

Thomas Poole and Thomas Wedgwood: The Correspondence of Two of the Coleridge Circle

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The Coleridge Bulletin is pleased to publish a public lecture delivered by Tim Fulford at the Thomas Poole Memorial Library, Nether Stowey, on the anniversary of Tom Poole's birthday, 13 July 2024. Tim would like to thank Diana Barsbam for organising and hosting the Annual Tom Poole Day of which this lecture was a part.

BORN IN 1771, THOMAS WEDGWOOD was the son of the groundbreaking industrialist Josiah Wedgwood. He grew up among his fathers' friends—the experimentalists and businessmen of the Lunar Society—including Erasmus Darwin, Thomas Day, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and James Watt. He became an experimentalist himself in his teens, and was by his twenties developing a response to the philosophical and educational ideas that the 'Lunatics' shared. His father died in 1795, leaving Tom and his brothers fabulously wealthy.

Tom was interested in image-making and in the effects on substances of light and heat, and also in the nature of perception and dreams, the operation of ideation and memory, and the role of feelings. This concern caused him to investigate childhood learning, to lay out theories of education and to sketch practical pedagogical schemes. According to Coleridge, Wedgwood's work was inspirational: 'beyond all other men known to me, [Wedgwood] added a fine and ever-wakeful Sense of Beauty to the most patient Accuracy in experimental Philosophy and the profounder researches of metaphysical Science; he . . . united all the play and spring of Fancy with the subtlest Discrimination and an inexorable Judgment' (*Friend* II 118). The poet Thomas Campbell declared Wedgwood 'a strange and wonderful being. Full of goodness, benevolence, with a mind stored with ideas—with Metaphysics—the most exquisitely fine I ever heard delivered; a man of wonderful talents, a tact of taste acute beyond description'.¹

Wedgwood was what we now call a manic depressive: he had intense bursts of enthusiastic energy for new schemes and then long periods of depressed lassitude. He was probably gay, and it is possible that his illness may have related to anxiety about his sexual feelings. In any case, his mental illness was related to a physical one: he was a long-term sufferer from a stomach ailment. This led him to become more and more emaciated and he died, addicted to the opium he took to counter the pain, in 1805. Whether the body was the cause of his mental ills, or the mental ills the cause of his bodily condition—or both—we cannot know. The illness meant he was often in Bristol to be treated by Thomas Beddoes, the progressive doctor, chemist and political radical who founded the Pneumatic Institution there to treat patients with the newly discovered gases oxygen and

¹ Letter of 17 July 1803; James Beattie, *Life and Letters of Thomas Campbell*, 3 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1849), I 463.

nitrous oxide. Beddoes treated the physical problem but also suspected Wedgwood's ills might be psychosomatic.

Wedgwood soon met the brilliant young men in Beddoes's circle: he invited Wordsworth to dinner in spring 1797 and then, on 15 September, began a five-day visit to Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy at Alfoxden, a couple of miles from Coleridge in Somerset.² It was on this visit that Wedgwood met Coleridge for the first time and also Thomas Poole, the stalwart friend and mentor who had brought Coleridge to live in Nether Stowey. In January 1798, Wedgwood and his brother offered Coleridge a lifetime annuity of £150 (about £12,000 in today's money). Wedgwood wanted Coleridge and his friend James Mackintosh to prepare his philosophical papers for publication.

Sent by Beddoes to Cornwall for his health in the winter of 1797, Wedgwood had met the brilliant teenager Humphry Davy and recommended him for a job at Beddoes's Pneumatic Institution. In Bristol, in 1800, Davy became Coleridge's friend and Poole's too, before moving to London where he collaborated with Wedgwood on some of the earliest experiments in photography. Wedgwood and Coleridge spent Christmas 1801 with Poole in Stowey, before going to London to stay with Davy. Davy, of course, went on to be one of the most brilliant scientists of the nineteenth century. He suffered a stroke in 1826 after which he frequently came to stay here with Poole, looking for an estate he could retire to.

