

Wordsworth's Causal Poetics of Thought

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Friedrich Schiller saw in utility “the great idol” of his age in whose “crude balance the insubstantial merits of Art scarce tip the scale.”¹ More recently, in these pages, Paul Keen has looked back to the Romantic moment to historicize the “Utilitarian Controvers[ies]” weighing on literature and criticism in the present.² If the useful has continued to beleaguer aesthetics down to our time—as a threat, rival, or snare, or as a value to be reclaimed—conversely utility appears as a fraught but constitutive question within literature and art’s self-understanding. This essay sets out to consider a defining engagement with the question of the useful at a formative moment in modern poetics. It argues that reflection on means-ends relations shapes a form of poetic thought in the work of William Wordsworth. The anti-utilitarian argument of Wordsworth’s “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” I suggest, intimates a causal poetics that goes on to stamp his seminal “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” and the grand project of *The Prelude*.

A discourse on the useful sets up relations between valued ends and the means understood to serve or promote them. Judgments about the utility of an object, activity, or experience are thus regulated by the kinds of ends taken to hold value, either in themselves as final goods or because they in turn yield other goods—or other intermediate utilities recognized as such. But judgments about the useful also depend fundamentally on an understanding of causal linkages: how a process or activity is seen to bring about a result, or

For setting me on the tracks of “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” and for many discussions of the poem early in what became this essay, I thank Peter Svare Valeur.

¹ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 6–7.

² Paul Keen, “The Philosopher in the Workshop: Romanticism and the New Utilitarianism,” *Studies in Romanticism* 59, no. 4 (2020): 493, 496–7.

an object or state of affairs to provide conditions for it.³ Such a causal understanding is at stake in Wordsworth's poetic reflection on means and ends.

On the one hand, Wordsworth raises the question of a discourse's capacity to grasp the causal relationality of its object, as in "The Old Cumberland Beggar" where the poet contemplates the titular Beggar's effects on a community. A structure of knowledge linking causes to effects finds an analogue in the argumentative form linking reasons and conclusions, which this poem and the later "Lines" systematically undermine. At the same time Wordsworth's poetic thought touches the causal modality of poetic language itself: the imbrication of poetic utterance in causal relations—how it comes about, its relation to its object, its own causational properties as an object in the world. In "The Old Cumberland Beggar," poetic thought thus finds its way into the economy of means and ends on which it reflects, as a privileged product of the encounter with the Beggar. The "Lines" and the overarching narrative of *The Prelude* go further to render poetic thought the object of its own causal speculations. Reflection on means-ends relations thus conditions and complicates the supposed "inward turn" of Wordsworth's poetry.

Far from dismissing the useful, the argument against a utilitarian political-economic reasoning in "The Old Cumberland Beggar" hinges on an opposed conception of means-ends relations. To a logic of mastery over causal relationality, the poem opposes a form of thought hospitable to indeterminate, plural, and open-ended causal valencies. The poem disputes the charge of uselessness on the Beggar's behalf not just by challenging the limited purview of utilities on which basis the charge is leveled, but also by intimating that uses are not fully determinable in advance, and actualizable only in practice. The general import of this argument to Romantic poetics, but also the problems it introduces, become apparent when we

³ This refers to something like the "efficient" and "material" causes of Aristotle's taxonomy, the first pertaining to the action producing a result, the second to the materials upon which it works to that end (Aristotle's "formal" and "final" causes may be understood to belong more properly to the end in view, although Aristotle regards them as causes because necessary *a priori* to any end).

recognize that the “Lines” and *The Prelude* similarly concern themselves with tracing unexpected pathways from what had not been apprehended as means to unbargained-for ends.

Wordsworth’s poetry, in other words, does not so much disclose an acausal space as gesture to one of multiplied causal potentials. If “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” as Eric Lindstrom has argued, “constructs a space free of direct instrumentality,” reconceived means-ends relations form a positive converse to this negative space, the productive counterpart to what Alex J. Dick calls the Beggar’s—and the poem’s—“unproductive labors.”⁴ My reading joins Jacques Rancière’s efforts to reinscribe aesthetic autonomy and poetic intransitivity as historic reconfigurations that multiply rather than subtract literature and art’s relations in and to the world. Rancière’s account of the modern poetic regime taking shape in Wordsworth’s time points to a *causal* poetics of the errancy of thought-writing with striking resonances to the language of “The Old Cumberland Beggar.”⁵ It suggests a logic by which Wordsworth’s poetry comes to embody immanently and materially the indeterminate causalities on which it reflects. The supposed inward turn of Wordsworth’s poetic thought then appears as a function of its reflection of and on means-ends relations. But a turn inward further supplies the apparent solution to an impasse: it shifts the terrain of indeterminate causalities to where these may be verified in and through the poetic thought materialized in the poem.

⁴ Eric Lindstrom, *Romantic Fiat: Demystification and Enchantment in Lyric Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 112. Alex J. Dick, “Poverty, Charity, Poetry: The Unproductive Labors of ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar,’” *Studies in Romanticism* 39, no. 3 (2000): 369. Dick’s argument and Lindstrom’s reading of the poem’s “‘useless’ advocacy” (93) nevertheless anticipate my own in the work of thought that they ascribe to poetic language, and in relation to utility and causality. My aims connect also to Marjorie Levinson’s appeal for “an enlarged notion of thinking” based in the materiality of poetic language; *Thinking Through Poetry: Field Reports on Romantic Lyric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.

⁵ Rancière’s historico-theoretical approach has the merit of inviting attention to the specificity of works as they intervene in or transform the matrix of an aesthetico-poetic regime. Wordsworth’s poetic thought leads me to pursue unexplored implications of Rancière’s account, and to diverge from Rancière’s own reading of Wordsworth and Romantic poetry, e.g., in “The Politics of the Spider,” trans. Emily Rohrbach and Emily Sun, *Studies in Romanticism* 50, no. 2 (2011): 239–50. Here Rancière contrasts Keats to Wordsworth on the basis of a political subjectivation itself contingent on the claim to causal rationality (242, 245).

“The Old Cumberland Beggar”: On Deeming Useful

Wordsworth’s poetry broods over the useful. *The Prelude* alternately evokes “A poet only to myself, to men / Useless,” or “deem[s] not profitless those fleeting moods.”⁶ The programmatic “Prospectus” to *The Recluse* pleads: “Be not this labor useless.”⁷ Wordsworth’s characteristic litotes, affirming even through double negation (“not profitless,” “not useless”), bespeak the poet’s preoccupation with the utility of his occupation. A body of verse elsewhere sees the Wordsworthian speaker ally his poetic activity to marginal characters ostensibly in similar need of affirmation: figures like the Female Vagrant, Simon Lee, the Leech-gatherer—or the Old Cumberland Beggar.

