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Article abstract

This article frames the poetry of William Wordsworth and the philosophical writings of Spinoza as mutually illuminating works exploring the ethical and ontological questions raised by bodies in states of passivity and immobility. Both writers, it argues, revise our idea of what a "powerful" body might be by developing the concept of "dynamic passivity"—a passivity that does not stand in simple opposition to states of activity, and that ought to be cultivated rather than overcome in the process of empowering the body. The article examines and contrasts the different ways in which Wordsworth and Spinoza conceive of this dynamic passivity, with particular attention paid to how the former embeds a cultivation of "wise passiveness" for the reader in the very form of his poems, through a variety of elements like syntax, metre, and acoustic effects.

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"Wise Passiveness": Wordsworth, Spinoza, and the Ethics of Passivity

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Given Wordsworth's memorable moments of deep introspection, it is easy to overlook the fascination with bodies in motion expressed in his writings. In his poems, the poet pays consistent and meticulous attention to movements, gaits, and postures. But, while he tasks the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) with following "the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated,"[1] the bodies and physical movements that preoccupy him the most are not "agitated" ones. Rather, Wordsworth follows the "settled quiet" and "mild composure"[2] of the elderly, the infant, the vagrant, or the disabled. Such attention to a wide range of alternative forms of embodiment, in its divergence from the narrow normative spectrum of the mature and healthy male body, has interested numerous critics. Examining the "Other" in Wordsworth's writings has been an important critical trend in recent decades: for example, scholars have discussed portrayals of the Old Cumberland Beggar, the Discharged Soldier, and the Leech Gatherer in terms of the poet's (mis)treatment of socio-economic inequalities and displacement.[3] And,

1. William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 3 vols, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.146.

2. "Old Man Travelling; Animal Tranquility and Decay, A Sketch" (8, 10). All citations of poems from the 1798 and the 1800 editions of *Lyrical Ballads* are from William Wordsworth, "*Lyrical Ballads*," *and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), and are hereafter cited in the text.

3. Celeste Langan, for example, points out the intricate connections between Wordsworth's depiction of vagrant and dispossessed bodies and the "improvisational

while there is certainly an attempt—successful or not—at political mobilization in Wordsworth's treatment of these characters,[4] it is also important to keep in mind that according to him the ethical ramifications of these alternative modes of mobility go beyond socio-economic matters. More often than not, the poet situates questions concerning bodies at a deeper level, positing the body's capacity for, and receptivity to, motions as an index of ontological development. In this respect, his writings display uncanny echoes of Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677), which also puts the question of bodies and affects, of motion and rest, at the heart of a philosophical project equating ontology with ethics.[5] While it is hard to ascertain whether Wordsworth had any direct knowledge of Spinoza, we can nonetheless note similar investments in their respective works. They both show a marked concern for the process of ethical development as it is predicated on fulfilment of the body and the mind, to say nothing of their shared pantheistic leaning and commitment to radical ontological equality.[6]

Given this interest in the body as a site of ethical development, it is worthwile asking: why is Wordsworth so concerned with bodies that

excursion" of his poetics, and proposes to use this connection as a model for thinking about the emergence of the liberal subject. See her monograph *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), i *et passim*. Meanwhile, David Simpson argues that Wordsworth's figures of liminal activity act as a kind of ghostly "death-in-life," and that their presentation oscillates between fetishism and reification, ultimately situating them in a space analogous to that of the commodity form and its circulation. For details, refer to his study *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1 *et passim*.

4. We can recall his transformative encounter with poverty while in France described in the 1805 *Prelude*: "we chanced / One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl / Who crept along fitting her languid self / Unto a heifer's motion … / … and at the sight my friend / In agitation said, ''Tis against that / Which we are fighting.'" See *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), 9.511–14 and 518–20.

5. On the recent recovery of Spinoza as a "submerged philosophical context" for Romantic poetry, see Marjorie Levinson, *Thinking Through Poetry: Field Reports on Romantic Lyric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 105–39.

6. Paul H. Fry emphasizes this latter aspect of Wordsworth's writings, stating that "at the heart of his poetic originality" is the belief that "poetry discloses the unity constituted by and as the being, apart from meaning and apart even from difference, of all human and nonhuman things." See Fry's monograph, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 9.

fall outside of traditional conceptions of activity and productivity?[7] I want to draw attention here to the positive affordances sketched by Wordsworth, instead of treating alternative embodiments and regimes of motion exclusively as symptoms of a failing economic system or as negative examples of "problematic" forms of life. In light of Spinoza's own reflections on the significance of bodies in motion, I argue that Wordsworth's interest in traditionally marginalized bodies, and especially his fascination for (quasi-)motionlessness, produces a revised conception of what a "powerful" body might be. Rather than relying on the naive dichotomy of, on the one hand, weak, motionless, and passive bodies, and on the other strong, kinetic, and active ones, we witness throughout Wordsworth's works a kind of power and intensity inherent to passivity and immobility. Here the Spinoza connection becomes particularly relevant. Like Wordsworth, and unlike most of his own contemporaries, Spinoza conceived of passivity as a state that did not necessarily stand in opposition to activity. Both writers model a desirable state of *dynamic passivity*, which they view as something to be cultivated rather than overcome, and as a prerequisite to becoming properly attuned to other bodies and to forming empowering alliances.[8]

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7. This question echoes Anne-Lise François's study of "recessive action," namely her call to "broaden our conception of what counts as an action." François's prompt is informed by a critical pushback against the "imperative to *act* upon knowledge" and against the "identification of virtuous action with the production of a concrete, manifest difference for the better, and the related emphasis on the good of exposing, disseminating, and making public one's 'goods.'" See Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 31, 3, 24, respectively.

