

THE PRELUDE, 1794

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One of the earliest sequences of philosophical poetry adapted for the poem on the growth of the poet's mind has often been celebrated as such, though arguably for the wrong reasons. Wordsworth stitched it in just over 100 lines into Book 3 of *The Prelude*, with an abrupt and self-conscious transition—"A track pursuing not untrod before"—acknowledging the sustained and surprisingly intricate act of self-borrowing that makes up the better part of the long verse paragraph that follows, beginning with the familiar lines,

From deep analogies by thought supplied,
Or consciousness not to be subdued,
To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower,
Even the loose stones that cover the high-way,
I gave a moral life, I saw them feel,
Or link'd to them some feeling . . .

(3.121–27)

James Butler, editor of the Cornell *Ruined Cottage* and *The Pedlar*, has traced this paragraph's provenance to lines developed in DC MS. 17 in early 1798, showing "how 'the foundations of [the Pedlar's] mind were laid' . . . and how the ministry of nature prepared him 'to recognize / The moral properties & scope of things'" (pp. 17–18; see 181, 185). For Butler, as for many before him and most to follow, this pronounced "turn to philosophical writing" represents the first fruits of Wordsworth's "philosophic

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discussions with Coleridge” at Alfoxden and Nether Stowey through the summer and autumn of 1797, when “Wordsworth seems to have absorbed a philosophic system . . . into which he could fit his own feelings about natural harmony” (16). Philosophically inspired and instructed by Coleridge, the story goes, Wordsworth in MS. 17 turned to “his own past experience and the way in which it affected his apprehension of reality” in order to produce “a Pedlar sequence which is, in fact, the poet’s first autobiographical work” (17).

Unfortunately, this frequently retailed developmental story is mistaken on both counts, for neither is the sequence indebted to Coleridge for its original philosophical inspiration nor does it represent “the poet’s first autobiographical work” on this particular philosophical front. That inaugural moment and inspiration demonstrably date to 1794, long before any discussions at all, philosophic or otherwise, with Coleridge. Wordsworth had indeed trod the philosophical track of these lines before, and not for the first time in MS. 17 of 1798, as Butler suggests, but rather in DC MSS. 9 and 10 of 1794, when Wordsworth took in hand a series of “corrections and additions” to *An Evening Walk*, the juvenile poem he had hastily published (along with *Descriptive Sketches*) the year before. Wordsworth returned to the best of these new lines when he first conceived the need, early in 1798, to supply his Pedlar’s philosophical credentials, which means that the signs that Butler takes as presumptive evidence for a “first” and “pronounced” turn to “autobiographical” philosophical poetry actually predate by three years or more the advent of Coleridge in mid-1797 as Wordsworth’s constant companion, poetic near-equal, and supposed philosophical mentor.¹ But if Coleridge cannot take any credit for Wordsworth’s truly first and evidently decisive turn to philosophically freighted self-reflection, who or what should instead? The long-awaited answer is in store here, but first I provide indisputable evidence that such an old critical chestnut really deserves another crack.

In context of the “Cambridge” book of *The Prelude*, the sequence in question appears to refer to Wordsworth’s first or second year at university, 1787–89, the period during which *An Evening Walk* was originally composed (*An Evening Walk* 3–7). But the poetry of the passage itself—its recognizably Wordsworthian thought, diction, and imagery—is attested in surviving manuscripts no earlier than a half-decade later, in the so-called Windy Brow additions to *An Evening Walk*. Wordsworth plundered several of these new sequences of 1794 to create *The Pedlar* drafts of 1798 from which the verses quoted above directly derive. The first

two lines excepted, the balance effectively rewrites in blank verse a claim that Wordsworth first struggled to articulate in a series of four heroic couplets in 1794:

A heart that vibrates evermore, awake
 To feeling for all forms that Life can take,
 That wider still its sympathy extends,
 And sees not any line where being ends:
 Sees sense, through Nature's rudest forms betrayed,
 Tremble obscure in fountain, rock, and shade;
 And while a secret power those forms endears
 Their social accents never vainly hears.²

(125–32)

Both sequences concern the poet's sympathetic responses to what the earlier one calls "Nature's rudest forms . . . in fountain, rock, and shade" and the later one neatly reduces, yet without sacrificing the 1:3 proportion of general-to-specific terms, to "every natural form, rock, fruit or flower." Wordsworth in 1794 "sees sense . . . tremble obscure" in such natural forms, broaching a still-obscure philosophical point he subsequently trims and clarifies, but again without sacrificing the underlying rhetorical structure of the original—in this case a visual metaphor—stating simply, "I saw them feel." True, Wordsworth goes on in *The Pedlar/Prelude* sequence to internalize and subjectivize the same idea, "Or linked to them some feeling," but this alternative, inside-out interpretation of his sympathetic experience was already floated in 1794's "awake / To feeling for all forms that Life can take." And what exactly does the poet, early and late, sensibly perceive in or feelingly project into natural forms? Their individual "social accents" (1794), which aggregate over time into "a moral life" (1798), "a consciousness not to be subdued" (1798) precisely insofar as it "sees not any line where being ends" and thus "wider still its sympathy extends" (1794).

