerable psychological impact upon those who saw outside forces transforming their way of life: "For many the shock of seeing the old landmarks and the old practices disappear was psychological rather than material . . ." (72). Losing the ability to keep "a pig, a few hens" or the right to collect wood from the commons, however immaterial from our point of view, would have "caused bitter resentment" among those who relied upon the commons to supplement their meager subsistence (73). Thus, if the many people between the ranks of tenant farmer and landless wage earner were not completely "swept away" in the force of economic and social change, as W. A. Armstrong would have it (88), the combined forces of population growth, loss of land, demand for wage labor and increasing prices nonetheless had a marked impact upon the lives of those at the margins. In Peter Mathias's cautious formulation, these forces "put great pressure on the small proprietors of land, the parishman and those lower down the social structure in the countryside" (55).

Accompanying this extensive transformation of the socio-economic landscape of rural England was an equally extensive transformation of the habitus and sense of identity of those who occupied that landscape. Torn loose from the moral economies of agrarian society and assimilating values and everyday practices amenable to the new economic structure, those who lived and worked in the countryside struggled to adopt and adapt to new practical demands. In "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," Thompson explains how the gentry became increasingly dependent upon a theatrics of power, as they withdrew from their customary and paternal responsibilities toward their tenants and laborers. As flat wages replaced such non-monetary perquisites, "economic rationalization nibbled (and had long been nibbling) through the bonds of paternalism" (384–85). While some gains were made in the relative independence of the laborers that such rationalization brought about, as Thompson notes, much of that independence amounted to little more than a new precariousness and uncertainty about their maintenance and subsistence (386).

Those who could not find adequate wage labor to substitute for their loss of customary tenant rights often found themselves among the growing ranks of rural or urban poor, many of whom turned to their parishes for support. Demanding more money for support of its poor, each parish had to increase the burden upon its ratepayers. This heightened demand led to a proliferation of proposals for changes in the management and delivery of poor relief, still fundamentally structured by the Elizabethan Poor Law, which had been variously amended since its inception in acts passed from 1597 to 1601. No one, it seems, could escape the problem of poverty, leading the author of A Compendium of the Laws Respecting the Poor (1803) to declare that the nexus of poverty and the Poor Laws, "from the nature of the subject, affects in greater or smaller degree, almost every member of the community" (1).

As social and economic relations changed, so too did the cultural practices and myths that had supported the older system. From roughly 1760 onward, we can discern what Clifford Geertz calls a "burry of semiotic activity" that erupts when major incongruities develop between social practices and the master narratives or discourses that naturalize or legitimate those practices. In the Interpretation of Cultures Geertz recognizes that in "these very discontinuities . . . we shall find some of the primary driving forces in change" (144). Burke's England serves as his example of a moment when the "hallowed opinions and rules of life come into question" and "the search for systematic ideologi- cal formulations, either to reinforce them or to replace them, flourishes" (218). In the various works that support, challenge, ignore or set up alternatives to reform the Poor Laws, one sees a proliferation of narratives about poverty and charity, many of which seem to be out of joint with the actual charges taking place. Confronted with new social and economic practices, some writers and artists sympathetic to the agricultural poor protested such changes in a reactionary insistence upon the integrity of the old ways; others more accepting of change attempted a dialectical adaptation or synthesis of the old to the new; while others, more rarely, introduced a new way of seeing and speaking about the rural countryside and its relations of production. The debates over poor relief, proposals for social reform, theories of political economy and population, and paintings and poetry about the rustic poor fall with great variety along this continuum between ideology and utopia, between situationally incongruent positions that either lag behind or anticipate social change (Manshein 203). More often than not, however, as in the case of William Godwin, Thomas Gainsborough and William Wordsworth, to name but a few notable examples, ideological and utopian positions are present together in a kind of unstable relationship in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century discourse on poverty.

For purposes of this analysis, we can isolate two major discursive strategies, both embedded in the discourse on poverty and the overlapping "agrarian idyll," that produce this tension between ideology and utopia. The first, a strategy of containment rooted in the aristocratic conventions of the pastoral and the geoirc, involves a "rustification" of poverty, a displacement of poverty into a scriptural space that attenuates its shock and violence. The second, a strategy of normalization rooted in middle-class conventions of capitalism and industry, involves the writing of values, like thrift, patience and industriousness, onto the working-class body. The cost of these strategies, however, was a blurring of social
boundaries. As agricultural labor violates the sacred oium of the aristocratic pastoral, the conventions separating the leisureed from the laboring orders begin to blur; as the poor appropriate thrift and industriousness as positive values, confusion similarly arises about what separates the "middling" from the "lower" orders. Thus in the discourse on poverty in the late eighteenth century, the center and periphery marked out by conventional poetic and social discourses collapse; distinctions blur as a new scriptural economy keeps pace with the new moral and industrial economy.

In the multitude of works directly or indirectly concerned with poverty, writers from William Cowper and George Crabbe to Anna Barbauld and Hannah More drew attention to, but at the same maintained their distance from, the poor. As literacy grew among the working poor, a morality industry emerged in Britain that attempted to foster better social relations among the classes without disturbing the "subordination of the ranks." Under the cloak of a socially integrating benevolence and sympathy, many of these works enjoined the poor to become, in Burke's words, "satisfied, laborious and obedient" and to recognize "that happiness that is to be found by virtue in all conditions" (Refections 124). While certain groups emerged specifically to address the issue of morality for the poor—such as the Sunday School Society (1785), the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor (1796), and the National Society (1809)—and while there was considerable disagreement over how, and how far, to educate the poor and relieve their suffering, even the most radical of reformers of the Poor Laws did not escape a paternalistic sense of superiority over the "lower orders." Although Evangelical reformers such as Richard and Maria Edgeworth, Hannah More and Sarah Trimmer display their paternalism most blatantly and tendentiously, even radical reformers such as Joseph Priestley, Richard Price, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft display a sort of unwitting acceptance of, and satisfaction with, the subordination of the poor. With the more conservative Evangelicals, radicals and reformers alike submit to the prescriptive and condescending assumptions about the relations of production implicit in the discourse on poverty.

The debate over literacy that gained frequency after 1750, when the need for a better educated, minimally literate, working class became evident, offers a particularly revealing site from which to excavate both the features and the ideological limitations of the discourse on poverty governing the scriptural possibilities of both reactionaries and reformers. From 1750 through the early nineteenth century, lay and clerical philanthropists founded numerous societies and schools, primarily to educate the working classes in basic literacy and to inculcate in them those Christian values that would promote discipline and the habits of industriousness, self help and deference to authority—both religious and secular. There was even a proposal in Dr. Townsend's The Poor Man's Moralist (1799) to engrave and paint moral slogans on the drinking jugs, saucers, handkerchiefs and other everyday items used by the working classes in order to deter the "deprivity" of the poor and to remind them of their social station. As the Anti-Jacobin Review (1808) noted in its enthusiastic review of the fourth edition of Townsend's work, this simple method of saturating the working-class mind with useful information would effect a symptomatic cure of the "ill of poverty "without disturbing the present order of things" (208).

