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Jacob Risinger

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WORDSWORTH AND GODWIN IN “FROZEN REGIONS”

BY JACOB RISINGER

In 1826, Henry Crabb Robinson broached the subject of William Wordsworth’s posthumous reputation in a letter fraught with prophetic anxiety:

It gives me real pain when I think that some future commentator may possibly hereafter write: “This great poet survived to the fifth decennary of the nineteenth century, but he appears to have died in the year 1814, as far as life consisted in an active sympathy with the temporary welfare of his fellow-creatures. He has written heroically and divinely against the tyranny of Napoleon, but was quite indifferent to all the successive tyrannies which disgrace the succeeding times.”¹

In his *Diary*, Crabb Robinson had defined indifference as “a want of passion.”² Here, he sets unfeeling indifference beside the failure of sympathy as looming signs of a poetic death-in-life, anticipating the many future commentators who approach *The Excursion* as the beginning of the end of Wordsworth’s aesthetic and political promise. Accounts of this infamous decline—described by H. W. Garrod as “the most dismal anti-climax of which the history of literature holds record”—frequently posit a connection between Wordsworth’s emotional calcification and poetic failure.³ For Frances Ferguson, his decline was the inevitable result of “the asceticism of his poetics.”⁴ More dramatically, Michael Cooke has described Stoicism as “the enemy of Wordsworth’s muse,” a philosophical disposition that “posed a threat to romantic poetry, to the romantic spirit itself.”⁵ A further leap of associative logic tends to connect what Thomas McFarland called Wordsworth’s “well-known stoicism” with his “well-known political conservatism.”⁶ In 1933, for example, Edith Batho defended Wordsworth from the many critics who dismissed him as “a reactionary and obscurantist in whom the springs of human pity and feeling had dried up.”⁷ For Mary Shelley, however, no defense could excuse Wordsworth’s lack of feeling and the apostasy it sanctioned. After reading *The Excursion* in September 1814, she noted, quite coolly, “He is a slave.”⁸

From Shelley forward, critics tend to approach *The Excursion* as a clear harbinger of Wordsworth's growing apathy, but critical desire to read the poem as a future-oriented index of change has obscured its retrospective orientation. At almost every turn, Wordsworth's various avatars in *The Excursion* pause to interrogate the moral significance of emotion, often entertaining a Stoic perspective on the passions that thwarts conventional Romantic expectations. For Wordsworth, this was not new territory, but already covered ground. In this essay, I argue that Wordsworth's sustained consideration of Stoicism in *The Excursion* resulted in a self-conscious reexamination of his early attraction to the radical philosophy of William Godwin. Though the product of a very different political context, Wordsworth's dialogic critique of passion in *The Excursion* resembles his response to an earlier and more revolutionary moment—to a time when he counted himself “amongst the dispassionate advocates of liberty and discussion.”⁹ At a larger level, Wordsworth's reassessment of Godwinian thought in *The Excursion* identifies him as a self-conscious inheritor of an impasse in eighteenth-century moral philosophy, one in which Stoicism exists not in opposition to a life of passionate expression but alongside it—at times comfortably, and at other moments beset by contradiction. For Wordsworth, like Godwin, the attempt to reconcile Stoicism with everyday life prompted a turn back to eighteenth-century moralists like the Third Earl of Shaftesbury and Adam Smith, both of whom approached Stoicism as integral to sociability and broad justice. Far from replacing what Northrop Frye called a “reptilian Classicism” with a “mammalian Romanticism,” writers like Wordsworth and Godwin inherited an ethics of sentiment already radically destabilized by its Stoic foundations.¹⁰

Though overshadowed by the rhetoric of passion and powerful feeling, Stoicism constituted a central but equivocal set of ideas in Romantic writing. Classical in origin, but transformed throughout history, Stoic philosophy was, in Ernst Cassirer's terms, pivotal to the “formation of the modern mind and the modern world.”¹¹ Though often associated with the complete elimination of emotion, the Stoics advocated a subtle moral psychology, one that linked virtue and judgment to the restraint of passion.¹² In the Romantic period, this restraint was variably portrayed as revolutionary or acquiescent—an indeterminacy that has uniquely shaped Wordsworth's critical fortunes. Critical accounts that link Wordsworth's apathy—from the Greek *apatheia*, “without feeling”—to his reactionary politics share broad commonalities with G. W. F. Hegel's discussion of Stoicism in the *Phenomenology*

of *Spirit*. For Hegel, Stoicism was the product of a “time of universal fear and bondage,” a slave ideology (to use Alexandre Kojève’s term) that mistakes detachment as a form of freedom.¹³ Retreating into the realm of thought and “solid singleness,” Hegel’s Stoic justifies inaction and cultivates a “stolid lifeless unconcern which persistently withdraws from the movement of existence.”¹⁴ From this Hegelian perspective, poetical retreat resembles the self-defeating outlook of an unhappy consciousness, a precursor to egotistical sublimity and its solipsism. For Wordsworth, however, the distinctly radical deployment of Stoicism in the 1790s made it more than an abstract, acquiescent stage in the evolution of mind. Wordsworth first encountered the Roman Stoicism of Seneca and Cicero at Hawkshead Grammar School, and his library at Rydal Mount contained multiple copies of Cicero, Epictetus, and other Stoic texts.¹⁵ But for Wordsworth, the specific contours of classical Stoicism were ultimately eclipsed by its outsized significance in the 1790s, a moment in which Stoicism and Revolution went hand in hand. In this heightened context, the most influential Stoic thinker to cross Wordsworth’s path was not Seneca or Epictetus, but Godwin.

Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* resists easy classification and tends to be allied with a kaleidoscopic array of philosophical positions, ranging from anarchism and utilitarianism to moral perfectionism. For Wordsworth, however, the antipathy to emotion and private affections on display in the first edition of *Political Justice* aligned it with the philosophy of the Stoics above all else. Wordsworth’s most direct account of his fascination with Godwinian philosophy appears in *The Prelude*. Disregarding the complexity of Godwin’s nine-hundred-page treatise, he underscores instead the dispassionate orientation of Godwin’s attempt

to abstract the hopes of man
Out of his feelings to be fix’d thenceforth
For ever in a purer element.¹⁶

Neglecting questions of property, punishment, and gratitude, Wordsworth links both the appeal and the inadequacy of Godwin’s system to the critique of passion that informs its politics. In describing Godwinian disinterestedness as a “[t]empting” (*P*, 10.810) scheme that makes space for the passions “to work / And never hear the sound of their own names” (*P*, 10.812–13) he portrays Godwin’s rejection of emotion as deceptive and self-aggrandizing, an illusion in which enthusiasm is fueled by the pretense of its absence. But what looks like a dismissive oversimplification actually anticipates Godwin’s own

substantive critique. When Godwin drew up a list of the principal errors that undermined the first edition of *Political Justice*, all three of his objections fell in line with Stoicism, broadly conceived:

The Enquiry Concerning Political Justice I apprehend to be blemished principally by three errors: 1) Stoicism, or an inattention to the principle that pleasure and pain are the only bases upon which morality can rest; 2) Sandemanianism, or an inattention to the principle that feeling, and not judgement is the cause of human actions; 3) the unqualified condemnation of the private affections.¹⁷

By the time Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*, Godwin had twice revised *Political Justice*, with each successive version moderating his Stoic outlook by placing new emphasis on “private affections” and the role of feeling in “human actions.” In attributing his dispassionate perspective to Sandemanianism—a particularly strict form of religious dissent—Godwin acknowledged the irrational roots of his own Enlightenment project, one in which the hyper-rational perfectibility of *Political Justice* springs from a deep religiosity rather than a secular critique.¹⁸ With its Christian outlook and flexible moral psychology, Godwin’s revised conception of Stoicism bears more than a passing resemblance to Wordsworth’s moderated Stoicism in *The Excursion*. Indeed, the conflation of piety and Stoic philosophy makes Godwin’s radicalism surprisingly consonant with what Willard Spiegelman has described as Wordsworth’s “mature, even preacherly stoicism.”¹⁹ In *The Prelude*, however, Wordsworth relies on a static, uncritical conception of Godwin, one that occludes revisions to *Political Justice* as well as the increasingly moderate position that both writers came to share. The centrality of *The Prelude* in the Romantic canon has only exacerbated this misprision, helping to make Godwin—to use Mark Canuel’s terms—“one of the most misunderstood of all Romantic writers.”²⁰ For Wordsworth and so many later Wordsworthians, it has been easy to follow Coleridge in dismissing Godwin’s ethical thought as little more than a “Stoical Morality which disclaims all the duties of Gratitude and domestic Affection.”²¹

At the same time, Wordsworth’s skeptical critique of Godwinian Stoicism was a paradoxical product of his own desire. The formidable detachment that Godwin made visible held a sublime appeal that cut through Wordsworth’s retrospective irony:

what delight!
 How glorious! in self-knowledge and self-rule
 To look through all the frailties of the world
 And, with a resolute mastery shaking off
 The accidents of nature, time, and place
 That make up the weak being of the past,
 Build social freedom on its only basis,
 The freedom of the individual mind,
 Which, to the blind restraint of general laws
 Superior, magisterially adopts
 One guide, the light of circumstances, flash'd
 Upon an independent intellect.