“But deem not this man useless.—Statesmen!” (l. 67).⁸ The poet wages his defense of the Old Beggar specifically on the ground of utility. My aim is less to read the Beggar as a surrogate for the poet affirming himself and poetry by proxy, than it is to examine the parameters of a poetic counter-discourse on means and ends.⁹ This in turn will shed light on the affinity of Wordsworth’s wandering Beggar to an errant causal poetics of thought. Eric Lindstrom identifies “The Old Cumberland Beggar” as “the foundational text for a certain major strain of Wordsworth commentary.”¹⁰ Alex J. Dick captures what I believe are three key ideas in this line of criticism when he describes the poem as “a metacritical reflection on

⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1:273 (X.199–200), 1:132 (II.331).

⁷ William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth: The Excursion; The Recluse, Part I, Book I*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (London: Clarendon Press, 1949), 1–6, l. 99.

⁸ William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems: 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 228–34, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text by line numbers.

⁹ A corpus of criticism centering on Wordsworth’s marginal figures has often noted their function as analogues for the poet or poetry, although Celeste Langan has notably critiqued the assimilation as mystifying in *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17, 24–25.

¹⁰ Lindstrom, *Romantic Fiat*, 90.

the limits of theoretical speculation” and “a critical foil to much of economic thought.”¹¹ First is the idea of the poem as a form of thought (one sense of “reflection”). This identification, we shall see, is itself nontrivial. Second is the notion of a poetic thought operating at the limits of thought: “metacritical reflection” referring to a mode of critical self-reflexivity. On the one hand, dwelling at limits can render productive certain failures of thought—in this case the deficiency of any definitive (ac)count of the Beggar’s uses. At the same time, it means exposing the failure of forms of thought insensible to their own limits. Poetic thought, in other words, also critically reflects *other* forms of thought. The third key idea, then, is that this other thought has to do with political economy and related discourses of Wordsworth’s time.

Critics often note in Wordsworth’s poetry a dogged resistance to clear-cut explanation whether of a moral, metaphysical, political, or economic order.¹² For Toby R. Benis, where poems like “The Old Cumberland Beggar” do offer a “clear line of interpretation,” still the “line of argument tends to disagree with the likely terms of debate.”¹³ The poem evidently proffers an argument. But its line, *pace* Benis, is far from clear. Ambiguity, in fact, that is the failure of a clear line of interpretation, is precisely what promises to unsettle the ground of debate. On the other hand, the poet meets the implied terms head-on on this point at least: he addresses his argument to the Beggar’s utility instead of dismissing the matter, on ethical grounds for instance, as a relevant consideration altogether. The poem intervenes rather in the logic of identification and relation of means and ends subtending judgments about the useful.

I follow a host of critics who, like Lindstrom and Dick, have looked to utilitarian and political-economic reasoning for the likely terms of debate and the foil to Wordsworth’s

¹¹ Dick, “Poverty, Charity, Poetry,” 368–9.

¹² See, respectively, Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 71–75; Paul H. Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 9, 59; Quentin Bailey, *Wordsworth’s Vagrants: Police, Prisons and Poetry in the 1790s* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 10; David Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.

¹³ Toby R. Benis, “Poverty and Crime,” in *William Wordsworth in Context*, ed. Andrew Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 187.

thinking. I pass briefly over this ground, therefore, in order to highlight a reductive value discourse and a logic of epistemic containment purporting to fix all relevant parts and relations. “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” by contrast, intimates proliferating relations that forestall such mastery. My concern lies ultimately with the conception of poetic thought underwriting such a reading. I move thus from the foil of political economy to the generality of a poetic thought that absorbs into its own texture an errant causal poetics.

The 1790s in Britain, a time of economic instability and deepening poverty, saw the expanding regulatory powers of the state combine with Enlightened discourses of rational planning to make a focal point of the vagrant poor as a problem to be—quite literally—contained. Legislators criminalized vagrants as socially disruptive, while intellectuals helped to frame the ideological parameters of the question.¹⁴ Wordsworth claimed later in life that he wrote “The Old Cumberland Beggar” at a moment when “political economists were . . . beginning their war upon mendicity in all its forms & by implication, if not directly, on Alms-giving also.”¹⁵ Although Wordsworth’s comment decades after the fact is open to question, the poem does directly evoke contemporary debates not only through its open address to “Statesmen” but in its attack on the House of Industry (l. 172).¹⁶ The reference is to the institution designed to put the so-called idle poor to profitable labor—discussed notably, and in flagrantly coercive terms, in Jeremy Bentham’s 1796–98 series of essays on “pauper management.”¹⁷ Thomas Malthus’s argument against poor relief in general, however, is telling both of the reductive conception of value and the epistemic logic of causal totality stamping much of these discourses.

¹⁴ Quentin Bailey documents this context extensively in *Wordsworth’s Vagrants*. Toby R. Benis provides a useful summary in “Poverty and Crime,” 183–4.

¹⁵ William Wordsworth, *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 56.

¹⁶ For a critical discussion of this “Fenwick Note,” see Philip Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of “Culture”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22 ff.

¹⁷ Jeremy Bentham, *Writings on the Poor Laws*, ed. Michael Quinn, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001–2010).

Although an early draft of “The Old Cumberland Beggar” predated by some months Malthus’s *First Essay on Population*, the poem’s defense of the ostensibly “useless” Beggar certainly resonates against “a crassly utilitarian, quasi-Malthusian view of the dependent poor as little more than a ‘redundant population.’”¹⁸ Malthus would argue that resources expended on “a part of society that cannot in general be considered as the most valuable” disadvantaged “more industrious, and more worthy members.”¹⁹ His rhetorical conflation of “worth” and “industry” speaks to a narrow conception of value and productive activity. It is consistent with a middle-class moralizing fixation on the “industriousness of the poor,” documented by Gary Lee Harrison, that universalized a “virtue of labor” into the supreme source of all value.²⁰ Wordsworth’s targeted gibe at the “House, misnamed of industry” (l. 172)—contesting, in a typical critical gesture, the false application of a name—not only calls attention to the sordid realities the name conceals (austere conditions, confinement, forced labor) but points to a more expansive purview of productive and useful activity.