8. We can also situate this cultivation of passivity in a broader Romantic context by putting Wordsworth's views in dialogue with Keats's concepts of "diligent indolence" and "negative capability." In his letter to J. H. Reynolds of 19 February 1818, for example, Keats writes: "Let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey, bee-like buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be aimed at; but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive." See *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 1.232. As Carmen Faye Mathes has recently pointed out, the critics trying to bring Wordsworth and Keats together on this ground have tended to rely on an unexamined concept of passivity as the mere binary opposite of activity, which according to her does not hold for Keats. In part, I wish to do for Wordsworth what Mathes does for Keats, namely to "recover passiveness as a dynamic attitude." See Carmen Faye Mathes, "'Let us not therefore go hurrying about': Towards an Aesthetics of Passivity in Keats's Poetics," *European Romantic Review* 25, no. 3 (2014): 310. My reading, however, is not necessarily meant to bring these two poets closer

In Wordsworth, such passivity and immobility lead to a state of "wise passiveness" by making one all the more receptive to "gentle passions" and open to the possibility of communing with various other modes of being and embodiment. This affective receptivity leads him to see ethical affordances in what might otherwise seem like a naive glorification of traditionally marginalized bodies, or a self-absorbed retreat into the stillness of introspection. Importantly, Wordsworth also situates this exchange as operating between the text and the reader. His pursuit of a poetic practice that fosters such wise passiveness in his readers shows that this ethics of passivity is inseparable from a theory of embodied reading.

In promoting receptivity to the gentle passions, Wordsworth sidesteps much of the prevalent eighteenth-century discourse on ethics, especially as it concerns the notion of "sympathy" as an immediate affective exchange that allows recognition of the Other's personhood or humanity. Just as he depicts figures whose mode of embodiment or mobility puts them in close proximity to the rock or to the trudging sea-beast, his narrated encounters with, for example, the Old Cumberland Beggar or the Leech Gatherer do not aim to recover an underlying "humanity" uniting subject, narrator, and reader. Rather, these moments attempt to foster a space of affective exchange that cuts across lines between species, and even the demarcation separating the organic from the inorganic. In this respect, the interplay of affects that Wordsworth generates—this "feeling-with," to borrow Nancy Yousef's distinction—is less a matter of immediate "sympathy" (with its "presupposition that two subjectivities come upon one another, finding or failing to find what they have in common" and its "irresistible teleology") than one of "intimacy," where proximity leaves the door open to radical and unresolved difference.[9]

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together. As I hope to show here, Wordsworth's ethics of passivity has ecological and ontological undertones that are absent from Keats's concept, which the latter develops along decidedly more social lines. Once again, Mathes articulates perfectly this element of Keats's thinking: "Keatsian passivity invites sociability—it creates lines of influence and agency that strengthen friendships and shape social dynamics" (310).

9. Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 2, 3.

Moving the ethics of passivity away from questions concerning inter-subjective recognition and the socio-economic forces that create marginalized modes of mobility is not necessarily a quietist retreat away from the political, any more than Wordsworth's introspective tendency is a self-absorbed withdrawal from the world. The poet is neither apolitical nor solipsistic in his investment in the ontological question of what alternative—and as of yet unrecognizable—modes of being can emerge from the commonality of man and rock, for example. Instead, he anticipates Elizabeth Grosz's reticence towards the humanist "politics of recognition" that underpin theories of sympathy—"on the grounds that the desire to be known, seen, and valued by the Other is an inevitably submissive acquiescence to a humanism that can never fail to be masculine."[10] In her project of developing a Spinozist "posthumanist politics of renaturalization," Hasana Sharp elaborates on this stance, which "maintains that the cure for dehumanization cannot be the achievement of 'personhood,' as long as personhood depends upon regarding one another as uniquely capable of transcending nature."[11] Spinoza's politics of renaturalization, in other words, ask us not to judge beings against a predetermined external and exclusivist criterion—e.g., are these "persons," or, do they fall under the category of "the human"?—but to evaluate entities according to their "power" (*potentia*), defined as an immanent capacity to act and be acted upon.[12] Similarly, Wordsworth's fundamentally ecological project of an ethics of wise passiveness illuminates the empowering affordances of opening oneself to gentle passions, irrespective of one's social or biological—or, indeed, ontological—standing.[13]

This discussion explores Wordsworth's reliance on figures of wise passiveness, by first unpacking his views on passivity and contrasting

10. See Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 159.

11. Ibid.

12. The nuanced difference between Spinoza's use of *potestas* and *potentia* is lost in English, which translates both terms as "power." While the former describes a relational power (power *over* something), *potentia* refers to the immanent and constitutive capacities of a being. The former therefore usually has more institutional or legal connotations, and the latter ontological ones.

13. As Simpson puts it, "[t]here is nothing of a conventionally restorative humanism about [Wordsworth's] determination to represent persons in a state of exigent singularity" (*Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern*, 3).

them to Spinoza's, before turning to three poems as case studies: "Resolution and Independence," which thematizes the very kind of wise passiveness Wordsworth values; and then "The Thorn" and "The Idiot Boy," both of which provide examples of how the Romantic poet uses prosody to cultivate a wise passiveness in his readers.