These are close and hardly accidental correspondences between the first six lines of *The Pedlar/Prelude* sequence and an eight-line stretch of composition from 1794 whose philosophical thought and expression were "new" in the sense of "unprecedented in Wordsworth's career" only then. Ditto for the remainder of the paragraph: the bulk of it proves on close inspection to be likewise heavily re-sourced from the *Evening Walk* revisions of 1794. The next eleven and a half lines, for example, constitute an expansion of a six-line sentence from 1794 that reads,

Blest are those spirits tremblingly awake
 To Nature's impulse like this living lake,
 Whose mirror makes the landscape's charms its own
 With touches soft as those to Memory known;
 While, exquisite of sense, the mighty mass
 All vibrates to the lightest gales that pass.

(191–96)

“The mighty mass” is, in the first place, “this living lake,” and it “vibrates” here, “exquisite of sense,” like other natural forms that “tremble obscure” with “sense” in the foregoing lines from 1794. *The Pedlar/Prelude* sequence adapts and improves the general diction and kinesthetic imagery of this passage, so that now “The great mass” of nature in “all” its forms “respire[s] with inward meaning” (*The Prelude* 3.127–29). Similarly, 1794’s double metaphor³ of “spirits” “like [a] living lake” that is “awake / To Nature’s impulse” is both personalized and imagistically concretized in *The Prelude*’s “I was as wakeful, even, as waters are / To the sky’s motion” (3.135–36). Immediately following this internalized metaphor is another—“[I] was obedient as a lute / That waits upon the touches of the wind” (3.137–38)—that consolidates the two figures that likewise immediately follow in 1794, according to which the exquisitely sensitive “living lake” embodies “touches soft” upon its liquid mirror and “vibrates to the lightest gales that pass.”

Yet another draft passage from 1794 supplies the newfound sense of natural insight and election that the mature Wordsworth attributes to his youthful Pedlar/self. The first-person singular of circa 1801,⁴ “for I had an eye / Which . . . evermore / Was looking . . . in all exterior forms” (3.156–59), based on the third-person singular of 1798, “he had an eye which evermore / Looked deep into . . . all exterior forms” (Butler 185), ultimately derives from the third-person plural of an eighteen-line sequence from 1794 concerning “those favoured souls, who . . . See common forms” from a heightened philosophical perspective (203–20). For these specially disposed souls, nature’s “common” forms are anything but: to “see” or, later, “look deeply” into these forms is to “prolong the endless chain” of feelings, “Of joy and grief, of pleasure and of pain,” that have attached to such forms at one time and another (203, 205–6). Likewise, expressly, with Wordsworth himself, whose first-person eye, looking deeply into exterior forms, communicates (“spake”) a “perpetual logic to my soul [that] . . . Did bind my feelings even as in a chain” (*The Prelude* 3.165, 167; cf. the

earlier line “linked to them some feeling”). Even the scope of this spectacular endowment that operates on “all exterior forms, / Near or remote, minute or vast” (3.159–60) comes ready measured from the same inspiring sequence of 1794, which depicts the “favoured soul’s” visionary “love” as a force that extends and diffuses itself, sunlike, from “near” and “minuter” objects to “life’s remotest bounds” (214, 218).

To sum up an analysis that is representative rather than exhaustive and can be repeated with a surprising range of Wordsworth’s heretofore “earliest” and, for many, most exemplary philosophical efforts:⁵ almost none of the philosophical thought, language, or imagery of *The Pedlar/Prelude* sequence I’ve been examining was original in 1798, never mind 1801; rather, the bulk of it backdates to 1794, which means that little or none of its philosophical ambition or content can rightly be ascribed to Coleridge.⁶ But if not Coleridge, then who? Who or what prompted Wordsworth to undertake the Windy Brow revisions of 1794 that represent, as James Averill, editor of the Cornell *An Evening Walk*, appreciates but does not otherwise explain, such a “marked shift in emphasis” and sudden “change in . . . interests,” whereby stock-in-trade landscape painting gives way to an unusually self-reflective form of “*paysage moralisé*” that plumbs and, so to speak, moralizes upon “the most obscure reaches of human experience” (13–15)? Who or what shifted Wordsworth’s focus, poetic and philosophical, so decisively and consequentially, as it would turn out, for Wordsworth and for English poetry at large, in the short space of time between late January 1793, when Joseph Johnson published the original *Evening Walk*, and late spring 1794, when Wordsworth drafted and fair-copied his breakthrough “corrections and additions” to *An Evening Walk* in MSS. 9 and 10?