Malthus censured the workhouse too in his sweeping attack on poor relief, but his rationale applies also to the alms-giving that Wordsworth defends. According to Malthus, money and provisions reallocated to the poor restrict the supply for everyone else. This inflates prices, deflates the value of others’ labor, and thus drags further sections of the population into poverty. All forms of poor relief, at the same time, essentially subsidize population increase among the poor, contributing doubly “to create the poor which they maintain.”²¹ Malthus’s tight-knit, overdetermined causal plot casts the receiver of parish provisions ultimately “as an enemy to all his fellow-labourers.” Conversely, it is contempt of dependent poverty, “hard as it may appear,” that provides the “absolutely necessary”

¹⁸ Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of “Culture,”* 21.

¹⁹ Thomas Robert Malthus, *First Essay on Population* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1966), 84.

²⁰ Gary Harrison, *Wordsworth’s Vagrant Muse: Poetry, Poverty, and Power* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 34–35. Harrison provides one of the most penetrating accounts of the ideological coordinates framing the period’s discourses on poverty.

²¹ Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 83.

“stimulus” towards the utilitarian end: “the happiness of the great mass of mankind.”²² Systematic knowledge, in Adam Smith’s definition, seeks after “one great connecting principle . . . to bind together all the discordant phenomena that occur as a whole species of things.”²³ Malthus attempts to grasp an entire social system through the potent principle of pricing, supply, and demand, to reveal the true effects of poor relief and the right means to the common good. It is something akin to this totalizing causal picture that Wordsworth attempts to pry open in thinking through the uncounted services of his Beggar.

Mark Koch is right to stress the poet’s assent to “defending the mendicant on the grounds of his utility.” This does not thereby trap “The Old Cumberland Beggar” within “utilitarian logic” and “the discourse of the political economists”: the concession may be less and more than Koch implies.²⁴ Certainly, the poem attempts to offer an alternative to crude utilitarian economism, by probing uses that a reductive sense of value occludes. Mary Jacobus follows such a line of interpretation, reading in the poem “an argument for the uses of compassion that sets out to beat the utilitarians at their own game.”²⁵ But the poem’s larger movement, beyond the search for alternative ends to legitimate a judgment on the useful, extends to a different logic of means-ends *relations* that unsettles the grounds of judgment. In fact the Beggar’s useful services, and the mechanisms through which he renders them, remain riddled with uncertainty. It is by multiplying and entangling relations that the poet’s count threatens or promises to overflow a logic of mastery and containment. Positively reconfigured relations might emerge from this negative critique without eliding the ambiguities of the

²² Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, 85–86.

²³ Adam Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W.P.D. Wrightman and J.C. Bryce (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 66. See Clifford Siskin, *System: The Shaping of Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 118.

²⁴ Mark Koch, “Utilitarian and Reactionary Arguments for Almsgiving in Wordsworth’s ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar,’” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 13, no. 3 (1989): 18, 23–24.

²⁵ Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 182.

poem's account of means and ends.²⁶

After an opening description, the poet sets out to detail the Beggar's "no vulgar service[s]" (l. 124) to a community: the Beggar elicits charitable deeds and sentiments; he represents a living "record" of these (l. 81); his presence sustains a "kindly mood" (l. 84) and disposes others "insensibly" to "virtue and true goodness" (l. 97); he presents a "silent monitor" rendering others cognizant of their advantages (l. 115); he induces elevated feelings and thoughts (l. 106) and inspires "lofty minds" (ll. 97–108).

Something more than the unquantifiability of these services marks the difference of the poem's account from a vulgar economic or utilitarian calculus. My summary in fact belies the entanglement and blurring of boundaries in the poem, where interconnected and mutually dependent terms prevent the clear delineation of means, ends, and their relations.²⁷ Is the "kindly mood" a good in itself, or insofar as it induces charitable acts? Sustained by the Beggar as living "record" of "Past deeds," it appears at once as origin and result of those "acts of love" (ll. 81–92). The poet proceeds to multiply and modify terms and relations, as if to remedy ambiguity or supplement lack. He soon refigures the living "record" as the admonishing "silent monitor," subtly recasting his earlier function before submitting it to further revision: "and perchance / Though he to no one give the fortitude" (ll. 119–22).

The reservation attached to the Beggar's active influence is critical. Any causal link, in fact, between the Beggar and his reported services is only ever obliquely submitted on his

²⁶ An older critical approach sought to elucidate and ground the Beggar's uses with reference, for instance, to eighteenth-century moral theories of sympathy. For some critics, such vindication in the "uses of compassion" smacked of a dehumanizing and egoistic instrumentalization of the Beggar. Others have since moved to locate the ethical import of the Wordsworthian encounter precisely in the failure of sympathy, brought up short by irreducible otherness. While the first line of explanation resolves or elides in my view compelling ambiguities, the latter approach can stop short of considering positively reconfigured relations. See Robin Jarvis, "Wordsworth and the Use of Charity," in *Beyond Romanticism: New Approaches to Texts and Contexts, 1780–1832*, ed. Stephen Copley and John Whale (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), 207; and Nancy Yousef, "Wordsworth, Sentimentalism, and the Defiance of Sympathy," *European Romantic Review* 17, no. 2 (April 1, 2006): 205–6.

²⁷ On the indistinguishability of means and ends in Kantian and Romantic conceptions of organic system, see Charles I. Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 17–20.

behalf. It is “habit,” the “mild necessity of use,” that “compels” villagers to “acts of love”—for “reason” to sanction *ex post facto* (ll. 90–93). The villagers “behold” in the Beggar a record and monitor (ll. 81, 114), or find in him an outlet for their natural charity (ll. 135–46). “Lofty minds” only “perchance” receive from him some “mild touch” of inspiration (ll. 97–108). The Beggar everywhere is passive, an inert(ial) figure drifting into plural relations through sheer presence rather than any active power of his own.

Tangled means-ends relations and a nebulous causal valency both register in the poem’s tentative tenor overall. Modifiers pepper the poet’s argument (“perchance,” ll. 103 and 119; “must needs,” l. 116; “I believe,” l. 125). A sense of provisionality inflects the turns of his blank verse as if nervously aggregating reasons, continually modifying, revising, supplementing. The account remains as though necessarily incomplete. Undercutting the assurance with which the poet set out to catalogue the Beggar’s uses, his poem shies away from fixing relations, assigning clear causation, giving a definitive tally or final word.

