Wordsworth and the Ethics of Things

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A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.
—William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" (lines 101–03)

For, strictly, it is language that speaks. Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal. . . . Language beckons us, at first and then again at the end, towards a thing's nature.
—Martin Heidegger, ". . . Poetically Man Dwells . . ." (216)

"THE PEOPLE THINGS MAKE": THIS TITLE OF A RECENT CONFERence panel refers to scholarship on the so-called it-narrative, a type of eighteenth-century prose fiction in which manufactured objects (such as coins or waistcoats) or animals (such as dogs or fleas) are central characters, with or without a consciousness.[1] When endowed with consciousness, these objects are thinking things of a sort, able to reflect on the people who made or cathect them. Recent critics have read these objects' tales as allegories of the commercial circulation of goods in society and have found in them a wide range of values, from the extension of sentimental ethics to the critique of it, from the advent of commodity fetishism to the destabilization of the subject.[2] Yet fascinating as these it-narratives are, their object protagonists are far from the only things that think in the eighteenth century or indeed in early modern literature as it becomes modern, and focusing exclusively on their tales will distort our sense of what was meant, and to some degree what we still mean, by *things*.

Here I inquire into "the things people do not (for the most part) make"—that is, the existential condition of things as a whole, the

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things that include us. Rather than look at it-narratives, I turn to things that tend, in whole or part, to resist narration, that appear in a lyric time of response and recollection and a figural space of catachresis and *energeia* ("animation").[3] William Wordsworth is my chief guide toward an understanding of things that are emphatically not made and a suspicion, developed in late Heidegger, of "making" itself.[4] "Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?" asks the speaker of Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring," contrasting the real or apparent pleasure in nonhuman nature to the alienation of human nature, an alienation inscribed in the poem's process of discursive reasoning (lines 23–24).[5] "There is nothing," Wordsworth later wrote, "so injurious as the perpetually talking about *making* by God. . . . [F]or heaven's sake . . . say as little as possible about *making*" (Letter to Clarkson 189). In other words, do not teach a God made over in the image of homo faber. The reflections on unmade things foremost in my mind are Wordsworth's lines from "Tintern Abbey" on "the life of things" and on "A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things." Wordsworth's things are irreducible to matter or to narrative; indeed, they are 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.

The nonnarrative fullness of things—a fullness historically figured as their "face" or, in Wordsworth, denominated their "life"—may prevent the ills of fixating on things as mere objects: commodity fetishism, consumerism, environmental devastation. Such ills can be overstated, of course. Bill Brown, in advancing "thing theory," avoids the moralism of Marxist critique by focusing on the constitutive interconnections between subjects and inanimate objects, individuals and their material things (*Sense* 5–8). Yet the distinction between subject and object—as well as between human and nonhuman, material and immaterial—weakens, in ethically and ecologically beneficial ways, when things are thought through in their unmade and nonrepresentational interconnectedness, their minimally personified face or animate life.

As the philosopher Silvia Benso has argued, our contemporary environmental crisis renders urgent an ethical attitude toward "things," a word she uses primarily in Heidegger's sense "of being present-at-hand" or, in her own terms, as an "undifferential" reference to "vegetal, mineral, artificial (and maybe even animal) entities" (xxxii). Heidegger conceives of things in a proto-environmental way, but he "arrests himself on the threshold of ethics" (xxxvi). Thus, Benso dialectically introduces Emmanuel Levinas, who formulates an ethics without regard for things. Levinas grounded his ethics on the face-to-face, nonassimilative encounter of one human being with another. Ethics in his sense (now often known as "postmodern ethics") is not a set of moral rules but rather an orientation toward or responsiveness to the Other.[6] Synthesizing Levinas and Heidegger, Benso stakes out an "ethics of things," a model of ecological rather than ego-logical interaction with nonhuman (or not exclusively human) things in their alterity.[7] To do so, she applies to things not faces but "facialities":

> Faces express a specific content, a defined contour, an individuated existence. Facialities invoke the intimation of signification of a face, and yet the vagueness of a cluster of meaning the demarcation of which remains blurred, fluid, porous to a continuous, osmotic exchange between inside and outside that mobilizes boundaries, and therefore definitions. . . . Facialities evoke the possibility of the existence of faceless faces, which, despite their facelessness, are yet endowed with

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> the intimating power of the face to demand an ethical response. (xxix–xxx)

Benso offers a prolegomenon to a metaphysical ethics of things, the grounds we have for benign response to and principled (in)activity regarding things, substantial and circumstantial, and particularly the things of nature in their irreducibility to human purposes. While it is beyond my present scope to advance this ethics with theoretical rigor—or, bluntly, to address why we ought to respect rather than destroy the earth—my aim in this essay is, first, to bring to light the prehistory of such an ethics in premodern and early modern language and literature. Pursuing the philology of *thing* allows us to recover uncannily the interconnectedness of all bodies and events in the substratum of a term we now often use to designate a more or less alienated object. The "face" attributed to these plenary things by the third earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713) may partly be understood in Benso's sense as a "faciality," the power to demand an ethical response. Following Shaftesbury, eighteenth-century poets bestowed on natural arrangements a face that could not be fully known but for that reason ought to be revered. Wordsworth passes from the quasi-individuated face to the weblike, suprahuman life of things, offering a way beyond not only ("Romantic") individualism but anthropocentrism itself and, in Romantic studies, critical initiatives tethered to Cartesian and Kantian models of subject and object.