If Poole was the centre, as a friend, host, and advisor, of the Coleridge circle in Somerset, Wedgwood was a key member—perhaps *the* key member—offering an intellectual input that Poole did not, and also providing financial support and, he intended, a local base. In 1799 he had Poole act for him in a series of complex negotiations over buying land at Combe Florey on the other side of the Quantock hills. It was one of Wedgwood's manic phases: he was excited by the purchasing process—could he outbid other purchasers? He succeeded in buying land but failed to purchase the attached mansion, and then got very involved in plans to build a large house. He aimed to bring his mother, sisters and brother Josiah to live nearby, and moved into a farmhouse and began learning how to farm and how to manage a dairy. He was hands-on, rather than a gentleman landowner who left the actual work to his employees. Poole remembered 'once finding him at Comb Florey digging down a hedge with a heavy sort of mattock, which we call a Bisgay, to use which requires the greatest exertion. Ah!, said he to me, "how cheerfully would I continue thus from morning to night, if I could enjoy such health as that man possesses"—pointing to a labourer who was near us'.³

Sadly, Wedgwood could not enjoy rude health—and he could not find a house for his mother and sisters in the area. Coleridge and Wordsworth were away from Somerset in Germany, and the scheme of reuniting the group near

² Date and duration from MS 1115, p. 5. This MS is held, as are the other Wedgwood MSS quoted in this article, in the V&A Wedgwood Collection, Barlaston, presented by the Artfund with major support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, private donations and a public appeal.

³ Margaret E. Sandford, *Thomas Poole and His Friends*, 2 vols. (London, 1888), II 210.

Nether Stowey when they returned fell to pieces as Wedgwood plunged into depression again. He had Poole sell the land he had worked so hard to buy and by early 1800 was sailing to the West Indies in the hope that a warm climate would cure his disease. Poole was left high and dry, and this was made worse when Wedgwood's sister refused Poole's offer of marriage. There followed an embarrassed pause that was only ended, in 1801, when Wedgwood wrote to commiserate Poole after the death of Poole's mother.

After this, the friendship blossomed again, with Stowey becoming a reunion retreat for the now-scattered circle, and with Poole socialising with Wedgwood, Coleridge, and Davy in London and even meeting up with Wedgwood in France. The letters that Poole and Wedgwood exchanged throw light on their intimacy and on their characters as friends, intellectuals, radicals, and travellers. They suggest why Coleridge valued them as companions and learned from their experiences and ideas.

My selections from their correspondence begin in November 1801, with Poole inviting Wedgwood to come and spend Christmas with him and Coleridge. He mixes friendship and concern; he knows Wedgwood was physically and emotionally delicate, and does his best to be sympathetic caring provider of solace:

come my dear Sir, and we will give you enough of [woodcocks and snipes] to amuse you in the morning, and in the evening you shall have Coleridge, and metaphysicks, and the heavenly muse—or if you prefer to those—quietness, and old stories, and beat the knave out of doors—these you shall have—what more shall I offer—? a hearty welcome—and my list of inducements is exhausted.⁴

Wedgwood did come and Coleridge too before going to London to be with Davy in the New Year. By the spring, Wedgwood's new plan was to improve his mood and his health by travelling in Europe, taking advantage of the arrival of peace after years of war with France. Poole hoped to seize the opportunity to travel in Europe for the first time, and he proposed joining Wedgwood for a walking tour. Wedgwood replied on 21 April:

A thousand thanks for your very kind letter—If your plans were at all compatible, I need not say what satisfaction y^r society woud have afforded me—but I shoud be a dead weight on y^r scheme—I have no curiosity left—no vigour of mind or body— . . .

I feel no appetite for rambling in France at present—& I am so capricious that I durst not embark on any scheme where any other mind than my own was to be consulted as to route, stay &c &c How I envy you the very different motion & feelings which in you, result from a healthful mind & body!⁵

⁴ Thomas Poole to Thomas Wedgwood, 24 November 1801; V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 54/7.

⁵ V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 67/6.

So Poole's offer was politely refused. What was behind Wedgwood's reluctance was his tact: he was wary of exposing a friend to the finicky needs and petty limitations of living with an invalid and melancholic. Also in play, however, was a depressive's somewhat self-fulfilling avoidance of intimacy. This left Poole in the same position with Wedgwood as he was with Coleridge and Davy—wanting their companionship more than they needed his. By 1802 Coleridge was living in the Lakes to be near Wordsworth; Davy was busy with his London professorship. They might visit Somerset for Christmas, but most of the time they lived and had friends elsewhere—all a contrast to 1798 and 1799 when they were, or were planning to be, Poole's neighbours.

Poole was not to be stopped however, and Wedgwood agreed to meet him in Paris, if not to be his touring companion. On 11 May Wedgwood wrote from Calais advising him on where to stay, who to meet, and how to get money and passports—all a matter of personal connections:

To obtain a letter of credit—say for £300—you name your Banker, or better get him to accompany you to Herries's, & he vouches for your solidity—Herries's letter then empowers you to draw to that amount on them & the drafts are paid you by their correspondents over the whole face of Europe. They give you a printed list of them.

