The Excursion and “The Surfaces of Things”
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According to Wordsworth, the signature difference between The Excursion (1814) and the rest of The Recluse project is “the intervention of characters speaking” (II 37). These intervening characters constitute a formal excursion from the solipsistic voice of “the first and third parts of The Recluse,” which “will consist chiefly of meditations in the Author’s own person” (37). And this formal excursion matches the philosophic injunction to sympathetic communion—the mind’s excusive power (155)—that the poem repeatedly prescribes for the forlorn Solitary. The intervening characters can be easy to ignore, however, because they are only thinly differentiated versions of Wordsworth tinged here and there with a feature of Coleridge and Thelwall. They are all Wordsworth-surrogates (Johnston 409; cf. Bushell, Gravil); they speak in the same idioms, and they share similar habits. The Wanderer wanders, but so does everyone else, including Margaret and her “truant sheep” (60-1, 64). Wordsworth’s characters are likewise so anonymous and flat, more like the typological cast of a generic joke (A wanderer, a solitary, a pastor, and a poet walk into pub . . .) than analogues of Lord Marmion or Childe Harold, never mind Elizabeth Bennet, Victor Frankenstein, or Edward Waverley.

And yet something about the character and characters of The Excursion worked, for many early- and mid-Victorian readers loved the poem and “character” was their most prevalent evaluative category. The poem straddles an aesthetic and epistemological shift from, on the one hand, the historically dominant model of character exemplified in The Excursion and upheld by its admirers and, on the other, the model of character emerging in the work of Romantic essayists and novelists and inhering still in modern critical assumptions and methods. The overwhelming majority of 20th-century critics, from Abrams and Bloom to Siskin and Levinson, and some of their more influential Romantic forbears, like Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Jeffrey, are invested in a depth model of character and knowledge. In an earlier version of this article I perpetuated this assumption by speculating that Wordsworth seems to characterize the material world of his poem by ascribing depth and interiority to it, as if the value of characters and objects must inhere in their depth. But the Solitary claims to be “pleased / To skim along the surfaces of things, / Beguiling harmlessly the listless hours” (II 97), and I have become skeptical, accordingly, of the epistemological dominance of depth. Surfaces also matter to Wordsworth. The Excursion exhibits a meaningful superficiality.

With The Excursion Wordsworth turns not just to characters, then, but to a different model of character than appears in The Prelude and Romantic fiction like Austen’s or Scott’s: a model of character dependent on the touch, exchange, and mutability of surfaces instead of the inwardsness and developmental growth that 20th-century critics applied to The Prelude and the Bildungsroman. Character in The Excursion is marked less by “lyric” or “inward” turns than by turns to sociality and the surfaces of things. This surface matters less as evidence of some putatively hidden meaning or agency than as a medium for feeling in-touch with the world outside of oneself. However much it invokes deep, internal feeling, The Excursion consistently intimates a taxonomic affect, the feeling of contiguity with other entities. In The Excursion, that is to say, character appears less as round fictional personhood than as the visible, taxonomical marks that differentiate and articulate species and varieties, groups and individuals, persons and things. These intervening characters hold together “the mighty commonwealth of things” (130).

The principal early critics of The Excursion, Jeffrey and Coleridge, dwell less on Wordsworth’s characters than on the alleged superficiality of everyday things in the poem. It does indeed teem with the “real” objects and concrete particulars that many later critics identify with realism. Thus Francis Jeffrey repeatedly quips that The Excursion abounds with “details of preposterous minuteness,” “useless and most tedious minuteness,” and “circumstances of no interest in themselves” (7, 15). The Excursion includes all of Wordsworth’s stock natural objects: clouds, streams, rocks, turf, and fir trees; lofty elms, mists, crags, who knows how many vales, and shadows—even the rather specific and superficial reflection of a “Shaggy and bold” ram (280). It also includes many generic Romantic urban objects: alabaster domes, silver spires, temples, a citadel, a palace, a pavilion and a terrace, towers, a miniature city built by children but, under the influence of a water-swollen volume of Candide, in ruins. Wordsworth formally pronounces this material abundance in lists, as when the Solitary introduces his home with a litany of nouns—"my domain, my cell, / My hermitage, my cabin, what you will" (85)—as if it were many different things at once.