(P, 10.818–29)

Jonathan Wordsworth has drawn attention to the control that Wordsworth exercises over this satire, deflecting “the obvious comparisons between Godwinian arrogance and Wordsworthian egotistical solitude.”²² Linking social and political freedom to a more integral mental freedom, Wordsworth discredits Godwinian philosophy by suggesting that its absurd faith in rationality makes it paradoxically irrational. But fractures in Wordsworth’s satirical control point to a fascination that counterbalances his critique. Though changed by time and circumstance, the “indisturb’d delight” (P, 10.838) that Wordsworth attributed to Godwin’s scheme reappears at the end of *The Prelude* in a rhapsodic celebration of the “genuine Liberty” (P, 13.122) of a mind that has “sovereignty within and peace at will” (P, 13.114).

Wordsworth’s disenchantment with Godwin’s unfeeling philosophy tends to be flagged as a central rupture in his poetic development, but only because Wordsworth himself forcefully set the precedent for this partition. In his abbreviated and unpublished “Essay on Morals,” he claimed that “such books as M^r Godwyn’s” fall short of “their intended good purposes” because they fail not only to “melt into our affections” but to incorporate themselves “with the blood & vital juices of our minds.”²³ In spite of these self-defensive assertions, the Stoic outlook that Wordsworth found in *Political Justice* outlasted his various political commitments and shaped his mature ethical sensibility. If this unexpected continuity belies Wordsworth’s simplistic account of a swerve away from abstract philosophy toward passionate poetry, it also unsettles the privileged place that emotion and affect tend to occupy in Romantic ethics and aesthetics. In *The Spirit of the Age*, William Hazlitt compared Godwin’s extreme objectivity to William Parry’s thwarted quest for an arctic transit from the Atlantic to the Pacific, a conceit that allowed him to depict the Romantic valorization

of passion as the byproduct of a powerful ethical fascination with a place beyond passion:

Captain Parry would be thought to have rendered a service to navigation and his country, no less by proving that there is no North-West Passage, than if he had ascertained that there is one: so Mr Godwin has rendered a service to moral science, by attempting (in vain) to pass the Arctic Circle and Frozen Regions, where the understanding is no longer warmed by the affections, nor fanned by the breeze of fancy!²⁴

Much of the poetry of Wordsworth's great decade valorizes the power of the imagination and the warmth of the affections, and yet *The Excursion* shows that Wordsworth, like Godwin, was prone to tarry in those "Frozen Regions" of the mind. In charting a philosophical continuity that transcends obvious shifts in ideology, my argument necessarily revisits James Chandler's insight that Wordsworth's "programmatic poetry," influenced by Edmund Burke, was "conservative from the start."²⁵ Chandler's exposition of Wordsworth's latent Burkeanism productively unsettles accounts of his development that emphasize moments of rupture and narratives of decline, but his capacious sense of influence also points to the possibility of an alternative coherence. If Burke's account of sentiment and prejudice colors even Wordsworth's radical years, then the Stoicism of Godwin's system—"the grandeur of its views, and the fortitude of its principles"—could easily inform a later text like *The Excursion*.²⁶ Burke's influence was, in Chandler's terms, "a touchy subject" that Wordsworth "preferred not to face."²⁷ The same could be said of Godwin and his Stoicism: willfully overlooked but never abandoned, its insistent reappearance in *The Excursion* disrupts the critical complacency that lets generalizations about Wordsworth's politics eclipse his central ethical commitments.

I. THE PERILS OF REVOLUTIONARY STOICISM

In 1799, Robert Southey confessed that at the height of the French Revolution he had "counteracted Rousseau by dieting upon Godwin and Epictetus."²⁸ Seven years later, he offered a more elaborate account of his revolutionary Stoicism: "I carried Epictetus in my pocket, til my very heart was ingrained with it. . . . I am convinced that Stoicism, properly understood, is the best and noblest system of morals."²⁹ In the polemical debates surrounding the French Revolution, reason was often pitted against sentiment in the fraught attempt to isolate the true foundation of political justice. Burke's sensibility deviated from the dispassionate

rationalism of figures like Godwin, who, in *Political Justice*, saw the progress of truth as indebted “not to the frenzy of enthusiasm, but [to] the calm, sagacious and deliberate effort of reason.”³⁰ While Godwin himself was often depicted as a “caricature of the unfeeling rationalist, the coldest-blooded metaphysician of the age,” Southey’s emphatic recollection of his revolutionary interest in Epictetus points to a different story, one that attests to the significance and ideological complexity of Stoicism in a revolutionary age.³¹ Indeed, the explicit, public, and insistent association of Stoicism and revolutionary culture makes Wordsworth and Godwin’s self-proclaimed attraction to Stoic ethics representative of a much broader tendency.

Shuttled between various ideological persuasions, Stoic philosophy was a point of contention in both radical and reactionary responses to the French Revolution. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke deployed Stoic caricature to ridicule French politicians who aped a “bold, hardy genius” in espousing paradoxical principles that ran contrary to nature:

These paradoxes become with them serious grounds of action, upon which they proceed in regulating the most important concerns of the state. Cicero ludicrously describes Cato as endeavouring to act in the commonwealth upon the school paradoxes which exercised the wits of the junior students in stoic philosophy. If this was true of Cato, these gentlemen copy after him in the manner of some persons who lived about his time—*pede nudo Catonem*.³²

For Burke, the mark of a “true lawgiver” was a “heart full of sensibility.”³³ In falling prey to the prevalent idea that “an unfeeling heart, and an undoubting confidence, are the sole qualifications for a perfect legislator,” members of the National Assembly substituted calculation and hubristic speculation for what Wordsworth would later call “the primary laws of our nature” (*Prose*, 1:122).³⁴ Impervious to the claims of real life, Stoicism became, for Burke, a tenuous school exercise.

Burke’s critique of fashionable French Stoicism alludes to a fundamental question posed by Horace in his *Epistles*: “[I]f a man were to ape Cato with grim and savage look, with bare feet and the cut of a scanty gown, would he thus set before us Cato’s virtue and morals?”³⁵ The stakes of the broad association between Stoicism and revolution in the 1790s rests on how one answers such a question, for as Dorinda Outram has argued, classical Stoicism served as a ready source of rhetoric and “role-playing models” for French politicians attempting to replace the values of an aristocratic culture with individual virtue

and self-sovereignty.³⁶ For Outram, such political theater balanced a modest philosophical pretext with an ambitious practical agenda. For Maximilien Robespierre, Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, and other French patriots, much could be gained by approximating the detachment of a figure like Cato, who would embrace death over tyranny, or the severity of a figure like Brutus, who would sacrifice his sons to preserve the Republic. But in emulating the sublime detachment of a Brutus or a Cato, authority and symbolism outweighed the value of philosophical precision. The doctrinal particulars of revolutionary Stoicism were less important than its ubiquity.