My second aim, then, is to situate Wordsworth as a pivotal figure in ecological ethics. Wordsworth borrowed from but gestured beyond Shaftesburian natural religion and Spinozan pantheism in imagining a joyous affection and nonappropriative stance toward natural things. By a similar movement, I revisit several of Wordsworth's Victorian readers—including John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold, and Walter Pater—who understood him as an apostle of joy in broadened natural sympathies, and from them I develop the green Romanticism sketched by Jonathan Bate in *Romantic Ecology*, his colloquy with select Victorians, chiefly John Ruskin and William Morris. With Bate, I take exception to a new historicism—still, arguably, the regnant mode in Romantic studies—that sees in Wordsworth's lyric imagination a bad-faith effort to evade historical-material realities such as the coal mines, iron works, and vagrants prominent in the Wye River Valley of the 1790s and admitted only obliquely into the largely internal landscape of "Tintern Abbey" (McGann 86–88; Levinson 46–57). The questionable assumption of this critique is, as Bate notes, that "the economy of human society is more important than . . . 'the economy of nature'" (9).

I would add that the fundamental oppositions on which the new historicist critique relies—human and nonhuman, history and nature, freedom and necessity—are already deconstructed in Wordsworth's poetry of the 1790s. Jerome McGann quipped, "Between 1793 and 1798 Wordsworth lost the world merely to gain his own immortal soul" (88), but the Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads* is not interested in a distinctly human, individuated soul. Thus, in "Lines Written in Early Spring" "human" becomes a delimiting adjective for some larger "soul" or life: "To her fair works did nature link / The human soul that through me ran . . ." (5–6). (The proper end of life is to "grow / Into souloneness with the Life of things," wrote the Wordsworth-inspired poet Henry Ellison ["Thoughts," lines 671–72].) Nor is the cosmos Wordsworth conjures limited to "the world" that McGann invokes, a place made by human activity in political and societal history. Wordsworth's system of things exceeds human agency, although it does not preclude it. Wordsworth allows that what we do or do not do matters greatly—morals, politics, and history remain central concerns for him—but he stressed, dialectically, that our choices and the outcomes

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of our actions are limited by and dependent on natural systems of determination. That things go on irrespective of our activity is a fallacy Wordsworth imputes to Rivers, the Iago-like villain of *The Borderers*, who seeks to evade responsibility for a murder:

> What? in this universe,
> Where the least things controul the greatest, where
> The faintest breath that breathes can move a world—
> What, feel remorse where if a cat had sneezed,
> A leaf had fallen, the thing had never been . . . ? (3.5.83–87)

Wordsworth endorsed Rivers's vision of ecological interdependence, which anticipates the "butterfly effect" of chaos theory, but he did not approve of Rivers's concomitant abdication of moral responsibility. We may infer that for Wordsworth the determining system of things—in "The Old Cumberland Beggar" he calls it "the tide of things" (line 157)—is not incompatible with human and thus historical agency, but neither is it fully answerable to it.[8]

To arrive at a robust sense of Wordsworth's relation to natural things requires that we begin with his relation to words as things and particularly to the rich and strange word *thing*—a word that appears (in singular and plural forms) 439 times in his corpus.[9] Words are a key part of human ecology, if by that phrase we mean "the study of the complex relationships between human communities and their dwelling places" (McKusick 70). Words structure our relations to things just as poets seek to structure our relations to words, even if "strictly," as Heidegger writes, "it is language that speaks." Wordsworth's poetry derives much of its peculiar power, Pater cryptically suggested, from the wells of the English language and its "older" literary instantiations: "Those who lived about Wordsworth were all great lovers of the older English literature. . . . He drew something too from the unconscious mysticism of the old English language itself" (137). I will argue that Wordsworth's insight into things is made possible by his receptivity to and delicate evocation of the comprehensive (or perhaps mystical) sense of *thing* that was available at the end of the eighteenth century and that to a lesser degree remains available today.

[I]

Contemporary "thing theory" tends to sideline or ignore the conceptual fullness and recalcitrance of *thing*, which Wordsworth, building on an eighteenth-century poetic heritage and more generally a rich English etymology, brilliantly conveys. Bill Brown cites Heidegger's contention that "the English word *thing* . . . has preserved the 'semantic power' of the original Roman word *res*, which is to say its capacity to designate a case, an affair, an event." Yet Brown adds, "I am specifically not deploying an etymological inquiry to delimit and vivify the meaning of things" ("Thing Theory" 5n15). Here I would like to deploy precisely such an inquiry, before turning to address what the eighteenth-century poetic career of things, as it culminates in Wordsworth, has to offer our theoretical engagement with them.

Historically, *thing* has a curious fate: it begins by meaning more or less everything but comes in the course of the nineteenth century to signify chiefly one type of thing—the manufactured object or commodity. *Thing* is originally an Old English term, related to the Old German *dinc* and the modern German *ding*. In Germanic tongues, *dinc* (or *ding*) conveys a wide range of meanings, from meeting or assembly (thus, the parliament of Iceland is called the *Althing*) through event, case, action, habit, on the one hand, and material entity or object, on the other. J. R. Clark Hall's Old English dictionary defines *thing* (neuter, as one might expect) as—take a deep breath—"creature, object, property, cause, motive, reason,

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lawsuit, event, affair, act, deed, enterprise, condition, circumstance, contest, discussion, meeting, council, assembly, court of justice, point, respect, sake." Context is all, as readers of *Beowulf* soon discover—Beowulf professes, on arriving in Denmark, "Grendel's thing became known to me on my native turf."[10] Here, this "thing" is not what Grendel has physically made. It is what he has done, the Grendel act or affair, or, at this point in the poem, a limited version of that act or affair, as much as wafts from Denmark to Beowulf's native Geat-land. All that Beowulf professes to know about Grendel's thing is that the monster has been harassing the feast hall of the Danes. Even here, in a narrative instance that is centuries away from Wordsworth's deliberately vague usage, "thing" designates a narrative that is not fully known and gestures toward the unknowability of larger chains of events. The Dane Hamlet reveals, as it were, the heart of the mystery: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.175–76).