Dynamizing Passivity

Wordsworth introduces the concept of wise passiveness in the very first poem of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, "Expostulation and Reply," a conversation in verse between two friends, William and Matthew. When Matthew asks why he would rather waste his days sitting alone on a stone than engage in a more obviously productive and empowering activity like "drink[ing] the spirit" of books (7), the latter replies:

> "The eye it cannot chuse but see,
> "We cannot bid the ear be still;
> "Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
> "Against or with our will.
>
> "Nor less I deem there are powers
> "Which of themselves our minds impress,
> "That we can feed this mind of ours
> "In a wise passiveness.
>
> "Think you, mid all this mighty sum
> "Of things for ever speaking,
> "That nothing of itself will come,
> "But we must still be seeking? (17–28)

In this dialogue, William is voicing Wordsworth's criticism of the notion that the human mind can only be empowered or "fed" by abstract, intellectual means, namely books, which, Matthew insists, he ought to actively seek out—"Up! Up! and drink the spirit breath'd / From dead men to their kind" (7–8). By describing William's lack of activity as a lack of productivity, and by associating this indolence with a life of the mind, Matthew frames the opposition between passive perceptions and active volitions in terms of a body and mind dualism. Such a schema goes as far back as Aristotle, and it played an important role in the devaluation of the body in favour of the intellect in scholasticism and in early modern writings by philosophers

such as Descartes and Malebranche.[14] This view was also a mainstay of the Enlightenment culture against which Wordsworth reacted in his writings. Alexander Pope, for instance, lays out this tension in characteristically dualistic fashion in his *Essay on Man* (1734). After setting up a series of antagonistic oppositions between activity and passivity, and mind and body—"in doubt to act, or rest" (2.7); "In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer" (2.9); "Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd" (2.13)—Pope goes on to explicitly attach values to each: "Man's superior part / Uncheck'd may rise, and climb from art to art: / But when his own great work is but begun, / What Reason weaves, by Passion is undone" (2.39–42).[15] Here mind is pitted against body (in a struggle associated with the conflict between activity and rest), and thought and passion, and it is the first element of each of those binaries that is associated with "Man's superior part." Even a reversal of this power dynamic—as witnessed in David Hume's famous statement that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave to the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them"[16]—maintains an oppositional, mutually exclusive relation between an active "master" and a passive "slave," whereby the one asserts itself only to the detriment of the other.

William's rebuff in the passage above is twofold. Firstly, he insists that his motionlessness is not as idle as it initially appears, pointing to an activity that is operative even at the level of bodies, human or non-human. This is a world in which external things are forever speaking, and in which the body itself is a locus of actions that are emphatically non-volitional. The eye cannot "chuse but see," he says, at once affirming its lack of agency (it cannot choose) and the necessity of its activity (it cannot *but* see).[17] As an intrinsically dynamic and

14. For an overview of this issue, see Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially chapters 1–5.

15. Quoted from the following edition: Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, ed. Tom Jones (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

16. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 415.

17. This line also echoes the beginning of the poem that opened the initial 1798 publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, namely Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere": "The wedding-guest stood still / And listens like a three year's child; / The Marinere hath his will. // The wedding-guest sate on a stone, / He cannot chuse but hear" (18–22). Given the intrusiveness and coerciveness of the Mariner in

relational being, William's human body is not defined by volitional and self-determined activity, but by giving up control of the encounters it seeks. By indulging in motionlessness, William abandons himself to a spectrum of invisible motions and exchanges between his body and its surroundings.

Perhaps a more important rebuff to Matthew is the poem's suggestion that this distributed, "quiet" activity is not antagonistic to enlightenment or inversely proportional to the activity of the mind. The powers impressing the mind from without are equally apt at feeding it, hence Wordsworth's key characterization of such a state as one of "wise passiveness." A kind of empowering knowledge comes from this strategic passivity, of leaving oneself open to outside intervention.[18] A similar line of thought recurs throughout Wordsworth's contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*. In "Michael, A Pastoral Poem," the closing piece of the 1800 edition, for example, the speaker recounts that:

> And hence this Tale, while I was yet a boy
> Careless of books, yet having felt the power
> Of Nature, by the gentle agency
> Of natural objects, led me on to feel
> For passions that were not my own. (27–31)

By opening oneself to "gentle agencies," as Wordsworth suggests here, one is introduced to a wide breadth of passions that are not one's own. This ability to feel with and for a rich array of different beings is a kind of ontologically indiscriminate sympathy—one that cares not for the mode of being that is felt for or sympathized with—as well as a type of learning contrasted to the education derived from books. In both these poems, the mind can thus be fed not despite passiveness but through its cultivation.

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this scene, the redeployment of these lines in the poem that usurped the place of the "Rime" in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* speaks to Wordsworth's attempt to imagine an alternative kind of passivity, one that is not necessarily the result of an overpowering external agency that "hath his will."

18. This exploration of the epistemological value of passivity recalls Amanda Jo Goldstein's discussion of Goethe's concept of "tender empiricism," recasting "'objectivity' to mean an observer's vulnerability to transformation by the objects under view." See her monograph *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 8.

Wordsworth himself theorizes this call for a wise passiveness more explicitly in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where we find not only an exposition of his poetic goals, but also a sketch of what a Wordsworthian ethics might be. While explaining why his poems eschew the traditional emphasis on action and setting in favour of a minute attention to feelings at play, Wordsworth praises the capacity to become excited "without the application of gross and violent stimulants," insisting that "one being is elevated above another in proportion as he possesses this capability."[19] He then frames his own project as an attempt to foster that very "capability" in his readers: "It has therefore appeared to me that to endeavour to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged."[20] Thus, from the opening pages of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth is explicit about the ethical aims of his writing practice, as well as about the way in which poetry is meant to impact both minds and bodies. He writes in a style expected to cultivate in his readers a greater capacity for excitement—or more specifically, a capacity to be excited without the artificial "stimulants" of bad art (in his words, "the application of gross and violent stimulants")—not simply because this appeal to the emotions makes for a more aesthetically pleasing and engaging experience, but because it "elevates" those who read his works above other beings.