The usual stopgap for plugging holes in this particularly patchy period of Wordsworth’s developmental history—William Godwin and his *Enquiry Concerning Human Justice* (1793)⁷—in this instance simply won’t stick, for Wordsworth’s new focus in 1794 on complex moral feelings linked to common natural forms can owe nothing at all to the dispassionate political reasonings of go-to Godwin. Yet within Wordsworth’s politics in late spring of 1794 lies the best clue to the impetus behind the poetic and philosophical change of heart he’s inscribing at the very same hour in the Windy Brow revisions to *An Evening Walk*. Though the documentary record of Wordsworth’s thought and reading at the time is notoriously thin, on the topic of politics it is for once unusually full and specific thanks to his epistolary planning with William Mathews of the never-to-be-launched *Philanthropist*. Of the series of letters that Wordsworth pens in support

of *The Philanthropist*, one in particular, written June 8, 1794, betrays his recent and careful reading of Dugald Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, the first volume of which was published in Edinburgh and London in early 1792 and widely reviewed through the early months of 1793, when Godwin's *Enquiry* was likewise noticed in the press.⁸

Although this particular letter has been persuasively read by Nicholas Roe, Kenneth Johnston, and others as a clear-cut endorsement of Godwinism on Wordsworth's part, a close comparative reading reveals that the political opinions Wordsworth subscribes align still more closely with Stewart's, which in their turn, especially in context of the broader analysis of human faculty psychology that Stewart sets out in *Elements*, more readily align with the post-Godwinian, pre-*Preludean* strains of the contemporary Windy Brow revisions. The case is not simply that Wordsworth shares a lexicon of moderate political progressivism with Stewart, for much the same can be demonstrated with Godwin and other reform-minded political pundits of the day. More revealingly for the argument of direct influence, each and every position that Wordsworth advocates in the course of the June 8th letter to Mathews can be traced to a single section of Stewart's *Elements* on "The Use and Abuse of general Principles in Politics" (sec. 8, pp. 233–73, of chap. 4, "Of Abstraction").

Wordsworth takes his lead from a key paragraph of this discussion, in which Stewart contracts for a reformist middle ground between Burkean conservatism and revolutionary progressivism or "innovation": "The danger, indeed, of sudden and rash innovations cannot be too strongly inculcated. . . . But it is possible also to fall into the opposite extreme; and to bring upon society the very evils we are anxious to prevent, by an obstinate opposition to those gradual and necessary reformation that the genius of the times demands" (245). Writing to Mathews, Wordsworth stakes out precisely the same moderate territory in very similar terms, observing first that, on the one hand, the revolutionary "destruction of [political] institutions . . . appears to me to be hastening on too rapidly"; worrying next that, on the other hand, reactionary British "conduct with reference both to foreign and domestic policy" may actually work to bring about "that dreadful event" (i.e., revolution) that would otherwise "be averted"; and moderately committing himself at last, following the order of Stewart's parallel arguments to the letter, to "a gradual and constant reform" of the existing political order (*Letters* 123–24). Stewart proceeds to argue in the next two sentences of the same paragraph that "the violent revolutions which . . . have convulsed modern Europe, have arisen" principally in consequence of

“bigoted attachment to antiquated forms,” a “reverence of abuses which have been sanctioned by time” (245–46). Wordsworth in his letter urges exactly the same argument, again in much the same terms: though he “recoil[s] from the bare idea of revolution,” he recognizes that “the people . . . can only be preserved from a convulsion by . . . reform of those abuses which, if left to themselves, may grow to such a height as to render, even a revolution desirable” (*Letters* 123–24).

Two closely related paragraphs in Stewart’s discussion likewise undergird Wordsworth’s declaration of political principles to Mathews. In one, Stewart suggests that, insofar as the “respect of hereditary rank, may have its use in counteracting that aristocracy which arises from inequality of wealth,” “it may reasonably be doubted, whether a well-wisher to mankind would be disposed to accelerate its destruction, till the true principles of political oeconomy are completely understood and acknowledged by the world” (259). With less ambivalence toward conservative institutions that, for the sake of social order, must nevertheless be temporarily preserved, Wordsworth writes to very similar purpose, arguing that although “Hereditary distinctions, and privileged orders of every species, . . . must necessarily counteract the progress of human improvement,” still, “The destruction of those institutions I condemn appears to me to be hastening on too rapidly” (*Letters* 123–24). “There is,” he accordingly continues, “a further duty incumbent upon every enlightened friend of mankind. He should let slip no opportunity of explaining and enforcing [the] general principles of social order” (*Letters* 124). An earlier paragraph of *Elements* suggests that these “general principles of social order,” which Stewart summarizes as the “oeconomical system,” “appear highly favourable to the tranquillity of society; inasmuch as, by inspiring us with a confidence in the triumph which truth and liberty must infallibly gain in the end over error and injustice, it has a tendency to discourage every plan of innovation which is supported by violence and bloodshed” (256). The letter to Mathews again follows suit. The “principles” that “infallibly” ensure “triumph” in Stewart become in Wordsworth “rules [that] cannot but lead to good” (*Letters* 124). Where Stewart’s principles are “highly favourable” to “tranquillity,” “truth and liberty,” Wordsworth’s rules are set to “establish freedom with tranquillity” (124). And just as Stewart would therefore “discourage every plan . . . supported by violence and bloodshed,” so Wordsworth declares himself “a determined enemy to every species of violence” (124). Nonviolent progress through political enlightenment would succeed where revolution neither had nor could, Stewart firmly believed;

Wordsworth, in his would-be-editorial persona of “The Philanthropist,” pretty much perfectly agreed.