Yet this hesitancy becomes recruitable to the poem’s “metacritical reflection,” marking its difference from a discourse of containment and mastery. If political economy, as Connell writes, was “*the dominant form of social analysis*” in Wordsworth’s time, Clifford Siskin specifies that this was as “a primary site for the totalizing and rationalizing of the social” into a “coherent System.” As a knowledge *form*, system could shape a logic of exclusionary “containment.”²⁸ Political economy—the specialized knowledge of value and production—accordingly purports to isolate all relevant parts and relations within a bounded whole: what falls outside is made invisible, inconsequential, or aberrant. So, political economy’s “systematic enclosure” banishes “unproductivity” as “that which must be excluded for the system to be a functioning whole corresponding to a theoretical ideal.”²⁹

²⁸ Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of “Culture,”* 6. Siskin, *System*, 29–30, 37, 163.

²⁹ Dick, “Poverty, Charity, Poetry,” 367–8, 372. System itself, as Siskin shows, proves a versatile form adaptable beyond rigid containment and schematic reduction. Marjorie Levinson indeed censures the

Wordsworth's *Beggar* is precisely the kind of figure liable thereby to appear as a redundancy or aberration. The poet seeks, in the first instance, to *make count* what another economy of ends and means occludes. But if ends prove impossible to count—the *Beggar*'s "record" is not the accountant's ledger—this is because means, ends, and their relations interlace, multiply, overflow his account. The poem defines its counter-discourse negatively, against the claim to isolate and fix means and ends in a bounded knowledge. But in reflecting critically the limitations of one form of thought, the poem makes productive its own dwelling at the limits of thought. The positive converse becomes thought's gesture to a different knowledge of means and ends: the causal pathways that the *Beggar* treads cannot be traced definitively because they are plural and proliferating, vagrant like the *Beggar* himself.

The Causal Poetics of Thought

"Still let him prompt," the poet entreats, "the unletter'd Villagers / To tender offices and pensive thoughts" (ll. 162–3). Yet the pensive thought of the lettered poet finds its curious way into the poem's scheme of means and ends. Having appeared first in the capacity of witness ("I saw an aged Beggar," l. 1), then as public orator (addressing "Statesmen," l. 67), the poet later makes his cameo as thinker:

Some there are,

By their good works exalted, lofty minds

And meditative, authors of delight

abuse of "system" as a term of opprobrium, seeing especially in (Romantic) poetic thought a malleable conception of systems as "models of complexity, fluidity, self-revision, and internal, diversely scaled, and self-interactive determination: in essence, the antithesis of the anomaly-eating monster" conjured by some commentators; *Thinking Through Poetry*, 133. My attempt to describe reconfigured means-ends relations beyond the simple negation of "systematic enclosure" joins Levinson on this point: note Levinson's emphasis namely on a complexity of *relations* and *movements* of thought.

And happiness, which to the end of time
 Will live, and spread, and kindle: minds like these,
 In childhood, from this solitary Being,
 This helpless wanderer, have perchance receiv'd,
 . . .
 That first mild touch of sympathy and thought. (ll. 96–106)

If decorum counsels indirection, unmistakably these are minds among which the poet would count his own. Acquainted himself in childhood with this wanderer (“Him from my childhood have I known,” l. 24), he attributes to him, if only “perchance,” his own early gleam of pensive thought. But the Beggar inspires—what may be ascertained with more immediate evidence—the meditative thought that takes the form of the poem before us. The dim original spark is doubled in the present and the *presence* of the poem. This facticity of the thought-poem, material evidence of thought’s productive encounter with its object, will be key.

We never in fact read of the poet partaking in “tender offices” on par with the villagers. The good works called forth from his kind appear to be poems, the fruit of “pensive thought.” The laden phrase—reading, almost tautologically, something like “thoughtful thought”—supercharges thought itself in the poem’s economy of means and ends.³⁰ Yet verbal overdetermination betrays indeterminacy; redundancy and excess signal lack or demurral from defining specific content for the thought induced by the Beggar. Except, that is, insofar as the poem itself is thought.

Poetry’s relation to thought might appear straightforward: the poem is a product of the poet’s thought; it is itself a form of thought; thus embodied it becomes in turn an object of thought. Yet the far-reaching shift in poetics underway in Wordsworth’s time altered

³⁰ “pensive, A. adj. 1. Sorrowfully thoughtful; gloomy, sad, melancholy. 2. More generally: full of thought, meditative, reflective.” OED Online. September 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/140265> (accessed November 17, 2021).

thought's relation to poetic language in ways that continued to inform modern writing and poetic and aesthetic theory. Jacques Rancière's account of this shift ties the new conception of poetic thought to a transformed causal poetics. Rancière describes a modern poetic regime premised in effect on the "term-for-term reversal" of four key principles that governed the classicist paradigm dominant up to that point.³¹ The "principle of fiction" defined poetic representation's distinct structure of rationality. The "generic principle" instituted a hierarchy of poetic genres defined by their proper subjects. The "principle of decorum" fixed to each class of subject an ideal code of language and conduct. The fourth principle, finally, upheld an ideal of "active speech." My focus will be on the first and last of these, which together encapsulate the causal stakes of the poetic shift.³²

"Fiction," for Rancière, does not mean "the invention of imaginary worlds"; it names a "structure of rationality" constructing modes of "succession and causal linkage between events."³³ Rancière's first principle thereby introduces causality to the internal logic of the poem. In the classicist conception, fictions string together events and passions as "the necessary or verisimilar consequences of a chain of causes and effects" that appears fully determined: characterized, in Rancière's words, by "a surfeit of rationality."³⁴ Rancière draws his terms from dramatic poetry given its paradigmatic status in (neo)classicist poetics and its

³¹ Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 50.

³² The four principles are introduced in *Mute Speech*, 43–49. The second and third have received most attention because they speak most directly to an aesthetic dimension of political subjectivation. Two recent books by Rancière pick up the centrality of causal rationality to poetics: *The Edges of Fiction*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019) and *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

³³ Rancière, *Lost Thread*, xxxi. Rancière's specific usage with reference to (neo)classicist poetics is distinct from—though not without bearing on—the fictionality that Catherine Gallagher, for instance, has shown to emerge with the rise of the modern novel; see "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel. Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 336–63. Rancière demonstrates, for example, that the classicist standard of "verisimilitude" meant likeness to an ideal rational order *as opposed to* referential or realistic representation; see *Mute Speech*, 45–46. Overlaps and contrasts between Rancière's and Gallagher's perspectives, along with Jonathan Lamb's insights into the place of fictive entities in modernity's emergent organizing structures, could be explored productively at length; Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 127–72.