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19. Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 1.148. While his invective here appears to be directed primarily at Gothic fiction—those "frantic novels, [and] sickly and stupid German Tragedies" (1.150)—it is worth noting that the poet also participates in a broader reaction to the eighteenth-century literature of sensibility. See, for example, Kate Singer's description of the writings of Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson in terms of a retreat away from overwhelming activity and towards a state that is nevertheless, as in Wordsworth's works, not simply inertia: "Smith and Robinson answer the sensitive and excessive physiological response that characterizes the discourse of sensibility in the eighteenth century, not with stillness, silence, or emptiness, but with a set of figures I am calling vacancy, that stem the tide of sensibility and open a space for another sort of release—and another sort of affect altogether—into the motion of the waves." See Kate Singer, *Romantic Vacancy: The Poetics of Gender, Affect, and Radical Speculation* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019), xiv. As Singer points out, the "poetess of sensibility" is also a figure with whom Wordsworth engages in an ambivalent manner through his singing female characters, like the Mad Mother or the Solitary Reaper, Wordsworth thus presents a woman who "weeps tremulous tears[,] whose body quivers with emotion, [… and who] overwhelms the poet with the material force of her sensation" (ibid., 63).

20. Ibid.

As previously discussed, an ethics cultivating a natural capacity to be affected puts Wordsworth at odds with many of his forebearers. There are, however, strong parallels to be drawn with Spinoza, who also breaks with tradition by "abandoning the distinction between active volitions and passive perceptions."[21] Significantly, just as Wordsworth is concerned with the relative "elevation" that comes from the capacity of being "wisely passive," Spinoza's most striking intervention in the discussion concerning passivity occurs when he evaluates the different degrees of excellence of one being—or "mode"—compared to another. Initially, Spinoza's fundamentally non-hierarchical philosophy might seem to leave no room for such comparative judgements. Indeed, up to Part II of the *Ethics*, everything points to a radical ontological equality between natural beings. For example, the appendix to Part I states: "The perfection of things is to be judged solely from their nature and power; things are not more or less perfect because they please or offend men's senses, or because they are of use to, or are incompatible with, human nature."[22] Read in conjunction with IID6, which states that "by reality and perfection I understand the same thing," this passage suggests that every being is already perfect insofar as it is real, and any form of comparison hoping to generate "degrees" of perfection according to external standards is illusory; such comparisons are but the anthropomorphic projections unto other beings of categories like "relatability" or "usefulness."

And yet, in IIP13S, Spinoza leans in a different direction: "However, we also cannot deny that ideas differ among themselves, as objects themselves do, and that one is more excellent than the other, and contains more reality, just as the object of the one is more excellent than the object of the other and contains more reality." Given the earlier passage, we might wonder what exactly Spinoza proposes as grounds for evaluating the relative "excellence" or "reality" of a being; how is it that one object or idea might have "more reality" than another? He attempts an explanation in the following passage: "In proportion as

21. James, *Passion and Action*, 151.

22. Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 31. Hereafter cited in the text, following the conventional abbreviations: P = Proposition; D = Definition; S = Scholium (so that, for example, so that, for example, "IID6" refers to Definition 6 of Part II, and "IIP13S" refers to the Scholium to Proposition 13 of Part II).

a body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once.... And from these [truths] we can know the excellence of a mind over the others" (IIP13S). In other words, the basis for comparative judgements is both one's capacity to act (doing many things at once) and to be affected (being acted on in many ways and perceiving many things). Thus, the capacity for affection is directly proportional to the ontological "power" and ethical "excellence" of a being.

Three features of Spinoza's position deserve to be highlighted here. First, relative excellence is judged according to both mental *and* bodily criteria. That is to say, there is no prioritization of the development of the mind over the body in the achievement of excellence. In fact, in the above passage, it is the capacities of the body that are discussed first in introducing the criteria for the assessment of perfection. The importance of a body with great affective capacities is something on which Spinoza insists throughout his *Ethics*: "Whatever so disposes the human body that it can be affected in a great many ways, or renders it capable of affecting external bodies in a great many ways, is useful to man.... The more the body is rendered capable of [being affected], the more the mind is capable of perceiving" (IVP38). Second, passivity is granted an equal role alongside activity when Spinoza describes what is a capacity for affection. Having a great degree of power or excellence does not merely imply the capacity to accomplish extraordinary actions, but also to be receptive in a way that is not possible to a lesser mode—that is, for the mind to perceive many things, and for the body to be acted on by many things. And finally, there is an insistence on quantity rather than quality in the assessment of this capacity. Acting powerfully, or having an outstanding bodily or mental receptivity, does not mean showcasing the ability to deal with actions and passions that are themselves powerful. Rather, it means, as Spinoza insists, the capacity to act on, and be acted on by, a great *many* things *at once*.