In Paris, the Swiss minister, M. Stapfer, lives *No. 20, Rue St George, au bout de la rue Cervette Boulevards*. I have mentioned you to him in a letter, & you have only to call, hand in your card, & add to it, *friend of Mr Wedgwood*. He speaks English & will befriend you in every way— . . .

You will find many Hotels with rooms of all prices in the Rue de la Loc—& you are there in the midst of the theatres, the museum—&c you will get rooms up two pair of stairs much cheaper—you will eat at the Restaurateurs. There is a delightful house of this kind in the garden of the Thulleries, which you must visit—It is dear—In general, you will dine in the Palais Egalité for 34^s ce 17^d English—wine included. My best respects to M. Barbier. A guinea in Paris is worth £25 livres—. ⁶

Poole's arrival was delayed, however, and Wedgwood wrote from Paris on 27 June: 'I am mortified in the highest degree at not seeing you in Paris—I have been anxiously expecting you every day for some time. My strength & spirits have entirely failed me & I am forced home by the same daemon that drive me thence'.⁷ The 'demon' was his illness—a perpetual restlessness of mind and body. As it turned out, however, he did not go directly home, bumping into Poole by chance in Clermont before returning to England. Poole then proceeded to the capital, and by 20 August, had been in Paris some weeks, and was ready to leave to tour Switzerland by himself. Feeling he would be lonely travelling solo, he hoped Wedgwood would come out again so they could spend the winter together in Italy:

⁶ V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 67/7.

⁷ V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 67/8.

it will give me most sincere pleasure to find a letter from you post restante at Geneva—but it would give me still more pleasure to meet you there in person—In which case if you liked it—I would accompany you for the winter but without such an inducement I do not feel courage to cross the alps—’tis not that I feel any danger—but I find there are moments when it is necessary for me to have some one near me whom I love, and also, I am satisfied cares for me—you will laugh at this—but we are, as we are—and I cannot help it—and I know that this feeling would come upon me the oftener—from my being at present perfectly ignorant of the Italian language.⁸

This letter presents a side of Poole not often seen: we know him as a valued friend; here we perceive that he needed friendship—perhaps demanded it—because he was lonely without it, lacking an intimate loved-one. Replying on 29 August, Wedgwood sympathised—he experienced terrible loneliness for the same reason—but was not to be tempted; he would stay at home.⁹

Poole next wrote on 18 October, from Geneva, having received Wedgwood’s letter waiting for him, rather than finding Wedgwood himself. He began with disappointment and a hint of reproach:

It would have given me much more pleasure to have found you than your letter of the 29th August on my arrival here—I had considerable hopes that you would have come—I thought there was something in the plan perfectly conformable to that continual motion of body and change of scene which had been recommended to you—Had I found you here I should have forgotten all my inducements to return home—I should have thought only of Italy and the means of making the journey, as far as lay in my power, as pleasant to you as it would have been to me—but whatever is, is right; and certainly the first object for you, beyond all physical applications, is to be where you have the most satisfaction of mind.¹⁰

Here, Poole’s insight is to recognize that Wedgwood’s mental health is primary, and constitutes the barrier to his taking the action that might restore both mind and body: Wedgwood is self-defeating, and simply urging him to help himself is of no avail. Poole accepts, too, that Wedgwood’s needs trump Poole’s own desires and disappointment. He then attempts to interest the depressed Wedgwood, while alleviating his own loneliness, by recreating on paper his solo tour of the Alps. On this tour, he followed in the footsteps of Wedgwood, who had made a Swiss tour in 1796, and of Wordsworth, who had been there in 1790. It was a deliberate immersion in the Romantic sublime and picturesque—a journey that enabled Poole do as his friends had already done and so confirm his

⁸ Poole to Wedgwood, 20 August 1802; V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 54/9.

⁹ V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 67/9.

¹⁰ V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 54/10.



'The Staubbach, in the Valley of Lauterbrunnen'¹¹

¹¹ 'The Staubbach, in the Valley of Lauterbrunnen', Engraving by J. Trambauer after a drawing by G. Closs, from *Switzerland: Its Scenery and People Pictorially Represented by Eminent Swiss and German Artists* (London: Blackie, 1881), opposite 239.

membership of the social circle: he now shared, and could show in writing that he shared, their formative aesthetic experiences. He wandered lonely as a cloud.