The clutter of objects littering this “domain . . . cell . . . hermitage . . . cabin, what you will” disturbs the orderly sensibilities of the Poet and the Wanderer:

What a wreck
Had we about us! Scattered was the floor,
And, in like sort, chair, window-seat, and shelf,
With books, maps, fossils, withered plants and flowers,
And tufts of mountain moss. Mechanic tools
Lay intermixed with scraps of paper, some
Scribbled with verse: a broken angling-rod
And shattered telescope, together linked
By cobwebs, stood within a dusty nook;
And instruments of music, some half-made,
Some in disgrace, hung dangling from the walls.  
(Hayden II 86)
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This disordered miscellany of neglected, half-made, broken objects characterizes the Solitary’s inability to regain the focused, productive order of his youthful faith in God, Enlightenment reason, and the ideals of the French Revolution. His life has been reduced to lifeless, fragmented, incomplete objects. And the syntax of the poem has been reduced accordingly to parataxis. The Solitary’s objects plainly pre-figure the unfeeling materialism of contemporary technology and science, which fail to ease the Solitary’s despondency (the Solitary elsewhere scoffs at geologists who chip away specimens from his precious crags).

Having lost his wife, his two children, and his passions, the Solitary, surrounded by objects, ironically lacks an object. He cannot see, as the Wanderer later affirms, that “There is an active principle alive in all things,” a principle which would reconnect the Solitary to humanity as well as to matter. But this poem invests far more in the ordering of things than in gestural intimations of an “active principle” or agency. Appreciating the active principle seems intended to restore order to the unhinged list of the Icelandic Parliament of the Solitary’s surroundings the missing ligatures, the unspoken active principle seems intended to restore order to the Solitary’s life. Appreciating the Solitary’s objects plainly pre-figures the unfeeling materialism of contemporary technology and science, which fail to ease the Solitary’s despondency (the Solitary elsewhere scoffs at geologists who chip away specimens from his precious crags).

In The Excursion, “things” functions not so much as a simple object, then, but as a gesture of point of contact that articulates the relationship between people and objects. “Things” implies processes that are actual and real, like particular objects, but that nevertheless exceed representation and include and relate all things in general. Taking Wordsworth at his word and taking character as necessarily or ideally deep, The Excursion offers a predictable prescription for the Solitary’s despondency: learn to see things as coextensive with and animate of the self, as the informing experiences or impressions comprising the mind conceptualized by Associationist psychology. Wordsworth expressly connects empiricist, Associationist notions of “impression” and “character” (II, 44). But taking Wordsworth at his actual words, his dictum, and considering how 19th century readers actually registered character, which was not so exclusively deep or self-reflective as it has been for posterity, the Solitary seems less isolated by his depression than an allegorical representation of the potential costs of a culture preoccupied with interiority.

With his varied, ambiguous, often-antecedent-less use of the word “things,” Wordsworth suggests the whole interrelated world of “more lowly matter” and its perception, material things in affective contact with people, “the thing Contemplated” (40). Instead of external references and their grammatical analogues, clear and immediate antecedents and referents, Wordsworth’s “things” often exhibit self-referentiality: not in so far as they might manifest the reflective power of the poetic self (the Wanderer’s “excursive power” of imaginative reanimating his affective experience of nature), but in so far as they grammatically instantiate the self-reflexivity that we typically ascribe to moral personages. They inscribe a self-reflexivity into the syntax of the text, a verse effect of internal allusion played out in the chiasmus or tautology of individual sentences. “Thus disciplined / All things shall live in us and we shall live / In all things that surround us” expresses an ecological reciprocity, to be sure, in which persons and things commingle and experience life only in their interaction (we are what we sense, and we sense our senses), but this reciprocity depends on the character of “things” itself, the ability of the pronoun to refer to itself, represent itself, substitute for itself. Such self-reflectiveness is elsewhere a feature of Wordsworth’s traditional characters,
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such as the Vicar, who "prized / The ancient rural character, composed / Of simple manners. Feelings unsuppress / And undisguised, and strong and serious thought; A character reflected in himself" (Hayden II 161). Many fictional personages exhibit a pronominal anonymity by which they seem to be substitutes or representatives of nobody in particular and therefore readers in general; to the extent that fictional personages have "nothing in common" (Gallagher xv-xvi)—are disembodied, without content—they act like money, a fungible, abstract medium. Wordsworth’s “things” function accordingly as a currency, fit exchange for anything, and thus extend the formal self-reflexivity of round characters to his exposition of non-personages.