The middle classes, especially the Evangelicals, wanted to use education to keep the poor in a position of social subordination, while at the same time making them economically independent. One of the founding principles of the Sunday schools, for example, as stated in John Liddon's General Religious Instruction (1792), was to ensure that each individual learn "to fill up that place which Providence has assigned him," because "a well-instructed Christian peasantry will constitute the support and happiness of the nation" (qtd. in Laqueur 191). In Sketches of the History of Man (1802), Henry Home, Lord Kames, complains that charity schools, whose mission was primarily to teach religious piety, social deference and gratitude—hardly a radical agenda—would be "more hurtful than beneficial: young persons who continue there so long as to read and write fluently become too delicate for hard labour and too proud for ordinary labour" (2: 46). He goes on to explain that "knowledge is a dangerous acquisition to the labouring poor: the more of it that is possessed by a shepherd, a ploughman, or any drudge, the less fitted is he to labour with content" (2: 46). Similarly, Sarah Trimmer's Reflections upon the Education of Children in Charity Schools (1792) argues that the poor should receive only limited education to ensure they accept their place in society:

[However desirable it may be to rescue the lower kinds of people from that deplorable state of ignorance in which the greatest part of them were for a long time suffered to remain, it cannot be right to train them all in a way which will most probably raise their ideas above the very lowest occupations of life, and disqualify them for those servile offices which must be filled by some of the members of the community, and in which they may be equally happy with the highest, if they will do their duty. (7)]

Despite her exceptional awareness of the social imbalance resulting from unequal education, in The Economy of Charity (1787), Trimmer restricts the curriculum for the children of the poor; their instruction should
As late as 1818 Robert Southey would summarize in similar terms the conventional reasons for educating the poor: "Give us an educated population—fed from their childhood with the milk of sound doctrine, not dry-nursed in dissent—taught to fear God and honor the king, to know their duty toward their fellow creatures and their creator..." (37).

Hannah More, whom J. C. D. Clark calls "a champion of the established order," believed that the poor should remain passive recipients rather than become producers of knowledge and opinion (English Society 246). More's Mrs. Jones of The Sunday School, one of the many mouthpieces for More's theories about education, attempts to get a subscription from the reluctant farmer Hoskins by explaining the political value of education for the poor: "I, farmer, think that to teach good principles to the lower classes, is the most likely way to save the country. Now, in order to do this we must teach them to read" (Works 1: 130).

According to the Evangelicals, education would not only lead the poor to accept their station in life and give them the moral values and virtues recommended by their betters, it would also prevent them from falling prey to radical thought. As Thomas Bernard, a major supporter of the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, puts it:

[A]mid the tremendous convulsions which have for some time agitated Europe, let us reflect how much of the evil is to be attributed to an improvident neglect in the education of the poor; a neglect which has left them a defenceless prey to the sophistry and delusion of the teachers of infidelity, and of the disseminators of sedition. Ignorant, unprincipled, incapable of giving a reason for their faith, or of explaining the reasons of civil order and society, to what miseries have not the poor in many parts of Europe been exposed. (66–67)

Similarly, in his Treatise on Indigence, Patrick Colquhoun, Glasgow merchant turned London police magistrate and a friend and follower of Jeremy Bentham, insists upon maintaining the social hierarchy even as he recommends a national system of education for the poor:

Let it not be conceived for a moment, that it is the object of the author to recommend a system of education for the poor that shall pass the bounds of their condition in society. Nothing is aimed at beyond what is necessary to constitute a channel to religious and moral instruction. To exceed that point would be utopian, impolitic, and dangerous, since it would confound the ranks of society, upon which the general happiness of the lower orders, no less than that of those in more elevated stations, depends. (146)
and other virtues, and, if possible, to have them taught to read and write. For in their mode of life...they have very little to command" (39). Never recognizing that the social conditions governing the poor might lead to a substantial change in their living conditions or their livelihood, Priestley, like Trimmer, advocated merely an education that would teach the poor to accept their circumstances, if not with gratitude, at least with content. Priestley puts it this way:

If...those who have the poorest prospects in life can be taught contentment in their station, and a firm belief in the wisdom and goodness of Providence that has so disposed of them, and consequently apply themselves with assiduity and cheerfulness to the discharge of their proper duties, they may be almost as happy, even in this world, as the most virtuous of their superiors, and unspuckably happier than the generality of them whose tempers and dispositions by no means suit their more exalted stations, and who have not virtue in proportion to their wealth. (Observations 29)

For both the moralists and reformers of the "middling orders," literacy was welcome as a means to inculcate specific values and behavior among the working poor, but only so long as limits were maintained upon that instruction in order to ensure social stability and avoid the dangerous threat of working-class dissent, if not insurrection. Trimmer, More and Priestley all share a common epistemological lens through which to view the poor; they draw upon a discourse which posits the middle classes as the superintendents of the poor, who must be kept temperate, industrious and deferent to their superiors.

As Jean Baudrillard claims in *The Mirror of Production*, despite its apparent opposition to capitalist modes of production, revolutionary discourse may reproduce the very forms it purports to critique. Moreover, the content of classical revolutionary (and one might add reformist) critique adopts productivity for its self-legitimation. Thus, Marx and Engels emphasized the productive potential of the post-revolutionary economy, just as early socialist thinkers, like Robert Owen, attempted to reorganize the means, only to serve the same ends, of economic production. In each case, the premise of some utopic community—posed as a Golden Age of the past or as a New Age to come—helped to frame and justify the political and economic transformations needed to build the new society. In the late eighteenth century, both apologists for and critics of the industrialization and capitalism of the English countryside found common ground in the virtue of labor, accepted as a kind of transcendent and indispensable value for people in any social class, but especially for those among the middling and lower orders. The industriousness of the poor was by far the primary concern of the middle-class moralists, who treated it as the key to all other virtues. As John Barrell has observed, in late eighteenth-century England “industry” was the chief virtue a poor man could display; consumers of art and literature came to “demand,” to use Barrell’s term, industriousness as a premium feature in literary and aesthetic representations of the poor (Dark Side 20). From Joseph Townsend’s *Dissertation upon the Poor Laws* (1786) to Frederick Eden’s *The State of the Poor* (1797), Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788) to Hannah More’s *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795-98), William Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) to George Crabbe’s *The Parish Register* (1807), the moral and economic value of the poor was thus constructed in terms of a relation to production. The constitutive features of the good or “deserving” poor included preeminently their industriousness, followed by independence, honesty and deference to authority—religious, political and economic. Both “industry” and “independence”—perhaps better known to Wordsworth’s contemporaries as “the spirit of independence”—appear in the discourse on poverty as a priori constituents of human worth, as natural and inevitable determinants of human value and dignity; yet each of these concepts registers only the value of persons in relation to some unspoken standard of productivity. The discourse on poverty masks the subsuming sign of production, to which these categories defer, as it confers a premium upon the industrious poor: a sense of dignity. Generally considered to be productive members of society who would refuse to accept poor relief even under the most abject conditions, the industrious poor were considered, ironically, those who best deserved respect and charity from those who were not poor. The idle poor, on the other hand, those who could not or would not work, were considered to be the undeserving poor. Because the discourse on poverty narrated profligacy, drunkenness and licentiousness as the causes of all idleness, the “idle” poor were considered to be objects of contempt, were not eligible for private charity (which would only encourage their profligacy), and so fell upon the parish and the workhouse for a grudging relief. Thus, the industrious poor gained a privileged place in the discourse on poverty, an ontological sense of human value which naturalizes the socioeconomic calculus upon which it depends.