Since I last wrote to you, I have indeed seen an immense variety of all that is beautiful and of all that is sublime in the physical and moral world—I have seen Switzerland I may say very thoroughly and with every possible advantage. . . . I wish my dear Sir you had been with me I verily believe it would have been of service to you—From Zurich to the fall of the Rhine and Chaffhausen, & on to Constance—the beautiful Isle of Meynau in the lake—to St Gall and Trogen, Gais Appenzel—I then mounted the Eben alp—descended—mounted the Hoherkasten and so into the Alviertal—on to Sargans, Wallenstadt, Glarus, Schitzt—~~xxxx~~ to the top of mount Rigi—to Weggis by the lake to Lucerne—from Lucerne through the Unterwald, over the Brunig to Meyringen in the valley of the Oberhasley—here is the famous cascade of Reichenbach from which I mounted the Schwendi and in passing to Grindelwald I saw several avalanches—¹²

Wedgwood had taken this route in 1796 and told Poole all about it. Writing to his brother Josiah on 17 July 1796, Wedgwood had noted, ‘Imagine a valley of quick descent filled up with green glass shot into longish crystals, terminating abruptly at the bottom & losing itself in snow at the top, shut in on both sides by the prodigious mountains of bare rock & you have a tolerable idea of the 2 glaciers of Grindelwald. It was a very hot day & the snow melting rapidly we had the good fortune to see some large masses of the glaciers <avalanches> tumble down the precipices, with a noise like the nearest thunder’.¹³

In his letter of 18 October 1802, Poole told Wedgwood, ‘I followed precisely the route which you have mentioned to Berne and I agree with you that the valley of Lauterbrunnen and the magical cascade there (for it does not look like mere ~~xxxx~~ water) are the finest things in Switzerland. Wedgwood had been delighted by this waterfall, writing to Josiah that

Lauterbrunnen is chiefly remarkable for its cascade—one side of this narrow romantic valley is walled in by a perpendicular rock of 1200 ft in height from the top of which a small river throws itself with a considerable arch, into the valley below—Before it comes near to the bottom, the whole is divided into a fine spring, which seen in sun shine affords two beautiful rainbows of nearly entire circles—standing anywhere within 200 to 300 ft round it, you are as much wet as in a heavy shower, & the wind generated by the rapid descent of the stream is so strong as to turn back a stout umbrella—All the trees & bushes, every blade of grass for near a hundred yards round bend from it as from the sea—Braving the wet & stepping almost under it, the spray is seen descending in the most beautiful round

¹² From the same letter of 18 October 1802; V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 54/10.

¹³ V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 21/8.

volumes or clouds in endless variety of form, whilst part dashing against the walls behind it at momentary intervals, silvers over every vein of the rock.¹⁴

After a pause to recuperate on the island that Rousseau had retired to, Poole set off again, as Wedgwood had done in 1796, and mounted the Col de Balm:

when the valley of Chamouny, the mont blanc in all its majestic sublimity, its glaciers, and its gigantic wonders presented themselves before me—this scene was amazing—but the objects require much contemplation to know them—their base and height are out of the reach of our organs—the moon appears nearly the same distance from us as the sun—I descended to the source of the Arve and on to the inn at Chamouny—the next day to the top of Montanvert I traversed the mer de glasse, descended to dinner—in the afternoon to the beautiful and extraordinary glacier de bossons—when returning <to the inn> I saw the sun pay his respects to mont blanc—long after he had taken leave of every other object—¹⁵

It may well be more than a coincidence that in the very weeks that Poole was touring Switzerland and viewing Mont Blanc, Coleridge, who had never been to the Alps, published a poem in which he imagined seeing the exact view that Poole saw. On 11 September, *The Morning Post* printed Coleridge's 'Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni', a piece written from England, which featured borrowings from the Danish/German poet Frederike Brun, and included a poetic address to Mont Blanc itself:

On thy bald awful head, O sovran BLANC,
The Arve and Arveiron at thy base
Rave ceaselessly; but thou, most awful Form!
Risest from forth thy silent Sea of Pines,
How silently! Around thee and above
Deep is the air and dark, substantial, black,
An ebon mass: methinks thou piercest it,
As with a wedge! But when I look again,
It is thine own calm home, thy crystal shrine,
Thy habitation from eternity!
O dread and silent Mount! I gaz'd upon thee,
Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,
Did'st vanish from my thought: entranc'd in prayer
I worshipp'd the Invisible alone. (*PW* I.2.720 [lines 3–16])

It seems not to have been noticed by critics that this poem, with its vicarious view-taking of the sublime mountain, may have been a tribute to, and a renewal of companionship with, the on-the-spot Poole. Poole wrote to Coleridge from

¹⁴ 17–19 July 1796; V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 21/8.