³⁴ Rancière, *Edges of Fiction*, 1.

Aristotelian foundation—hence the nomenclature: principle of “fiction.” But this causal rationality finds an analogue in the inferential structure of argumentation and reasoning, the chain of reasons and conclusions, at play in a poem like “The Old Cumberland Beggar.” The transposability of the classical causal structure Rancière calls “fiction” is such that it migrates to the explanatory models of social scientific discourse—thus including Wordsworth’s target political economy—just as it breaks down as a principle of poetic language.³⁵

The ideal of “active speech” introduces the question of causation at the level of poetic utterance itself. It refers, in effect, to a rhetorical paradigm of language: so central to the English poetic tradition up to Wordsworth’s time, and against which Wordsworth set himself in open reaction. “Literature” itself, encompassing until the nineteenth century virtually all written culture, found its effective basis in the “overriding unity of rhetorical doctrine.”³⁶ The emergence of modern aesthetics, and concomitantly a new idea of the literary, marked a “dissociation” from rhetorical theory.³⁷ Rancière’s account helps to foreground the stakes of a causal poetics within this familiar history. Notwithstanding a somewhat simplifying view of early modernity’s vast edifice of rhetorical theory and practice, Rancière points us to a change in the causal status of poetic language that is operative in Wordsworth’s reflections on means and ends—Wordsworth, after all, helped to define Romantic poetics against his own reductive view of classicism.³⁸ Rancière’s revisionism of the aesthetic tradition effectively complicates

³⁵ See Rancière, *Edges of Fiction*, 1–5. The typical causal plot identified here by Rancière leads to happiness or unhappiness via surprising reversals, in remarkable resonance with Malthus’s argument on poor relief.

³⁶ John B. Bender and David E. Wellbery, eds., *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 15.

³⁷ Dietmar Till, “The Fate of Rhetoric in the ‘Long’ Eighteenth Century,” in *Performing Knowledge, 1750–1850*, ed. Mary Helen Dupree and Sean B. Franzel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 72.

³⁸ Although Rancière takes a necessarily partial view of the field of rhetoric, the object of his reference chimes with what Bender and Wellbery distinguish as a restricted rhetorical tradition, dominant in European literate culture up to the nineteenth century, from “rhetoricity” as a persistent condition of language and discourse (although itself subject to historical transformations); see *Ends of Rhetoric*. For an extended discussion of the constructed neoclassicism against which Romanticism came to define itself, see Robert J. Griffin, *Wordsworth’s Pope: A Study in Literary Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

the (Kantian) “distinction between ‘purposeful’ and ‘purposeless’ that is responsible for the exclusion of rhetoric from the system of the arts” and “the Romantic elimination of rhetoric as the basis of poetic theory.”³⁹

The rhetorical paradigm draws from the scene of oratory the “values that define the power of poetic speech.”⁴⁰ An “ideal of efficacious speech” posits the use of language to effect determinate ends: to persuade to an opinion, induce an action, elicit an emotion, or simply convey an idea. The power of active speech, in other words, is directedly causal and means-ends oriented. “Action,” Rancière specifies, signifies “not the simple expenditure of energy” but “use of the appropriate means to ends.”⁴¹ The perfection of rhetoric as an art and a craft of language presupposes, at least as a regulative ideal, the possibility of mastery over its causal powers. Therefore, as Dietmar Till writes, “the theory of effective and aesthetically pleasing style had its place within the theory of the mastery of stylistic elements (*elocutio*).”⁴²

This mastery presupposes in turn the determinacy of causal chains of transmission. The rhetorical model here makes explicit the properties of the causal logic governing poetic language and its representations. The “horizontal axis of the message transmitted to a determinate auditor” is also the axis of the agent producing a definite effect on a patient.⁴³ The chain of transmission is linear. It begins and ends at fixed and known points. Its path, in principle, is predictable. Linearity, closure, and determinacy thus form the conditions for active speech as the possibility of mastery over the causal powers of language, just as they

³⁹ Till, “Fate of Rhetoric,” 73. Bender and Wellbery, *Ends of Rhetoric*, 11, 19.

⁴⁰ *Mute Speech*, 47–48. Drama again provides for Rancière a privileged site for the poetic “staging of the act of speech” and its rhetorical power. John Dryden did not succeed in producing for England an orthodox classicist drama with the peremptory status of its French counterpart. English literary culture was none the worse for it, with no less an elaborate system of poetic genres likewise based in Aristotelianism and classical models, in increased dialogue with French classicism after 1660, and reaching its apogee with the Augustan generation. The supremacy of rhetoric enshrines the principle of active speech within this English tradition.

⁴¹ Rancière, “Politics,” 242. Hence the general implications of the principle of “fiction” defining the poem as a “representation of action.”

⁴² Till, “Fate of Rhetoric,” 74.

⁴³ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 63.

define the strict concatenation of causes and effects in the rational structure of the poem and its representations. This duality finds a basis in Aristotle's foundational *Rhetoric*: the rhetorician who possesses the means of persuasion masters also the inferential structure of argument—the succession of premises and deductions—as well as the rational structure of the object of discourse itself.⁴⁴

Together active speech and the principle of fiction call for command over language's dual power to effect specific ends and to grasp objects of discourse within a rational causal structure. The linear, bounded, and determinate causal relations such mastery presumes appear antithetical to Wordsworth's wandering Beggar. According to Rancière, a new poetics is founded when active speech is displaced by the unmastered errancy of the mute letter: the principle of "writing." Writing here names precisely the dissolution of the mastery of active speech: "the specific mode of visibility and availability of the written letter overturns any relation by which a discourse might legitimately belong to the person who utters it, to whom it is addressed, or to the way in which it should be received." Writing is "orphaned utterance," "not directed by a father who is capable of guiding it in a legitimate way to where it can bear fruit." This is the meaning of Rancière's eponymous "mute speech": speech deprived of "the power of living speech, that is, the speech of the master."⁴⁵

The antithesis to the active power of speech, however, is not causal dead-end: not the subtraction but the multiplication of causal valencies. The paradox of mute speech is that its muteness renders it all "too talkative": it "drifts all over the place . . . incapable of distinguishing whom it should or should [not] address."⁴⁶ This marks a stark difference from the rhetoric characterized by Bender and Wellbery as "an art of positionality in address" discriminating "among audiences according to rank, education, and social character": a

⁴⁴ See Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. G. A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), I.2, 1355a–b, 1356b. See also Till, "Fate of Rhetoric," 70. The analogic rational structures of argument and "action" link in this sense Aristotelean rhetoric and poetics.