That Wordsworth must have carefully read *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* relatively near to or even at the time he was penning this largely derivative letter is significant, for Stewart’s treatise concerns a good deal more than just politics. Weighing in on the broader philosophical debate between Lockean empiricists and Berkeleyan idealists, Stewart writes in the first place to analyze the powers of mind that cannot be derived from sensational experience but that must instead operate upon such experience in order to build up increasingly complex orders of ideas. These innate or “elemental” cognitive powers that manipulate sensational information in support of human intellection are, in Stewart’s initial analysis (he was already projecting the two additional volumes of his masterwork that appeared, decades later, in 1814 and 1827), “powers of external perception,” “attention,” “conception,” “abstraction,” “association,” “memory,” and “imagination.” The first volume of *Elements* dedicates a chapter to each of these “faculties or principles of the human mind,” and, wherever possible and appropriate, Stewart illustrates his metaphysical claims with extracts, often accompanied by detailed analyses, from the poetry of Addison, Butler, Home, Mason, Pope, and others, that is, the canon of eighteenth-century English poetry in which the 24-year-old Wordsworth was especially well versed.

In a section that Wordsworth is unlikely to have overlooked, “Of Poetical Fancy” in the chapter “Of Association,” which begins just thirty pages after the close of the political section from which I’ve been quoting, Stewart seeks to uncover the unique psychological data that lie coded in “our most celebrated poetical performances,” for example, in “allusions from material objects, both to the intellectual and the moral worlds” (307). Instances of this especially poetic kind of “allusion,” in which a concrete physical object as topic or tenor generates an abstract metaphysical subject as figure or vehicle, are, Stewart admits,

comparatively few in number, and are not to be found in descriptive or in didactic works; but in compositions written under the influence of some particular passion, or which are meant to express some peculiarity in the mind of the author. Thus, a melancholy man, who has met with many misfortunes in life, will be apt to moralize on every physical event, and every appearance of nature; because his attention dwells more habitually on human life and conduct, than on the material objects around him. (307–8)

The passage reads like a recipe for the *Evening Walk* revisions of 1794, which repeatedly turn from the “material objects” and “physical events” of the original poem’s “descriptive” tableaux to represent “the intellectual and the moral worlds” that the poet now meditatively associates therewith. Many of the resulting sequences do indeed express “some particular passion” and “peculiarity in the mind of the author,” a “favoured soul” who is, as Averill and others have perceived,⁹ suddenly “apt to moralize on . . . every appearance of nature” and whose attention now “dwells more habitually on human life and conduct” than it had in either of the loco-descriptive poems Wordsworth had committed to the press only a year before.

Deriving Wordsworth’s new introspective or “autobiographical” impulse from Stewart helps to explain two other peculiarities of *The Pedlar/Prelude* sequence that come into focus when it is set beside the *Evening Walk* revisions from which it derives. One is the fifth line of the quotation I’ve given at the outset—“Even the loose stones that cover the high-way”—which, unlike the immediately preceding and following lines, has no precedent in the *Evening Walk* revisions of 1794. There is precedent for it, however, in Stewart, and precisely in connection with the passage from “Of Poetical Fancy” on melancholic metaphors that I’ve just introduced. Moreover, that same passage from *Elements* will account simultaneously for the second peculiarity of *The Pedlar/Prelude* sequence, which likewise has no precedent in the revisions of 1794: Wordsworth’s strange aside that “Such sympathies” with “natural form” in “rock, fruit or flower, / Even the loose stones that cover the highway,” “would sometimes show themselves / By outward gestures and by visible looks” (3.124–25, 145–46). “Some call’d it madness” (3.147), Wordsworth enigmatically continues: well, who, specifically?

Again, the imagined autobiographical context of Book 3 of *The Prelude* would imply Cambridge peers or perhaps tutors, but the poetic and philosophical contexts of the passage, datable precisely to mid-1794, indicate instead a more considerable figure in Wordsworth’s developmental history, Dugald Stewart, whose doubts about melancholic natural sympathies still register forcefully when in 1798 Wordsworth revisits his *Elements*-inspired ruminations of 1794. In his discussion of poetic “allusions” or analogies that “are not to be found in descriptive or didactic works” but instead signal a more fanciful, meditative order of “composition written under the influence of some particular passion, or . . . express[ing] some peculiarity in the mind of the author,” Stewart illustrates the point with lines from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, in which the banished

Duke Senior, a “melancholy man” who “moralize[s] on . . . every appearance of nature,”

Finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

Stewart immediately comments, “But this is plainly a distempered state of mind; and the allusions [i.e., “trees have tongues to speak,” “running brooks are books,” “stones are sermons”] please us, not so much by the analogies they present to us, as by the picture they give of the character of the person to whom they have occurred” (308).