These binary and determinate categories within the discourse on poverty governed virtually every analysis and representation of the poor—both urban and rural—in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; and it is clear to anyone who has followed the discussion about homelessness in Europe and the United States that they persist even today. Throughout the eighteenth century, as William Go- gart’s series of the “Idle and the Industrious Apprentice,” Thomas Mott.^3^1’s series called “Industry and Idleness,” and the publications of Hannah More and others through the Cheap Repository Tract Society suggest, cultural production operated to censure the idle and praise the industrious, spinning out endless warnings about the punishment for
waste and the rewards for productivity. As More cautioned in his *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799): “Life is but a short day; but it is a working day” (1: 117).

As moralists and reformers called upon the growing numbers of poor to eschew idleness and take upon themselves habits of industry, the poor soon found that appealing to their industry provided a quick source of legitimacy. Consequently, as Reinhard Berdix has noted, during the eighteenth century both “the workers and their spokesmen . . . made an emphatic distinction between the idle and the industrious poor, and . . . stressed the major contribution which the latter made to the welfare of the nation” (40). Nonetheless, while the many works praising benevolent paternalism emphasized the cheerful, wholesome and economically beneficial labor of the rustic poor, the actual value of their industrious-ness was beginning to change. As industrial practices triumphed over customary moral economies, the emphasis upon hard work gave way to an emphasis upon worker output. As Bentham observes, the “claim to recognition” conferred upon and expected by the industrious worker, “who shunned the sin of idleness even as he accepted the burden of poverty,” began to erode with the advance of industrialization (40). That is, workers came to be valued less for their industriousness and more for their industrial output, less for the ontological value of their labor and more for the economic values of the commodities they produced. Moreover, as poverty was less often attributed to the inevitable, natural and necessary workings of Providence and more to the purported prodigality and idleness of the poor themselves, the role of charity and poor relief came more sharply into question. Overall, in the wake of the age of benevolence and reform, a harsher, more cynical view of the poor began to displace the paternalistic, but tolerant, view of the poor as a group whose want was decreed by Providence whose needs should be supplemented by their economic, if not moral, superiors.

Of course, even the providential legitimation of poverty did not prevent its practitioners from experiencing callous and cold-hearted, as the notorious case of Soame Jenyns proves. In *A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (1756), Jenyns argues that God created poverty as the natural condition for those at the lower rungs of the social ladder. Since poverty was necessary, Jenyns’s infamous argument goes, any intervention to abolish it or improve the living conditions and especially the understanding of the poor threatened to break apart the social fabric. Like Tocqueville and More after him, Jenyns recommends only a strictly limited degree of literacy for the poor, since, in his words: “Ignorance, or the want of knowledge and literature, the appointed lot of all born to poverty, and the drudgeries of life, is the only opaque capable of infusing that insensibility which can enable them to endure the miseries of the one, and the fatigues of the other” (34). Carrying his argument so far as to suggest that the well-to-do should therefore accept the benefits they gain from the disadvantage of the laboring poor, Jenyns of course provoked the wrath of Samuel Johnson, who attacked Jenyns’s blantly callousness in the *Literary Magazine* (1757). Nonetheless, despite John-son’s thorough thrashing of the treatise, Jenyns’s view of poverty as the natural and inevitable, God-given condition of the laboring poor continued to surface throughout the late eighteenth century, most notably in popular works like Jonas Hanway’s *Virtue in Humble Life* (1774), William Paley’s *Reasons for Contenation* (1792), Hannah More’s stories and poems in *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795–98), and Edmund Burke’s *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1795), among many others.

In his *Natural Theology* (1802), Paley explained that “the poor, that is, they who seek their subsistence by constant manual labor, must still form the mass of the community; otherwise the necessary labor of life could not be carried on; the work would not be done, which the wants of mankind, in a state of civilisation, and still more in a state of refinement, require to be done” (284). Though the unequal distribution of property, according to Paley’s *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) is an evil, “it is an evil, which flows from those rules, concerning the acquisition and disposal of property, by which men are incited to industry, and the object of their industry is made secure and valuable” (95). Thus Paley, like Malthus and Townsend affixes the doctrine of providential poverty with an account of the political economy of poverty. In *Natural Theology*, he writes: “A world furnished with advantages on one side, and beset with difficulties, wants, and inconveniences on the other, is the proper abode of free, rational, and active nature, being the fittest to stimulate and exercise their faculties” (276). Moreover, like the natural law theorists, Paley links poverty to the pressures of population: “Mankind will in every country breed up to a certain point of distress,” in which provision “will pass beyond the line of plenty and will continue to increase till checked by the difficulty of procuring subsistence. Such difficulty therefore, along with its attendant circumstances, must be found in every old country: and these circumstances constitute what we call poverty, which necessarily imposes labor, servitude, restraint” (*Natural Theology* 276–77). For these writers, to use Barrell’s phrase, poverty is “nothing else than the stimulus provided by God to our industry and self-improvement!” (*Dark Side* 86).

Nonetheless, though Paley’s doctrine of property legitimizes the gap between rich and poor as the inevitable workings of Providence, Paley believes that no person should be denied “a sufficiency for his subsistence, or the means of procuring it” (*Principles* 203). This right to subsistence is founded upon natural law, in that the division of the commons “was made and consented to, upon the expectation and condi- tion, that every one should have left a sufficiency for his subsistence, or the means of procuring it” (*Principles* 203). Thus, Paley enjoined those who were not poor to assist those who were: “When the partition of
propriety is rigidly maintained against the claims of indigence and distress, it is maintained in opposition to the intention of those who made it, and to his, who is the Supreme Proprietor of every thing, and who has filled the world with plenteousness for the sustenance and comfort of all whom he sends into it" (Principles 203–4). Paley, then, represents a kind of compromise between benevolent paternalism and natural law theory, for he is unwilling to abandon the poor to their own deserts. Others, like Malthus and Townsend, had few qualms about dismissing society's responsibility to the poor.

Malthus placed the burden of welfare not on the rich but squarely on the poor themselves. As he puts it in the second edition of the *Essay on Population* (1803), “they [the poor] are themselves the cause of their poverty, . . . the means of redress are in their own hands and in the hands of no other persons whatever” (qtd. in Himmelstein 118). Townsend's *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws* also reflects the harsher attitude that we see in Malthus and that came to dominate the view of political economists up through the time of the New Poor Law.

For Townsend,

It seems to be a law of nature, that the poor should be to a certain degree improvished, that there may always be some to fulfill the most servile, the most sordid, and the most ignoble offices in the community. The stock of human happiness is thereby much increased, whilst the more delicate are not only relieved from drudgery, and freed from those occasional employments which would make them miserable, but are left at liberty, without interruption, to pursue those callings which are suited to their various dispositions, and most useful to the state. (35)

Townsend believed that hunger was Providence's greatest incentive to put the poor dutifully to work, and he advises legislators that poverty works to affirm the natural bonds and obligations of society, among the first of which "stands the relation of a servant to his master" (26). "The first duty required from a servant," Townsend explains, "is prompt, cheerful, and hearty obedience" (26), and in order to get that obedience no more effective incentive exists than hunger: "The wisest legislator will never be able to devise a more equitable, a more effectual, or in any respect a more suitable punishment, than hunger is for a disobedient servant. Hunger will tame the fiercest animals, it will teach decency and civility, obedience and submission, to the most brutish, the most obstinate, and the most pervers" (27).