Wordsworth's “things” stand in for, half-realize and “half-create,” a process of abstraction that produces the kind of social connectivity and knowledge that the despondent Solitary, who is of all the characters in The Excursion most liable to inward turns, lacks. These “things” are seen but invisible, half known, silent, or speaking a different language, and yet, as things, the poem insists that they are material. Like personages, in The Excursion “things” often reifies an abstract, ephemeral, dynamic relationship and attitude; it instantiates a posture rather than a fixed possession or identity. Thus the Solitary recounts how, in a rare moment of excursive happiness,

[. . .] From the depths
Of natural passion, seemingly escaped,
My soul diffused herself in wide embrace
Of institutions, and the forms of things;
As they exist, in mutable array,
Upon life’s surface. (113)

This recovery is ephemeral, but it tellingly takes the form of a "mutable array,” a changing spread, schema, or superficial pattern. This superficial web of meaningfulness matches the impressive and pleasing but by no means deep feeling of nature at the Solitary’s home: “the clouds / The mist, the shadows, light of golden suns, / Motions of moonlight, all come thither – touch, / And have an answer – thither come, and shape / A language not unwelcome to sick hearts” (87). Wordsworth here describes rot features of nature touching and reflecting back off of the walkers, but he disparages neither the features nor the feeling for their ordinaries; he valorizes the quotidian and the transient affect: “perpetually we touch / Upon the vulgar ordinances of the world” (88). Inflected as it is with Wordsworth's familiar injunctions to brood inwardly, The Excursion nevertheless manifests here an aesthetic alternative to metaphoric interpretation, intimacy, and development; The Excursion privileges feeling “ordinances” in both the sense of feeling ordinary and the sense of feeling directional ordinates.

In “despondency corrected,” the fourth book of The Excursion, Wordsworth’s Wanderer comforts the Solitary with an “eloquent harangue,” as the Poet admiringly snubs it, about how he needs to learn to look at objects as neither animate and inanimate things nor as repositories of his projected subjectivity, but as traces of scientifically-but-dynamically ordered processes. “Science,” the Wanderer preaches, “Shall be a precious visitant” when,

Her dull eye,
Dull and inanimate, no more shall hang
Chained to its object in brute slavery;
But taught with patient interest to watch
The processes of things, and serve the cause
Of order and distinctness, not for this
Shall it forget that its most noble use,
Its most illustrious province, must be found
In furnishing clear guidance, a support
Not treacherous, to the mind's excursive power. (155)

The “processes of things” reproduces the “excursive power” of the mind not in disclosing or unveiling the hidden laws underlying or motivating phenomena but in directing the mind outward. This “science” tentatively arrays things only to reorder them again, just as Wordsworth, according to Kenneth Johnston, conceptualized his poems as matter to be reordered, revised, and rewritten again as new beginnings and parts of an “ever-about-to-be” Recluse. “Excursive” means diffuse, and Wordsworth’s use of “things” is excursive in this way. "Things" cannot chain the poet in slavery because the word allows him to avoid specifying any particular objects (however unspecific his particular objects tend to be), though it nevertheless implies something concrete and, as an excursion out and away from oneself, objective or disinterested. The verbal flexibility of pronouns like “things” multiplies the potential predicates of Wordsworth’s subjects; it lets all sorts of named and unnamed people, objects, and ideas touch. And in The Excursion, if not in the rest of his oeuvre, this contact takes place outside of the speaker in common places in a commonwealth of things.

