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## Notes Towards a History of Gentleness

Alexander Freer

Who will write the history of gentleness? In which times, and in what forms, does gentleness obtain: as hesitation and firmness, calculation and unreflective act? Gentleness is hard to record because it evades notice. It is a form of generous attention, and a kind of skilled practice, yet often works by drawing attention away from itself, and naming it has very little to do with experiencing it. There are strict constraints: you can't be gentle if you are uncertain, anxious, or overly delicate, nor if you are too briskly efficient. At its most self-effacing, gentleness is a feel for the breaking point prior to reaching it, a sense for the fragility of things that forecloses their purely instrumental use, and subordinates its practitioners to the objects of their care. This is analogous to the attitude that arises from what Heidegger calls equipmental breakdown, save that no damage is needed. Equally, and in tension with this analogy, gentleness is a technique, a style, and a rhetorical strategy. It is the velvet glove that hides the iron fist. "Her manner was incurably gentle, and she was not aware how much it concealed the sternness of her purpose," Austen writes of her heroine in *Mansfield Park*, suggesting that gentleness can dissemble even where its practitioners do not (256). Far from being all softness, gentleness anticipates damage: it contains "an element of negativity," or even a kernel of mourning (Malabou, xiv). At its most controlled, gentleness is a kind of quiet discipline; at its most free, gentleness is an articulation of risk.

This essay has its origins in a conference panel which asked us to think again about Wordsworth's famous Boy of Winander episode.<sup>1</sup> My aim was to read it as a study of gentleness, understood in the terms I have just offered. This essay expands on that reading

and goes some way to situating it within a history of gentleness. It proceeds through three phases of increasing magnification: a broad survey of gentleness, looking forward from the eighteenth century to the present; gentleness in Romantic literature and aesthetics; and close engagement with the particular forms of gentleness in Wordsworth, whose writing provides my central case studies. Wordsworth's gentleness gives the Winander episode its lightness but also underpins its famously elusive disclosure of damage and loss. It emerges in stretches of noise and silence, moments of possibility and unanticipated shock. As many readers have noted, the passage is linguistically complex. A "gentle shock of mild surprize" is not far from doubly redundant: the shock *of* the surprise, the gentleness emerging *from* the mildness (*Thirteen-Book Prelude*, V.407). Here the syntax performs what it describes: an adjective gives way to an unexpected noun; for a first-time reader, the gentleness of the shock is its own surprise. Yet the subsequent *narrative* shock, when the poet reveals his Winander boy portrait to be posthumous, may strike as less than mild. We can speak of Wordsworth's gentleness in two senses, then: his characterization of gentleness in writing, and his employment of gentleness as literary technique. Gentleness is often employed in the service of elegy, and the power of that association can bring an elegiac tone to other contexts. But while one might reasonably expect lightness to imply ease, Wordsworth's gentleness is difficult; it is a way to handle subjects that are otherwise difficult to talk about. I speak of Wordsworth's gentleness in particular (and will go on to consider a wider Romantic gentleness) to stress that his is one mode, and one moment, in a complex history. Indeed, gentleness of this sort stands in pointed contrast to an earlier eighteenth century discourse of gentleness, and can function as a critique of it. There is a politics of gentleness, as well as an ethics and an aesthetics.

This analysis is indebted to the work of Anne Dufourmantelle, whose two short studies on gentleness and on risk comprise some of the most interesting recent thinking about the demands and rewards of gentleness. Her work is quite different to the philosophical and literary material I discuss here: it draws extensively on her clinical experience as a psychoanalyst, and is marked by an insistence that we act on our desires. Dufourmantelle's lyrical prose is more suggestive than it is systematic, and her social and political concerns are distinctly contemporary. In short, this work does not speak directly to Romantic writing nor to the debates over gentleness that will engage the rest of this essay. Yet Dufourmantelle's characterization of gentleness as a kind of risk will be illuminating in what follows.