As I will discuss further in Chapter Four, Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) also argues that want is a great incentive to labor and to genius. Malthus reverts to the language of physico-

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theology—as he puts it, reasoning "from nature up to nature's God"—for his vindication of poverty:

This view of the state of man on earth will not seem to be unattended with probability, if, judging from the little experience we have of the nature of mind, it shall appear, upon investigation, that the phenomena around us, and the various events of human life, seem peculiarly calculated to promote this great end [the development of the human mind]; and especially, if, upon this supposition, we can account, even to our own narrow understanding, for many of those roughnesses and inequalities in life, which querulous man too frequently makes the subject of his complaint against the God of nature. (356)

Want, then, in Malthus's final analysis, "could not be withdrawn from the mass of mankind without producing a general and fatal torpor, destructive of all the germs of future improvement" (359). Since one of the "gracious designs of Providence" that keeps the social machine in motion is the principle of population developing faster than food supply, "want and its consequent misery are the desolation and waste necessary to stimulate industry and even imagination" (361). In this context, Arthur Young's infamous and Boudery-like injunction stands out as only a rather more straightforward, or one of the more brutally blunt, examples of this pervasive doctrine: "Everyone but an Idiot knows that the lower class must be kept poor or they will never be industrious" (qtd. in Jarrett 80).

Young's anxiety about the increasing possibility that through their works tie poor (meaning in the eighteenth century anyone who had to work for a living; that is, by logical extension, anyone whose wealth did not derive from some form of landed property) might move up out of their station shows the degree to which he both understood and feared the power of a new economic system to disrupt the fixities of the old. The only way to keep the poor "in their place" (and so keep the natural aristocrat) was to deny them wages that would allow them to exchange their labor or the products of their labor for new social positions that would destabilize the chain of subordination—that system of permanent, as opposed to temporal, identities. If labor is no longer simply a productive activity but a commodity that can be bought and sold, or withheld at will to renegotiate its value, the once naturalized social hierarchy is exposed as arbitrary and subject to unpredictable mutation. Moreover, the laborer—or, more powerfully and threateningly, a collective entity of united laborers—is now free to contest his or her relationship with his or her former master. In the controversy surrounding *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), a reviewer of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the
Rights of Man (1791) raises the spectre of just such a scenario. In The Gentleman’s Magazine (February 1791), we read: “The Scripture every where keeps up the distinction of rich and poor; but Mrs. W’s millennium is to restore mankind to the level of the golden age” (153). The reviewer accuses Wollstonecraft and other radical reformers of intending “to poison and inflame the minds of the lower class of his Majesty’s subjects to violate their subordination and obedience” (154). In Thoughts and Details on Society (1795), Burke made his own reply to the radical reformers, affirming the need for subordination and obedience among the poor, whose condition of poverty cannot, indeed should not, be helped. Burke writes: “We, the people, ought to be made sensible, that it is not by breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the Divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer” (Works 7: 464). To show that he meant what he said, Burke advocated small charity to the laboring poor, but he would tolerate no public protest over their abject conditions: “Let compassion be shown in action... but let there be no lamination of their condition. It is no relief to their miserable circumstances; it is only an insult to their miserable understanding... patience, labor, sobriety, frugality, and religion, should be recommended to them; all the rest is downright fraud. It is horrible to call them ‘The once happy labourer’” (Works 7: 371-78).

This fear of social insubordination prompted not only a rain of aspersions on Wollstonecraft and others, but numerous appeals for landlords to restore their customary practice of benevolent paternalism. The benevolent landlord and his grateful industrious laborer were conspicuous figures of the agrarian idyll as it was approached the contested field of politics in the 1790s. From George Crabbe’s encomium in Book II of The Village (1783) on the benevolent Duke of Rutland, to Hannah More’s Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society (1788), to the precious panegyrics to aristocratic benevolence in Samuel Jackson Pratt’s Bread, or the Poor (1801), the doctrine of in loco parentis was peddled as an insurance against instability. Interpellating the laborer as a natural subordinate to the natural aristocrat, such works testified to a growing if repressed awareness that such was not indeed the case. Thus the agrarian idyll became increasingly bound up with nostalgic revisions of the feudal past, which led eventually to the more conservative elements of what Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy in “Figures of Romantic Anticapitalism” call “resti-
tutionist romanticism” (40), characterized by an uncritical nostalgia for pre-capitalist socio-cultural formations that saw its greatest flowering in the Young England movement of the 1840s—itself born out of the crisis between labor and capital—with its relish for chivalric spectacle and romantic feudalism.

Poverty and the Agrarian Idyll

The determinate categories of industry and idleness and the binary structure of industrious morality upon which they depend cross over the boundaries between the social, aesthetic and economic spheres. In literature, art, social treatises and popular middle-class journals, the discourse on poverty informed both aesthetic and social practice, not only creating an idealized pauper for popular aesthetic consumption, but also setting up the criteria by which to judge the actual poor. While many works concerning the rural poor criticized the colonization of the countryside by urban and industrial values and practices, the attempt to rescue the traditional values of the country by isolating them in a rustic landscape and by emphasizing the industriousness, thrift and contentment of the rural poor actually helped to fix those industrial values onto the body of the rural working poor. Indeed, by inscribing industriousness—or its converse, idleness—as the premier value of the poor, the discourse on poverty placed the rustic poor under a yoke of production. Even as painters and writers drew upon the myth of the countryside as a sanctuary of stability and simplicity, they were incorporating the inhabitants of that ostensibly site of repose values congruent with the industrialism and capitalism to which they were often opposed. Thus, the familiar representations of both the urban and rural poor demonstrate the interdependent strategies of containment and normalization.

Ann Bermingham observes in Landscape and Ideology that “when the countryside—or at least large portions of it—was becoming recognizable, and dramatically marked by historical change, it was offered as the image of the homely, the stable, the aristocratic” (9). Yet the thrifty and industrious plowmen, milkmaids and laborers who occupied those homely spaces in the paintings of Thomas Gainsborough, the prints of Francis Wheatley, the poems of Samuel Jackson Pratt and the tales of Maria Edgeworth served to embody in idealized and sentimentalized forms the very work discipline from which the country was to be a refuge. The precious scenes of domestic bliss, cheerful toil and beatific simplicity that characterize the representations of the poor in Gainsborough, Wheatley, Pratt and Edgeworth, to name only a few, portray English rural life as a kind of indigenous Eden. As Barrell has observed of Gainsborough, this idyllic portrait of rural harmony satisfied “a demand to see the rural life portrayed as it ought to be, decent and edifying, even if it is not” (Dark Side 63). With notable exceptions like Thomas Bewick and George Morland, who produced more realistic representations of the poor, writers and artists after 1760 drew upon a complex set of iconographic and narrative strategies that constitute what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the agrarian idyl in order to depict the rural poor as pleasing objects for aesthetic gratification or as instructive objects for...
moral edification. Indeed, as the numbers of urban and rural poor increased and became more troublesome, a polished, second-order spectacle of poverty began to absorb the attention of the polite classes. With a wide array of simulated poverty designed to meet their expectations for an image of a cheerful, healthy and contented peasantry, the polite classes could indulge both their curiosity and sympathy for the poor in a pleasing spectacle of rustic poverty without troubling themselves too much about the actual conditions of the poor.

In landscape painting, genre painting, popular prints and literary works, the harsher outlines of poverty faded into the background or were obscured by highly stylized and sentimental portraits of the poor, such as Gainsborough’s and Wheatley’s. As Sean Shesgreen has recently observed in his *The Criers and Hawkers of London*, the moralized and sanitized spectacle of poverty for which Gainsborough and Wheatley came to be celebrated replaced the more graphic realism of down-to-earth observations of the poor like those found in Marcellus Laroon’s *Cryer of the City of London* (1687). Indeed, the fate of Laroon’s Cryer in the hands of its eighteenth-century publishers provides a graphic example of the way in which the agrarian idyll held sway over the visual arts in late eighteenth-century England.