¹⁵ From Poole's letter of 18 October 1802; V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 54/10.

Switzerland (Coleridge told Wedgwood in a letter of 20 October that he had 'heard twice—& written twice' [CL II 876] but was afraid one of his letters had missed Poole on his travels). However, Coleridge did not keep incoming letters and so what Poole wrote, and whether Coleridge sent the 'Hymn Before Sunrise', is now unknown). It would not be surprising if he did, since 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison', one of his most successful poems, written from Poole's garden in Stowey, was similarly a vicarious imagining of the views that his friends, on a Quantock walking expedition, were taking in his absence. By conjuring up, from a distance, the walk that he had taken in the past and that they were now taking, Coleridge stimulated his imagination and, in the process, vicariously included himself in the group, offering his poem as a blessing of and tribute to their friendship (he would later do something similar in his 1807 lines 'To William Wordsworth Composed on the Night After His Recitation of a Poem on the Growth of an Individual Mind'). The 'Hymn Before Sunrise', if it was a kindred enterprise, was however hampered by the fact that he had never actually walked in the valley that he knew Poole was now in.

It was important to the group aesthetic that the sublime was encountered on foot (whether actually or imaginatively). The sublime experience was to be a result of a physical as well as mental saturation in the place visited. Indeed, the mental engagement was often expressed in physical terms, as in Wordsworth's phrase 'felt along the heart' in the poem written when he and his sister walked in the Wye Valley (lines 29 of 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey'). Poole proved a redoubtable walker, and let Wedgwood know of his credentials:

from Chamouny to Servoz, Salenche, Cluze and Bonneville and here I terminated this second expedition a foot—I had walked in the last five days 46 leagues [138 miles] over you know what sort of country—I felt little or no fatigue, but on the contrary much pleasure, and I can truly say he who has health and makes this excursion in any other way, loses half the advantage and pleasures of it.¹⁶

In making this tour on foot, Poole was asserting himself as part of the new, back-to-nature Romantic group. Walking through sublime mountains, rather than viewing sedate landscapes from a carriage, was the new fashion—the mark of revolutionary youth who disregarded the closeted comforts of gentlemen and roughed it as the peasants did. Coleridge had written to Poole from the German Harz mountains in 1799, relating sleeping in barns or on the ground, exploring caves and overnighting on peaks. He had transformed mind and body, he declared, by moving amongst mountains that

ran aslant, now rose up behind each other or now, . . . presented almost a Sea of huge motionless waves too multiform for Painting, too multiform

¹⁶ From Poole's letter of 18 October 1802; V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 54/10.

even for the Imagination to remember them yea, my very sight seemed *incapacitated* by the novelty and Complexity of the Scene. Ye red lights from the Rain Clouds! Ye gave the whole the last magic touch! I had now walked five & thirty miles over roughest Roads & had been sinking with fatigue but so strong was the stimulus of this scene, that my frame seemed to have drank in a new vitality; for I now walked on to Goslar almost as if I had risen from healthy sleep on a fine spring morning: so light and lively were my faculties. (*CL* I 510–16)