To understand how Dufourmantelle thinks in *The Power of Gentleness*, it's helpful to begin with her earlier work, *In Praise of Risk*. The latter aims to resist the fantasy of absolute safety. Such a fantasy is objectionable on two grounds, she contends. First, it can be understood as a strategy of avoidance and denial that forecloses the painful but ultimately transformative knowledge of one's own vulnerability. Second, if one believes that total safety is possible, that belief can justify almost limitless concessions to whatever regime promises to provide it. It is against these wishes that Dufourmantelle counsels us to abandon ourselves to the possibility of risk. "To abandon yourself is to confront abandonment, the fear lurking deep within us that never lets us out of its sight," she writes (*Risk*, 18). Risk requires something like a leap into freedom, yet this is not the freedom of individual choice or intellectual self-sufficiency. It is rather the freedom from neurosis and intellectual closure that comes with accepting the limits and fragility of what one can control.

To take on risk in Dufourmantelle's sense is not to speculate but to embrace the fragility of life lived intensely with others:

this risk isn't entirely subjective, or personal, or even voluntary; it is that by which we constantly exceed ourselves. It is that in which we are lost and exchange the feeling of irremediable loss for the desire to remain on the move in territories where it's possible to explore desire. (*Risk*, 71)

There is much more that could be said about the psychotherapeutic stakes of these claims, and how they interact with a critique of contemporary political technologies of social control and risk management. Most significant for this discussion is Dufourmantelle's insistence that risk is necessary to meaningful social life. This helps to explain why in *The Power of Gentleness* her appeal is not straightforwardly to softness and restraint. The gentleness for which she advocates is fragile and temporary, both a form of care and a way of registering the limitations of others and oneself (15). It is difficult to handle, in the same way that an ancient and priceless vase might be, and like that anxious handling, it is necessarily tactile. For Dufourmantelle, the trembling or arresting power of gentleness is essential. Indeed, "[t]here can be gentleness in fear" (68). Understood in this way, gentleness does not merely cancel out harshness or violence but claims its own positive content. It is an act of vulnerability, an act that can become mutual knowledge but must begin as a singular and unreciprocated leap. While the arguments Dufourmantelle makes are embedded in their own clinical and philosophical contexts, this basic distinction will serve us well: there is gentleness as self-restraint and there is gentleness as risk. This is a contested history, encompassing heterogeneous and divergent gestures, acts, and forms of life.

Romantic gentleness, as I'll go on to develop the notion here, needs to be understood in distinction to an earlier eighteenth-century tradition of European political thought in which gentleness stands for individual responsibility, restraint, and moderation. In this tradition, gentleness is both a necessary condition for an emerging liberal polity and a source of moral improvement. Its most famous theorist is Montesquieu, who declares in *The Spirit of the Laws* that “[k]nowledge makes men gentle [*Les connaissances rendent les hommes doux*], and reason inclines toward humanity; only prejudices cause these to be renounced” (249). If knowledge improves *because* it softens, it doesn't seem too much of an overstatement to say that the Enlightenment project is ultimately an exercise in the propagation of gentleness. By stressing the role of education, Montesquieu makes gentleness an acquired practice rather than an innate characteristic, aligning wisdom and worldliness with moral conduct in much the same way as Addison and Swift would in Britain around the same time in the pages of *The Spectator*.<sup>2</sup> Montesquieu's argument is one element of a wider shift in understanding, nicely illustrated by the first and second definitions of *gentle* in Johnson's *Dictionary*, from “dignity of birth” to “softness of manners” (1:801). As gentleness transforms from a birthright to a form of behavior, it becomes possible to speak of an ethics of gentleness, and even a gentle education. The concomitant moral value can thus be earned, rather than inherited. In this way, the changing meaning of gentleness can be understood to index the shifting power of aristocratic and commercial interests (illustrated across the long eighteenth century by the changing fortunes of two archetypes derived from the term *gentle*, the city gentleman and the landed gentry.) This is an explicitly secular, male gentleness, yet it owes its moral force to ideals of Christian gentleness and its persuasive power to notions of feminine softness.