The Spinozist criteria for evaluating a being's perfection establish an ethical project that is in part defined by striving to increase the body's capacity to be affected. When Wordsworth, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, proposes to cultivate in his readers a capacity for excitement, it is thus not a stretch to hear an echo of Spinoza's position, especially given the notable caveat about "stimulants" that the former writer

adds in presenting his project. As we saw, Wordsworth insists that "the human mind is capable of excitement without the application of gross and violent stimulants," and later attacks "frantic novels, [and] sickly and stupid German Tragedies" for leading to a "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation" and "acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind."[23] These comments recall Spinoza's nuanced perspective: a powerful capacity to be affected is not merely the facility to endure a powerful affection; rather, this capacity necessitates a subtler baseline sensibility, namely the ability to be affected by a multiplicity of gentle passions.[24] Wordsworth is deeply concerned with the capacity to register underwhelming passions rather than overwhelming ones, as shown by the significance he consistently attaches to understated affections.[25]

This investment in passivity as an alternative gateway to activity is key to understanding Wordsworth's interest in the marginalized bodies populating his native Cumbria. But his willingness to experiment with an empowering passivity is also where he departs most from Spinoza, who shows decidedly more ambivalence concerning figures that challenge normative embodiment and mobility. For example, Spinoza writes that he does not "know how greatly we should admire someone who hangs himself, or children, fools, and madmen, etc." (IIP49S[III.B (iv)]); additionally, he judges that "he who, like an infant or child, has a body capable of very few things … has a mind which considered solely

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23. Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 1.150.

24. In this respect, Spinozist and Wordsworthian views of passivity distinguish themselves from Stoic *impassivity*. Whereas the latter concept is either a preventive or a therapeutic exercise aimed at avoiding or attenuating inevitably overwhelming passions (such as grief or anger), the former perspectives try to open a space for passions that would otherwise go unrecognized. On stoicism and Spinozism as different strategies for coping with "states of vehemence," see Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 230–34.

25. Here the examples abound: the "gentle shock of mild surprize" ("There Was A Boy," 19); "the gentle agency / Of natural objects" ("Michael," 29–30); and "for [nature] can so … impress / With quietness and beauty" ("Tintern Abbey," 126, 127–28). See also the claim, in the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, that "he whose soul hath risen / Up to the height of feeling intellect" shall have his life full "Of little loves and delicate desires, / Mild interests and gentlest sympathies" (13.204–05, 209–10). On Wordsworth's project of "recording such ordinary surprises," see Christopher R. Miller, *Surprise: The Poetics of the Unexpected from Milton to Austen* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 171–98.

in itself is conscious of almost nothing of itself, or of God, or of things" (VP39S). Whereas Spinoza commonly uses the figures of the child, the "madman," and the "drunkard" as examples of what powerful bodies are not, it is to these types that Wordsworth consistently turns in order to sketch alternative models of what bodies can do and be. And here, in a way, Wordsworth follows a path opened by Spinoza himself; although *Ethics* generally showcases its author's disdain towards certain kinds of bodies, Spinoza nevertheless notes that "many things are observed in the lower animals which far surpasses human ingenuity, and that sleepwalkers do a great many things in their sleep which they would not dare to do awake" (IIIP2S). As he famously writes: "no one has yet determined what the body can do" (IIIP2S). Even though he never openly endorses this position, Spinoza does implicitly carve out a space for alternative embodiments and the empowering use of passivity.

The Poetics of Wise Passiveness

Encountering Stillness

We witness a similar exploration of what the body can do in the encounter with the Leech Gatherer in "Resolution and Independence," a poem Wordsworth initially drafted in 1802 and published five years later in *Poems, in Two Volumes*.[26] Taking a stroll near a pond, the narrator comes upon a man with "His body … bent double, feet and head / Coming together in their pilgrimage" (73–74). This figure, the Old Man, is stuck in uncanny immobility:

> As a huge Stone is sometimes seen to lie
> Couch'd on the bald top of an eminence;
> Wonder to all who do the same espy
> By what means it could thither come, and whence;
> So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
> Like a Sea-beast crawl'd forth, which on a shelf
> Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun itself.
> Such seem'd this Man, not all alive nor dead,
> Nor all asleep. (64–72)

26. Citations are from William Wordsworth, *"Poems, in Two Volumes," and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

This Old Man's motionlessness makes him difficult to categorize and he is only described as a negation of recognizable states: "not all alive nor dead, nor all asleep." Recalling the state described by William in the poem "Expostulation and Reply," this passivity turns the body into a site of exchange with its environment, and Wordsworth points out this transformation in the preface to the collection. Commenting on his use of similes in the passage quoted above, Wordsworth elucidates:

> The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast; and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate it to the stone; which intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original image, that of the stone, to a nearer resemblance of the figure and condition of the aged Man; who is divested of so much of the indications of life and motion as to bring him to the point where the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison.[27]

David Simpson draws attention to the power dynamics between poet and subject latent in such descriptions, noting that Wordsworth "makes poetic drama out of giving dead things life and taking life away from the living," and positions the Old Man as a commodity form in his verses. As Simpson rhapsodizes, "[t]he poet giveth, the poet taketh away, dispensing life and death, stillness and motion, for the purposes of making a striking record of how things seemed to him at the time, given his own mood and the particular slant of light."[28] This reading is reliant, however, on a certain biocentrism that plays into the normative binaries of life/motion and death/stillness that Wordsworth tries to problematize. The uncanny intensity of the Old Man's motionlessness is less a sign of commodification (turning what is alive into something dead) or fetishism (turning what is dead into something alive)—two readings that conceive of him solely in relation to the poet—than an attempt to reinscribe him in relation to his entire environment.

The Old Man is thus presented as a host for the gentle passions teeming in the active universe surrounding him, leading to a dynamic indistinction where he and his environment constantly pass into one

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27. Wordsworth, "Preface to the Edition of 1815," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 3.33.

28. Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern*, 180–81.

another.[29] The narrator, for example, tells us that "his voice to me was like a stream / Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide" (114–15). This zone of exchange is reinforced by the numerous syntactical ambiguities throughout the poem, which open up the possibility of competing readings where subject and object can always potentially change place with one another. In the lines "he the Pond / Stirred" (85–86), for example, it remains open who (or what) is stirred by what (or whom). The lines "still as I drew near with gentle pace, / Beside the little pond or Moorish flood / Motionless as a Cloud the Old Man stood" (80–82) stand out for a similar reason. The most obvious reading sets up an oxymoron that perfectly captures the character's contradictory state: he is compared to a monolithic object, seemingly trudging along at a glacial pace, but in fact exhibiting a vast array of internal micro-movements. Yet this passage leaves open the possibility that it is not the Old Man but the pond or the flood that is "Motionless as a Cloud." It also remains unclear whether "still" is used as an adverb, denoting the unchanging nature of the scene as the narrator approaches, or as an adjective, referring to the immobility of the Old Man.[30] In fact, wordplay involving "still" abounds throughout the poem, encapsulating the Wordsworthian understanding of "stillness" as both physical immobility and dynamic tendency to persist: "The Old Man still stood talking by my side" (113); and "'Yet still I persevere'" (133).

The Old Man's uncanny stillness and interplay with his environment ultimately point to its own kind of knowledge: "At length, himself unsettling, he the Pond / Stirred with his Staff, and fixedly did look / Upon the muddy water, which he conn'd, / As if he had been reading

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29. Ron Broglio notes how Wordsworth, in his picturesque poems of encounter, often "abandons conventional subject–object relationships and in their place creates confounding layers of intersubjective identity." This creative act leads to "an ontologically different subject, a self that is literally beside itself as identity gets established through a transfer of characteristics between the body and the land." *Technologies of the Picturesque: British Art, Poetry, and Instruments, 1750–1830* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2008), 82.

30. Owen Boynton analyzes in detail the role played by punctuation in generating syntactical ambiguity throughout the poem. Comparing the changes in punctuation between the 1802, 1807, and eventual 1849 versions, he concludes that the version published in *Poems* in 1807 has in fact the most ambiguous syntax. See Owen Boynton, "Wordsworth's Perplexed Punctuation in 'Michael' and 'Resolution and Independence,'" *Romanticism* 19, no. 1 (2013): 83–86.

in a book" (85–88). As in the poems previously examined, wise passiveness as ability to register gentle affections is described as a practice analogous to, yet distinct from, that of engaging with books. The fact that Wordsworth explicitly describes the Old Man's environment as legible, something capable of being "conn'd," signals an intervention in models of knowledge acquisition. The act of "reading" a landscape as if it were a book was a well established trope by the time Wordsworth was writing these lines, one particularly present in eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poetry, in which nature is a repository of symbols reflecting human values and virtues, which are waiting to be deciphered.[31] As Paul H. Fry highlights, however, Wordsworth pushed back against "moralizing emblems" and "anthropocentric landscape moods" throughout his career, essentially "subverting the book of nature *topos* from within."[32] "In a word, Fry summarizes, Wordsworth "appears from his first poetic efforts to have felt that nature becomes even more astonishing if you give up the belief that you can read it like a book."[33] Indeed, the interpretation of nature as a placeholder for human values is emphatically *not* a case of openness to agencies other than one's own, but rather, as we saw in Spinoza, an act of overwriting otherness in accordance with whether it "please[s] or offend[s]" our senses, or whether it is "of use to [...] human nature" (Appendix to Part I).. Nonetheless, perhaps what Wordsworth is getting at here is more nuanced than the need to completely give up the belief that nature can be read like a book. By comparing the Leech Gatherer's conning of the waters to an act of reading, Wordsworth does not settle for a strict opposition between the practice of reading artificial signs associated with books and an illegible (because non-anthropomorphic) nature. He does not, in other words, confine reading to the disembodied space of human-made symbols, but rather distinguishes between two modes of reading, each of which inflects how we engage with landscapes *and* books. I would argue that Wordsworth, rather than depicting natural environments through a dispassionate model of book reading, develops

31. On the significance of the concept of *paysage moralisé* for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetry, see M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 208–12.

32. Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*, 78.

33. Ibid., 76.

a model of environmental "reading" predicated on dynamic passivity and then applies it to one's engagement with actual books.

The Gentle Passions of Prosody

Given how intertwined Wordsworth's ethics of wise passiveness is with the act of reading itself, it is important to consider the impact of this project on the form of his poems, especially since in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* the poet insists that the capacity to be excited without the application of violent stimuli is something he strives to inculcate in his readers. The possibility of fostering such a sensibility through the act of reading is supported by Wordsworth's materialist view of the prosodic elements of poetry. The Romantic poet is vocal about the embodied relation he imagines his readers to have with the poems of *Lyrical Ballads*. In the note to "The Thorn," for instance, he insists on "the interest the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of the passion, but as *things*, active and efficient,"[34] and in the preface to the 1802 edition he describes poetry as being able to make acts of contemplation "palpably material to us."[35] This attentiveness to the material dimension of reading once again echoes Spinoza's own position. As Warren Montag notes, Spinoza's theory of the body's relationship to the mind is also implicitly a theory of reading:

> The written form of these propositions itself possesses a corporeal existence, not as the realization or materialization of a pre-existing mental, spiritual intention, but as a body amongst other bodies. Spinoza's philosophy compels us to replace questions like "Who has read it?" and "Of those how many have understood it?" with "What material effects has it produced, not only on or in minds, but on bodies as well?"[36]

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34. Wordsworth, "Note to 'The Thorn,'" in *Lyrical Ballads*, 351; italics in the original.

35. Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1850)," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 1.167. In an 1804 letter to John Thelwall, he also notes, in regard to lineation and metre, that "it will be *Physically impossible* to pronounce the last words or syllables of the lines with the same indifference as the others, i.e. not to give them an intonation of one kind or an other, or to follow them with a pause, not called out for by the passion of the subject, but by the *passion of metre* merely." See *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Early Years, 1787–1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 434, emphasis added.