In the subsection of his final chapter (“Of Imagination”) that treats “the Inconveniences resulting from an ill-regulated Imagination,” Stewart lays out the rationale behind his bald assertion that Duke Senior’s tendency to read “Sermons in stones” shows “plainly a distempered state of mind.” The underlying cause of the Duke’s imaginative distemper is precisely his “banish[ment]” to the forest of Arden, his lonely “life, exempt from public haunt” as Shakespeare puts it in the line immediately preceding the two that Stewart cites (*As You Like It*, 2.1.15). In Stewart’s view, an individual who lives “at a distance from society” and thus from the daily “pursuits” and “bustle of the world,” and who consequently gives himself up to “long habits of solitary reflection,” will be “apt to contract an unnatural predilection for meditation, and to lose all interest in external occurrences,” at least as they exist in themselves and in relation to others and not merely as occasions to “converse with [his] own thoughts” (508). Within pages, however, Stewart discloses that the very same conditions of social isolation and habitual introspection can lead to quite opposite and philosophically desirable effects, in particular to “the discovery of those profound conclusions which result from an accurate examination of the less obvious relations among ideas” (510). Thus, while “the disordered state of mind to which these observations refer . . . is chiefly incident to men of uncommon sensibility and genius,” Stewart equally expects that “Among the natives of wild and solitary countries we may . . . meet with sublime exertions of poetical imagination and of philosophical research” (510–11). Given this counterevidence of native genius, Stewart allows that “there is one sense of the word *melancholy* . . . which implies nothing either gloomy or malevolent” (510) but rather a rare combination of gifts that might naturally conduce to the production of sublime philosophical poetry.

Even as it inspired his sudden turn from natural description to associated self-reflection, *Elements* may have alerted Wordsworth to a critical

issue that he would have to resolve if he wished to put himself forward as the native genius capable of versifying Stewart's natural philosophy of the human mind. To state the crux bluntly in the specific terms Wordsworth shares with Stewart (and Shakespeare behind him): when is it madness and when is it not to give "a moral life" even "to the loose stones of the high-way" or to find "sermons in stones"? What precisely tips the balance and differentiates these two otherwise identical states of mind? By 1801, when he incorporates the *Evening Walk* additions, as reworked for *The Pedlar*, into *The Prelude*, Wordsworth is at last prepared to lay Stewart's commonsensical concern to rest, stating definitively of his own pansympathetic condition that "It was no madness" (3.156). But Wordsworth arrived at this conviction only circuitously. His path lay through the passionate distempers of moral imagination afflicting the sailor and the female vagrant in *Salisbury Plain*, Rivers and Mortimer in *The Borderers*, and Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*. This trilogy of sociopolitical problem poems preoccupied Wordsworth from 1795 through 1797 and thereby delayed until early 1798 the full flowering of the new buds of philosophical purpose that sprang to life in 1794. Jonathan Wordsworth's *The Music of Humanity* traces in detail how the intervening poems on the "unbalanced mind" rapidly develop from the "extravagant" "sensationalism" of *Salisbury Plain* and *The Borderers* to the naturalized "compassion" of "Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree" and *The Ruined Cottage* (59, 66), and Kenneth Johnston's *Wordsworth and the Recluse* emphasizes the political motivation behind this essentially empirical evolution, as Wordsworth more "closely observes the suffering caused by social forces beyond the control of ordinary people, particularly as it affects their mental condition as both cause and effect of their inability or unwillingness to cope with consequences" (7). This new, quasi-clinical interest in the psychological and social causes of imaginative distemper could well have been stimulated by Stewart, who clearly anticipates Wordsworth's philosophical "ambivalence" about the moral value of the mind's imaginative projections upon its immediate sensations (Jarvis 37).