Old English, and Modern English in its wake, does not delimit *thing* to material object. Indeed, in Old English there is no term, such as *object*, for a material entity (or, as in German philosophy, the nonself mutually constituted in relation to a subject). From this linguistic detail we can surmise that medieval Germanic-language speakers, much like the ancient Romans (whose *res* parallels or informs *thing*), did not in general conceive of material objects in a delimited physical sense, as separate from events, from the constitution and frame of that which is and comes to be, and from the transcendental conditions for knowing what little we can know of systems or stories that exceed our comprehension—in short, as Lucretius put it in his poem on Epicurean enlightenment, "the nature of things" (*de rerum natura*). This etymological fullness of *thing* is captured in the first part of Samuel Johnson's definition of the term in his *Dictionary* (1755): "whatever is." (Heidegger similarly notes that "*thing* or *dinc* . . . denote[s] anything whatever that is in any way" ["Thing" 176].)

However, we can find on Johnson's page the shadow of commodification. Johnson's full definition makes *thing* less than a noun, and alienates humans beings from things: "Whatever is; not a person." The definition is paradoxical: "whatever is" contains persons. Johnson could have ventured the hypotactic "Whatever is, excepting persons," but this is problematic if "whatever is" includes the conditions and events (space, time, the weather) from which personhood is inextricable. It is for us, as the poet Mark Akenside declared in *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744), "To weigh the moment [importance] of eternal things, / Of time, and space, and fate's unbroken chain, / And will's quick impulse" (1.89–91). We cannot be excluded from these things. Johnson is trying to have it two ways, defining *thing* as the all and as the nonhuman only, even while recognizing their incompatibility. The lexicographer takes liberties unavailable to the logician. Johnson presents the rift between humanity and inert or inhuman things that exists by 1755, but it fits badly in the historical *thing*.

Ten years after the first edition of Johnson's *Dictionary* appeared, William Blackstone began publishing his magisterial *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69), the second volume of which is on "the Rights of Things" or "the *jura rerum*, or, those rights which a man may acquire in and to such external things as are unconnected with his person" (1). *The Oxford English Dictionary* attributes to Blackstone the first clear example of *thing* as a "being without life or consciousness; an inanimate object, as distinguished from a person or living creature."[11] The *OED* next adduces from *Barnaby Rudge* (1840) a sentence that mentions "[c]onsideration of persons, things, times and places." Dickens's distinction among persons, places, and things now informs the standard multipronged definition of *noun*, but it is significant that for

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Johnson *noun* is simply "the name of any thing in grammar," a definition that renders noun and thing coextensive. It is tempting to say that between Johnson and Dickens—between the mid-Georgian and Victorian eras—arises commodity fetishism, the severance of manufactured or cultivated objects from human (or, *pace* Marx, extrahuman) activities and processes and their enshrinement as autonomous, even magical, entities. With industrial modernity, the limited sense of *thing* as a material and noncognitive object, particularly a manufactured object, gains prominence in the word's semantic field.

Wordsworth does not use *thing* in this delimited sense, even when he describes what we are now most apt to call *things*: the commodities and multitudinous spectacle of the metropolis. Recounting his "[r]esidence in London" in book 7 of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth reproduces the names and to a degree the looks of things—for instance, "the labouring hackney-coaches, the rash speed / Of coaches traveling far"; "the string of dazzling wares, / Shop after shop" (lines 165–74, 173–74)[12]—but his one use of the word *things* has a devisualizing and deobjectifying effect: "The endless stream of men and *moving things*" (158; my emphasis). The phrase is deliberately vague (what are these things? do they not move as men do, or do they include men?) and thus serves as a counterpoint to the proto-cinematic sweep of the rest of Wordsworth's descriptive catalog,[13] harking back instead to the "marvellous things" of his boyhood imaginings of the city (108).

Wordsworth uses *things* in a way that blurs distinctions between persons and nonpersons, between entities and events. This usage may reflect, as Pater remarked, "the unconscious mysticism of the old English language itself"—but it also reflects the Stoic convention, evident in early modern literature, of seeing things as a unity sustained by a rational power or spirit. Thus, Shaftesbury apostrophizes a world soul in which all things participate and that animates all things: "Sole-Animating and Inspiring Power! Author and Subject of these Thoughts! Thy Influence is universal: and in all Things thou art inmost" (*Moralists*, pt. 3, sec. 1).[14] Shaftesbury's deity is the Stoic Logos, the faintly personified rational principle that undergirds and upholds all aspects of the universe—in Spinoza's formulation, with which Shaftesbury may have been acquainted, "that eternal and infinite being we call God, *or* Nature" (198; pt. 4, pref.).