36. Warren Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries* (New York: Verso, 1999), xxi.

Montag subsequently concludes: "Thus writing … can affect bodies, 'move' them without having affected the mind, but it cannot have affected the mind without having affected the body."[37] In other words, for Spinoza writing is not just a conceptual practice but a physical and affective one as well, which is then furthered and expanded by the poet's self-conscious experiments with the powers of language.

Of the numerous qualities of verse that make words "not only … symbols of the passion, but … themselves part of the passion,"[38] the one about which Wordsworth is most vocal is also the feature that separates verse from prose, namely the "power of metre."[39] Wordsworth insists on the capacity that the metre has to generate meaning through its very material effects, acting in tandem with and, thereby complementing, semiotic meaning. The poet usually describes this relation in terms of maintaining an overall equilibrium of passions in the reader—using, for example, a regular metre to "temper" the excitement generated by vivid images, or vice versa.[40] Still, I would like to highlight another way in which Wordsworth mobilizes the capacity of the metre to generate meaning: metre as a mode of "feeling-with," as a form of sympathy departing from eighteenth-century understandings of the concept, and imparting to the reader a state of wise passiveness analogous to that depicted in many of his poems. For Wordsworth, an important aim of poetry is the creation of a space in which the feelings of the poet and of the reader fuse with those of the poem's subject. He makes this clear in the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)": "it will be the wish of the poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs."[41] Wordsworth's use of metre is one way to achieve this effect, and more often than not the sympathy generated by his poems cuts across social and natural lines; the passive reader is asked to experimentally "feel" alongside the elderly, the disabled, the (nonhuman) animal, or even the mineral.

37. Ibid., 21.

38. Wordsworth, "Note to 'The Thorn,'" in *Lyrical Ballads*, 351.

39. Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 1.172.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 1.161.

The opening stanza to "The Thorn" provides an example of this power of metre in play. The poem opens with three lines of iambic tetrameter and one of iambic trimeter, a rhythm very close to the recognizable metre of popular ballads: "There ís a thórn; it loóks so óld, / In trúth you'd fínd it hárd to sáy, / How ít could éver háve been yoúng, / It loóks so óld and gréy" (1–4; accents added). The next two lines continue in the same pattern: "Not hígher thán a twó years' chíld / It stánds eréct this áged thórn" (5–6). At this point, expectations are raised for another line of iambic tetrameter followed by an iambic trimeter to close that first stanza. This expectation, however, is only partially fulfilled:

> No leáves it hás, no thórny points;
> It ís a máss of knótted joínts,
> A wrétched thíng forlórn.
> It stánds eréct, and líke a stóne
> With líchens ít is óvergrówn. (7–11)

Expecting a final line of iambic trimeter at line eight to bring closure to the stanza, we instead stumble upon an additional iambic tetrameter, which slows down the reading pace and in turn introduces a few more lines to the extended stanza. Notably, this rhythmic sprouting makes itself felt just as the poem presents the image of a "mass of knotted joints," and then moves into a description of overgrowth. These first eleven lines in fact feel as if two competing stanzas, each with its own regular metre, were grafted onto one another. As the rest of the poem unfolds, it also becomes apparent that this stylistic effect has broader thematic ramifications. The poem's narrative comes to focus not only on the conflicting emotional, and mental but also bodily states of its protagonist, Martha Ray, who is abandoned for another woman by her fiancé while pregnant with his child: "Sad case for such a brain to hold / Communion with a stirring child!" (144–45). We could as a result read the poem's unusual metre as an attempt to instill in the reader a sense of Martha's conflicting bodily rhythms. In light of Wordsworth's own comments on metre and his poetic vision in general, we can see "The Thorn" as an exercise in bodily composition, both within the poem (thorn/lichen, mother/child) and between the poem and the reader.

Yet while metre is the formal feature that Wordsworth himself discusses at great length in his commentary, his poems often display

a reliance on a wider and richer array of poetic resources than this paratext suggests. The prosodic soundscape in the opening stanza of "The Idiot Boy" provides an example of this diversity. The poem tells the narrative of Betty Foy, who sends her disabled son Johnny to fetch the doctor from a nearby village for their sick neighbour Susan. Johnny never reaches his destination, and as Susan recovers, Betty becomes worried and goes looking for him. She eventually finds him sitting nonchalantly by a stream with his pony grazing nearby. On a thematic level, the poem follows a trajectory from the world of human affairs to the world of nature—or, more accurately, to a world in which human categories and the very distinction between the human and the natural vanishes.[42] This movement recalls the effect produced by the many figures of wise passiveness found in Wordsworth's poems, subjective objects that trouble ontological boundaries.

In the first stanza, we find a similar trajectory from a human, well-individuated, and categorial world, toward one of ontological indistinction:

'Tis eight o'clock,—a clear March night,
The moon is up—the sky is blue,
The owlet in the moonlight air,
He shouts from nobody knows where;
He lengthens out his lonely shout,
Halloo! halloo! a long halloo! (1–6)

We start firmly set in the human world of metric time ("'Tis eight o'clock"), a world that is cut into discrete units of meaning by its exclusively monosyllabic staccato, its use of caesuras further splitting the first two lines in half, and its presentation of the scenery through parataxis: "'Tis eight o'clock,—a clear March night, / The moon is up—the sky is blue." The lines that follow slowly transition into a more integrated and fluid rhythm by dropping the caesuras, introducing polysyllables, and relying on generally softer sounds: "The owlet in the moonlight air, / He shouts from nobody knows where." The final line, like the previous ones, is in iambic tetrameter, but its reliance on repetition, and the exclusive use of vowels as well as /h/, /l/, and /ŋ/ (ng)