Thus, in two telling fragments that bespeak the imaginative origins of *The Ruined Cottage* and that represent "Wordsworth inside out, . . . examining negatively themes that in positive form will become his trademark" (Johnston 35; see J. Wordsworth 7ff.), Wordsworth depicts a speaker and a character whose affective projections upon inanimate objects are unmodified by natural, healthful associations that are nevertheless immediately in view. The speaker of "Incipient Madness," for

example, suffers from that “settled temper of the heart, when grief, / Become an instinct, fasten[s] on all things / That promise food,” converting them inexorably into the substance of its one domineering attachment or idea (*Ruined Cottage* 468, lines 8–10). His “sickly heart” has accordingly “tied itself / Even to [a] speck of glass” (12–13), a fragment of window pane belonging to the ruined cottage where, presumably, the speaker’s beloved once dwelt. Fixated upon the shard of glass and its cherished associations, the speaker cannot perceive the moral lesson of recovery through relocation, of “moving on” physically and emotionally, that nature patiently repeats before his very eyes, by the month, by the season, and by the year:

Three weeks
 O’er-hung by the same bramble’s dusky shade
 On this green bank a glow worm hung its light
 And then was seen no more. Within the thorn
 Whose flowery head half hides those ruined pales,
 [Three] seasons did a blackbird build his nest
 [And] then he disappear’d. On the green top
 [Of th]at tall ash a linnet perch’d himself
 And sang a pleasant melancholy song
 Two summers and then vanish’d. I alone
 Remained: the winds of heaven remained—with them
 My heart claimed fellowship and with the beams
 Of dawn and of the setting sun that seemed
 To live and linger on the mouldering walls.

(35–49)

Oblivious in his Mariner-like obsession—“I alone / Remained”—to the living examples of animate fellow creatures, the speaker “claim[s] fellowship” only with inanimate forces of nature whose inevitable daily returns seem to mirror his own and thus to validate the obsessive faithfulness of his distempered sensibility. He is reading a sermon in the diurnal presence of the wind and sun that is not really there to be read.

The impoverished and nearly starving mother of five depicted in “The Baker’s Cart” is similarly afflicted by her own “sick and extravagant” mind, thanks specifically to the “strong access / Of momentary pangs” of hunger and maternal feeling that has “driv’n [her] to that state / In which all past experience melts away / And the rebellious heart to its own will / Fashions the laws of nature” (*Ruined Cottage* 463, lines 21–25). When the Baker’s cart

loaded with bread is mercilessly driven past her cottage, presumably because of an account long in arrears, she distractedly blames the vehicle itself for lack of human feeling, thereby revealing the deeply psychological consequence of her and her children's social isolation and physical privation: "That waggon does not care for us," she whispers to the speaker "in a low and fearful voice" that "bespoke a mind" "by misery and rumination deep / Tied to dead things and seeking sympathy / In stocks and stones" (463, lines 16–17; 467).

As Simon Jarvis has argued, the starving mother's misattribution of moral consciousness to the "stocks and stones" of the Baker's cart is the insane obverse of the moral life donated to "the loose stones of the highway" by the philosophical Pedlar and his prototype, the youthful poet of *The Prelude* Book 3 (7). Johnston has likewise observed of "Incipient Madness" that while "one would not want to claim [its] speaker is the Pedlar or the narrator of 'The Ruined Cottage,' let alone Wordsworth, yet they all share an obsessive fixation on a ruin for reassuring signs of life" (34; see Jarvis 39). But the crucial difference in the mind of the Pedlar and the poet who tells his (own) tale is that its profound sensibility is nevertheless tempered by its enduring ability to read "the forms of things" with a "worthy eye" and thus to take their restorative associations rapidly to heart. Returning in his annual rounds to Margaret's now ruined cottage, the Pedlar "see[s] . . . / Things" in the desolate scene that reawaken such painful sentiments of love and loss, "a tear" invariably clouds the "old man's eye" (*Ruined Cottage* 48, lines 129–30; 56, line 250). In this, as Johnston suggests, the Pedlar reenacts something of the same affective fixation that more deeply disturbs the speaker of "Incipient Madness," whose melancholic mind likewise imposes its own cherished meanings on an objective scene of ruin to which he compulsively returns. However, the Pedlar's affectively troubled mind remains alive to and is therefore steadied by sanative associations cued by the "common forms" that immediately surround him, such as the "happy melody" he hears in "this multitude of flies" or the "still . . . image of tranquillity" he beholds in the "weeds, and the high spear-grass" that top the cottage's ruined wall (56, lines 248–49; 75, line 514). His psychological stability and penetration, like his poet's, stem from his early formative exposure to the "fixed and steady lineaments" of nature in "all things which the rolling seasons brought" (153). The Pedlar had thus "received / A precious gift for as he grew in years / With these impressions would he still compare / All his ideal stores, his shapes, & forms," measuring the subjective "shapes" and "forms" of his own thought and feeling against the

objective shapes and forms of nature, rather than misreading those objective shapes and forms by the “dimmer” lights his own therefore ill-regulated imagination, like the pathetically fixated speaker of “Incipient Madness” (151, 153). The sanative associations stimulated by an upbringing among the eternal forms of nature thus preserve the Pedlar from the potential madness of his own strong sensibility. Wordsworth can therefore claim about him, as he will subsequently about himself, that “From nature & her overflowing soul / He had received so much, that all his thoughts” were safely “steeped in feeling” (173; see *The Thirteen-Book Prelude* 2.416–18). The Pedlar’s example, which is the poet’s own, stands as a living answer to the problem of melancholic distemper that Wordsworth, in all likelihood thanks to Stewart, lingeringly associated with the 1794 additions to *An Evening Walk*. This helps to explain why Wordsworth should return to those revisions in order to create an introductory sequence for *The Ruined Cottage*¹⁰ and to fashion a developmental history to warrant his Pedlar’s natural moral sympathies.