This deity has no form, but it can nonetheless be seen in the order of nature or, in the catachresis by which this order was also known, the face of things. Shaftesbury claims that "the Face of Things" is always beautiful for those who understand the principle according to which all things work together necessarily, if to us darkly (*Moralists*, pt. 1, sec. 3). (Thus, the Stoic must "adapt to all things," a phrase Shaftesbury borrows from the Greek of Marcus Aurelius [*Life* 26].) The face of things is a denominative face, a "thing of nothing," in Hamlet's phrase.[15] It is not a face such as pagans gave their gods, nor the visage of Yahweh, the eternal "I am," which Moses can see just once "face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (*Bible*, Exod. 33.11).[16] Rather, this face tentatively transforms the indefiniteness of things into a constellation that evokes without representing the Other in whose face Levinas has taught us to see the ground of ethics and divinity (48–52, 72–81, 197–201). It is, in Benso's terms, more a faciality than a face. Shaftesbury grants things the intimating power of the face and asks us to imagine and love that face, even if it is no more than a name.

The face of things is not Shaftesbury's own locution: it goes back at least as far as Samuel Daniel (1563–1619), who maintained in his verse epistle "To Henry Wriothesley" that the experience of adversity, which alone teaches "the true face of things," is requisite to happiness (line 36). But knowledge of the face of things is rarely accorded in English

verse. As Yahweh's face is alternately visible and invisible to Moses, so the modern face of things is occasionally revealed but more often shaded or concealed, a challenge to ocular empiricism as well as to the humanist notion that things exist to become objects of human thought. Milton fired the first salvo against representational thinking with regard to the face of things in having Satan's voice tempt the sleeping Eve with a nocturnal landscape designed for human, indeed her, eyes alone:

> [N]ow reigns
> Full Orb'd the Moon, and with more pleasing light
> Shadowy sets off the face of things; in vain
> If none regard; Heav'n wakes, with all his eyes,
> Whom to behold but thee, Nature's desire,
> In whose sight all things joy, with ravishment
> Attracted by thy beauty still to gaze.
>
> (*PL* 5.41–47)

Here the face of things is cloaked in shadow, figuring for the fit reader its incomplete comprehensibility. Conversely, the heavens are assigned eyes that, Satan's voice cajoles, are only for Eve.

In Milton's wake, eighteenth-century poets, largely abandoning the Satanic notion that nature revolves around human beings, took up the cloaked face of things as a metaphor for a posited order we cannot fully know. From Alexander Pope on, the face of things appears and reappears as veiled in night or mist or fog or other pleasing obscurity—not, as in Shaftesbury (or Lucretius), illuminated by philosophy.[17] In Miltonic fashion, poets preferred veiled truth to a white mythology, while assuming, however, that there was indeed a naked face of things, an outward form redolent of an internal rationale, to be hidden. In a physical register, Pope in his *Odyssey* made "darkness cover'd o'er / The face of things" a stock translation of Homer's stock phrase *knephas elthe* ("darkness came").[18] James Thomson and Thomas Warton played variations on Pope's phrase, giving it metaphysical overtones: darkness "gathers round / To close the face of things" (Thomson, "Summer," lines 1653–54); "congregated clouds, / And all the vapoury turbulence of heaven / Involve the face of things" (Thomson, "Winter," lines 55–57); "all is silence drear; / And deepest sadness wraps the face of things" (Warton, lines 151–52). In these last lines from Warton, human subjectivity suffuses a suprahuman order, but it is not clear which element is given the upper hand: either human sadness veils the face of things from only human beings, who are thus alienated from the suprahuman fullness of things, or sadness is imputed to the catachrestic face of things through a humanistic "pathetic fallacy." With the latter possibility, we move at once backward, to a Satanic representation of anthropocentric nature, and forward, toward the Romantic trope of mind's sovereignty over the empirical world, if not over things as such.

[II]

It is well known that Wordsworth (sometimes) purveyed this trope of the sovereign mind. His countervailing rejection of mind's ascendancy over things is less appreciated. "The face of things" or "the face of nature" persists in Wordsworth's poetry, its relation to humanity variously configured.[19] At times Wordsworth is eager to assert human mastery over things, as in the famous Mount Snowdon episode in book 13 of the 1805 *Prelude*. Wordsworth allegorizes the "huge sea of mist" that, seen from atop Snowdon, obscures the Irish Channel as the mind's "domination" of "the outward face of things," a domination deriving from the self's transcendental priority over nature and the superiority of imaginative "higher minds" to "the grossest minds" (lines 40–119). But to counterbalance the vertical cast of mind one finds in such a passage, there is the leveling of human and nonhuman, high and low, found for example in *The Pedlar* (ms. E), in which the protagonist comes to feel "the

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pure joy of love" diffused "by the silent looks of happy things, / Or flowing from the universal face / Of earth and sky" (lines 175–80). In this vision of connectedness, human beings might themselves constitute "happy things"; they possess no privilege in the peddler's terrain. Elsewhere Wordsworth throws into doubt even the minimal anthropocentrism of assigning a face to earth and sky. In book 5 of *The Prelude*, the slippage from "the speaking face of earth and heaven / As . . . prime teacher" (12–13) to the "ghastly face" of a drowned schoolmaster (472) reveals through disfiguration the giving face that constitutes if not all identity then at least the identity of God or nature in a Stoic vein.[20]