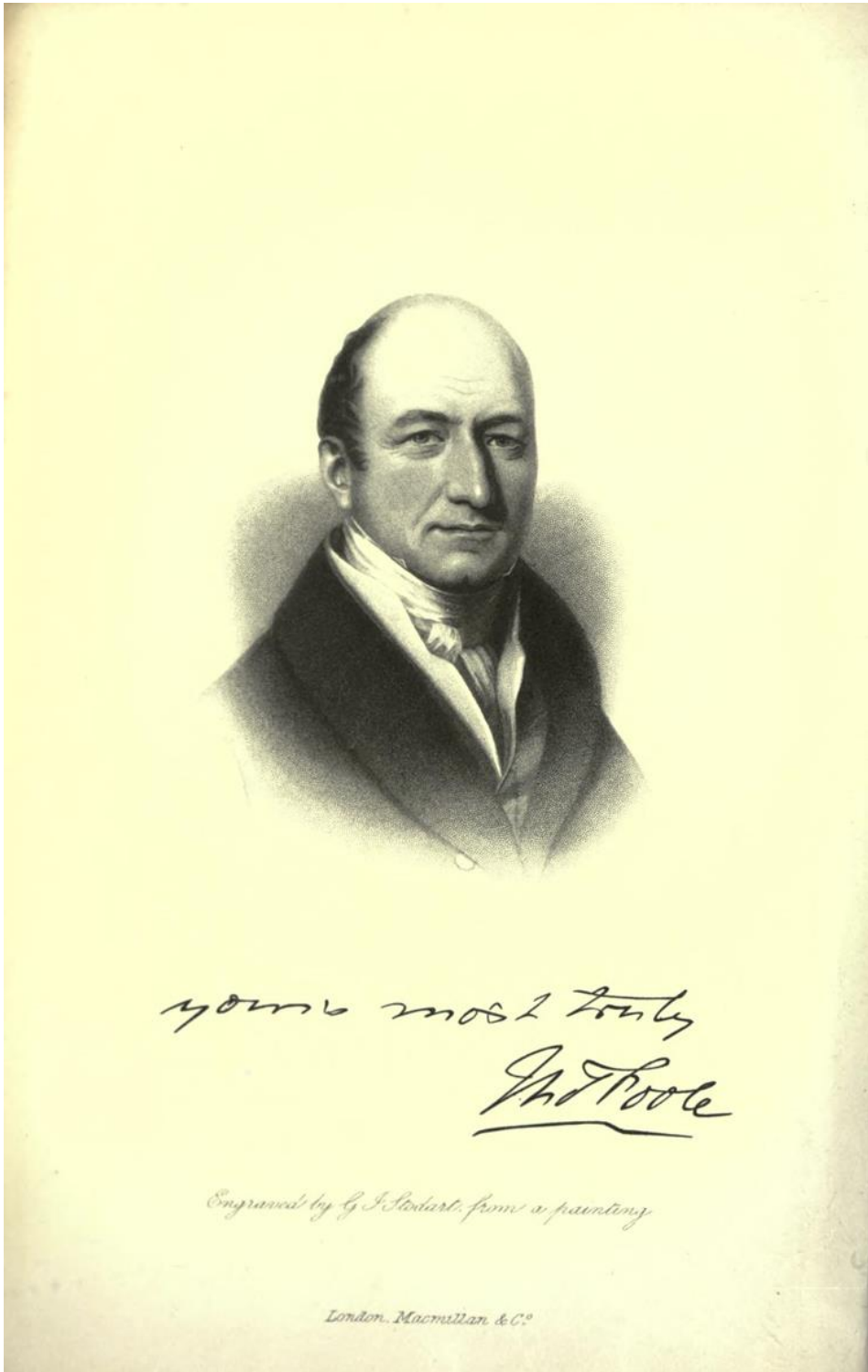
It was, as it were, a hands-on and feet-on experience—not viewing, but getting up close or down and dirty. Coleridge’s letter makes it exhilarating. Wedgwood had reported, from his 1796 Alpine tour, ‘I find myself so much stronger every day that I am very rarely sensible of fatigue in our longest marches. In the Alps so many new & interesting objects present themselves at every turn, that though we often climb the steepest mountains for 4 or 5 hours together, so far from feeling any fatigue, I find myself much fresher than after a journey of half the length in the plain’.¹⁷ Wordsworth, meanwhile, made his foot tour of the Alps the climax of his great autobiographical poem *The Prelude*:

The brook and road
 Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy pass,
 And with them did we journey several hours
 At a slow step. The immeasurable height
 Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
 The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
 And every where along the hollow rent
 Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
 The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
 The rocks that muttered close upon our ears—
 Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
 As if a voice were in them—the sick sight
 And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
 The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light,
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
 Characters of the great apocalypse,
 The types and symbols of eternity,
 Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.¹⁸

Now Poole was a fellow traveller in the Romantic landscape par excellence—belatedly a full member of the group that had once revolved around Stowey.

¹⁷ 17–19 July 1796; V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 21/8.

¹⁸ *Prelude* (1805), VI.556–72, in *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979).