Robespierre, for example, argued before the National Convention that while the “idle hypotheses of various philosophers” were more important to metaphysicians and “eternal wranglers” than practical legislators, the example of Stoicism could exert a powerful force in political life.³⁷ After praising Cato and Brutus’s dedication to “the sublime sect of the Stoics” and its founder Zeno, he described the emulation of the Stoics as especially valuable during moments of political turmoil and transition:

Cato never wavered between Epicurus and Zeno. Brutus and his illustrious colleagues, who shared his dangers and his glory, also belonged to the sublime sect of the Stoics, who entertained such exalted views of the dignity of man. Stoicism produced the noble emulation of Brutus and of Cato, in the fearful epochs that followed the fall of Roman liberty; that preserved the honour of human nature, degraded, not only by the vices of the descendants of Caesar, but by the criminal apathetic patience of the people.³⁸

Disambiguated from an apathy that tolerates tyranny, Robespierre’s Stoicism sets personal passion aside and endures sacrifice and hardship to preserve liberty. Surpassing mere emulation, Brutus and Cato’s inflexible love of liberty gave rise to a pervasive new iconography in revolutionary France: a bust of Brutus stood beside the orator’s tribune at the National Convention, and Parisians could stroll down recently renamed streets like the Rue de Brutus or the Rue de Cato.³⁹

Though eliding the philosophical complexity of Stoic ethics, such iconography and nomenclature spoke to the powerful resonance of Stoic detachment in both France and Britain. As French cathedrals were converted into Temples of Reason, Robespierre and the National Convention replaced Christianity with a “cult of the Supreme Being.”⁴⁰ This transformation called, among other things, for yearly festivals dedicated “to heroism,” “to disinterestedness,” and “to stoicism.”⁴¹

Nor was the British press blind to Robespierre's Stoic play-acting: in 1794, the *Whitehall Evening Post* claimed that he was born "almost without any passion whatever, or rather endowed with the powerful art of hiding all those passions which might endanger his popularity and impair his success."⁴² Similarly, a correspondent for the *Sun* observed that Robespierre, affecting the utmost simplicity, had "worn the same coat nearly these two years" and lodged "at a Carpenter's house, with all the plainness of a Stoic philosopher."⁴³ These critiques of Robespierre's disingenuousness point toward a skepticism that many British readers shared. In a Parliamentary debate on the course of the war with France, Charles James Fox linked French Stoicism with "the brutality of savages" and warned that, if unchecked, it would spread across Europe and "overwhelm the World."⁴⁴ The *Sun* reported his speech as follows:

In common with every friend to Mankind, he must lament that the horrible massacres which were daily perpetrating in France, and the general misery in which the European World was involved, seemed unfortunately to have had the effect of hardening the hearts of men. . . . In parting with those sympathetic feelings which lead us to participate in the joys or sorrows of our fellow-creatures, we had relinquished the best attributes of our Nature. . . . Such cold and selfish Stoicism, so contrary to the beauty of the Christian System, and so subversive of the true dignity of Man, ought to be checked in its progress, lest Europe should once more become barbarous, and ignorance, cruelty and darkness once more overwhelm the World.⁴⁵

Over the course of the 1790s, Burke's widely disseminated disenchantment with abstract rights prompted a broad reinvestment in the power of the public affections at the expense of Stoic philosophy. After the execution of Robespierre, the distance separating revolutionary Stoicism from its dispassionate ideal became utterly apparent.

But retrospective critique does not diminish the allure of Stoicism in the early 1790s. For Wordsworth, the experience of revolutionary Stoicism was channeled primarily through Godwin's philosophy. Like Robespierre, Godwin was a self-proclaimed emulator of Cato from an early age.⁴⁶ Later, in *Political Justice*, he translated Cato's iconographic Stoicism into a political principle, asserting that the "man, who is accustomed upon every occasion to consult his reason, will speedily find a habit of this nature growing upon him till the just and dispassionate value of every incident that befalls him will come at length to spontaneously suggest itself" (*PPW*, 3:197–98). *Political Justice* boldly

probed the efficacy of cool reason applied to “extreme cases,” but primarily in the hope that Stoic detachment would become a facet of ordinary experience (*PPW*, 3:198). For Godwin, crisis was the backdrop against which the “calm, sagacious, and deliberate effort of reason” emerged most forcefully (*PPW*, 3:111). While Burke held crises like the mob attack on Versailles as “events” in which “passions instruct our reason,” Godwin adopted a contrary stance.⁴⁷ In a notorious example of this dispassionate doctrine, he asks in *Political Justice* whether a man whose palace was in flames should save François Fénelon, the Archbishop of Cambrai, or his own mother from a burning garret. Elevating the greater good over his own little platoon, Godwin claims that since Fénelon will benefit the cause of justice much more than one’s mother, he should be saved: after all, “What magic is there in the pronoun ‘my,’ to overturn the decisions of everlasting truth?” (*PPW*, 3:50). What Charles Lamb called Godwin’s “famous fire case” was little more than a modern version of Brutus’s willingness to sacrifice his sons for the greater good of the Republic. Both cases turned on a Stoic ethic that set “the benefit of the whole” above the claim of partial passions (*PPW*, 3:49). Though poorly received by his critics, the extremity of the example crystallized, for Godwin, a virtue that could take milder forms in common life.

II. RESOLUTION, INDEPENDENCE, AND INDIFFERENCE

Wordsworth’s lyrics are populated by figures whose quiet endurance and emotional vacuity testify to his deep interest in the efficacy of everyday Stoicism. Unaccountably placid and always passive, and hardly acting though acted-upon, figures like Michael, the discharged soldier, and the Old Cumberland Beggar all explore emotional detachment as a virtue that emerges out of “incidents and situations from common life” (*Prose*, 1:123). The leech-gatherer in “Resolution and Independence” stands as an especially central example of Wordsworth’s post-Godwinian attempt to examine the value of detachment, fortitude, and emotional regulation. In the poem, Wordsworth invokes the fate of Chatterton and Burns to testify to an affective imbalance that had, at times, overshadowed his own existence. For Wordsworth, the problem was precisely that

it sometimes chanceth, from the might
Of joy in minds that can no farther go,
As high as we have mounted in delight
In our dejection do we sink as low.⁴⁸

Countering this vacillation, the leech-gatherer emerges in this poem as a paradigm of tempered equipoise. Though hardly attempting to forge new social freedoms or overleap “the blind restraint of general laws” (*P*, 10.826), the leech-gatherer resembles a simplified rendition of Wordsworth’s Godwinian fantasy in *The Prelude*: “shaking off / The accidents of nature, time and place” (*P*, 10.821–22), he looks through the frailty of the world and becomes, for Wordsworth, an exemplar of wise forbearance. It is almost as if the title of the poem anticipates Wordsworth’s Godwinian satire in *The Prelude*. With his own “*resolute* mastery” (*P*, 10.821, emphasis added) and “*independent* intellect” (*P*, 10.829, emphasis added) the leech-gatherer becomes an uncanny pastoral manifestation of virtues that Wordsworth associated with Godwin’s philosophy.

Wordsworth’s initial figurative description of the leech-gatherer marks his fascination not with the old man’s virtue or constancy but with his sublime insensibility:

As a huge Stone is sometimes seen to lie
 Couch’d on the bald top of an eminence;
 Wonder to all who do the same espy
 By what means it could thither come, and whence;
 So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
 Like a Sea-beast crawl’d forth, which on a shelf
 Of rock or sand reposes, there to sun itself.⁴⁹

While the remarkable simile here is often thought to be the beastly one, Wordsworth’s figurative equation of a man and a stone carries more philosophical weight. In imagining the leech-gatherer as a stone on top of an eminence, Wordsworth isolates a perspective from which profound autonomy appears incommensurate with any explicable means; as he put it in his *Guide to the Lakes*, such stones “defy conjecture as to the means by which they came thither” (*Prose*, 2:187). But the obscurity of means to an end can hardly stand as proof of vigorous autonomy, for to aspire to the condition of a stone is to be both a product and a part of nature’s process. Wordsworth’s recumbent sea-beast points tacitly to Hobbes, whose chapter “Of the Liberty of Subjects” in *Leviathan* asserts that “when the impediment of motion is in the constitution of the thing itself, we use not to say it wants the liberty, but the power to move, as when a stone lieth still, or a man is fastened to his bed by sickness.”⁵⁰ Devoid, as Wordsworth himself acknowledges, “of so much of the indications of life and motion,” the stone marks a transposition of Godwin’s inherently political Stoicism, a swerve away from a discourse

of political liberty to a more essential kind of agency (*Prose*, 3:33). Hobbes had characterized the stone's immobility as an incapacity. In "Resolution and Independence," Wordsworth claims that the ability to remain unmoved is in fact its own kind of power.