In the fine ambiguities of Wordsworth's verse, the extrahuman acquires an agency that may or may not derive from or prove comparable with human agency. "I saw the sentiment of being spread / O'er all that moves," Wordsworth claims of his teenage self in *The Prelude* (2.420–21): through one of those busy "of"s that Christopher Ricks has identified as a hallmark of Wordsworth's style (110–25), "the sentiment of being" encompasses "being" as object and subject, referring to a sentimental apprehension of being, to being's own "sentiment" (in Johnson's second definition of the term, its essence or "sense considered distinctly from the language"), or to both at once. It is thus impossible to tell whether human sentiment or extraconceptual being—in a further indeterminacy—either "spread" (past and possibly ongoing activity) or "had spread itself" (accomplished act) or "had been spread" (accomplished act of another agent) over a multiplicity of beings (e.g., "O'er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings, / Or beats the gladsome air" [2.425–26]). Wordsworth's style allows for maximal possibilities of interconnection with minimal clarification of who or what is acting or being acted on. He ends his litany to being by subsuming multiplicity into the unity of "one life," but even that unity remains divided among possible agents: "in all things / I saw one life, and felt that it was a joy" (2.429–30). Life, like being, may spread over the poet or spread outward from him. Such puzzlement over where (if anywhere) human beings end and nature begins is, the ecocritic Greg Garrard has argued, what "mark[s] romanticism as proto-ecological" (464). But we can find a fully ecological stance, as well as an ethics, in Wordsworth if we attend to his ambiguities as a bidirectional movement that refuses primacy either to self (the Other's other) or to (things as) the Other.

The issue of this ethics is, for Wordsworth, joy. The bond between (one) life and joy has a human history, which we can trace back to Stoic philosophy and, most immediately, to Spinoza, from whom Wordsworth borrows selectively. By Coleridge's account, he and Wordsworth were talking in the summer of 1796 about Spinoza (*Biographia* 193–97). The book in question is, most likely, Spinoza's *Ethics*, written in Latin and published posthumously in 1677. Spinoza's pantheistic view of God and human beings can be found in a Wordsworth manuscript fragment from February 1799:

> [A]ll beings live with God, themselves
> Are God, existing in one mighty whole,
> As undistinguishable as the cloudless east
> At noon is from the cloudless west, when all
> The hemisphere is one cerulean blue.
> ("Fragments," lines 16–20)

Wordsworth links union in God and the unity of nature through a simile ("[a]s indistinguishable as") and in doing so suggests what Spinoza argues—that God and nature are the same, the substance of which all things are simply attributes (thus all beings "[a]re God"). Spinoza equates God with the eternal, immutable laws of nature, such as science may discover, and with a universal system of causal necessity, in which every event is predetermined by antecedent events. To know God is to have an "adequate knowledge of the essence of things"—of the necessity of all objects and

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events (141; pt. 2, proposition 40). Possessing a clear conception of this necessity will, Spinoza believed, weaken the irrational power of the passions over us, giving us calm, rational joy, and, at the extreme, beatitude.

Spinoza's impress can be seen in Wordsworth's (and Coleridge's) emphatic use of joy as an aspect of the apprehension of God in or as nature. Spinoza, more than the Stoics from whom he borrows, stresses the intellectual joy of coming to know God. Joy (*laetitia*) is "that passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection"—in other words, a greater capacity for self-preservation—while sadness is "that passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection" (161; pt. 3, proposition 11). Although "there are as many species of joy, sadness, love, hate, and the like, as there are species of objects by which we are affected" (184; pt. 3, proposition 56), the best species of joy and love stem, first, from the life of social virtue—rationally seeking "the common advantage of all" (210; pt. 4, proposition 18)—and, finally, from the knowledge of God, "the mind's greatest good" (213; pt. 4, proposition 28). Moving by "intellectual love" toward the knowledge of God—and so toward human perfection—occasions the greatest joy (257–59; pt.5, propositions 24–32).[21] Wordsworth echoes Spinoza's metaphysical ascent from passionate dependence on transient objects to an intellectual love and joy in book 13 of the 1805 *Prelude*. The individual who cultivates "reason in her most exalted mood" (or "imagination") and the intellectual love of God shall feel a "joy" that, although independent of circumstance, shall nonetheless be completed or "perfected," socially and ethically, by "all that friendship, all that love can do" (198–204).

Yet Wordsworth generally echoes Spinoza's joy in the underlying oneness of things without his focus on the joyful understanding of it. Extending the franchise of joy, Wordsworth not only proposes a more generally human ability to intuit (rightly or wrongly) the interconnection of all things but also suggests that things can do the same and thus deserve the respect owed exclusively to human beings in Spinozan and ancient Stoic ethics. "'Tis my faith that every flower / Enjoys the air it breathes," Wordsworth maintains in "Lines Written in Early Spring"; "the budding twigs spread out their fan, / To catch the breezy air; / And I must think, do all I can, / That there was pleasure there" (11–12, 16–20). Thinking separates the speaker from the joy of being that he accurately perceives or erroneously projects, as well as distinguishing these two epistemic possibilities. But for Wordsworth in balked understanding begin responsibilities. The possibility that subrational things experience joy implies ethical consequences in our attitude toward or interaction with them. According to Wordsworth, subrational things (or rational things in subrational moods) are not inferior or accountable to the philosophical mind capable of rational reflection on the "one life." As Wordsworth writes even in the most rationalistic, Coleridge-inspired moment of *The Prelude*, human reason can at most "chasten" and "balance" "the deep enthusiastic joy, / The rapture of hallelujah sent / From all that breathes and is" (13.261–63).