Thus the Wanderer does not prescribe a spiritual acknowledgement of the Imagination or the One Life within us and abroad to cure the Solitary’s despondency. This despondency is among other things a solipsistic interiority and negligence of things other than people: "unless above himself he can / Erect himself, how poor a thing is Man!" (130, emphasis in original). To induce the Solitary to turn outward, to undo his inward turn, the Wanderer prescribes a taxonomic investigation of the relationship between things. This taxonomy produces differences and identities that echo the “distinctions” of The Prelude, which are “puny boundaries,” “things [. . .] which we have made” (20):

Happy is he who lives to understand,
Not human nature only, but explores
All natures, — to the end that he may find
The law that governs each; and where begins
The union, the partition where, that makes
Not human nature only, but explores
All natures,—to the end that he may find
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union, the partition where, that makes
Kind and degree, among all visible Beings;
The constitutions, powers, and faculties,
Which they inherit,—cannot step beyond,—
And cannot fall beneath; that do assign
To every class its station and its office,
Through all the mighty commonwealth of things
Up from the creeping plant to sovereign Man.
Such converse, if directed by a meek,
Sincere, and humble spirit, teaches love:
For knowledge is delight; and such delight
Breeds love

The Wanderer here affirms a taxonomical method of moral converse with the world in which the character of the Solitary appears to be a function of his ability to recognize natural historical characters of speciation. In natural history, as in literature, characters are features selected to demarcate the border, “The union” and “the partition,” between imagined species, classes, and orders of life; characters articulate individuals and types. They are marks chosen by taxonomists to differentiate and relate different kinds and degrees of things; they are the structures, as Foucault writes in *The Order of Things*, “selected to be the locus of pertinent identities and differences” (140). In Coleridge’s terms, they are “distinctions without division” (Abrams 185). However invested in the notion of character as individual, developmental, and deep moral (psychological) agency, 19th-century writers like Wordsworth and his most agreeable readers were at least equally invested in a notion of character as such a taxonomical medium. Thus the “Solitary,” who needs help rediscovering his common descent.

The Wanderer’s excursive “Science” of half-creating and half-perceiving the character of things instances a fundamental epistemological change. Before Charles Lyell wrote *Principles of Geology*, his teacher William Buckland and James Hutton interpreted geological structures as deep, layered, moving things—not exactly Black Crags chasing them, like young Wordsworth, across Ullswater, but material symptoms of hidden processes. Hutton and Buckland interpreted strata, fossils, and other geological objects as “signs and tokens” of agency, movement, and change that they could only imagine. Analogously, certain anatomists like John Hunter and John Abernethy and zoologist Georges Cuvier transitioned from the classification of external anatomical features to physiology, the interpretation of hidden, functional internal organs, processes, and systems. Alan Richardson shows how such thought extended into neurophysiology: figures like Johann Spurzheim and Joseph Gall interpreted the brain and nervous system as material embodiments of the abstract life of the mind. The literary corollary was the organic criticism espoused by Coleridge and German Romanticism: the analysis of poems as integrated, organic bodies whose parts secretly embody and contribute to the inner logic of the whole (Levere 32-4). In different ways, these approaches register material objects as the evidence of abstract processes and relations, whose description constitutes the knowledge these writers aim to produce. They employ “character” as the hinge or contact between things rather than as the identity or essence of things in themselves.

The Wanderer’s prescribed taxonomy of the processes of things, the reaching for distinctions that are not divisions, does gesture at organic operations hidden beneath “the surfaces of things.” Such gestures might seem to solicit comparison with the “economy of character” described by Deirdre Lynch. Lynch explains how the “semantic plenitude” of round characters (fictional personages) was a product of a Romantic-period culture of “character appreciation” which “produces the depth that needs explicating and with it the textual effects that signal the psychological real” (135). But 19th-century writers neither restrict the “textual effects that signal the psychological real” to fictional personages nor restrict character to psychological realism. The Wanderer appreciates “things” as well as people, dead and alive. And neither the Wanderer nor the Solitary are here distinguished by their capacity for intimate, individual relationships with characters. Their goal is to see themselves as part of the world. Like the unimpassioned “matter-of-fact” science that the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* criticizes, the Solitary, “Viewing all objects unremittingly / In disconnection dead and spiritless,” suffers from a too-excessively systematic and permanent division of the world. So the Wanderer advises him to make new systems, but also to embrace their artificiality and need for perpetual revision:

If tired with systems, each in its degree
Substantial, and all crumbling in their turn,
Let him build systems of his own, and smile
At the fond work; demolished with a touch

The Wanderer weakly encourages the production of system in place of system, which implies that he can only approach knowledge of “the forms of things” (66, 113) but never get there. The Wanderer prescribes the kind of continual revision to which William Galperin, following Johnston, ascribes Wordsworth’s “authority” (29-63). In his discourse on method, the Wanderer emphasizes not the growth that will accrue to the Solitary, like a round character, then, but to the relentless play of touch: the putting together of commonwealth after commonwealth of things. Character and knowledge here are not functions of becoming but of relating. The perpetual “intervention” of Wordsworth’s characters matters more than any content of their character. The dominant epistemology and aesthetic of interiority has led us to privilege the internal changes experienced by round characters, by the voice of *The Prelude*, but *The Excursion* experiments with the less comfortable, less permanent, less individual experience of changes of place, attitude, and company.

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turn to common people and things. A reader of “Tintern Abbey” might appreciate lines like, “the least of things / Seemed infinite” (Hayden II, 47), as intimating that the imaginative mind can see the complexity and pathos hidden within such quotidian persons and things, but for the Wanderer this infinity is a matter of linkages. The Wanderer describes an insatiable yearning for a lasting vision and revision of the transcendent order of things; but, considering the Solitary’s less poetic constitution, affirms instead that:

He
Is a still happier man, who, for those heights
Of speculation not unfruitful, descends;
And such benign affections cultivates
Among the inferior kinds; not merely those
That he may call his own, and which depend,
As individual objects of regard,
Upon his care, from whom he also looks
For signs and tokens of a mutual bond

The Wanderer finds such “signs and tokens” in his admiration of “Empurpled” mountains and molehills, emettis, “the mute company of changeful clouds,” summer flies, cawing rooks, sea-mew, and sedentary birds (133-4). This expresses a sense of ecological sympathy and condescension, which parallels the Wanderer and Wordsworth’s own inclusion of humble social types like the Solitary, the pastor, and other rustics. But it expresses also a tension between aspiration to the metaphysical and condescension to the material, a tension embodied in the word “things.”

The Wanderer’s ideal of “Science” guides the “mind’s excursive power.” His scientific ideal promises an escape from self by examining the invisible relationships among real things without ever really being able to know and appropriate them or, in writing, ever having to choose just one set of them. Thus the Wanderer describes the “Authentic tidings of invisible things” as if authenticity was the product of invisibility (Hayden II 152). He advises the Solitary to find comfort in conversation with “living things, and things inanimate” but these things speak “With inarticulate language.” The Wanderer advises the poor Solitary to find “a thing impossible to frame,” “eternal things,” and “spiritual presences of absent things”; things that surely exist, the frustrated Solitary must think, but things that cannot be found or seen, because the Wanderer does not quite say what they are (Hayden II 153, 143, 124, 122, 154). These are “moral things / Of gravest import,” precisely because of how inaccessible the import is. They allegedly are, like the shell in the dream of the Arab in The Prelude, natural symbols of interiority and depth, process and organic revision (Kelley).

The “Preface” to Lyrical Ballads credits poets with “a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present” (Hayden I 877-78). “Things” was part of Wordsworth’s poetic “system” and “experiment” described in the “Preface.” Mark Schoenfield explains that Wordsworth’s “exploration of the real language of men . . . does not refer” to the actual language of everyday men, which, Wordsworth writes, would result in “triviality and meanness both of thought and language [. . .] more dishonourable to the writer’s own character than false refinement.” Invoking the Latin root of real, res, which means “thing,” and Dr. Johnson’s definition of real as “Relating to things not persons; not personal,” Schoenfield demonstrates that “The real language of men” speaks about things – land, cloth, natural objects – and it comes from a communicating relationship with these things, rather than from an abstracted property interest in them (Schoenfield 123). Rustics, Wordsworth says, “hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived” (Hayden I, 870). In practice this language lacks specificity and balances its material reality with a tendency to abstraction or imprecision, a tendency to substitute pronouns for nouns.