Obdurate and unfazed by shifting fate and fortune, the figure of the stone exemplifies Wordsworth's latent attraction to a Stoicism that the leech-gatherer comes to represent. Stoniness was, after all, an old trope for the dispassionate bearing of the Stoic sage. In Elizabeth Carter's translation of Epictetus's *Dialogues*, an encounter with Epictetus is compared to meeting "a Stone or a Statue."⁵¹ In 1804, Coleridge wrote to Wordsworth and compared himself to Mortimer from *The Borderers*, confessing that he longed "to retire into stoniness & to stir not, or to be diffused upon the winds & have no individual Existence."⁵² Unswayed by pain, pleasure, or any other emotion, the stone in these examples becomes an emblem—almost a caricature—of Stoic detachment. Acknowledging the pleasure he felt in contemplating "the fortitude, independence, persevering spirit, and the general moral dignity of this old man's character," Wordsworth adopts the very fact of his imperturbability as a "stay secure" that might counterbalance an irresolution endemic to the poetic vocation.⁵³

By channeling reflections on Stoic detachment through the figure of the stone, Wordsworth separated a philosophical attitude from both its customary rhetoric and its political extremity. His attempt to write about Stoicism in verse bears out Simon Jarvis's sense that Wordsworth's poetic thinking involves an attempt "to obstruct, displace, or otherwise change the syntax and the lexicons currently available for the articulation" of singular philosophical experience.⁵⁴ In Crabb Robinson's compressed terms, Wordsworth "reclathes his *idea* in an individual dress which expresses the essential quality, and has also the spirit and life of a sensual object, and this transmutes the philosophic into a poetic exhibition."⁵⁵ Displacement and realignment were especially vital to Wordsworth's reflections on Stoicism, for as I argue above, the revolutionary deployment of its lexicon made it difficult, or at least complicated, to register an interest in Stoicism in conventional terms. At the same time, transmuting Stoic ideas into a stone-like form put Wordsworth in close proximity to a system that he would take great pains to disclaim in *The Prelude*. In a striking coincidence that unsettles the standard, simplified account of Wordsworth's renunciation of Godwinian rationality, both authors invoked the trope of the stone to account for their evolving perspectives on Stoicism. For Wordsworth, the stone signified a kind of aspiration; for Godwin, it came to represent the overextension of *Political Justice's* unfeeling rationality.

Wordsworth read Godwin's *Caleb Williams* in 1795.⁵⁶ Given his intimate acquaintance with Godwin, he might have been familiar with its original unpublished ending, where a drugged and despondent Caleb claims, "True happiness lies in being like a stone."⁵⁷ As a radical examination or "symbolical enactment" of his views in *Political Justice*, *Caleb Williams* captures both the ambition and the austerity of Godwin's benevolent perfectibility.⁵⁸ Yet by the time Wordsworth was confronting his own moral crisis over the efficacy of abstract reason, Godwin was significantly qualifying his own philosophical commitments. In revisions to *Political Justice* in 1796 and 1798, Godwin reacted against the "*Principle of the Stoics*" (PPW, 4:208) that elevates virtue "into something impossible and unmeaning" (PPW, 4:209), and he conceded that disinterested benevolence must be rooted in pleasure, sympathy, and the affections. In *The Enquirer*, he forcefully denounced "an intemperate spirit of philosophy" and warned that the "sect that carried this spirit to the most ridiculous extreme among the ancients, were the Stoics" (PPW, 5:150). Chastened by the reception of *Political Justice* as well as the death of Mary Wollstonecraft, Godwin vehemently condemned the extreme emotional austerity that he and the Stoics had once held in common.

Like Wordsworth, Godwin was enacting a form of self-critique, one that foregrounded his increasingly moderate stance by repressing the severity that had once characterized his deeply held philosophical convictions. In *The Enquirer*, he reframed a sentiment of Hume's to deflate the value of his own Stoic inheritance:

I can guess very nearly what I should have been, if Epictetus had not bequeathed to us his *Morals*, or Seneca his *Consolations*. But I cannot tell what I should have been, if Shakespear or Milton had not written. The poorest peasant in the remotest corner of England, is probably a different man from what he would have been but for these authors. (PPW, 5:141)⁵⁹

In closing his Seneca and opening his Shakespeare, Godwin previews his professional turn from philosophical to literary labor and sets himself up as a self-purported new man of feeling.⁶⁰ But the transition was never completely effected. Continually negotiating the divide between emotional responsiveness and its antithesis, Godwin often invoked the stone as a mediating trope. Overturning his definition of happiness in *Caleb Williams*, Godwin replicated an almost Wordsworthian turn toward emotion, but one that placed him squarely in the realm of an eighteenth-century ethics of sentiment:

A sound morality requires that nothing human should be regarded by us as indifferent; but it is impossible that we should not feel the strongest interest for those persons we know most intimately, and whose welfare and sympathies are united to our own. True wisdom will recommend to us individual attachments; for with them our minds are more thoroughly maintained in activity and life than they can be under the privation of them, and it is better that man should be a living being, than a stock or a stone. (*PPW*, 2:179)⁶¹

Wordsworth's own uncertainty and irresolution had been allayed by the figure of a stone-like man on top of an eminence, but like Godwin, much of his career would involve accounting for the cost of that security, as well as its values and limitations.

III. THE PURER ELEMENT: ESSAY ON SEPULCHRES AND THE EXCURSION

Critics often approach *The Excursion* along Victorian lines, allowing its pieties to obscure its revisionary commitments. As such, Wordsworth's invocation of "reason's steadfast rule" in 1814 might seem different in kind from Godwin's appeal to the "calm, sagacious and deliberate effort of reason" (*PPW*, 3:111) in 1793—yet another manifestation of the reduced scope and splendor of Wordsworth's earlier views.⁶² But as the first published installment of Wordsworth's long-deferred *Recluse* project, *The Excursion* takes up the traumas and moral quandaries of the 1790s, exploring latent continuities between Wordsworth's mature ethical outlook and his youthful commitments. Adopting many of the conventions of philosophical dialogue, the poem recounts the lofty conversation that occurs between a Poet, a sagacious pedlar (called the Wanderer), a despondent Solitary, and a rural Pastor—all of whom are imperfect avatars of Wordsworth himself. At once retrospective and self-reflexive, *The Excursion* revisits Wordsworth's early attraction to revolutionary Stoicism while also exploring its modulation and influence over time. Yet Wordsworth's aversion to broadcasting his long-standing debts to both Godwin and Stoicism magnifies the significance of seemingly subtle cues—in this case, their shared fascination with the monumental function of "senseless stone" (*Prose*, 2:54).

In 1811, Wordsworth wrote a perfunctory letter to Godwin that ended with a somewhat imperious request: "If you can command a Copy of your book upon Burial, which I have never seen, let it be sent to Lamb's for my use."⁶³ Duncan Wu questions whether Charles Lamb ever managed to send Wordsworth a copy of Godwin's *Essay*

on *Sepulchres*, but it unquestionably resonates with Wordsworth's reflections in both *The Excursion* and his contemporaneous *Essays upon Epitaphs*.⁶⁴ Godwin calls for an idiosyncratic democratization of Westminster Abbey's memorial project, proposing that a "very slight and cheap memorial" be erected next to the remains of all of Britain's illustrious dead (*PPW*, 6:7). Godwin's memorial quest to preserve native virtue for future generations resembles Wordsworth's attempt—in *The Excursion* and its own country churchyard—to depict the mental fortitude and everyday Stoicism that persists amidst the trials of ordinary life. Confronting his inability to save the Solitary from his despondency through argument alone, the Wanderer turns to the renovating and didactic potential of "[a]uthentic epitaphs" (*E*, 5.653), supplementing "abstractions" with "solid facts" (*E*, 5.639) and "plain pictures" (*E*, 5.640) of the dead and departed. In his own *Essay*, Godwin similarly sidesteps "cold generalities and idle homilies of morality" in favor of imaginative access to real lives (*PPW*, 6:22).

Both Wordsworth and Godwin identify graveyards as repositories of "solid facts" and "plain pictures" that might supplement abstract moral speculation, but the real crux of the essay's confluence with *The Excursion* lies in Godwin's recollection of reading Spenser's *Epithalamion* near the ruins of the Valle Crucis Abbey. Godwin's vivid impression of the contrast between Spenser's passionate sensibility and monastic austerity prompted an assured footnote, one that subtly incorporates the tension and transformation that had characterized his post-*Political Justice* career:

Nothing can be more beautiful, than the idea in Grecian Mythology, of the two kinds of fire, and the divinities that presided over each. . . . The fire of Vulcan was the fire of the forge and of thunder; it was fitful and furious: but the fire of Vesta was the purer element, which burned evenly, and was never extinguished. By this emblem it is signified to us in the most expressive manner, that chastity, a heaven-born resolution, and the sublime pursuit of a determined purpose, is not, 'as dull fools suppose,' a frigid and languid state of thought, but has in it a fervour and enthusiasm. . . .