⁴⁵ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 93–94.

⁴⁶ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 93–94.

condition that subtends “the bond of classical rhetoric to speech itself, as opposed to writing.”⁴⁷ The “tracing of the mute letter,” by contrast, circumvents the line leading “quite precisely, and for a single purpose,” from defined “origin” to known “destination.”⁴⁸ Its paths bifurcate unpredictably, proliferate to no determinate end. Causation and means-ends relations are as much at issue as communication: poetic writing running adrift becomes “available for any use,” appropriable “to anybody’s ends.”⁴⁹ Of course, language shaken loose from the authority of its emitter is a commonplace of poetic theory in our time. In tracing this condition to the foundation of a modern poetic regime, Rancière foregrounds its sense as the dissipation of causal mastery over poetic language and over the causal structure of its representations.

This errant writing strikingly evokes Wordsworth’s poetic alliance to the wandering Beggar. The Beggar’s muteness and inertia as he wanders adrift are those of the mute letter, paradoxically multiplying their causal valencies. The poet unable or unwilling to fix means and ends, causes and effects in a definitive (ac)count reflects in the contours of his thought their nonlinear, open-ended, and indeterminate relations. Adopting the form of a reasoned argument, based in the progression of reasons and inferences, the poem presents a sinuous course of thought, riddled with stops and starts, repetitions, modifications, and revisions. It leaves off its catalogue of uses in provisionality and inconclusion. Having assumed initially the oratorical posture of public address, what effects does the poet’s rhetorical performance promise to produce, to what opinion persuade, what actions induce, what message convey? From “Statesmen” the poet urges suspension of judgment (“deem not”) and a foregoing of action (“Let him pass,” l. 155); from the rest of us, nothing seemingly more definite than a “pensive thought” to match or extend his own. The poem presents its distinctive logic of means-ends relations more in a movement of thought enacted than message conveyed. This

⁴⁷ Bender and Wellbery, *Ends of Rhetoric*, 7, 15.

⁴⁸ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 104.

⁴⁹ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 87, 94. Translation modified to match the original more closely; see *La Parole muette: Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* (Paris: Hachette, 1998), 82.

leads finally to the question of thought's relation to poetic language.

The regime of writing for Rancière entails “a different idea of the relation between thought and matter.”⁵⁰ Whereas the paradigm of active speech stipulated an “intellectual part of art” (thought) that “commands its material part” (language), the mute letter brings about their fusion, “the necessary union between speech and thought.”⁵¹ In John Dryden's orthodox rhetoric, thought is accorded logical precedence over language: “The first happiness of the Poet's imagination is Invention, or finding of the thought,” second its judicious “moulding,” and “third is Elocution.”⁵² Thought, in this classical scheme of *inventio-dispositio-elocutio*, provides the idea which language then puts into words, and the intellectual activity that submits expression to its *design* (both structure and purpose). The regime of writing collapses this “poetico-rhetorical edifice” onto “the single level of *elocutio*.”⁵³ But thought does not disappear from the equation with the suppression of the intellectual parts of invention and disposition. Rather, the union of speech and thought makes the latter coterminous with the material part of language, immanent in “the new object of the poem.” New possibilities open as poetic language escapes its subservience to prior idea and rhetorical design: the thought-poem “presents, on its very body, the physiognomy of what it says.”⁵⁴ Here is another implication of the paradoxical “mute speech”: its power becomes a function of its qualities of being and embodiment, at the expense of the saying and doing of active speech.

The new bond of poetic thought to inert materiality finds peculiar expression in a trope of “petrification,” linking literary language to the “muteness of stone,” which Rancière traces in his sources.⁵⁵ In fact, poetic thought's affinity to inert matter, and to stone particularly, reverberates in Wordsworth's poetry. Paul Fry, for instance, locates in commitment to the

⁵⁰ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 43.

⁵¹ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 49, 57.

⁵² John Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy: And Other Critical Essays. Volume 1*, ed. George Watson (London: Dent, 1977), 98.

⁵³ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 145.

⁵⁴ Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 43, 63.

⁵⁵ See Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 41–43, 59–60, 75, 82.

“minerality of being” the core of Wordsworthian ontology, whereas Adam Potkay discusses Wordsworth’s “Ethics of Things.”⁵⁶ Mary Jacobus likens thinking “in and through lyric poetry” to thinking “in and through things,” seeing lyric poetry after Wordsworth as itself “a mute insensate thing.” The kinship of poetry to inert matter, for Jacobus as for Rancière, paradoxically multiplies the powers of both: the “silence of mute insensate things” turns out to be “not silent at all but vocal.”⁵⁷

The paradox again informs the affinity of Wordsworth’s thinking of means and ends to the passive inertia of his Beggar. William Hazlitt, who dubbed Wordsworth the “prince of poetical idlers, and the patron of the philosophy of indolence,” was also early in noting the virtual nonhumanity of Wordsworth’s characters.⁵⁸ And critics have continued to note the latter’s approximation to natural objects or parts of the landscapes in which they are described. Robin Jarvis likens the Beggar to “the stone pile on which he is seated,” while for David Sampson the old man “vacillates between the animate and the inanimate.”⁵⁹ Passivity and inertness now appear as the conditions of a paradoxical valency, an (in)animacy that multiplies the potentialities of the mute letter as opposed to the restricted, unidirectional power of active speech.

Stone and rock, as key emblems of the thing-like materiality of poetry, lead invariably in Wordsworth into “the realm of the epitaphic.”⁶⁰ Some remarks on epitaphic inscription will therefore help to conclude this part of the discussion and open onto the next. Inscription—poetry that stages the surface on which it is ostensibly written—presents a privileged site for the embodiment of poetic thought in dual alliance with inert materiality and the errancy of

⁵⁶ Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*, 10; Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics*, 72–89.

⁵⁷ Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3, 63, 117.

⁵⁸ See Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*, 6. Hazlitt is quoted in David Simpson, *Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 33.

⁵⁹ Jarvis, “Wordsworth and the Use of Charity,” 208. David Sampson, “Wordsworth and the Poor: The Poetry of Survival,” *Studies in Romanticism* 23, no. 1 (1984): 46.