Shesgreen documents the conversion of Laroon’s Cryer from a series of realistic images of street criers into a collection of highly stylized and sentimental portraits targeted for the children’s book market. Henry Overton published four editions of Laroon’s Crye in their original form between 1711 and 1733. When Robert Sayer took possession of the Overton firm in 1751, he acquired the plates for Laroon’s Cryer and decided to publish them in altered form as a six-part serial. Under the direction of Sayer, Laroon’s stark depictions of London street vendors and paupers with their hard, black-and-white outlines were transformed into pretty pictures for the consumption, as Shesgreen speculates, of “bourgeois uncles” who bought the book “as a gift—typically avuncular—for their nieces” (42). Sayer’s alterations to the plates were substantial. The ragged clothes of the vendor women were replaced with finer yet more revealing garments; the stark white backgrounds to each vendor were filled in with conventional landscapes; and verbal allusions to anything that might offend young ladies’ taste, such as the plates of “The London Cartezan” and “Madame Creswell,” were deleted.

“Dainty Sweet Nasegays” (Plate 1) demonstrates the bucolic quality of Sayer’s alterations. The highly conventionalized landscape obliterates completely Laroon’s depiction of the bleakness and emptiness of urban poverty, substituting instead a rapturous view that befits the eighteenth-century consumer’s sensibility. In an inversion of Wordsworth’s formula in the *Prelude* (1850) of “by distance ruralised” (1.89), the ragged street crier is ruralised into distance; that is, the highly

Plate 1: “Dainty Sweet Nasegays.”
Idiosyncratic street characters of Laroone's original plates become "types and emblems," to invoke Wordsworth again, of a generalized idea of Poverty. The female criers, well illustrated by "Dainty Sweet Nosegays," were made to conform to what might be called the trope of rustic décolletage. While overt allusions to female sexuality were expunged, the women vendors were made to be more erotic with enhanced busts and lowered necklines. Such eroticized images apparently appealed to the convention of the bashful coyness of the English country girl, a convention both parodied and popularized by John Gay's The Shepherd's Week and which, as Barrell has noted, had become a fixture of "the comic ideal of rural life" by the middle part of the eighteenth century (Dark Side 58). Barrell notes that dating from the publication of The Shepherd's Week, "the countryside of England was... considered to be populated by desirable girls who, though they might be hoped to distribute their favours with some freedom, did so with a bashful sincerity which added to their charm..." (Dark Side 58). Although Sayer kept what poet John Scott calls the "cottagge Maryians, in ther torn array" (qtd. in Barrell 63) to titillate the male buyers of Laroone's heavily revised suite, such suggestive figures presumably were not intended to serve as models for the young ladies who ultimately received the book.

In their rustification of poverty Sayer's revisions to Laroone's Cryers take part in a larger network of aesthetic and literary representations of the poor at the close of the eighteenth century. Sayer's alterations to Laroone's prints appeal to conventions drawn from the agrarian idyll and point forward to the pastoral sentimentality of paintings like Reynolds's The Cotagers (1788), Gainsborough's cottage scenes of the 1780s, and Wheatley's Cries of London and even more bucolic Four Times of the Day (1799). As with these works, Sayer's revisions to Laroone's Cryers place urban poverty into a rural setting, where its harder edges can be blunted, where the spectator's eye—hardly offended by the elegant simplicity of the reconstituted costermmongers—can find relief or refuge by fixing on the landscape. Shesgreen rightly says, "With these precious, insipid, and highly finished prints, the ensemble abandons the depiction of city life and embraces the pastoral..." In espousing the arcadian and the bucolic, the suite becomes a document in the history of artistic banality, anticipating by a short time Francis Wheatley's influential Cries of London, the nadir of the genre" (41). This nadir is marked by the lack of any effort to depict the poor realistically and an attempt to glut the market with confectionary images of sentimentalized poverty to satisfy the growing late eighteenth-century taste for paupers shorn of their dirt and rag—in the terms of Anna Barbauld, shorn of "their squalor and mean employments" ("Inquiry" 222). Wheatley's "Two bunches a penny primroses, two bunches a penny" (Plate 2) portrays the eroticized country Marian in a vignette that evokes the childhood innocence and domestic simplicity associated with the countryside.
Even in the engraving we can see how the chiaroscuro heightens the contrast between country and city as the light falls on the cherubic faces of the young woman, her brother and sister, with their baskets of wildflowers. The urban landscape, itself stylized, recedes in the shadowy background; a dichotomy is established between the mechanical austerity of the city and the organic bloom of the country. Even an early twentieth-century critic could be moved to fancy by such examples of what he called Wheatley’s “fragrant pictures . . . where there is no suggestion of crowd or noise, no woman or girl who is not comely, the girls, in fact, all appealingly pretty, and even the men having a tendency to good looks . . .” (Salaman 252). Stripped of any suggestion of squalor, crime or pain, Wheatley’s Cries pointedly elicit such emotional responses to the poor and so impede any critical move to register their suffering or account for their poverty.

The most extreme solution to the problem of the representation of poverty may be found in the picturesque injunctions to strictly regulate the kinds of poor to be included in painting, or, as in Humphry Repton’s “View from my own Cottage, in Essex” before and after “picturesque improvement” (Plates 3 and 4), to banish it altogether. Notice again how the ruralization, that is, the picturesque improvement, of the landscape here imposes a safe distance between the spectator’s vantage point and the bustle of the village street. Although the other figures remain in the “improved” version of the picture, the beggar—most likely a wounded soldier or sailor given his wooden leg and the patch over his eye—does not appear at all. Repton’s picturesque improvement amounts to a kind of wilful denial: where poverty cannot be seen it must not be. While the picturesque presents a special case, which I will discuss at length in Chapter Two, Repton’s radical proposal to contain the spectator in a prettified landscape that serves to remove him or her from the embarrassment of beggars and the ugliness of poverty is the logical conclusion of the move to beautify the poor. Absence, it this case, is the ultimate beauty—the most picturesque of all treatments of poverty.

As John Barrell, Ann Bermingham, Carol Fabricant and Alan Liu have shown, the naturalization of poverty in picturesque or rustic scenes constitutes a “politics of landscape,” part of which involves the agrarian idyll with its call to beautify poverty and distance the reader and spectator from the actual poor by means of banishing poverty altogether, obscuring poverty beneath a Claudian veneer of sentimental scenery, or, as I will discuss below, afflicting poverty with labor. With these strategies, or any combination of them, these cultural works substitute a second order of poor—a simulated spectacle of poverty—for any actual encounter with the poor. The aggregate simulae that constitute this spectacle bear the values that those who are not poor themselves impose upon the poor. Hence the “deserving poor” as represented in art and literature become the heroes and heroines of the sentimental novel,
the noble cottagers in the paintings of Gainsborough and Wheatley, and, as we will see, the happy laborers in the poetry of Cowper, Gray and Crabbe. The "undeserving poor" become the beggars, the gypsies and the idle clowns. In these figures we see the prototypes for the vagrant and industrious poor in Wordsworth's poetry, though as I hope to show, Wordsworth's representation of the poor sometimes disrupts the comfortable position of the reader or spectator of poverty. Even as it invokes many strategies of the agrarian idyll, Wordsworth's poetry often moves up close to the poor, leaving behind a troubling sense that this visit to the Other enacts a return of the repressed—a confrontation with more than just a spectacle of poverty, but with an empowered pauper who holds a mirror up to the reader's own impoverishment.