George J. Stodart after Thomas Barber, Portrait of Tom Poole
Frontispiece of Margaret E. Sandford, *Thomas Poole and His Friends* (London, 1888)

Another aspect of Switzerland as a Romantic landscape was political. Swiss liberty had been a cause célèbre among Poole's circle since 1798, when Napoleon invaded the country. Poole and Coleridge had been admirers of the French Revolution in its early years. Even in 1796, after the Parisian bloodbath of 1793 and 1794, Poole still seemed to his neighbours to have 'democratick sentiments'—while his friends Coleridge and Southey were said in Stowey to be 'shamefully hot with democratic rage'.¹⁹ This was like terming someone a Communist in Macarthyite America. The Home Office sent an agent to spy on Coleridge's and Wordsworth's activities in Stowey. After all, Britain was at war with France: they were suspected of traitorous support of the French enemy: they might be prospecting the Somerset coast for a Napoleonic invasion. When Napoleon invaded Switzerland instead of England, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Poole were appalled: it was the death of their remaining admiration for France—now a militaristic empire rather than a democratic republic. Coleridge said so in a newspaper poem:

Forgive me, Freedom! O forgive those dreams!
 I hear thy voice, I hear thy loud lament,
 From bleak Helvetia's icy caverns sent—
 I hear thy groans upon her blood-stain'd streams!
 Heroes! that for your peaceful country perish'd;
 And ye, that flying spot your mountain snows
 With bleeding wounds; forgive me, that I cherish'd
 One thought, that ever blest your cruel foes!
 To scatter rage, and trait'rous guilt,
 Where Peace her jealous home had built;
 ('France, an Ode' in *PW* I.1.466 [lines 64–73])

Publicly renouncing their pro-French reputation, Coleridge—and Wordsworth too—now located the political liberty they wanted for Britain in the self-governing, democratic Swiss cantons, bravely resisting but overwhelmed by French armies.

Matters changed in Switzerland while Poole was present. In summer 1802, the French army pulled out, and the pro-French government was then attacked by independence fighters—mostly comprising the peasants from the rural cantons. In early September, these fighters captured Bern, despite being shelled by government troops. Poole reported, 'I arrived at Berne two days after the government had quitted it—before the blood which was shed at the gate was hardly dry—The town was filled with 6,000 of the armed Peasants—I need not say how interesting the days were which I spent at Berne—when we meet I shall read you my journal'.²⁰ Poole's tour took him to Lausanne 'where I found the exiled government with M. Virminac the French Ambassador—he received me with all possible politeness—I spent one day & part of another with him—The

¹⁹ Remarks quoted in Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends*, I 136 and 104.

²⁰ From Poole's letter of 18 October 1802; V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 54/10.

day I dined with him we heard the cannonade of an action—the heads of the government were present—those are interesting moments for studying human nature’.²¹ Shortly afterwards, the government collapsed entirely.

Poole was now at the centre of European politics—a reporter from the front, with access to the corridors of power. He was inspired by the patriotic resistance. He told Wedgwood, ‘The Swiss are a noble race of men—I cannot tell you how much I was interested, and how much I sympathised with them in passing through the little Cantons—We only want[,] said they[,] our antient institutions—before the French came here[,] said a peasant to me[,] we were as free as light—the swallow that skims the air was not more at liberty than we. It was glorious to see, as I often saw, those Peasants wind down from the mountains covered with clouds singing their songs of Liberty with arms in their hands, going to the general rendezvous—you can have no conception of their enthusiasm and joy—may they be happy’.²² This was exactly what Coleridge had hoped for in England—a popular, peaceful revolution led by sturdy, independent yeomen—the shepherds of the Lake District, for instance, which Wordsworth called a ‘visionary mountain republic’,²³ as if it were another Switzerland.

The revolution was not to last: to Poole’s dismay, Napoleon sent 40,000 troops and then reimposed French rule—and it was not to come about in England either. But while he was in Switzerland, Poole gained access to the elite circle of exiled intellectuals who kept the ideals of the early French Revolution active—Jacques Necker, Louis XVI’s last finance minister, his daughter Madame de Stael, and her lover Benjamin Constant. De Stael was a critic of Napoleon’s despotic tendencies; she became the foremost female intellectual in Europe—a person who both defined personal and political liberty in her writings and embodied it in her conduct. Constant had been the leader of opposition to Napoleon in France; it turned out that he and Poole had a mutual friend—the liberal writer James Mackintosh, Wedgwood’s brother-in-law.