“Seeing things as they really are” is, for The Excursion, to see things as the markers of some inscrutable something else. As Adam Potkay writes in Wordsworth’s Ethics, “Wordsworth’s ‘things’ are irreducible to matter or to narrative; indeed, they’re uncontainable by any narrow definition of ‘thing.’ They bespeak the fusion of object and event, matter and energy, surface and depth, as well as generality and particularity, the categorical and the specific. Wordsworth’s ‘things’ are things without objects, things anterior to and in excess of subject/object dualities.” Potkay beautifully demonstrates how Wordsworth’s “incantation of ‘things’ […] conjures the word’s own strange but not inhuman thingness” and, from a modern ethical and ecological perspective, “suggest[s] unfathomable systems that we need, perhaps, more than narrative itself” (85, 89). If the dreary case of The Excursion resists Potkay’s inclination to align the ethics of Wordsworth’s ambiguous and inclusive “things” with joy, it certainly gestures at a form of moral knowledge alternative to narrative Bildung and its self-discovering characters.

Romantic-period readers noticed the ambiguous “intercommunings” of humans and non-humans in The Excursion. In the “Character of Mr. Wordsworth’s New Poem The Excursion,” Hazlitt notes the “power of intellect” and “depth of feeling […] which pervades every part of [The Excursion] and which gives to every object an almost preternatural and preternatural interest” (19: 9). With “preternatural,” the review discerns a “life of things” that exceeds human influence and subjectivity, and, with “preternatural,” exceeds also the physical reality of the material world. Hazlitt discerns objects that are more than objects, but objects that are not quite anthropomorphic subjects either. Hazlitt’s review ascribes to Wordsworth “a constant sense and superstitious awe of the collective power of matter, of the gigantic and eternal forms of Nature, on which, from the beginning of time, the hand of man has made no impression” (19: 9). Hazlitt admires everything in The Excursion – everything except for its subjects and
Wordsworth “a constant sense and superstitious awe of the collective power of matter, of the gigantic and eternal forms of Nature, on which, from the beginning of time, the hand of man has made no impression” (19: 9). Hazlitt admires everything in *The Excursion* - everything except for its subjects and
characters. "If the subject of the Poem had been equal to the genius of the Poet, if the skill with which he has chosen his materials had accorded with the power exerted over them, if the objects (whether persons or things) which he makes use of as the vehicle of his feelings had been such as immediately and irresistibly to convey them in all their force and depth to others . . ." (19: 9). For Hazlitt (as for Jeffrey), the rustic figures and objects of The Excursion fail to convey "immediately and irresistibly" the "force and depth" of "things." Whatever his reservations about vulgar rustics in particular, however, Hazlitt actually objects to specificity altogether. He desires what he praises elsewhere in a lecture on Cowper and Thomson as "abstractness" of description, a lack of specificity that is nevertheless grounded in reality (5: 100-01).

Ironically, this abstractness is the Solitary's preference, too. He yearns for the freedom of "things":

'Oh! what a joy it were, in vigorous health,
To have a body (this our vital frame
With shrinking sensibility endued,
And all the nice regards of flesh and blood)
And to the elements surrender it
As if it were a spirit!

The Solitary wants corporeality and spirit; he wants concreteness and abstraction. The "As if" here emphasizes his limits, his corporeality and insufficiently spiritual self. The Solitary yearns to become "a thing impossible to frame" (124), to become "preterhuman," as Hazlitt might have put it, but not to become a static, impenetrable thing. Yet the Solitary's enjoyment of "nice regards of flesh and blood" recalls the ideal science of the "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads: when science and poetry merge, when Science "shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood," the poet will "aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of men." Poetry will, in other words, personify the "objects of science" as a "Being," a character with "sensation" (I 882).

Part of Wordsworth's nostalgic imagination of childhood was his integration of character and thing; and his emphasis in these passages is on the "process." In 1843, for instance, he recalled to Isabella Fenwick how, as a child, he would feel so immersed in the flow and voice of the river Derwent, that, "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school I grasped at a wall or a tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality. At that time I was afraid of such processes" (Poetical Works IV 463). Such communing is neither projection of self onto things nor a personification of things with the anime or interiority of their own selves, but a conception of character as the interface or product of contact between selves and things.