III

While the agrarian idyll distances the spectator or reader from the place of poverty, substituting for actual social conditions a composite image of rural England as a place of social harmony, fulfilling labor and blissful simplicity, it simultaneously confers an ontological value upon the idealized inhabitants of that indigenous Eden. More broadly, the agrarian idyll serves as one of the primary topos of the broader movement of romantic anti-capitalism sweeping Europe in the early nineteenth century. As it transforms the working subject into a mythic and transcendental subject, and as it naturalizes the relations of production in the countryside as timeless and essential processes of nature, the agrarian idyll confers upon the rural poor a sense of human dignity and registers its disenchanted with the burgeoning commodity culture invading its rustic sanctuary. In its most conservative forms, the agrarian idyll serves the interests of the past, inventing a golden or green age of England against which to try what it posits as the disjunctions and alienation taking place in the present. In its more utopian forms, the agrarian idyll anticipates the liberation of the agricultural laborer from the aristocratic gaze that denies his or her right to self-determination and bars his or her access to political power. Thus, the agrarian idyll, however fraught with ideologi-cal contradictions that temper and even threaten to disable its potential, actively criticizes (and even exaggerates) the forces of depopulation, industrialization and alienation as it sometimes moves toward the recognition of agricultural laborers and farmers as people with real political as well as human rights, as people whose histories and stories are worthy of attention and respect.

As the social value of the epithets "honest poverty" and "industrious poor" began to decline within the practical discourse of the industrializing political economy, their nostalgic and critical value began to increase. In the cultural productions of the late eighteenth century the
moral economy of pre-industrial England gained force as a critique, however contradictory it may be, of industrialization. Indeed, the structural economic changes that disturb the tacit assumptions of social place and the legitimations of hierarchy affect the way in which what were once perceived as politically neutral cultural formations—e.g., the pastoral—are read. Barrell, for example, has discussed the way that the agrarian idealism in Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* became increasingly less acceptable (more threatening) to its English readers among the polite classes, especially after the 1790s, when the English poor were seen as a potentially radical body. In the 1790s, as Barrell suggests, the “pastoral vision of society”—an egalitarian image of agricultural rest or rustic ease—was increasingly incompatible with the polite classes’ need to put all of England to work. In discussing the few proposals for the redistribution of land along egalitarian lines—Robert Wallace’s *A Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind*, (1753), William Ogilvie’s *The Right of Property in Land* (1781), and William Godwin’s *Political Justice* (1793)—Barrell writes:

It seems in fact that the polite classes in the eighteenth century had no fear of such notions making much headway among the poor until the 1790s; that to write approvingly of them in the polite literature—where an agrarian egalitarianism appears either as an imagined original, as in Goldsmith’s poem, or as a theoretical or remote ideal—was more or less acceptable till then; and that only from about the 1790s could *The Deserted Village* be read as a radical poem which pointed (by implication) to the future as well as to the past. (Dark Side 82)

Because the pastoral vision was perceived as a threat and because it could be “appropriated as a radical ideology” (Dark Side 81), increasingly it was displaced by a more politically acceptable georgic (or Georgian) vision of agricultural labor.

One can speak, then, at least after 1790, of a critical nostalgia, a possible revisionist reading and a new writing of pastoral and georgic that redeploy their conventional ephebes and idéologèmes—“cheerful toil,” “rustic simplicity,” the “Noble Savage”—as a vision of not just social harmony, but social equality and political justice. This critical nostalgia is placed into the service of works largely critical of the industrial transformation of English society, such as Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* and Wordsworth’s *The Ruined Cottage and Home at Grassmere*. Rather like a melodic line played against a harmonic background that has shifted from, say, the major Ionian mode to a minor mode like the Dorian, these pastoral ephebes or idéologèmes evoke a more foreboding atmosphere and suggest far different ideas than formerly. From ringing in the dominant ideology of a natural aristocracy, these terms now sound the contradictions and displacements of a culture whose socio-economic and cultural grounds are radically disjointed. While such epithets may be—and are—criticized for pointing backward to a golden age of benevolent paternalism that never existed, the critically constructive and utopian function of such epithets and motifs should not, as they have largely been, simply impugned or ignored. Indeed, the latent content of a golden or green England, while a nostalgic vision of a mythic and invented past, enables but does not necessitate a utopic vision of the future.

In *Ideology and Utopia*, Karl Mannheim suggests that utopian constructs may call attention to what he calls the “discrepancy . . . between the traditional mode of thought and the novel objects of experience” in a society undergoing change (101). While we cannot ignore that it was often used, as in Goldsmith’s *Deserted Village*, by Tory writers whose primary concern was the incursion of new money into the reserved spaces formerly held fast by a relatively fixed landed aristocracy, in its stark antipathy to and reaction against the industrial transformation of England, the agrarian idyll of late eighteenth-century pastoral georgic at least points to the harmful effects of capitalist expansion, both in the country and in the city, even as it often fails to posit a viable alternative.

Although the idealized pauper or laborer may have been to some readers a sentimental repository of effective power or a sign of the laboring class under the control of an idealized natural aristocracy, this same pauper or laborer embodied those virtues and values that in fact enabled the working poor to form a political consciousness of self-worth and to achieve some portion, however small, of effective power. While the sentimental portrayals of rural simplicity in Gainsborough, Goldsmith, Cowper, Pratt, Wordsworth and even “peasant poets” like Collier, Clare, Bloomfield and Yearsley, may have blinded some readers to the problems of rural poverty or reinforced for others an ideology of labor, these portrayals encouraged some readers to acknowledge the human worth of the rural poor, to recognize the suffering and hardship they endured as a result of socio-economic practices, and perhaps even to act in behalf of the poor to protect their human rights and sense of dignity. In particular, in the works of William Wordsworth, the agrarian idyll posts a romantic alternative to the capitalization of agriculture which challenges the assumptions of industrial ideology and the new habits of work discipline even as it reinforces some of industrialism’s basic, and we might add, bourgeois, values.

If Wordsworth’s work does not present an exhaustive analysis of the industrial practices that threatened to value human beings as commodities for exchange in a marketplace of labor, we might remember that the conditions for a materialist critique of the new industrial relations were hardly in place in time for Goldsmith, Crabbe and
Wordsworth, among others, to achieve the kind of rigorous and dialectical awareness that we associate with economic and sociological analysis. At least since Friedrich Engels's *Anti-Dühring* and the 1880 pamphlet derived from that work *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, cultural critics have recognized that certain economic conditions and the visible class struggles of the 1830s in England and France were necessary to move socialist critique from its early phase of utopian longing to its later phase of materialist critique. To ask for more is to engage in a kind of romantic ideology and an ahistoricism: to ask the poet to be a prophetic visionary who not only escapes wholly the ideological limitations of her or his time, but basks in the sun of the postmodernist present to return as a reactionary priestess or priest to illuminate the caves of a pre-Marxist moment.