Montesquieu's vision of gentleness (which could also be translated as softness or sweetness) is at the heart of the liberal project to replace organized violence with *le doux commerce*. "Commerce cures destructive prejudices," he writes, "and it is an almost general rule that everywhere there are gentle mores, there is commerce and that everywhere there is commerce, there are gentle mores" (338). In his landmark study of political arguments for capitalism, Albert O. Hirschman observed that Montesquieu's argument has a long reach (60-1). The perceived gentleness of commerce, Hirschman suggests, should be understood "in comparison to the passionate pastimes and savage exploits of the aristocracy" (63). Yet while this amounts to a negative definition, there is also an affirmative version of Montesquieu's argument that we might term an ethics of commerce. Trade diminishes prejudice, which facilitates increased trade. Tact and politeness are the supreme virtues of the merchant. "Commerce itself is not gentle; rather, Montesquieu argues, when commerce is present, mores tend to be gentle, and vice versa" (Terjanian, 14). Beyond simply distracting ambitious young men from other ways to seek their fortune, commerce is, on this argument, a civilizing force. It seems to be this legacy that Dufourmantelle has in mind when she says that "for the philosophers, gentleness merges with civilization" (*Gentleness* 32). It remains possible to find arguments of this form (which are occasionally referred to generically as "*doux commerce*" arguments) in the publications of the World Bank, the World Economic Forum, and libertarian think tanks, which tend to imply, if not explicitly claim, that trade with ostensibly illiberal regimes will liberalize them, or at least prevent international conflict. Similarly, Montesquieu's insistence that *knowledge* makes men gentle echoes in Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of our Nature*, where scientific progress is said to have reduced interpersonal violence.

Hirschman traces the origin of *le doux commerce* as a formula to the earlier sense of commerce as conversation, where *doux* implied not only politeness but the requisite softness to speak easily with women.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the whole argument fits neatly into the grooves of an analogous argument about gender—that women refine men through their complementary virtues of sociability and gracefulness—while also displacing it.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the commerce argument restores to prominence the “conventional homosocial education” of men that a more domestic discourse of politeness had displaced (Klein, 111). Hirschman notes, gentleness retained these existing social and behavioral senses even as it was being retooled for new purposes:

The term thus carried into its “commercial” career an overload of meaning that denoted politeness, polished manners, and socially useful behavior in general. Even so, the persistent use of the term *le doux commerce* strikes us as a strange aberration for an age when the slave trade was at its peak and when trade in general was still a hazardous, adventurous, and often violent business. (Hirschman, 62)

This may not be so strange. If gentleness eases the competitive aggression of commerce, wouldn't the most violent of trades rely on practices and techniques of gentleness all the more? And wouldn't this ideology of gentleness be invoked most insistently precisely where there is least difference between trade and the forms of armed expropriation it ostensibly displaced?

As these arguments make clear, claims about the gentleness of social groups and trades are inescapably political. That this politics of gentleness was already being promulgated behalf of a class of enlightened and polite merchants in the second half of the eighteenth century helps



to explain why Jean-Jacques Rousseau attacks gentleness with such force in the *First Discourse*, his great assault on the assumption of European historical progress. Rousseau's critique of gentleness takes aim at precisely Montesquieu's civilizing conception. He writes:

Knowledge makes men gentle, says the famous Philosopher ... True, knowledge makes men gentle. But gentleness, the most amiable of virtues, is also sometimes a weakness of the soul. Virtue is not always gentle, when the occasion requires, it can arm itself with due severity against vice, be fired with indignation against crime. (*Discourses*, 64)

Rousseau's primary objection is that gentleness can become indistinguishable from selfish inaction. As Christopher Kelly puts it, "[w]here Montesquieu had seen commerce producing directly a narrow and self-interested concern for strict justice and indirectly a making gentle of morals, Rousseau sees the apparent gentleness of morals concealing and therefore liberating a selfishness unconcerned with justice, strict or not" (27). Where Montesquieu indicts the ignorant authoritarian, Rousseau counters that the gentle intellectual is in practice no more benevolent. In an aside anticipating Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, Rousseau also argues that gentleness can be a form of self-justification for a weaker party, rather than a mark of real virtue. As the Church gained institutional power, Rousseau writes in one of his many replies to critics of the *First Discourse*, "[t]hose ever so gentle Christians, who had known only how to yield their throat to the knife, became one another's frenzied persecutors" (43).