⁶⁰ Jacobus, *Romantic Things*, 151.

writing. Geoffrey Hartman's classic essay on the topic identifies inscription as the prototype for "a principal form of the Romantic and modern lyric."⁶¹ Wordsworth generalizes inscription into a form of *viva voce* meditation inscribing a scene in a virtual present. Poetic language becomes coterminous with a process of thought just as this thought fuses itself to the materiality of writing and its media. Such a poetics no longer relies, as Bender and Wellbery put it, on "a theory of the production of effective or persuasive discourse," but one of "sensate cognitions" and "the signs that convey them."⁶² For Andrew Bennett, this materiality of the sign conditions inscription's "detachability": its ability, per Jacobus, to leap "from reader to reader, crossing space and time"—joining again Rancière's errancy of writing.⁶³

To these Romantic origins Hartman traces the "modern dictum" that "A poem should not mean / But be": to the formation of a poetics that attempts to "absorb 'truth' into the texture of the lyric."⁶⁴ This absorption enables the reading of Wordsworth's metareflection on means and ends as bearing on its body a physiognomy of their relations. For Frank Kermode, modern poets (Romantic to modernist) wanted words to stand with "the same sort of physical presence 'as a piece of string.'"⁶⁵ But if the "designification" of material things, as Paul Fry has it, signals an "avoidance of thought and its estrangements," this might best be understood with reference to that commanding relationship of thought to language associated with active speech.⁶⁶ The "mereness" of objects, Hartman responds, need not "favor non-meaning."⁶⁷ And inert presence need not be acausal. Severed from the mastery of active speech, poetic

⁶¹ Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry," in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958–1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 221–3.

⁶² Bender and Wellbery, *Ends of Rhetoric*, 18.

⁶³ Andrew Bennett, *Wordsworth Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 85–89; Jacobus, *Romantic Things*, 153–4. See also Jonathan Culler on the "iterable now of lyric enunciation," in *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 289.

⁶⁴ Hartman, "Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry," 230. Hartman's "dictum" is the closing statement of Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica," *Collected Poems, 1917–1982* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 107.

⁶⁵ Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 136.

⁶⁶ Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*, 159, 181.

⁶⁷ Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Paul Fry's *Wordsworth*, and the Meaning of Poetic Meaning, or Is It Non-Meaning?" *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 8, no. 1 (2009): 9, 18.

writing might then “live, and spread, and kindle” (l. 103) along plural, indeterminate paths, while poetic thought becomes primed to model these movements in its very contours.

Poetry thus reflects on means-ends relations by turning a model of causality into the immanent property of poetic thought. But the truth of the “piece of string” is also that of being—to borrow again from Fry—“just there.”⁶⁸ This *thereness* leads to another function of poetic thought’s turn inward: the verification of indeterminate causalities in and through the facticity of poetic thought embodied in the object of the poem.

“The history of a Poet’s mind . . . shall justify itself”

For Kermode, words remained “so used to being discursive that it is almost impossible to stop them discoursing.”⁶⁹ Kermode could be describing the talkativeness of mute speech, but he also means something else: absorbing truth into the texture of poetic language relativizes but does not neutralize propositional and denotative content. That content, after all, announced the problem of means and ends in “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” even clued us to the weight that thought carries in the poem’s causal economy. Neither can we entirely pass over the poet’s stated investment in affirming the Beggar’s usefulness. But if the poem stages the failure to pin down relations thereby to intimate their uncontainable multiplicity, then the suspicion lingers whether the best such negative critique can offer is a holding off of judgment. The poet gets caught between the double negative (“deem not . . . useless,” l. 77) and the desire to affirm a “pulse of good” (ll. 160–1). Wordsworth’s squaring of this circle will be my final concern here. It leads from “The Old Cumberland Beggar” to the “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” and it points forward to *The Prelude*.

The question is a crude one: if the Beggar’s influence eludes definitive account, then

⁶⁸ Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*, 201.

⁶⁹ Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 136.

how can the poet affirm its tendency toward the good? For all his psychologistic explanations, his apprehension of the complexity of relations, the poet supplements his account with appeals to metaphysical and customary orders of things to guarantee his affirmative vision. “Nature’s law”—so he opens his argument—binds to all things “a spirit and pulse of good” (ll. 73–79). Finally a poor villager adds to the moral and psychological rewards of charitable action “her hope in heav’n” (ll. 148–54). The poet further conjures the customary order of an organic community through the “habit” and “mild necessity of use” that hitch together past, present, and future “offices of charity” (ll. 90–94). Rather than provide grounding and cement, these appeals open out the causal structure at both ends, pointing to receding roots and eschatological destinations. They culminate in the peroration so many commentators have found troubling: “As in the eye of Nature he has liv’d, / So in the eye of Nature let him die” (ll. 188–9): that which is, must be, until it is not.

Are we then left with the poet’s bare word? We are: but in the sense of that word as a poetic thought-object there before us. Think again of the overdetermined “pensive thought” sparked “perchance” by the Beggar. If the original spark is only dimly attributable, its doubling in the present and the *presence* of the poem proffers a less mistakable connection: that of thought to its object, the product of their encounter tangible in the object of the poem. Poetic thought not only bears in its shape and movements a modality of means-ends relations but supplies the material evidence to seal the circle of their indeterminacy. This dual logic of verification and justification would find itself perfected in the “Lines,” and maximized in *The Prelude*.

Despite their apparently dissimilar subjects, the “Lines” like “The Old Cumberland Beggar” reflect on means and ends. The two poems share striking features of language and form. The “Lines,” in effect, pick up where the earlier poem left off. Although “The Old Cumberland Beggar” was published in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, two years after the “Lines,”

its first completed draft dates to early 1798. The verso of an early draft sheet of “Beggar” even bears a fragment of what would become the “Lines.”⁷⁰ Yet the kinship of the two poems has been overlooked. “The Old Cumberland Beggar” fits the description of M.H. Abrams’s “Greater Romantic Lyric,” of which the “Lines” are exemplary.⁷¹ Both poems open with scenic description, launch into prolonged reflection, and return finally to the opening scene.⁷² Both poems stage twice-seen scenes: the Wye valley is revisited after a five-year interval, and the Beggar known in childhood is encountered anew. In both cases, the poet ponders uncharted benefits derived from unlikely sources.

As with “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” the “Lines” multiply these benefits in a persistently tentative register. Modifying locutions, qualifications, and revisions inflect the argument even more pervasively: “such, perhaps / As may have had no trivial influence” (ll. 32–33); “Nor less, I trust / To them I may have owed” (l. 37); “If this / Be but a vain belief” (ll. 50–51); “I dare to hope” (l. 66); “I would believe” (l. 88); “perchance” (ll. 112, 147).⁷³ The poem likewise grapples with tangled and mutually dependent causalities, reflected in the sinuous self-revising movement of its “Lines.” This interconnection reverberates perhaps in that great central image “Of something far more deeply interfused,” comprising thought and matter, the natural world and “the mind of man,” “All thinking things, all objects of all thought” (ll. 97–103).