Critics from Coleridge to the present have with good reason employed "imagination" to describe Wordsworth's process of "Coercing sympathy with all things," but Wordsworth was not satisfied with that term. In the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" to Poems (1815), which came out the year after The Excursion, Wordsworth decries the inadequacy of conventional 18th century terms of criticism: "Taste," he writes, "like imagination, is a word which has been forced to extend its services far beyond the point to which philosophy would have confined them." Wordsworth's explicit objection is that taste is a "passive" concept that could not describe the "intellectual acts and operations" that should be the objects of poetics or criticism. Wordsworth seems to have wanted a word to describe the character of "things," the way that poetic "things" implied in their indeterminacy a meaningful, living, and decorous orientation to one another, a common descent: "manifestly and palpably material" and yet "operative," "alive," "Belongings," as Wordsworth put it in the 1802 "Preface" (I, 879, 882). The "Essay, Supplementary" insists that to be "as permanent as pure science," writing must "[comprehend] sufficient of the general in the individual to be dignified with the name of Poetry" (Hayden II 924, 909). This invokes the language of Baconian induction — the abstraction of individual particulars into generals — that also structures the 1802 Preface, where the "object" of "Poetry" is "truth, not individual and local, but general [...] no object standing between the Poet and the image of things" (I, 879).

Such inductive abstraction mimics what "things" does for Wordsworth in The Excursion: it allows him to particularize generalization, to specify objects without specifying particular objects. If these intervening characters somewhat estrange The Excursion from what would become the dominant aesthetic and epistemology of organic wholeness and deep or round characters, they firmly accommodated it to the dominant 19th-century paradigms of knowledge, whereby moving, affective truth necessarily straddled concrete particularity and vague generality. Wordsworth's style here records a time when "To skim along the surfaces of things, / Beguiling harmlessly the listless hours" (II 97) could bear epistemological credibility, when character was less about who a personage was or was becoming on the inside than about how he or she interfaced with the outside world.

NOTES

1 Mary Shelley might offer a comparable novelistic form of superficial character in The Last Man, which consistently associates Adrian's heroism with his "manner" and "touching" sociability (251, for example). For all its affected brooding, the novel privileges sociality, manner, physical contact, and surfaces to depth and growth; it largely eschews free indirect discourse and the other tropes associated with developmental, self-reflective characterization, and therefore appeals to the alternative paradigm of superficial but meaningful character that I am describing.

2 In Biographia Literaria, Coleridge, like Francis Jeffrey, derides Wordsworth's proclivity for "matter-of-factness," for "a laborious mi-
2In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge, like Francis Jeffrey, derides Wordsworth’s proclivity for “matter-of-factness,” for “a laborious mi-
nuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects." Seamus Perry has written that Coleridge, notwithstanding his objections to Wordsworth's too-minute descriptions of objects, nevertheless includes non-sequitur objects in his poetry and thereby cultivates "an inconstancy of style, the effect of which is to create a sense of comprehensiveness, of things included that would not normally be included but which demand and justify their place, so to say, simply through the insistence with which they are themselves" (104). For Perry, the "counterclaim of fact, upon which [New Historicist] criticism depends, may already be a part (if sometimes an uneasy part) of how Romantic writing gets to work in the first place" (105).

On prepositions, particularly "of," see Ricks. On "as if" and "of course," see Farina.

The middle of The Excursion is a fitting forum for such a conversion of things into processes: "The Title-page announces that this is only a portion of a poem," and that poem, The Recluse never gets beyond a work-in-progress (Hayden II, 35). John Wyatt makes much of Wordsworth's use of "distinctness" in this passage as an allusion to John Ray's The Wisdom of God as Manifested in the Works of Creation, vision, and (good and bad) scientific modes of seeing (122-25).

Jay Clayton explains that "Visionary moments often have no content," and in this respect, I am saying, "things" are the ideal objects of visionary experience because they are an inarticulate language, an excursive language: "things" exist, for sure, but one can't see them (5).

WORKS CITED