Rather than a prolepsis of a poststructuralist or postmodernist critique (with all the advantages of hindsight) of the turbulent socio-economic changes taking place in the moment of its production, what we might expect from late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century poetry may be something more like the prevenient of what Bloch dubs the "utopian function." Chastened, if not restrained, by the concrete material conditions of its historical moment, the anticipatory gaze of poets must grasp the actual potentials of the contingent material conditions in which they are placed. A poetry of hope, not fantasy, in other words, must embrace the limits, as well as the imaginative horizons, of possibility. The "positive utopian function," in Bloch's terms, is the active substance of a desire for transcendence whose wings are kept trimmed by a conscious em'raciting of its historical substance—"human culture referred to its concrete utopian horizon" (*Principle of Hope* 1: 146). While Bloch argues that the positive utopian function emerges from the dialectical interplay of subjective and objective factors within a particular nineteenth-century discourse, we can adapt Bloch's and Mannheim's concepts here to ascertain the degree to which Goldsmith, Crabbe and Wordsworth embrace their own historicity as they construct, by positive construction or negative critique, their own utopian imaginings. We may ask, do these poets deploy a critique of industrialization that is merely facetious and nostalgic, a kind of empty supplement or atavistic excrescence, or do they indeed anticipate in their work a potential transformation latent in the aggregate materiality of their own historical moment? In their romantic turn toward the past, what latent utopian possibilities remain as an unconscious, unrealized surplus? As I will argue, despite the historical displacement of Wordsworth's work so well demonstrated by Levinson, Liu, McGann and Simpson, among others, some of Wordsworth's poems clearly engage their history and allow working-class readers to appropriate their utopian potentials and romantic anti-capitalism in the interests of progressive change.

Poverty and the Agrarian Idyll

IV

As Hugh Sykes Davies believes, there is much, even in the so-called "experiment" of the *Lyrical Ballads*, in Wordsworth's poetry "which belonged, with some characteristic but minor differences, to the traditional modes of poetry of the eighteenth century . . . ." (193). As we have seen and as Barrett discusses at length in *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, two of those traditional modes of poetry in particular, the pastoral and the georgic, governed the representation of the rural poor in poetry, just as the conventions of landscape and genre painting determined the appropriate use of rustic figures in painting. The social and juridical categories that distinguished the poor into two basic groups—the industrious and the idle—infirstrate the eighteenth-century pastoral and georgic loco-descriptive poem or painting to become determinate features of the industrial laborer, the beggar, vagrant, gypsy or bandit. In many ways, the silent vagrants of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, the beggars, peddlers and discharged soldiers, with their "artless tales" and measured speech, serve as paradigmatic examples of those indigent deemed worthy of charity according to the principles set down by Steele, Smith, Townsend and others, who wanted the poor to be industrious, frugal, deferent and independent of charity. Thus, to treat Wordsworth's representations of the poor, his appropriation of rustic language, imagery, incidents and settings for his poetry, without showing their role and relative position within the broad network of representations of the poor in the theoretical, political and cultural works of the late eighteenth century would be to ignore the role of his poetry to modify, as well as to reproduce, features of the discourse on poverty, and to negotiate, rather than simply represent, relationships between the poor and those who are not poor.

Like many of the writers I discuss in the course of this book, within certain ideological limitations, Wordsworth sympathizes with the poor, criticizes the inadequate systems of poor relief that often exposed them to abuse and contempt, and in general attempts to lead the reader's understanding of the poor, especially the rural poor, beyond the constitutive polarities of the discourse on poverty. Wordsworth's representations of the poor in his early poetry rely on different narrative and rhetorical strategies from those of his immediate predecessors and his contemporaries. Pratt's poetry and Wheatley's paintings, for example, displace the problems of urban poverty into a rustic setting that naturalizes indigence and allows the spectator to forget—at least for a moment—the harsh edges of urban indigence. Crabbe's *The Village* and *The Parish Register* rely primarily upon a Hogarthian progress narrative and the medium of metonymy to call attention to the "disgusting" moral and physical conditions of the laboring poor (as I discuss in Chapter Three). The representations of the poor in Wordsworth's *Salisbury Plain*, *Lyrical Ballads*, *The
that Barbauld recommends for a writer who would have us "feel a strong degree of compassion" (224).

The attempt to create sympathy for the poor while trespassing conventional poetic propriety and transgressing boundaries of the discourse on poverty, however, creates a double bind for the poet. In order to gain the reader's sympathy for his rustic characters, Wordsworth ultimately must rely upon the very conventions governing the definition of the "good" and the "bad" poor that his poetry challenges. At best it seems that he can only estivate the reader in relation to those conventions, so that the arbitrariness and the inflexibility of the conventions become apparent. At its most subversive, Wordsworth's poetry, while it depends upon the normative conventions of the discourse on poverty to elicit a sympathetic response from the reader, alerts the reader to the questionable value and the artificiality (i.e., the social origin) of those conventions which have through habitual use in discourse attained the status of a priori or ontological truths. Thus, while the discourse on poverty and its binary system of morality haunt the rustic demesnes of Wordsworth's poetry, the poetry threatens to expose them as artificial constructs, if not to exorcise them altogether. In the chapters that follow, I hope to show that Wordsworth's poetry engages but does not affirm the conventional assumptions about poverty, that it deploys those assumptions in a poetic discourse that challenges and questions them.
Notes to Chapter One

force which acts without relaxation, makes the lot of every mortal gravitate. Not to be drawn into the abyss, it is necessary to mount up by continual effort; and we see by our side the most diligent and the most virtuous sometimes slipping by one false step, and sometimes thrown headlong by inevitable reverse.” (Theory of Legislation 127–28).

With this caveat in mind, one can see how Wordsworth’s vagrants might function on the nexus for a specular literary identification between the idealized vagrants and the spectator whose labor or genius may not suffice to balance him or her at the edge of Beethoven’s abyss of indifference.

5. Thomas Laqueur’s Religion and Responsibility describes how the education provided by the morality industry unintentionally gave rise to a powerful critical literate among many working-class men and women. For further discussion, see E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, especially Chapter 16, and my last chapter here.

Notes to Chapter One

1. The concept of a moral economy has been the subject of recent debate among social historians. Generally it appears that tenants and agricultural laborers did indeed appeal to a “customary moral economy,” as Thompson calls it in his influential essay “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” as a standard against which to measure and protest change in their relations with landlords. In discussing a tenant protest against Sir William Lowther in Westmorland, C. E. Searle recently concludes that custom “was made up of more than just the formal record as inscribed in memorials court books... It also contained an active and living component, which embraced the experience and collective memory of present and past generations” (120).

2. Given his dependence upon the Lowther estate, Wordsworth would no doubt have had some firsthand knowledge of what Searle calls the “confutation between an ascendant capitalism and the claims of the customary economy” (121).

In discussing the effects of industrialism on the popular sense of time and work discipline, David Landes argues that the displacement of agricultural time by factory time especially from the 1770s onward amounted to nothing less than a “revolution in time.” The mechanized forms of factory life disrupted the “natural rhythms” of agricultural life and required the laborers a wholesale reorientation of the regulation of the body. Mark Harrison’s “The Ordering of the Urban Environment: Time, Work and the Occurrence of Crowds 1790-1837,” offers a useful critique of Landes, arguing that while the everyday life of a factory worker was subject to the mechanistic routine of the time clock, the agricultural laborer was still governed by more natural elements, such as the hours of daylight and seasonal fluctuations in weather (139). As I will discuss briefly in the “Postscript,” in a letter to Francis Wragham of 5 June 1808, Wordsworth shares a keen awareness of this transformation of time and work discipline when he recommends that a select library of religious books be set up for factory workers, because these books “may be of the same use as a public Dial, keeping every Body’s clock in some kind of order” (MT 2: 249). Because the natural forms and rhythms of nature govern the work time of agricultural workers, Wordsworth says that they have little to no need for clocks and such books.