There is, and perhaps always has been, much cant afloat in the world, about *warm hearts*, and *cold hearts*: and no doubt there is a real division of human beings into what may be loosely called the *feeling* and the *unfeeling*. But the division is not exactly as it is vulgarly understood. The hottest fire is not that which on every slight incentive blazes on the surface, but that which is close pent up in the recesses of the heart. . . . In a word, the sincerest warmth is not wild, but calm; and operates in greater activity in the breast of the stoic, than in that of the vulgar enthusiast. (*PPW*, 6:21–22)

Godwin's attempt to differentiate a furious and strangely mechanical passion from its chaste and austere counterpart channels the special kind of frustration that grows out of being misunderstood. For years, friends and critics alike had misconstrued his call for disinterested benevolence as mere indifference, forcing him to endure the "flood of ribaldry, invective and intolerance poured out against me and my writings" (*PPW*, 2:163). But here, Godwin forcefully dissects the exclusionary logic implicit in these critiques: Stoicism signifies not the absence of passion but its perfection, and the most vociferous display of emotion rarely coincides with true social concern. Looking past the cant of false dichotomies, Godwin rejects superficial caricatures of Stoic moral psychology and quietly casts his lot with the sublime and steady fire of Vesta. Wordsworth had once condemned Godwin's attempt to

abstract the hopes of man
 Out of his feelings, to be fixed thenceforth
 Forever in a purer element.
 (*P*, 10:807–809)

Here, however, Godwin himself redefines that "purer element" not as a frigid and "unfeeling" wasteland but as the source of true "fervour and enthusiasm" (*PPW*, 6:21).⁶⁵

For Godwin, Stoic virtue is not a form of apathy but an outgrowth of fierce commitment. His footnote coincides with a central question reiterated throughout *The Excursion* and its philosophical dialogue. The most succinct formulation of this ethical quandary occurs in a rare instance of rhetorical humility, one in which the Wanderer ponders the transposition of "naked reason" in a question that even he, for once, hesitates to answer:

How shall Man unite
 A self-forgetting tenderness of heart
 And earth-despising dignity of soul?
 Wise in that union, and without it blind!
 (*E*, 5.577–80)

Searching for an "inward principle" (*E*, 5.573) that might reconcile the "active energy" (*E*, 5.575) of social benevolence with a more Stoic and "passive will" (*E*, 5.574), the Wanderer—inadvertently or not—echoes Adam Smith's sense of an inherent connection between the "amiable virtues" of "indulgent humanity" and the "awful and respectable" virtues of "self-denial" and "self-government."⁶⁶ Wordsworth and Godwin's evolving interest in Stoicism and their reassessment of its worldly

capacity reflect their inheritance of an impasse between Stoicism and sympathetic exchange in eighteenth-century moral philosophy. At the same time, Godwin's defense of a union between sensibility and Stoic self-mastery clarifies Wordsworth's preoccupation with a similar correspondence in two concrete ways: his synthesis accords with a pattern of logic Wordsworth had already broached in his first *Essay upon Epitaphs*, and his fiery "emblem" directly informs the Wanderer's description of virtue in *The Excursion*.

A year before requesting a copy of *Essay on Sepulchres*, Wordsworth articulated his own version of the paradoxical connection between feeling and unfeeling natures in his first *Essay upon Epitaphs*—a reflection that he described as "dictated by a spirit congenial to that which pervades" *The Excursion* (*E*, page 302). The essay focuses on the question of immortality, but it includes a striking contrast between two divergent yet representative responses to bodily remains. Landing in a strange country, the poet Simonides reverently buries an unknown corpse, while an unspecified "ancient Philosopher" regards a dead body with contempt (*Prose*, 2:52). The moral that Wordsworth expounds from the contrast is not that "tender-hearted Simonides was incapable of the lofty movements of thought, to which that other Sage gave way," nor that the callous philosopher would necessarily be blind to earthly considerations "in a different mood of mind" (*Prose*, 2:52). Instead, he observes that "[e]ach of these Sages was in sympathy with the best feelings of our nature; feelings which, though they seem opposite to each other, have another and a finer connection than that of contrast" (*Prose*, 2:52–53). Since qualities in the natural and moral world "pass insensibly into their contraries," Wordsworth himself adopts "a midway point," one that acknowledges the legitimacy of both positions (*Prose*, 2:53). Wordsworth's reflections on (im)mortality suggest that he would have been sympathetic to Godwin's point about warm hearts and cold hearts—"they have another and a finer connection than that of contrast" (*Prose*, 2:53).

While Godwin upsets the false binary between vehement sympathy and cool detachment, his own pursuit of a "midway point" ultimately emerges out of his vested interest in the rehabilitation of Stoicism. Wordsworth's allusive rendering of Godwin's note in *The Excursion* captures his interest in a similar revisionary concern. Towards the end of book four—in one of the poem's few extended similes—the Wanderer transposes Godwin's vestal imagery in describing a virtue that persists amidst "each vicissitude of loss and gain":

Within the soul a Faculty abides,
 That with interpositions, which would hide
 And darken, so can deal, that they become
 Contingences of pomp; and serve to exalt
 Her native brightness. As the ample Moon,
 In the deep stillness of a summer even
 Rising behind a thick and lofty Grove,
 Burns like an unconsuming fire of light,
 In the green trees; and kindling on all sides
 Their leafy umbrage, turns the dusky veil
 Into a substance glorious as her own,
 Yea with her own incorporated, by power
 Capacious and serene. Like power abides
 In Man's celestial Spirit; Virtue thus
 Sets forth and magnifies herself; thus feeds
 A calm, a beautiful, and silent fire,
 From the incumbrances of mortal life,
 From error, disappointment,—nay even from guilt,
 And sometimes, so relenting Justice wills,
 From palpable oppressions of Despair.

(E, 4.1055–74)

The chronological history detailed by Mark Reed and the editors of the Cornell Wordsworth holds open the possibility that Godwin's footnote in *Essay on Sepulchres* could have exerted a direct influence on this passage, but irrespective of causality, thematic and linguistic connections are striking.⁶⁷ While Godwin turns to mythology and Wordsworth to nature, both use the metaphor of an "unconsuming fire" to account for a constancy or virtue that includes but does not exhaust human passion. Wordsworth's diction is at its most abstract and philosophical here: the soul is equipped with a virtue or "Faculty" that turns obstacles or "interpositions" into paradoxical affirmations of an innate freedom from such obstacles. The "brightness" of this faculty transforms the dark aspect of necessity into its opposite; "incumbrances of mortal life" become nothing more than "contingences of pomp," or in the *Oxford English Dictionary's* terms "splendid or impressive display[s]" of one's "freedom from necessity."⁶⁸ Such virtue is likened to the light of an "ample moon" impeded by a "thick and lofty grove," but rather than obstructing this light, the trees are absorbed in "an unconsuming fire of light" that only magnifies the "serene power" of the moon itself. Like Godwin's "fire of Vesta," the conflagration that results stands in for a faculty that blends real "fervour and enthusiasm" with Stoicism and its sublime resolve.

In commending a virtue that subverts “incumbrances” to its own glory, Wordsworth validates a Godwinian position he had once criticized: the autonomy or freedom of an “individual mind” (*P*, 10.825) capable of “shaking off / The accidents of nature, time and place” (*P*, 10.821–22). Wordsworth’s extended simile and complex natural imagery point to a realignment in his thinking, one that tempers his critique of Godwin in *The Prelude* while also clarifying the nature of the Stoicism that pervades *The Excursion*: far from reactionary, dispassionate virtue precedes life’s “interpositions,” nor is it defined by them.

The ethical status of Wordsworth’s moderated Stoicism figures prominently in critical estimations of *The Excursion*—and while it is rarely distinguished with a specific philosophical label, it becomes a frequent reference point in the poem’s “strong discourse” (*E*, 4.256). Jane Worthington once noted that while Wordsworth “took up Stoicism with enthusiasm,” innumerable passages in *The Excursion* suggest that he “continued to reflect upon it long and carefully.”⁶⁹ Stoicism frames evaluations of the Wanderer as a character as well as the famous “reconciling addendum” with which he concludes the story of Margaret. Its “grave Philosophy” is defended by the Solitary, prescribed by the Wanderer, and rendered as narrative by the Pastor, whose authentic epitaphs center on those “thoroughly fortified” (*E*, 3.344) souls who have “withdrawn from Passion’s crooked ways” (*E*, 5.350–51). Even the landscape takes on a Stoic hue, prompting the Poet to describe the Solitary’s vale as “perfectly secure” (*E*, 2.374) and unperturbed:

It could not be more quiet: peace is here
 Or no where; days unruffled by the gale
 Of public news or private; years that pass
 Forgetfully; uncalled upon to pay
 The common penalties of mortal life,
 Sickness, or accident, or grief, or pain.