Madame de Stale & M^r Constant spoke of Mr Mackintosh & his writings in terms of high praise—I wish he could have heard them—as well-earned praise gives, and ought to give, pleasure to every honest breast—On my taking leave Madame de Stale desired me to visit her at Paris & in short nothing could be more pleasant than this day.²⁴

Thus, the Wedgwood connection helped put Poole into the international network in which liberal political ideals were maintained. In Paris he had a long discussion with the veteran Whig leader, Charles James Fox—also well-known to the De Stael circle. The Somerset farmer from rustic Nether Stowey was now at the political centre. It was the excitement and confidence he gained from this

²¹ From Poole’s letter of 18 October 1802; V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 54/10.

²² From Poole’s letter of 18 October 1802; V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 54/10.

²³ From Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes. The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), II 207.

²⁴ From Poole’s letter of 18 October 1802; V&A Wedgwood Collection, WM 54/10.

that led him, a year later, to London to work for parliament on its enquiry into the state of the poor. Poole had become a man of public affairs—but that's another story—perhaps for next year's Poole Day.

What about Poole's friendship with Wedgwood? Wedgwood's condition deteriorated. On 10 November 1802 he reported a severe bipolar attack:

For about 3 weeks I was much better & stronger than I have been for some years & infinitely more cheerful. I seconded this kindly effort of nature by every possible exertion of my own. I lived in the fields, shooting, walking &c I took a farm & wholly abandoned myself to active & cheerful prospects. In the midst of this occupation, as if by some vile incantation, I was without warning tumbled suddenly into the lowest condition & left to contemplate the ruin of all my projects like the visions of a dream, . . . completely possessed by languor & despondency.²⁵

But by September 1803 Wedgwood was enjoying Davy's company in London and hoping Poole would join him. Poole came to town in November, but Wedgwood was soon gone, retreating to his brother's house in Dorset. Poole lobbied government on Wedgwood's behalf and wrote Wedgwood cheering letters, knowing that he was lost in gloom. Poole visited him in Dorset in 1804; afterwards Wedgwood, now confined to his bedroom, sent him game and recipes from his chef, which brought French cooking to Nether Stowey, apparently for the first time.

The venison . . . came perfectly good, and myself and some of my neighbours feasted upon it, and drank your health. We really determined it to be better than the haunch itself. I thank you for it.

We ~~dress~~ managed and dressed it, and made the pastry with great success après M. Horne. On other respects also we have shewn ourselves inapt pupils. We have ~~xxxx~~ assorted Macaroni, omelette &c^a and to morrow I have a few friends and mean to have a Harico precisely a la Horne. I did propose mock turtle, but Nannys powers shrunk from the undertaking, so I have contented myself with the Harico, and added a fowl. We have succeeded admirably well in glazing the ham, which is really a great improvement to the tast, as well as to the appearance of the thing. For all these, and a great many untried things, you will thank Mr Horn for me.²⁶

Not everyone in Stowey was quite ready for fancy French food: one of Poole's last letters to Wedgwood reports

I had <one of> the hares and <the> partridges . . . instead of ducks &c^a, so figured as ~~e~~ a country gentleman, rather than as a country farmer who has not leave of his landlord to kill game. The other hare I gave poor ~~Mark~~

²⁵ V&A Wedgwood Collection, copy.

²⁶ Poole to Wedgwood, 10 September 1804; V&A Wedgwood Collection WM 54/28.

Mackay who lives at Castle Hill House. He is an old port wine drinker,—he says he is now ~~xxx~~ drinking his 24th pipe to his own share,—he is also an old sportsman, and having been kept almost wholly in bed for the last year or two by the gout, he can only recall the pleasures of the field, by the taste of the game, of which he is very fond. He amuses himself much by dissecting it, by discovering how it was killed &c &c if he sees a broken bone, he tells you how many he has lamed . . . if he finds a shot in his mouth, he almost hears the report of the gun.²⁷

Country pastimes! A pipe of port = 550 litres or 121 gallons. So that's 2900 gallons, or 17,616 bottles that Mackay drank: nearly a bottle every day for 50 years. No wonder he had gout.

Statistics apart, the relationship with Wedgwood shows Poole's loyalty to and care of a man he admired, a man whose friendship he needed and who opened a wider intellectual and cultural world to him, a man who, he sensed, needed support but who withdrew, depressed, when he got too close. Poole's last letter to Wedgwood is an invitation to stay at Stowey, Poole having prepared everything to make a desperately ill man comfortable. But Wedgwood was too weak to stay and he died, emaciated, on 10 July 1805, leaving his philosophical writings unpublished and the Coleridge circle, now dispersed, depleted of one of its most promising and valued members.

²⁷ Poole to Wedgwood, 10 October 1804; V&A Wedgwood Collection WM 44/29.