“Thought” permeates the “Lines” thoroughly. The word appears ten times, with six instances of “mind” to boot—including “elevated” and “lofty thoughts” (ll. 96, 129) to echo the “lofty minds” of the earlier poem. And well it might, since the subject of the poem, the causal pathways traced, all belong to the journey of poetic thought itself. The poet of “The

⁷⁰ See Geoffrey Little, “Forms of Beauty, Loops of Time: Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey,’” *Arts: The Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association* 12, no. 0 (January 23, 2012): 70.

⁷¹ M.H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 76–108.

⁷² The conclusion to the “Lines” even features prominently the jussive “let” from the coda of “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” treated compellingly in Lindstrom, *Romantic Fiat*, 89–112.

⁷³ Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 116–20.

Old Cumberland Beggar” had attributed to that figure benefits to a community at large. Here the poet meditates on the remembered scene’s influence on the trajectory of his thought. When he turns at last to another, his accompanying sister, it is with the “cheerful faith” (l. 134) that her experience might replicate and extend his own.⁷⁴ As in “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” the pathways from sources to ends are tortuous, and elude full account. But finally poetic thought in all its meanderings offers up itself as product and image of those processes.

The poet answers his own repeated doubts namely by mustering facts of mental experience (ll. 23–58). He begins, almost Cartesian-like, with the raw *isness* of mental fact (albeit couched in double negative): the forms of the Wye valley “have not been” absent from his mind. “I have owed to them,” he ventures next, “sensations sweet.” As if recoiling at the creeping of causality into his language, circumspectly he proceeds: “such, perhaps, / As have no slight or trivial influence”;⁷⁵ “Nor less, I trust, / To them I may have owed another gift.” Again he hedges: “If this / Be but a vain belief”; only to answer in a (literal) doubling down: “yet oh! how oft— / . . . / How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee / O sylvan Wye! . . . / How often has my spirit turned to thee!” Against the uncertain modality of “may,” the poet doubles down on the declarative present perfect: I have turned. Doubt as he might his attribution of effects to causes, he asserts as a matter of (mental) fact that he *has turned* to those sources. Crucially, the poem before us constitutes such a turn, palpably realized, just as it stands a monument to and of the turnings of thought pursuing erratic paths from causes to effects, origins to destinations. The thought-poem offers itself doubly as material evidence of the

⁷⁴ This “faith” evokes David Hume’s critique of causation and induction, his claim that we act on faith—based in habit and custom—when we expect the future to replicate linkages between events that we have observed as conjoined and declared causally connected. Wordsworth could be seen partly to absorb Hume’s skepticism, in a causal poetics in which means-ends relations are not assertable in advance but only verified in practice. This presents perhaps an early sign of Wordsworth’s intellectual divergence from Coleridge—preempting the kind of philosophical poem Coleridge urged from him. On Coleridge’s response to Hume’s position as a threat to “the possibility of metaphysics,” see Timothy Michael, *British Romanticism and the Critique of Political Reason* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 134.

⁷⁵ cf. the Beggar’s “no vulgar service” (l. 124).

processes it traces in its lines and their issuance in a product that embodies them. As object of thought, finally, the poem precludes their extension.

This logic of self-verification would find maximal form in *The Prelude*: the poem of the adventures of poetic thought on its way to finding itself. The psychodrama of “the growth of a poet’s mind” announces itself with a question: “Was it for this?” opening the *Two-Part Prelude*, and which the poem’s successive versions expand to answer in the affirmative.⁷⁶ Its four words encapsulate a drama of causes and effects, of ends to justify means. The preposition (“for”) relates causally two pronouns of indeterminate reference. The copula (“was”) looks back—as in the retrospective “Lines”—on an accumulated experience (“it”), which deictic “this” orients toward the present. “This” is the poet(ry) that past experience has produced, and further promises. But “this” becomes also the poem at hand, the monument of poetic thought in quest of the “origin and progress of [its] own powers.”⁷⁷

“Was it for this?” is a question of poetical crisis, poetry interrogating itself as to the “good works” that can exalt it, that justify its promise and pursuits. Instead of the grand philosophy of *The Recluse* “on Man, Nature, and Society,” *The Prelude* as we know grows into its own fulfillment. Poetic thought produces the philosophical poem by tracing in its sinews the surprising paths that lead it to itself. Yet the “growth of a poet’s mind” expands to think not only itself but a world—however mistakable. It does not so much substitute “picture in the mind” with “picture of the mind” as produce a thought in and of the world.⁷⁸ And not necessarily the thought of a transcendent(al) mind but a material thought-object.

Poetry thus comes professing nothing less than a form of thought, materialized but “detachable,” and as thought-object further available to thought—even appropriation to ulterior ends. Nor do the propositional and denotative contents of poetic language disappear,

⁷⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1798–1799*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 43.

⁷⁷ Preface to the “The Excursion,” in Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, 2.

⁷⁸ Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 87.

but remain part of the materials poetry offers up. Still, thought thus embodied offers no guarantee beyond such availability, asking perpetually to be tested, *verified*, extended. As the poet of the “Lines” had turned finally to another in “cheerful faith,” so in *The Prelude*:

It will be known by thee at least, my Friend,
Felt, that the history of a Poet’s mind
Is labour not unworthy of regard.
To thee the work shall justify itself.⁷⁹

* * *

If we have come some way from the anti-utilitarianism of “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” this has been the point: reflection on means and ends leads in Wordsworth to defining questions for poetics. “The Old Cumberland Beggar” had to absorb into its texture nonlinear, indeterminate, and open-ended causal relations, rendering these into immanent properties of poetic thought. The “Lines” further deploy the thought-poem as a resource for the verification and justification of indeterminate causalities made available otherwise through negation. In *The Prelude* too the self-recoil of poetic thought offers up the sinuous object of thought to justify the ways from means to ends, while the verification of thought by thought precludes their extension—if always only perchance. The coil winds decidedly outward. But potentials multiply perhaps at the cost of an ambivalent inwardness that makes—indeed has made—of poetry’s relation to the world a seemingly perpetual crisis.

⁷⁹ Wordsworth, *Thirteen-Book Prelude*, 1:323 (XIII.407–10).

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