(*E*, 2.384–89)

For Adam Potkay, these varied iterations of Stoicism in *The Excursion* exceed the level of content to transform the nature of the verse itself, resulting in a “stoic *aesthetics*” or “impersonal style” that “waxes classical” and recycles “mamoreal utterances that seem translated from a dead language.”⁷⁰

Whether at the level of content or style, Wordsworth’s attempts to look past the vulgar distinction between feeling and unfeeling natures are scattered throughout *The Excursion*, with the possibilities and incongruities of Godwin’s tempting scheme hovering constantly in the

background. But when taken in isolation from this decisive subtext, the moderated Stoicism on display in *The Excursion* can appear as troublingly uncritical. In a passage that has elicited much commentary, the narrating Poet connects the Wanderer's remarkable sensibility to his decisively Stoic outlook:

he kept
In solitude and solitary thought
His mind in a just equipoise of love.
Serene it was, unclouded by the cares
Of ordinary life; unvexed, unwarped
By partial bondage. In his steady course
No piteous revolutions had he felt,
No wild varieties of joy and grief.
Unoccupied by sorrow of its own
His heart lay open; and by Nature tuned
And constant disposition of his thoughts
To sympathy with Man, he was alive
To all that was enjoyed where'er he went;
And all that was endured; for in himself,
Happy, and quiet in his cheerfulness,
He had no painful pressure from without
That made him turn aside from wretchedness
With coward fears. He could *afford* to suffer
With those whom he saw suffer.
(*E*, 1.382–400)

With a mind held in a “just equipoise of love,” the Wanderer resembles Oliver Goldsmith’s *Citizen of the World*—a resonant phrase in Stoic ethics—who counsels that while an “absence of passion” might not be desirable, a mind “influenced by a just equipoise of the passions” can enjoy a true tranquility.⁷¹ At the same time, Kevis Goodman’s shrewd analysis of the Wanderer’s psychic balancing act conveys a sense of how precarious such an equilibrium might be; in her terms, “the Wanderer’s ‘sympathy with man’ is very nearly replaced by the achievement of a Stoic *apatheia*, an existence above and free from passion.”⁷² For Godwin and Wordsworth, however, these moral postures were hardly incompatible, nor was their indeterminacy such a bad thing. Unencumbered by bondage to “partial” passions, the Wanderer’s Stoicism is not unlike that which led the Solitary, prompted by the fall of the Bastille, to set aside “the depths / Of natural passion” (*E*, 3.744–45) only to find his “soul diffused” in “wide embrace” (*E*, 3.746). Wordsworth was alert to the ways in which Stoicism could pass into apathy, but like Godwin, his immersion in eighteenth-century

moral philosophy made him reluctant to dismiss Stoic virtue as a solipsistic antithesis to sensibility.⁷³

This complex but formative background to Wordsworth and Godwin's dispassionate perspectives can be epitomized by the prominent but occluded role that Stoicism plays in the thought of Shaftesbury and Smith. Shaftesbury, countering the Hobbesian account of self-interest, held that "to deserve the name good or virtuous, a creature must have all his inclinations and affections, his dispositions of mind and temper, suitable and agreeing with the good of his kind."⁷⁴ In this sense, local and individual affections all worked together for the good of the whole. For Shaftesbury, the love of a parent for a child and what he described as "the love of fellowship, company, and compassion" were all natural affections, productive of the good.⁷⁵ The high ethical value he placed on these generous affections led Andrew Kippis to describe Shaftesbury as "the Head of the School of sentimental Philosophy."⁷⁶ But in his *Philosophical Regimen*—a series of private notebooks modeled on the meditations of Marcus Aurelius—Shaftesbury revisits the topic of natural affections, this time commanding himself "not to think any more of natural affection in the imperfect and vulgar sense, but according to the just meaning of the word and what it imports."⁷⁷ In this redefined sense, he differentiates between the "*natural affection* of a rational creature, capable of knowing nature and of considering the good and interest of the whole" and the "lower" or "subordinate" affections, however natural they might seem:

This is the province of the truly wise man who is conscious of things human and divine: to learn how to submit all of his affections to the rule and government of the whole; how to accompany with his whole mind that supreme and perfect mind and reason of the universe. *This is to live according to Nature, to follow Nature, and to own and obey Deity.* If I have friends, I act the part of a friend; if I am a father, the part of a father. If I have a city or country, I study its good and interest; I cherish it as I ought; I hazard myself and do all for it that in me lies.⁷⁸

But in drawing a contrast between a heightened, Stoic sense of natural affection and its more conventional signification, Shaftesbury immediately qualifies this assertion by detailing what following "the rule and government of the whole" might actually entail:

If I must no longer be a father; if children or friends are taken from me; if He who gave me a country and a nation take it back, and either by war or any other means cause it to cease or perish, all is well. I am

free and unconcerned, so that I have done my part for my country; so that I have not been wanting to my friend; so that I have acted the part of a father. But shall I not bemoan my child? Shall I be thus indifferent and unconcerned? Shall I have no more natural affection? Wretch! Consider what it is thou callest natural affection. In what way canst thou have natural affection whilst this thou callest so is still retained?⁷⁹

Acknowledging how demanding this austere vision of natural affection appears to be, Shaftesbury also affirms that it is the only foundation upon which virtue, justice, and generosity can truly be said to exist. For Shaftesbury, one of the most influential moral theorists of the eighteenth century, natural affection means two entirely different things—one of which looks like what Wordsworth calls “first affections” or “primal sympathy,” and one of which is decidedly Stoic.⁸⁰ This dichotomy never really goes away.

Similarly, in Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Stoic self-command emerges as an insistent counterpoint to sympathetic exchange. At first glance, Smith seems dismissive of the whole Stoic operation, suggesting that all of “the metaphysical sophisms” by which Stoicism is supported “can seldom serve any other purpose than to blow up the hard insensibility of a coxcomb to ten times its native impertinence” (*T*, 143). But this repudiation radically underrates the impact that Stoic ethics had on Smith’s moral philosophy. As his editors note, Stoicism takes up “far more space” in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* than “any other system, ancient or modern” (*T*, 5). Indeed, in the sixth and final edition of *Moral Sentiments* published in 1790, Smith vastly expanded his accounts of duty, virtue, and self-command while also underscoring their particular Stoic resonance. There are many things to say about Smith and Stoicism, but in this context, two will suffice. On the one hand, Smith was adamant that the unequivocal elimination of passion—what he called a “perfect apathy” (*T*, 292) or “stupid insensibility” (*T*, 244)—was incompatible not only with justice or humanity, but with “every thing which Nature has prescribed to us as the proper business and occupation of our lives” (*T*, 292–93). The value of Stoicism was tied to its moderation. At the same time, his description of the ambition and method of Stoic ethics bears more than a passing resemblance to his own influential moral psychology:

Man, according to the Stoics, ought to regard himself, not as something separate and detached, but as a citizen of the world, a member of the vast commonwealth of nature. To the interest of this great community, he ought at all times to be willing that his own little interest should be

sacrificed. Whatever concerns himself, ought to affect him no more than whatever concerns any other equally important part of this immense system. We should view ourselves, not in the light in which our own selfish passions are apt to place us, but in the light in which any other citizen of the world would view us. (*T*, 140–41)

However solipsistic it might appear, Stoicism was social in its means and end, with a mechanism for regulating passion that functioned very much like Smith's "impartial spectator": in both cases, an external perspective worked to counter the partiality of passion. Smith even goes so far as to suggest that the "man within the breast" might be taught by Stoic reasoning "to attempt to overawe all our private, partial, and selfish affections" (*T*, 293). But if this Stoic or Smithian self-division works against the dangers of uncritical sensibility, it also qualifies the demands of an immoderate Stoicism.

Shaftesbury and Smith's mitigated Stoicism helps clarify the Wanderer's particular blend of sensibility and insensibility. Unencumbered by domestic attachments yet attuned to the centrality of passion, his imperfect Stoicism is not centripetal and solipsistic but expansive, focused—in Smith's terms—on "the vast commonwealth of nature" (*T*, 140). Secure against "wild varieties of joy and grief," the Wanderer's Stoic *apatheia* leads not to apathy but to what Wordsworth, in his *Prospectus* to *The Recluse*, calls "joy in widest commonalty spread" (*E*, page 39). Though moderated by time, Wordsworth's Stoicism—like Godwin's—was never entirely divorced from its revolutionary origins.