The ramifications of the philosophical pedigree I’ve been mapping here and that I canvass in much greater detail in *Wordsworth Before Coleridge* are, needless to say, far-reaching. For not only does this line of descent put Wordsworth on the track of his greatest philosophical poetry several years before the *annus mirabilis* of 1797–98 and thus well before the period of his supposed philosophical schooling by Coleridge, it simultaneously puts a *terminus ad quem* to the period of Wordsworth’s postrevolutionary “degradation” to Godwinian (or Gallic¹¹) rationalism, which turns out to have been, as Wordsworth “in truth” ultimately admits, “transient” indeed (*The Prelude* 11.243, 251). In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth says that his submission to “the Philosophy / That promised to abstract the hopes of man / Out of his feelings” served only “to cut off my heart / From all the sources of her former strength” (10.806–8, 11.77–78). This rational retreat from his own natural sensibilities and sympathies produced a temporary but nonetheless debilitating self-division that Wordsworth figures in the strongest terms imaginable for the period in question, as “war against myself” (11.74). In this state of mind, “betray’d” into a labyrinth of “errors” by “reasonings false / From the beginning, inasmuch as drawn / Out of a heart which had been turn’d aside / From nature,” Wordsworth could hardly have penned the “400 new and revised lines” of *An Evening Walk* (ix) that already prefigure the philosophic “truth” he claims to have “learned” only in the process of recovery from these errors, when “Nature’s self, by human love / Assisted, through the weary

labyrinth / Conducted me again to open day" (*The Prelude* 10.881–86, 921–23). Rather, the very fact of these lines and of their seminal relation to the better-known philosophic verse of 1798 and beyond seems to testify that, thanks to Stewart, by mid-1794 Wordsworth was already on the road to recovery from the self-subverting spell of Godwin.

Once again, Wordsworth's letter of June 8, 1794, through its many faithful echoes of Stewart's political discussion in *Elements*, helps to prove the case beyond doubt. Toward the end of his general declaration of political principles, before he "come[s] . . . to particulars" with regard to *The Philanthropist*, Wordsworth advocates for free discussion stimulated by a free press as the best mechanism to promote and disseminate the "general principles of social order." This was a widely shared liberal platform, to be sure, but the terms and logic of Wordsworth's advocacy here again most closely parallel Stewart's. "The liberty of the press," Stewart writes in *Elements*, "has, to so wonderful a degree, emancipated human reason from the tyranny of antient prejudices; and has roused a spirit of free discussion," so that "public opinion has acquired an ascendant in human affairs," never more so than "in the present age, . . . when the rapid communication, and the universal diffusion of knowledge, by means of the press, . . . secure infallibly, against every accident, the progress of human reason" and foster "a firm confidence in the certainty of that triumph which truth and liberty must infallibly gain in the end over error and injustice" (238, 245, 247, 260). Wordsworth, having remarked at the outset of his letter "the changes of opinion respecting matters of Government which within these few years have rapidly taken place in the minds of speculative men," likewise observes that "freedom of inquiry" supported by "liberty of the press" has helped to "diffuse . . . knowledge" so widely that "truth must be victorious" over even "the most atrocious doctrines" (*Letters* 123, 125). So, too, with the qualification Wordsworth thereafter "add[s] that, when I observe the people should be enlightened upon the subject of politics, I severely condemn all inflammatory addresses to the passions of men, even when it is intended to direct those passions to good purpose" (*Letters* 125). Godwin, it is true, makes the general claim that "we must . . . carefully distinguish between informing the people and inflaming them" (1: 203), but Stewart writes much more fully to the point, warning that "while the multitude continue imperfectly enlightened, they will be occasionally misled by the artifices of demagogues; and even good men, intoxicated with ideas of theoretical perfection, may be expected, sometimes to sacrifice, unintentionally, the tranquillity of

their cotemporaries, to an over-ardent zeal for the good of posterity” (247). Despite their good intentions, Stewart declares that “the views of those men . . . cannot be reprobated with too great severity” (245).

Testifying to the remarkable quality of his memory, Wordsworth in *The Prelude* characterizes his post-Godwinian political mind-set in terms that recall not merely this general idea from his letter to Mathews but, more particularly, its source in Stewart:

With settling judgments now of what would last
And what would disappear[, I was] prepared to find
Ambition, folly, madness in the men
Who thrust themselves upon this passive world
As Rulers of the world, to see in these,
Even when the public welfare is their aim,
Plans without thought, or bottom'd on false thought
And false philosophy . . .