[III]

"Tintern Abbey" is Wordsworth's best-known, and perhaps his greatest, poetic statement on "all that is." The poet recalls earlier recollections, "mid the din / Of towns and cities," of a previous visit to the Wye River valley and the reveries these recollections allowed, when "with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things" (lines 47–49). This last phrase is novel: a search of the *Chadwyck-Healey English Poetry Full-Text Database* reveals scant use of "the life of things" before Wordsworth, and Wordsworth's impress on later poetic use of the phrase is clear.[22] With this phrase, Wordsworth turns away from the

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quasi-personified face of things and allows that things can be animated without our seeing them, even minimally, as our selves. If a figural charge adheres to "the life of things," it is that of Aristotle's *energeia*, the attribution of activity to (apparently) lifeless things. Yet through the special decorum of Wordsworth's *energeia* any attribution or poetic making seems detection or surmise.

It is through "a sustained movement of surmise," Geoffrey Hartman writes, that Wordsworth "gradually expands into communion" (27–28). The poet recalls that five years earlier nature to him had been a visual and libidinal experience of the lone self, but he has since lost his attraction to nature's (sur)face:

> For I have learned
> To look on nature, not as in the hour
> Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
> The still, sad music of humanity. . . .
> And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things. (89–103)

The culminating lines of this great passage resolve the tension found in Johnson's definition of *thing* as "Whatever is; not a person." Here we are distinguished as or among "thinking things," and yet both our selves and the objects we make through thinking are joined in the anteriority and comprehensiveness of "all things." We are things among things, metaphysically, ecologically, participating in a life of things that is nowise reducible to a story we can tell about it.[23]

Wordsworth's insight into thingness relies on an incantation of *things* that conjures the word's own strange but not inhuman thingness. Wordsworth's emphatic repetition of the word is illuminated by his 1800 note to "The Thorn" (Lyrical Ballads 351), another poem in *Lyrical Ballads*: words are things we cling to and repeat in "impassioned" states, when "the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of the passion, but as *things*, active and efficient, which are themselves part of the passion."[24] Wordsworth's theoretical vindication of the repetitions of passionate speech gives to his repetitions in "Tintern Abbey"—"all thinking things . . . all things"—yet another layer of signification: things include words themselves, words that do not entirely represent things but that belong to and circulate among them, especially where those things are passions.

This native language of things is, for Wordsworth, lyrical and not narrative or procedurally philosophical. In the passage from "Tintern Abbey" quoted above, Wordsworth codes his relation to things as intuitive by implicitly contrasting it with what "I have learned." But what he has learned is not to hear the music of humanity but only "to look," and "hearing" magically appears, a participle unattached to agency, an activity apart from philosophical education. An ironic relation to narrative accompanies the lyric speaker's next claim—"And I have felt"—but what is felt turns out to be not emotions in time and place, the stuff of the "frantic [i.e., gothic or sentimental] novels" Wordsworth deplored in 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, but rather a disturbing "presence" and joyful, elevated "thoughts" that may or may not be coincident with or equivalent to "a sense sublime" of what impels all things. Having thus dismantled the time and space coordinates of narrative, and directly after the tolling of "things," Wordsworth faintly parodies the narrative logic of consequence or the philosophical logic of deduction: "*Therefore* am I still / A lover of the meadows and the woods, / And mountains . . . " (103–05; my emphasis). "Therefore" is here pseudo-logical, evocative either of premises not to be found or of a narrative development similarly absent.

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The life that Wordsworth sensed beneath the face of things is not answerable to human life or logic. Things do not justify loss and suffering in general or in particular—"Tintern Abbey" is neither a theodicy nor, in M. H. Abrams's term, a "biodicy" (96). Insight into things is, rather, an insight into necessity or impulsion. Objects and events are determined by prior events and objects in a way we cannot fully understand; still, in intimations of order we may find some comfort.

[IV]

In sum, Wordsworth, working with the stuff of the English language, working from Stoic and Spinozan philosophy and from a poetic face of world order, wound his way into a lyric apprehension of the life of things, a life that human beings, with their passions and actions and words, share almost as equals with other thinking things and indeed with all things. Some of Wordsworth's Victorian and early-twentieth-century readers recognized at least a part of this. Of the various "elementary feelings" Wordsworth in his *Preface* laid claim to expressing, these readers responded in particular to his ability to communicate joy in things. They found in Wordsworth's verse a joy that traverses nature's scale and challenges the vertical cast of mind along the way, suggesting horizons of equality among all beings. Mill wrote of Wordsworth's poems, "In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings" (151). Arnold wrote in his 1879 preface to Wordsworth's poems:

> Wordsworth's poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties; and because of the extraordinary power with which, in case after case, he shows this joy, and renders it so as to make us share it. The source of joy from which he thus draws is the truest and most accessible to man. . . . [A]ccording to his own strong and characteristic line ["Prospectus to *The Recluse*," line 18], he brings us word "Of joy in widest commonalty spread." (51)

Arnold responded forcefully to what he took to be Wordsworth's ethical program, one redolent of moral egalitarianism, hopeful of social cohesion, and evincing the joys that people have in common with one another and perhaps with other creatures and things.

Wordsworth often grounded his normative values in the folkways of the past, as in "The Old Cumberland Beggar," a tale of a very old man and the old mores he sustains. Yet Wordsworth's astute readers understood the poet to be offering a utopian vision of the future. As the American critic Edwin Percy Whipple wrote in 1844, Wordsworth's heart lies in "a period when universal benevolence will prevail upon the earth" (383). "Wordsworth may be a politician of the past, but he is emphatically a poet of the future. . . . His England of a thousand years past is the Utopia of a thousand years to come" (381–82). In a 1920 essay titled "Neglected Sources of Joy," W. J. Jupp commends Wordsworth's "vision of the brighter, holier time that shall yet be upon the earth," when all will come to share his "sense of the unity of all existence in the invisible and eternal order, the consciousness that we and all other creatures are at one in that unity" (668–69).