Above all, gentleness holds an uneasy place in Rousseau's political writing because it is the virtue of a polite and commercial people. Commerce depends on the production of luxuries,

he argues, and luxury is what causes people to compete for advantage. The gentleness of *doux commerce* is therefore not enlightened restraint so much as rivalry by other means. It very nearly is a luxury itself: gentleness becomes a mark of distinction among commercial actors, as well as a screen of respectability for the brutal aspects of economic self-interest. If it displaces physical violence, it also displaces virtue and obligation with a thin facsimile of care.

While Rousseau is nominally supportive of gentleness per se, and can be understood to argue that what goes by that name is generally some version of *amour propre* in disguise, it's hard to fully dissociate gentleness from luxury in the *Discourses* because both are linked by an essential softness and an aversion to the harshness of duty. If gentleness is the fruit of knowledge and commerce, it is for that reason for Rousseau part of the same harvest as vanity, idleness and cowardice. But behind these arguments one can sense the older sense of gentleness as the accomplishment of women. The simplest criticism that flows from Rousseau's austere, muscular republicanism (and the one that sounds to modern ears closest to sheer sexism) is that gentle values turn stoic citizens into an "effeminate" bourgeoisie (*Discourses*, 21). For Rousseau, gentleness remains a feminine virtue more than it becomes a commercial one. This aside, the case against the gentleness of commerce is not unlike the case against the cult of politeness: the behavior, while unobjectionable in the abstract, can easily become a way for its adherents to attack economic and social inferiors while proclaiming their own goodness; gentleness disavows conflict while effecting it by other means.

This critique also has a long legacy, particularly through critics of liberalism from the left. We can recognize a version of Rousseau's argument in Samuel Moyn's recent book, *Humane*. In

essence, Moyn argues that as the United States collectively lost its stomach for organized violence overseas, recent administrations turned to ostensibly clinical, constrained, and even allegedly humane methods of waging war, typified above all by the use of unmanned drones. “The importance of editing war crimes out of your wars should not excuse spurning your one-time commitment to peace,” Moyn writes; “the ideal of a humane war might have turned out to be less an ideal choice than an imperial excess and tragic mistake” (130). At best, the desire for restraint makes an inherently negative act more palatable to its critics. At worst, it becomes a way of infinitely extending wars by making them near-invisible to those in whose name they are waged. In all these cases, gentleness becomes a kind of disavowal, a way to imagine that commerce is not inherently combative; that moral philosophy can replace moral action; that war can be reframed as a form of extraterritorial policing. Rousseau’s argument is not *do not be gentle*, any more than his overall conclusion is *do not be enlightened*. His point is rather that gentleness goes astray wherever it is supposed to mitigate or transcend conflict. Gentleness goes astray, we might say more broadly, where people do not recognize that it is a speculative term, riven with internal tensions and contradictory usages. “The opposite of gentleness is not brutality or violence,” Dufourmantelle says; “it is the counterfeit of gentleness” (*Gentleness* 58).

The claim that knowledge makes men gentle presupposes that knowledge implies control (or, in Adorno’s terms, domination). Commercial gentleness is a form of moderation and self-control practiced by the shopkeeper who bites his tongue and the trader who learns not to offend on his travels. Gentleness quells the passions, and diplomacy allows de-risking. And yet for all the talk of restraint, commercial gentleness propagated power in ways that female gentleness did not. In the final analysis, Rousseau objects most to the elevation of individual self-mastery over civic obligation, which he deems the more crucial political virtue. This

helps to explain why Rousseau sounds so different when discussing the gentleness of women (in *Emile*, “the first and most important quality of a woman is gentleness”), because he rules them out as political agents (370). The gentleness of commerce implies restraint, and as Rousseau correctly infers, restraint is only a virtue when practiced by those who would otherwise use violence. The politics of gentleness turn on the very thing gentleness purports to disclaim: force.