(12.69–76)

By June 1794, Wordsworth was already possessed of these “settling” political judgments and, as evidenced especially by the *Evening Walk* revisions, had already “brought to test / Of solid life and true result the Books / Of modern Statists,” including, no doubt, Godwin’s *Political Justice* (12.76–78).

This conclusion is strengthened by a still more explicit reference to Stewart’s political theory in *The Prelude*’s earlier account of the poet’s recovery. In a directly related passage in Book 10, Wordsworth diagnoses the fundamental error of his previously “unsettled,” which is to say exclusively rational, political judgments:

. . . I was perplex'd and sought
To accomplish the transition by such means
As did not lie in nature, sacrificed
The exactness of a comprehensive mind
To scrupulous and microscopic views
That furnish'd out materials for a work
Of false imagination, placed beyond
The limits of experience and of truth.

(10.830, 841–48)

Taking advantage of hindsight, Wordsworth specifies the nature of the defect in his Godwinian political vision—“scrupulous and microscopic views”—as well its corrective: “The exactness of a comprehensive mind.”

The antithesis, right down to the very words in which it is framed, is Stewart's, from the opening pages of his discussion of the "Use and Abuse of general Principles in Politics." "In applying . . . such principles to practice," Stewart writes,

it is necessary . . . to pay attention to the peculiarities of the case; but it is by no means necessary to pay the same scrupulous attention to minute circumstances. . . . There is even a danger of dwelling too much on the details, and of rendering the mind incapable of those abstract and comprehensive views of human affairs, which can alone furnish the statesman with fixed and certain maxims for the regulation of his conduct. (237)

Though Stewart's political "views" are no less "abstract" than Godwin's, they are, as Wordsworth suggests through what appears to be a direct allusion, much more "comprehensive," for they are grounded not in one "inflexible" law of reason that (in Wordsworth's experience at least) is "endlessly perplex'd" in "scrupulous and microscopic" quibbles and cases (10.893), but rather in "those principles which we obtain from an examination of the human constitution, and of the general laws which regulate the course of human affairs," which together provide "a comprehensive view of the subject" (Stewart 236, 259).

By the summer of 1794, in brief, both Wordsworth's poetry and his politics exhibit profound reorientations that (a) contribute fundamentally to the philosophical poetry to come and (b) may be conjointly derived from a single inspiring source, volume 1 of *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*. Coleridge was not even in the picture yet, but Dugald Stewart certainly was, helping to set Wordsworth's philosophical and poetic agenda both for the maddening short term, 1795–97, and for the great decade to follow. The greatest work of that decade may have commenced and often coincided with, but it was in no simple sense caused by or even inconceivable without, the unquestionably invigorating presence of Coleridge.

NOTES

1. See Coleridge's comment, published twenty years after the fact in *Biographia Literaria*, that Wordsworth in 1797 was someone "to whom I could look up with equal reverence, whether I regarded him as a poet, a philosopher, or a man" (1: 188).

2. Quotations of *An Evening Walk* are from the Reading Text of the "Expanded Version of 1794," pp. 127–56 of the Cornell Wordsworth edition of the poem.

3. Or, more technically, simile with a personified vehicle.

4. See Mark Reed's introduction to *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, p. 1: 10.
5. For further examples and full discussion, see my recent monograph *Wordsworth Before Coleridge: The Growth of the Poet's Philosophical Mind, 1785–1797* (Routledge, 2018), from which this article has been adapted, at the kind invitation of Marilyn Gaull, to whom I am deeply grateful, and with express permission of Taylor and Francis Group LLC Books, conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.
6. The two hemistiches on “the one Presence, and the Life / Of the great whole” may seem to constitute an exception to the rule, for the philosophy of “one life” does not derive from Stewart. But nor does it derive from Coleridge—see chap. 5 of *Wordsworth Before Coleridge*.
7. See, e.g., Nicholas Roe's *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* and my response in chap. 3 of *Wordsworth Before Coleridge*.
8. Indeed, Thomas Holcroft's triple-decker reviews of both Stewart's *Elements* and Godwin's *Enquiry* overlapped one another in the April 1793 issue of the *Monthly Review*. Some time ago John Hayden anticipated my claims for Stewart as (in his words) “the best candidate to replace Hartley as a major influence on Wordsworth,” but he found that “there is no external evidence that Wordsworth read him, just as there is no evidence that he read Hartley” (114, 117). Still, as I outline here and in much greater detail in *Wordsworth Before Coleridge*, the internal textual evidence for Stewart's influence is considerable.
9. See, e.g., Paul Sheats in *The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry*: “Nearly all the additions move from sensation toward thought, as Wordsworth's mind plays freely over the highly objective imagery of 1788, elaborating its moral and emotional significance” (102).
10. See *An Evening Walk*, p. 133, lines 57–68, and J. Wordsworth, pp. 8, 18.
11. James Chandler reads Wordsworth's rational disaffection as generally “Gallic” rather than specifically Godwinian; see *Wordsworth's Second Nature*, 196–98, 222–23.

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