And with this consciousness comes, I would add, an ethical imperative. Wordsworth elaborated on the ethical implications of the life of things in a fragment he wrote shortly after "Tintern Abbey":

> There is an active principle alive in all things:
> In all things, in all natures, in the flowers
> And in the trees, in every pebbly stone
>
> That paves the brooks, the stationary rocks
> The moving waters, and the invisible air.
> All beings have their properties which spread
> Beyond themselves, a power by which they
> make

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Some other being conscious of their life. . . .
(Lyrical Ballads 309)

Wordsworth then nods to the animating world soul of Shaftesbury and the Stoics and elaborates on the human mind's proper, benevolent, activity unconstrained by positive law or what he calls "negative morality" (73). But what most interests me here are Wordsworth's opening lines on the activity of all natural things and, especially, their claims to attention. Instead of anthropomorphizing things, Wordsworth here moves toward "thingicizing" ethics. That is, his ethics of things is grounded in the nature of things and, more particularly, in the claims to (our) conscious attention made by natural things. Though not personified or given a human face, these things still have facialities in Benso's sense. We are bound to them by affection and duty, and they have a possibly similar bond to us. We can apply to Wordsworth Benso's description of her own project: he too "aims at restoring things to a preeconomical horizon of festive appreciation and celebration within which things can be encountered in their facialities and tendered—that is, treated with tenderness—because of the generosity of their self-giving, as if their alterity were a gift" (xxxi).

In Wordsworth's poems, the alterity of animals and of rocks, stones, and trees is often a gift: an ass awakes Peter to his own moral being in *Peter Bell*, a "lonely pair / Of milk-white Swans" give of themselves in *Home at Grasmere* (lines 248–89), and the "grey stone / Of native rock" provides "the home / And centre" of Wordsworth's schoolboy "joys" (Prelude 2.33–36). The whole "circumambient world" is a gift to the villagers of Grasmere:

[T]hem the morning light
Loves as it glistens on the silent rocks,
And them the silent rocks [love], which now
from high
Look down upon them, the reposing clouds,
The lurking brooks from their invisible haunts,
And old Helvellyn, conscious of the stir,
And the blue sky that roofs their calm abode.
(Prelude 8.55–61)

In all these poems, moreover, the self-giving of mute or insensate things grounds a moral order that human beings lamentably seek to break. Thus, Peter first beats the ass destined to soften his heart (404–535 [1st ed.]); some resident of Grasmere, Wordsworth fears, may have shot the now-absent swans; the "grey stone" of Hawkshead "was split and gone to build / A smart assembly room," the site of gaudy amusement (Prelude 2.38–39). In all these scenarios, things keep on giving so long as they are allowed. Wordsworth's poems kindle in thinking things a vigilance toward the things of nature, a reminder of their commonality.

During the nineteenth century, things were increasingly taken to be that which was not human, especially manufactured objects. Marx addresses this tide of materialization with his concepts of reification (when human activities turn into alien, fungible things) and commodity fetishism (when made things become our new masters). Yet these industrial-era developments did not foreclose a more encompassing sense of things, one that persists to this day in ordinary locutions such as *the way things go* and *thinking about things*. Such things still evince the continuities between entities and events and blur the difference between subjects and objects in the constitution of those entities and events. More important, they suggest unfathomable systems that we need, perhaps, more than narrative itself. It may be quixotic to think that the vestigial etymological force behind the greeting *How are things?* might help (re)insert us into a less reified world, one in which human and nonhuman activities are viewed as interanimate with objects, made and unmade. But perhaps this is what literature, and Wordsworth in particular, still has the power to do.

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Notes

1. "The Things People Make," Lynn Festa's title for two panels at the 2004 Boston convention of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, recurs as a section title in her book (ch. 3, sec. 1).

2. Lamb, who sees "it-narratives" as critical of sentimental ethics, provides a convenient summary of earlier criticism on the topic (214–15). See also Blackwell.

3. The rhetorical concept of *energeia* derives from Aristotle (1411b), who associates it with *kinēsis* ("motion") and "speaking of lifeless or soulless things [*apsycha*] as living things [*empyscha*]" (my trans.). *Energeia* is variously translated into English: e.g., it appears as "actuality" in Freese's Loeb translation of Aristotle and "animation" (my preferred term) in Hobbes's abridgment and translation (173).

4. "When and in what ways do things appear as things? They do not appear by means of human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals. The first step towards such vigilance is the step back from the thinking that merely represents—that is, explains—to the thinking that responds and recalls" (Heidegger, "Thing" 181).

5. Quotations from "Lines Written in Early Spring" (76), "Tintern Abbey" (116–20), and "The Old Cumberland Beggar" (228–34) are from Lyrical Ballads *and Other Poems, 1797–1800*.