2. W. A. Armstrong cites a doubling of per capita relief in many villages by the end of the eighteenth century (97). As an indication of the dimension of the problem, the receipts for parish poor relief increased from under .75 million pounds in the 1750s, to

5.2 million pounds by 1805, and to more than 8 million pounds by 1813, when rates leveled out until after 1834 (Mathias 46).

2. For a fuller discussion of the changes Sayer made to Lacon’s plates, see Shengree (40–42).


5. See Richard Sha’s “Gray’s Political Elgcy: Poetry as the Burial of History” for a discussion of Gray’s ambivalent and ideologically motivated treatment of the poor in his Elgcy Written in a Country Churchyard. Shaving the collision of Gray’s elgcy and the discourse on poverty in contemporary treatises and debates about the poor, Sha notes that Gray’s “compassion [for the poor] is strongly predicated both on the cheerful industry of the poor, and on their acceptance of their place” (338).

6. The formation of the mythic laborer has its origins in the primitivist doctrines of the eighteenth century as they intersected or overlapped with what Clifford Geertz calls the “universalist” concept of human nature that pervades Enlightenment thought. For the Enlightenment, nature and human nature appear to be homological—entirely congruent, ordered and governed by consistent, indissoluble and timeless natural laws (“Concept of Culture” 35–36). Hayden White’s “The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish” offers a more complex analysis of eighteenth-century pretensions that can be applied to the mythic agrarian laborer. While perhaps less widely applicable than the “noble savage” concept, the trope of the agrarian laborer nonetheless exhibits some of the same fetishistic qualities that White finds in the latter. White describes how the myth of the noble savage, which is really a remaking of the wild man image, serves “only after the conflict between the European and the natives had already been decided and when, therefore, it could no longer hamper the exploitation of the latter by the former” (186). Moreover, through a dialectical encounter with both the wild man image and the noble savage, Europeans worked through (but did not resolve) their basic conflict and cleavage about “the nature of their own humanity” (189). A similar displacement and dialectic are at work in the oppositions between the profane, urban poor and the virtuous, rural laborer. The mythic agrarian laborer arises well after the decision to exploit labor had been made, and the oppositions between profanity and virtue, idleness and industriousness—as we shall show in more detail in Chapters Two and Three—indicate that the middle classes especially, but also members of the higher orders, were working out through the myth of the agrarian laborer and its spectral other—the urban manufacturing worker—their uncertainty about the nature of their own morality, utility and value.

7. See Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation, on the devolution of laborers to the Sperrinbank system of relief that was introduced in Berkshire in 1795 (79). In his Work and Authority in Industry, Poland and Community a reevaluation of the significance of Polanyi’s observation (41–43). While both Polanyi and Bendix exaggerate the influence the Sperrinban system on blurring the distinction between wage and relief—and the importance of the Sperrinbank system on bringing about this distinction—they do overstate the significance of the system on blurring the distinction between wage and relief. The uncertainties introduced by the Sperrinbank system were primarily limited to the south and eastern counties of Kent, Sussex and Essex—other forms of relief throughout England in the late eighteenth century, such as the workhouse and the roundhouse system (in which out-of-work laborers had to “go the rounds” in the parish to find work for a specified period of time). In contrast, rural laborers, who in a customary agricultural economy would not have been categorized by periods of unemployment. As W. A. Arrowsmith recently commented, the “roundhouse” system . . . appeared to involve an undesirable element of wage subsidies calculated to lower the recipients’ self-respect and make for indifferent standards of performance (“Countryside” 97).
8 McGann's distinction between romantic ideology and romantic work offers a crucial distinction here, for the utopian writers may not themselves be aware of the discrepancy between their nostalgic utopian vision and the actual social practice or habitus, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, in which they are immersed. McGann calls those works "primary," which "do not bring their own dialectical state into question" (Romantic Ideology 108). Among these works we may include Goldsmith's The Deserted Village, much of Cowper's The Task, and Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey and "The Old Cumberland Beggar." From the retro-view of the cultural critic, however, the uncritical idealism of these primary texts exemplifies a society in conflict, a society in which the pastoralism was forced and out of complementarity with the turbulent agrarian transformations taking place in the English countryside. The reflexive displacement and idealization, even escape, that such poems transmit (and even subsequent ones from a later, more self-critical phase of English romanticism, like Shelley's and Byronic), has, however, reveal the troubled source from which these poems attempt to withdraw. In McGann's words, "The poetry supplies a reflection of the world, ... but the image is generated from the poetry's 'reflect' or response to that world and its own act of observation. In this way the poetry draws itself into the world it is reflecting" (130). Or, perhaps more clearly: "The grand illusion of Romantic ideology is that one may escape such a world through imagination and poetry. The great truth of Romantic work is that there is no escape, that there is only realization (in a wholly secular sense)." (213). I cannot resist noting that Blyth anticipates our post-structuralist "discovery" of a post-constructionist critique of romantic ideology, much as he observes: "Romanticism does not understand utopia, nor even its own, but utopia that has become concrete understands Romanticism and makes intrudes into it, so far as archaic and historical material, in its archetypes and works, contains a not yet voiced, undischarged element" (Principle of Hope: 141). A. J. P. Taylor's "Utopia and Science," a pamphlet derived from three Chapters of Ataturk Dzhabir: Engels distinguishes between what he calls utopias and scientific socialism: The socialism of earlier days certainly criticized the existing capitalistic mode of production and its consequences. But it could not explain them, and, therefore, could not get the mastery of them. It could only simply reject them as bad. The more strongly this earlier socialism denounced the exploitation of the working class, the greater was its exploitation. So it was justly to show in what this exploitation consisted and how it arose. But for this it was necessary (1) in the conception of the capitalistic method of production in its inevitability during a particular historical period, and therefore, also, to present its inevitable downfall, and (2) to lay bare its essential character which was still a secret. This was done by the discovery of surplus value. (89).

9 Other critics have noted the new demands that Wordsworth's poetry made upon its earlier readers. Mary Jacobus, for example, argues in Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyric Ballads, that Wordsworth poetry involved a new kind of imaginative engagement with the vanguard, doomed mothers and aged figures otherwise commonplace in much of the romantic poetry of the 1790s. In its redenunciation of the ballad, the "ballad reader's expectations are aroused, disappointed—and redirected toward what were for Wordsworth more significant aspects of human experience" (233). Most importantly, and perhaps the clue to Heather Glencross's elaboration of this concept, Jacobus notes that like Hannah More, Wordsworth was linking instruction (her religious, his ethical) to popular forms; while Moore more aimed at reviving religious doctrine to the semi-lyric, Wordsworth aimed to awaken his literary readers from their everyday tropes. In Jacobus's words, he wanted them to "think about their own code" (239). For further discussion on Wordsworth's "novelty" see John E.

4 In a further elaboration of the politics of the picturesque, Litwack Wordsworth: The Sense of History finds in the politically motivated debates over picturesque theory that "the picturesque ... was not to be compared with the American or very early French Revolution. The Revolution, was that picturesque landscape became an almost automatic second language of politics" (113). I offer my analysis of the picturesque as an aesthetic that further distances the poe from the polite spectator as an important qualification of