42. Johnny's words, which bring the poem to a close, exemplify this blurring of conceptual distinction by mixing up owls and cocks, and moon and sun: "The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, / And the sun did shine so cold" (460–61).

sounds transform the whole line into a single undulatory utterance that is barely held in check by its exclamation points: "Halloo! halloo! a long halloo!" Significantly, this line is for the most part constituted of onomatopoeias. Whereas we began with artificial signs referring to a human world, we end closer to natural mimesis, in a continuous yet periodically modulated sound. Even the sole "human" word featured in that line ("a long")—hidden among the sound of the owls, not unlike Johnny at the end of the poem—becomes indistinguishable from its surroundings through the sheer force of consonance ("halloo! a long halloo").

Insights drawn from studies in cognitive poetics, which examine the effects of poems as "bodies" on the readers' own bodily and cognitive processes, clarify how this transition—from prosodic differentiation to indistinction—relates to the question of dynamic passivity. Reuven Tsur, for example, notes that the voiceless stops /p, t, k/, and vowels along with the liquid and nasal consonants /l, n, ŋ/—precisely the two kinds of sounds that bookend the opening stanza of "The Idiot Boy"—stand at opposite poles of the acoustic and phonetic spectrum. This difference leads to distinct bodily and cognitive effects. At a prereflexive level, it is easier to convert or "recode" the acoustic information of the former into phonetic and then semantic categories, because these sounds are already relatively distinct from their surroundings: the "signal" is more easily distinguished from the "noise," as it were, so they are "perceived as unitary linguistic events, stripped of all pre-categorial sensory information."[43] On the other hand, vowels and /l, n, ŋ/ sounds are more continuous and fluid, and thus carry more sensory richness along with a greater degree of ambiguity, making it harder to distinguish in the acoustic information what is phonetically significant from what is not. These are, in other words, sounds that tend to enmesh with their surroundings. The net effect, argues Tsur, is that vowels along with liquid and nasal sounds dispose readers to be open to a wider spectrum of auditory information, to a receptivity which is arguably correlated with greater emotional openness and flexibility.[44] On a general level, this is an example of the way in which poetry as a body

43. Reuven Tsur, *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics: Second, Expanded and Updated Edition* (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academy Press, 2008), 9. Cf. Ibid., 222.

44. Ibid.

of sound impacts the reader both corporeally and cognitively. But more specifically, this description of how we process acoustic information sheds light on the effect that Wordsworth is generating in the opening stanza of "The Idiot Boy." By gradually transitioning from voiceless stops to vowels and liquid and nasal consonants, Wordsworth encourages what Tsur calls feelings of "openness," "tenderness," or "emotional adaptability,"[45] all of which aptly characterize the Wordsworthian state of wise passiveness.[46]

In this respect, Wordsworth's poetry is an illuminating example of the implications of Spinoza's theory of bodies. Not only does the latter insist on an ethics of bodily power or excellence that necessarily must accompany the cultivation of the mind, but his revision of cultural understandings of excellence leads to novel ways of thinking about what a powerful body might be. For Spinoza, as for Wordsworth, a powerful body is not just a physically active one; it is also a body that showcases an outstanding capacity to be affected by many things, which in turn lend it the ability to "compose" with other beings and thus acquire knowledge. But Wordsworth's approach also revises Spinoza's position. By being more open-minded to what form such

45. Ibid.

46. In Percy Shelley's essay "On Life" we can hear echoes of the way in which Wordsworth ties together his ethics of passivity to both ontological indifference and affective openness and tenderness. These strands are brought together in Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy" through the figure of the child, which Spinoza notably dismisses as having "a body capable of very few things" and a mind "conscious of almost nothing of itself, or of God, or of things" (VP39S). Shelley writes: "Let us recollect our sensations as children. What a distinct and intense apprehension had we of the world and of ourselves.… We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass. There are some persons who in this respect are always like children […who] feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction. And these are states which precede or accompany or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life." See *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Freistat (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 507. As Julie Carlson notes, this call to "recollect" a childlike affective state also leads Shelley to an ethical project woven into the very fabric of his poetic practice: "Not only is the end goal of human development for Shelley attainment of a similarly undifferentiated cognitive and moral state but also poetry is the means through which so-called developed minds intuit, re-experience, and learn to desire to regain this lack of differentiation." For the context, see Julie Carlson, "Like Love: The Feel of Shelley's Similes," *Romanticism and the Emotions*, ed. Joel Faflak and Richard C. Sha (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 82.

a passivity might take, Wordsworth explores a position suggested but never fully adopted by the *Ethics*. We also hear echoes of this project in the work of contemporary critics: for example, Derek Attridge writes of a "willed passivity" when a text is approached "as an event rather than as an object."[47] Likewise, Michel Chaouli describes the reader's position vis-à-vis a text as one of "exposure":

> Exposure names that way of being in which I put myself into a position such that I can be affected in ways I cannot fathom. When I lean back in the theatre seat before the movie starts or walk back and forth looking for the right spot from which to take in a painting, I am developing techniques of becoming passive in the right ways. This learned passivity, this developed sensitivity is what exposes me to what is "beyond myself."[48]

Capitalizing on the reader's position of exposure, Wordsworth employs the tools at his disposal to, in his words, "produce or enlarge a greater capability to be excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants"—and in so doing, he transforms his poetics into an ethics of wise passiveness.

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47. Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8.

48. Michel Chaouli, "Criticism and Style," *New Literary History* 44, no. 3 (2013): 333.