IV. WORDSWORTH'S COMMANDING EMINENCE

In its attempt to describe how one might find, in ordinary life and in the wake of calamity, "central peace, subsisting at the heart / of endless agitation" (*E*, 4.1140–41), *The Excursion* explores Stoic detachment while acknowledging, as Wordsworth's Pastor does, that it aspires to a "speculative height we may not reach" (*E*, 5.484). But like Smith and Godwin, Wordsworth was loath to abandon the imperfect possibilities of Stoicism. In *The Excursion*, he persistently explores a metaphor that links command over the passions to the power of perspective and distance. Throughout the poem, a detached prospect on the world and its variable passions becomes part and parcel of a detached perspective on the self. Without attempting to forge a system from its scattered speculations, I isolate one viable manifestation of Wordsworth's moderated Stoicism at the intersection of Geoffrey Hartman's insight that the poem has deep roots in eighteenth-century topographical poetry

and Charles Taylor's notion that modern selfhood involves inhabiting a "moral topography"—"of being able to find one's standpoint" in a moral landscape and achieve "a perspective in it."⁸¹

In his account of his early misfortunes, the Solitary calmly describes the stroke of "fatal Power" that shattered his early happiness (*E*, 3.646). When both of his children are suddenly caught in the "gripe of death" (*E*, 3.648), he is aggrieved, all the more so when he discovers that this traumatic loss has left his wife "Incalculably distant" (*E*, 3.672): she was "Calm as a frozen Lake when ruthless Winds / Blow fiercely, agitating earth and sky" (*E*, 3.659–60). While his wife submits to "Heaven's determinations" (*E*, 3.667), the Solitary admits that "the eminence on which her spirit stood, / Mine was unable to attain" (*E*, 3.668–69). In describing his wife's uncomplaining acceptance as an antecedent of his own apathy, the Solitary deploys another image of an eminence unperturbed by passion and passing necessity. Emerging out of both loco-descriptive poetry and Stoic philosophy, what Pierre Hadot has called "the view from above" affords the disinterested spectator an opportunity to evaluate and better understand his own relation to social existence.⁸² In his *Meditations*, for example, the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius advises that "[w]hen you are reasoning about mankind, look upon earthly things below as if from some vantage point above them."⁸³ Yet given the trajectory of the Solitary's political future and the nature of Wordsworth's political past, the composure of the Solitary's wife could also be glossed with Godwin's recognition that a "consequence of the doctrine of necessity is its tendency to make us survey all events with a tranquil and placid temper, and approve or disapprove without impeachment of our self possession" (*PPW*, 3:173). For Godwin, the heights of what he calls a "comprehensive view" render one "superior to the tumult of passion" (*PPW*, 3:173).

In book 13 of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth turns the prospect trope on its head, trading the visible and comprehensive landscapes in John Denham's *Cooper's Hill* and James Thomson's *The Seasons* for a sublime encounter with the "dark deep thoroughfare" where nature had lodged the "soul, the imagination of the whole" (*P*, 13.64–65). While the prospect trope in *The Excursion* is not entirely dissociated from this "power to commune with the invisible world," its multiple expressions find Wordsworth looking back toward the visible world in search of a perspective from which contemplation might be reconciled with a life of connection and action (*E*, 9.87). A metaphorical prospect like the one on display in Thomson's "A Happy Man" offers a clear

sense of how resonant terms from *The Excursion*—all italicized by Thomson—could be reconciled from the right perspective, one

Where *Judgment* sits clear-sighted, and surveys
The Chain of *Reason* with unerring Gaze;
Where *Fancy* lives, and to the bright'ning Eyes
Bids fairer Scenes, and bolder Figures rise;
Where *social Love* exerts her soft Command
And lays the *Passions* with a tender Hand,
Whence every *Virtue* flows, in rival Strife,
And all the *moral Harmony* of Life.⁸⁴

Like the Wanderer's disconcertingly "just equipoise" (*E*, 1.384), the view from above holds out the promise of a satisfying equilibrium of dispassionate judgment and "*social Love*." But as John Barrell has forcefully argued, the fantasy that a "disinterested viewpoint" might culminate in true social knowledge was beset by contradictions: its ideal of disinterestedness was predicated on economic privilege, and the unified view of society that distance made possible was necessarily a simplified one.⁸⁵ But since the Stoic positioning the prospect trope both accommodates and figures is itself imperfect, Amanda Anderson's contention that critical distance can only exist as "a temporary vantage, unstable achievement, or regulative ideal" is particularly relevant.⁸⁶ In *The Convention of Cintra*, Wordsworth described the fleeting nature of detachment in a similar way:

A man of disciplined spirit, who withdrew from the too busy world—not out of indifference to its welfare, or to forget its concerns—but retired for wider compass of eye-sight, that he might comprehend and see in just proportions and relations: knowing above all that he, who hath not first made himself master of the horizon of his own mind, must look beyond it only to be deceived (*Prose*, 1:342).

Balancing Stoic self-mastery with sympathy and social concern, Wordsworth suggests that the distancing power of contemplation stands as a necessary precursor to action. He advocates, in other words, what Smith had described as the attempt to "remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station" in an effort to view our sentiments and motives "as at a certain distance from us" (*T*, 110). In inclining toward such a view, Wordsworth followed Godwin, who declared in the second edition of *Political Justice* that

[T]he soundest criterion of virtue is, to put ourselves in the place of an impartial spectator, or an angelic nature, suppose, beholding us from an elevated station, and uninfluenced by our prejudices, conceiving what would be his estimate of the intrinsic circumstances of our neighbor, and acting accordingly. (*PPW*, 4:65)

In *The Excursion*, Wordsworth turns to such an “elevated station” for the impartiality it might allow rather than the inspiration it might convey. In this sense, the prospect trope mediates between the claims of self and society, marking the place or metaphorical scene of an ethical self-practice that, in Foucault’s own Stoically-inflected terms, defines a principle of relation to the self through which both active and contemplative life become possible.⁸⁷

In a telling example, Wordsworth describes the Solitary’s attempt to escape the melancholy that followed in the wake of the French Revolution. The Solitary travels to North America—to roam, as he puts it, “at large, to observe, and not to feel” (*E*, 3.900). Temperamentally averse to the “Big Passions” (*E*, 3.908) on display in American cities, he becomes a “detached Spectator” (*E*, 3.909) who seeks in the wild “a composing distance from the haunts / Of strife and folly” (*E*, 3. 913–14). In this venture, he imagines himself as a particularly contemplative noble savage who,

having gained the top
Of some commanding Eminence, which yet
Intruder n’er beheld, he thence surveys
Regions of wood and wide Savannah, vast
Expanse of unappropriated earth,
With mind that sheds a light on what he sees.
(*E*, 3.944–49)

The ideal of a noble savage turns out to be as illusory as the ideal of unmitigated Stoicism, but the Solitary consistently demonstrates a desire, often thwarted, to achieve precisely the “contemplative position” that Coleridge, in *Table Talk*, tied to the genius of Wordsworth’s philosophical poetry: “His proper title is *Spectator ab extra*.”⁸⁸ Hazlitt once claimed that Godwin had placed “the human mind on an elevation, from which it commands a view of the whole line of moral consequences.”⁸⁹ From such a perspective, Godwin absolved man from the ties of “private and local attachment” so that he might “devote himself to the boundless pursuit of universal benevolence.”⁹⁰

The Excursion and its many prospects show Wordsworth as still captivated by a similar pursuit, though it also conveys a sense of how

thoroughly he had reimagined the stakes of Godwin's attempt "to pass the Arctic Circle and Frozen Regions, where the understanding is no longer warmed by the affections."⁹¹ Ready to advance human welfare, and thirsty for the certainty of "secure intelligence," Wordsworth first turned to Godwin with a hope that

man should start
Out of the worm-like state in which he is,
And spread abroad the wings of Liberty,
Lord of himself, in undisturbed delight.
(*P*, 10.835–38)

Wordsworth's account of that initial desire is quickly followed by an affirmation of his fidelity to Godwin's aspiration, as well as a sense of how that original vision was amended over time:

A noble aspiration!—yet I feel
The aspiration—but with other thoughts
And happier: for I was perplexed 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 furnished out materials for a work
Of false imagination, placed beyond
The limits of experience and of truth.
(*P*, 10.839–48)

For the ancient Stoics, the restraint of passion was not an end in itself but a corollary to the foundational assertion that an ethical being must live according to nature. Wordsworth's critique of *Political Justice* and its austere morality was not ultimately a repudiation of Stoicism, but a sophisticated insight into the conditions under which its bid for liberty might thrive. Murdering to dissect, Godwin went against nature in his initial pursuit of justice, but like Godwin himself, Wordsworth increasingly linked the liberating potential of Stoicism to its management of distance and perspective. Forsaking "microscopic views" in an attempt to comprehend the world in "its just proportions and relations" (*Prose*, 1:342), Wordsworth's fixation on Stoicism in *The Excursion* attests to his unabated desire for an ethical perspective responsive to "the limits of experience and of truth."

Ohio State University

NOTES

¹ Henry Crabb Robinson to Dorothy Wordsworth, 26 February 1826, in *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, 2 vol., ed. Thomas Sadler (New York: AMS, 1967), 2:18.

² Crabb Robinson, 1:47.

³ H. W. Garrod, *Wordsworth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 138.

⁴ Frances Ferguson, *Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), xv.

⁵ Michael Cooke, *The Romantic Will* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), 216.

⁶ Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), 148.