6. See Bauman on "postmodern ethics"; for a synopsis of Levinas's ethics and of challenges to it, see Buell 14–16.

7. Benso writes of the expression "ethics *of* things": "*Of* things means . . . the directionality of a double movement: that which moves out from the things to reach the I and the other, and that which, in response to the first, moves from the I and the other to reach the things and to be concerned by them. The first movement is that of the demand or the appeal that things place on human beings by their mere impenetrable presencing there. It is the thingly side of the ethics of things. The second movement is that of tenderness, as the [human] response to the demand . . ." (142). Benso's "ethics of things" accords in principle, though not in its philosophical elaboration, with positions held by literary ecocritics: cf. Murphy's "ecofeminist" call for a "heterarchical" relation to the "anotherness" of nature or the nonhuman (3–8, 22–23).

8. Kroeber suggests a similarly paradoxical connection in Malthus and in pieces of English Romantic writing between viewing nature as a deterministic (if evolving) system and seeing the individual in it as free (13–15, 88–89).

9. "Thing" appears 125 times and "things" 314. By comparison, "nature" has 395 occurrences (Cooper).

10. "Mē wearð Grendles þing / on mīnre ēþeltyrf undyrne cūð" (lines 409–10). I thank Monica Brzezinski Potkay for her aid with Old English.

11. Before adducing Blackstone, the *OED* offers two citations of *things* that do not clearly refer to a material object as distinct from person, time, place, or event: "Things . . . of general Use or Pleasure to Mankind" (William Temple, 1689–90); "Things . . . are all to be used according to the Will of God" (William Law, 1729).

12. All quotations from *The Prelude* are taken from the 1805 ed.

13. On the cinematic effects of *The Prelude*, book 7, and Wordsworth's reluctant kinship to the mass culture he ostensibly criticizes, see Galperin 112–28.

14. Cf. Shaftesbury's private notebook: "The Deity is present with all things, knows all things, and is provident over all" (*Life* 20).

15. Hamlet plays with the paradox that a "thing" can be a "nothing"—i.e., a word, designation, role, affair, etc., can be illusory, grounded on no more than language, or a usurpation, erected on an absence (here the dead body of the king his father):

> HAMLET. The King is a thing—
> GUILDENSTERN. A thing, my lord?
> HAMLET. Of nothing. (4.2.29–31).

16. See Yahweh's contradictory statement in Exod. 33.20: "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me and live."

17. Lucretius opens book 3 of *De rerum natura* with praise of Epicurus's illumination of, in Creech's 1682 translation, "the rise of things" (line 19). In the eighteenth century, another impediment to seeing clearly the status of things is their constant change or becoming: Defoe remarks in his preface to *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724) that "the Face of Things so often alters . . . that there is Matter of new Observation every Day presented to the Traveller's Eye" (qtd. in Turner 189).

18. Pope 9.195–96, 10.210–11, 14.510–11. Cf. Gen. 1.2: "and darkness was upon the face of the deep."

19. The "face of things" that include us is also formulated, in the period, as "the face of nature"; instead of being veiled, however, the face of nature is what we are more clearly allowed to see, by power of philosophy or revelation. See, e.g., Young, "Night the Fourth" lines 474–504; Beattie, bk. 2, st. 47; and Hume, pt. 12 (the sceptic Philo's partial and perhaps ironic concession to natural religion that we find God discoverable "on the whole face of Nature").

20. On face as the figure of figuration itself in bk. 5 of *The Prelude*, see Chase 13–31.

21. Spinoza's conception of "joyful understanding" is summarized by Susan James: "the clear, adequate ideas with which we reason demonstratively belong to a totality identical with God's thoughts or God's mind. So when we infer one adequate idea from another, we think some of God's thoughts, and in this way begin to merge with God or nature by partaking of his (or its) perfection and power. The knowledge that this is what reasoning is gives rise to a joy, stemming this time from the capacity to blur the boundaries of the self, and become a part of the greatest totality of all" (195). The Stoic roots of Spinoza's

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joyful understanding can be found, e.g., in Cicero: "the mind should know its own self and feel its union with the divine mind, the source of the fullness of joy unquenchable" (497; bk. 5, sec. 25).

22. E.g., the phrase appears at least six times, with Wordsworthian resonance, in Ellison's 1839 *Madmoments* (1: 253, 1: 393, 1: 408, 2: 25, 2: 168, 2: 331). The only notable use of "the life of things" before Wordsworth comes in Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* sonnet "The glorious pourtraict of that Angels face," a poem on female beauty that cannot be captured by visual art: "A greater craftesman's hand thereto doth neede, / that can expresse the life of things indeed." Spenser uses the phrase to evoke the spark of thinking things that eludes manual or mechanical reproduction; Wordsworth, by contrast, conjures the quasi- or nonvisual ("with an eye made quiet") apprehension of all things in their united or respective existence(s).

23. "Thinking thing" is a redundancy or minimal differentiation according to an (erroneous) etymology that Wordsworth may have known about—that of the London radical John Horne Tooke. Tooke's derivation of "think" from "thing" (as *reor* from *res*) is a cornerstone of his noun-derived and materialist basis for all verbs and abstractions (405–06). Wordsworth's deconstruction of the human-thing opposition is echoed in his subsequent lyric "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal"—"She seem'd a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years" (Lyrical Ballads 164; lines 3–4)—in a manner that renders problematic the aporetic logic Miller finds in "the unbridgeable gap between one meaning of the word 'thing' ["person" or, more particularly, "young woman"] and the other ["object"]" (107).

24. Keach places Wordsworth's note to "The Thorn" in the context of a wider Romantic concern with "words as things" (23–45). Cf. Coleridge's rejection of the word-thing opposition in a letter, also of 1800, to William Godwin, urging him "to destroy the old antithesis of *Words* & *Things*, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too" (626).

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