⁷ Edith Batho, *The Later Wordsworth* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), 341.

⁸ Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844*, 2 vol., ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 1:25.

⁹ William Wordsworth to William Matthews, 8 June 1794, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 8 vol., ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967–93), 1:126.

¹⁰ Northrop Frye, “Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility,” *ELH* 23 (1956): 144.

¹¹ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1961), 168.

¹² For a nuanced account of Stoic moral psychology, see Margaret Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 193. See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), 53–54.

¹⁴ Hegel, 193.

¹⁵ See Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth’s Reading, 1770–1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 166; and Bruce Graver, “Duncan Wu’s *Wordsworth’s Reading, 1770–1799*: A Supplementary List with Corrections,” *Romanticism on the Net* (1998), <https://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/1996/v/n1/005711ar.html>. For sensitive accounts of Wordsworth’s Stoicism, see Bruce Graver, “Wordsworth and the Stoics,” *Romans and Romantics*, ed. Timothy Saunders, Charles Martindale, Ralph Pite, and Mathilde Skoie (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 145–60; and Jane Worthington, *Wordsworth’s Reading of Roman Prose* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1946). For an especially compelling case for the neglected centrality of Wordsworth’s Stoicism, see Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012).

¹⁶ W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, vol. 1 of *The Thirteen Book Prelude*, 2 vol., ed. Mark Reed (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991), book 10, lines 807–9. Hereafter abbreviated *P* and cited parenthetically by book and line number.

¹⁷ William Godwin, “Autobiographical Fragments,” *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, 8 vol., ed. Mark Philp (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1992), 1:53.

¹⁸ For Godwin’s Sandemanianism, see Daniel E. White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), 94–7.

¹⁹ Willard Spiegelman, *Wordsworth’s Heroes* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), 173.

²⁰ Mark Canuel, *The Shadow of Death: Literature, Romanticism, and the Subject of Punishment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 71.

²¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), 164.

- ²² Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 267.
- ²³ W. Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 3 vol., ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 1:104. Hereafter abbreviated *Prose* and cited parenthetically by volume and page number.
- ²⁴ William Hazlitt, "Mr. Godwin," *Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vol., ed. P. P. Howe (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1933), 11:23.
- ²⁵ James Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), xviii.
- ²⁶ Kenneth Graham, ed., *William Godwin Reviewed: A Reception History, 1783–1834* (New York: AMS Press, 2001), 70. This particular quotation derives from an unsigned article in the *Monthly Review*.
- ²⁷ Chandler, 29.
- ²⁸ Robert Southey to William Taylor, 12 March 1799, in *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Carol Bolton and Tim Fulford, *Romantic Circles Electronic Edition*, https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters, 387.
- ²⁹ R. Southey to Thomas Southey, 21 December 1806, in *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, 1246.
- ³⁰ Godwin, *The Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, 7 vol., ed. Mark Philp (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993), 3:111. Hereafter abbreviated *PPW* and cited parenthetically by volume and page number.
- ³¹ Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility* (London: Routledge, 1993), 89.
- ³² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 9 vol., ed. Paul Langford (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 8:218–19.
- ³³ Burke, 217.
- ³⁴ Burke, 217.
- ³⁵ Horace, *Epistles*, in *Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), book 1, epistle 19, lines 12–14.
- ³⁶ Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 69. For Outram, the move to align one's public identity with "Stoic-republican virtue" (77) often obscured "the complex doctrines of classical Stoicism" (69), nor were most revolutionaries keen "to take on board the whole freight of the consideration which the ancient world had devoted to the control of the passions" (69).
- ³⁷ Maximilien Robespierre, speech to National Convention on 7 May 1794, in J. G. Millingen, *Recollections of Republican France, From 1790 to 1801* (London: Henry Colburn, 1848), 272.
- ³⁸ Robespierre, 274.
- ³⁹ See Harold Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1937), 139–42. For a discussion of Cato and Stoicism in a transatlantic context, see Julie Ellison, *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999).
- ⁴⁰ "Decree on Worship of the Supreme Being," *Church and State in the Modern Age: A Documentary History*, ed. J. F. Maclear (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 88.
- ⁴¹ "Decree on Worship of the Supreme Being," 89.
- ⁴² "News," *Whitehall Evening Post* 7436 (1794).
- ⁴³ "News," *Sun* 484 (1794).
- ⁴⁴ "News," *Sun* 485 (1794).
- ⁴⁵ "News," *Sun* 485 (1794).

⁴⁶ In his autobiography, Godwin recalled wearing the wig of a venerable ancestor while “representing the character of Cato in my father’s barn, agreeably to the costume of the original frontispiece to [Addison’s] play” (*Collected Novels and Memoirs*, 1:5).

⁴⁷ Burke, 131.

⁴⁸ W. Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), 124.

⁴⁹ W. Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 126.

⁵⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan Parts I & II*, ed. A. P. Martinich and Brian Battiste (Peterborough: Broadview, 2011), 188.

⁵¹ Epictetus, *All the works of Epictetus, which are now extant*, trans. Elizabeth Carter (London: Printed by S. Richardson, 1758), 252.

⁵² Coleridge to W. and D. Wordsworth, 4 April 1804, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vol., ed. Earl Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), 2:1116.

⁵³ W. and D. Wordsworth to Mary and Sara Hutchinson, 14 June 1802, in *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 1:367; W. Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 129.

⁵⁴ Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth’s Philosophical Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 4.

⁵⁵ Jarvis, 23.

⁵⁶ See Wu, *Wordsworth’s Reading, 1770–1799*, 66.

⁵⁷ Godwin, *Collected Novels and Memoirs*, 3:340.

⁵⁸ Pamela Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 45.

⁵⁹ For David Hume’s original sentiment, see *PPW*, 6:83.

⁶⁰ For Godwin’s turn from Stoicism to what he called the empire of feeling, see Rowland Weston, “Politics, Passion, and the ‘Puritan Temper’: Godwin’s Critique of Enlightened Modernity,” *Studies in Romanticism* 41 (2002): 445–70.

⁶¹ See Julie Carlson’s astute account of this transition in *England’s First Family of Writers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2007), 88. Don Locke observes that this passage appears three times without alteration in Godwin’s published writings between 1798 and 1801. See Locke, *A Fantasy of Reason: The Life and Thought of William Godwin* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 145–46.

⁶² Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James Butler, and Michael Jaye (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), book 4, line 91. Hereafter abbreviated *E* and cited parenthetically by book and line number unless otherwise specified.

⁶³ W. Wordsworth to Godwin, 9 March 1811, in *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 2:469–70.

⁶⁴ See Wu, *Wordsworth’s Reading 1800–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 93–94.

⁶⁵ See Carlson, 89.

⁶⁶ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. Raphael and A. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 23. Hereafter abbreviated *T* and cited parenthetically by page number.

⁶⁷ See Wordsworth, *E*, page 426, and Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Middle Years* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), 23.

⁶⁸ OED, s.v., “pomp, *n.*,” 1c, “contingence, *n.*,” 3.

⁶⁹ Worthington, 71.

⁷⁰ Potkay, 151, 161, 164, 163.

⁷¹ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World*, in *The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, 5 vol., ed. Arthur Friedman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 2:201.

⁷² Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 123.

⁷³ See Samuel Baker, "Scott's Stoic Characters: Ethics, Sentiment, and Irony in *The Antiquary*, *Guy Mannering*, and 'The Author of *Waverley*,'" *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 70 (2009): 443–71. Baker offers a resonant account of the "antinomy of Stoicism and sentimentality" (446).

⁷⁴ Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 192.

⁷⁵ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men*, 192.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, 2 vol. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 2:152.

⁷⁷ Shaftesbury, *The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen of Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury*, ed. Benjamin Rand (New York: Macmillan Co, 1900), 8. For a compelling analysis of the oblique role of Stoicism in Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, see Rivers, 2:91–6, 2:118–20.

⁷⁸ Shaftesbury, *Philosophical Regimen*, 6.

⁷⁹ Shaftesbury, *Philosophical Regimen*, 6.

⁸⁰ Wordsworth, "Ode," *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 275–76.

⁸¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), 111–12. See Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1797–1814* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), 296.

⁸² Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 238–50.

⁸³ Cited in Hadot, 244.

⁸⁴ James Thomson, *Liberty, The Castle of Indolence, and Other Poems*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 285.

⁸⁵ John Barrell, *English Literature in History* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), 35. For his further exploration of these contradictions, see Barrell, 51–109.

⁸⁶ Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), 32.

⁸⁷ See Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1986), 86.

⁸⁸ Coleridge, *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: John Murry, 1851), 186.

⁸⁹ Hazlitt, 11:18.

⁹⁰ Hazlitt, 11:18.

⁹¹ Hazlitt, 11:23.