## II

As I come to address literary gentleness more directly, it’s worth noting that the labels I have offered so far (commercial, Christian, feminine, Romantic) are schematic at best, and that ideas and instances of gentleness are rarely so clear cut. In practice, gentleness resists (let’s say it lightly dissuades) the hard negation implicit in every strict definition. Hugh Blair’s widely-anthologized sermon on gentleness is a complex and capacious example: gentleness is a private, moral value and a social good. Blair’s gentleness is distinctly Christian, and derives from Christian duty and reverence, and yet proves highly compatible with secular projects for social harmony and individual self-interest (135). Indeed, passages from the sermon made their way into volumes of self-improvement literature (eg. Knox, 71-3). Blair develops one firm distinction, however: between the gentleness that has “its seat in the heart” and various imitations and superficial performances (121). In moral life, he distinguishes the “true gentleness” that informs active, Christian virtue from the “passive tameness of spirit” that might (as Rousseau worried) amount only to apathy (118). In social terms, he observes a divine gentleness that “corrects whatever is offensive in our manners,” and contrasts it with a “studied smoothness of manners” that amounts to mere simulation (120).

Blair is clear that gentleness is an agent of improvement, yet he resists a purely instrumental account that would reduce gentleness to social utility, an account in which a person's outward "smoothness" is gentleness enough, and any social success is proof of its efficacy. By employing a distinction between inner and outer—true and merely performative—Blair can maintain that gentleness is more spiritual, and more substantial, than its mere outward effects, but in doing so he instead creates a problem of sympathetic knowledge in which the "truth" of someone's gentleness cannot be discerned from their actions alone. Much as Kant offers us no way of knowing whether we act from lawful motivation or merely from our inclination towards a good action, Blair offers no hard distinction between the acts of a truly gentle soul and the smoothest simulation. You could call this a Protestantism of the virtues, but this grasping for category is also symptomatic of the historical transformation of gentleness itself: from essence to conduct, and from "dignity of birth" to "softness of manners." Once people come to believe that inner character shows itself only through outward acts, their own best efforts at gentleness demands scrupulous introspection, while the closest they can get to knowing the gentleness of others is a phenomenology of their touch.

Similarly, the increasing gender ambiguity of gentleness across the long eighteenth century, caught between a traditional vision of female softness and a newer ideal of masculine sophistication and politeness (sometimes termed "manly gentleness" in an effort to resist the old association), frustrates simple appeals. It is true that eighteenth-century aesthetic theory inherits the old gender binaries. Theorists including Edmund Burke and Anna Letitia Barbauld oppose sublimity to "the softer qualities of gentleness, grace, and beauty" (Barbauld, 217-8, cf. Burke, 95). The physiological basis of Burke's aesthetics in particular lead him to emphasize the smoothness of beautiful bodies (which makes them soft to the touch, and therefore inherently, even biologically, gentle, insofar as they are imagined to be

strictly passive) (92). Yet literary examples tend to show the fluidity, rather than the fixity, of these aesthetic categories. Wordsworth's lyric portraiture of men (most obviously the old men, such as the Leech Gatherer or the Old Cumberland Beggar, but also younger men such as Michel Beaupuy or John Wordsworth) does not observe these distinctions. These men are gentle without being feminized; Wordsworth's portraits express tenderness without smoothing out the creases of a grave face or palsied hand. A more dramatic example of gentleness transgressing the gendered sublime / beautiful binary is found in Byron's journal, where he rebukes Schlegel's claim that Dante lacks gentle feeling:

Why, there is gentleness in Dante beyond all gentleness, when he is tender. It is true that, treating of the Christian Hades, or Hell, there is not much scope or site for gentleness—but who *but* Dante could have introduced any “gentleness” at all into *Hell*[?] (Byron, 8:39-40)

It is a mark of Dante's prowess that he can find gentleness in Hell, much like Turner can find the sunbeam in a storm. Far from undermining the sublimity of the *Inferno*, the gentleness in Dante gilds its most terrible subject matter, Byron contends, and raises itself to new heights. It is when it goes against the grain that we sense gentleness beyond all gentleness.

The closest Wordsworth comes to a direct engagement in the social politics of gentleness is in the mock serious usage in the *Lyrical Ballads*. “O gentle reader!” says the speaker of “Simon Lee,” chastising the reader who desires the outrageous stimulation of a tall tale (*LB*, 67). In the apostrophe we can hear both the older sense of genteel, and the more modern sense of kind or mild: Wordsworth is at once gently undermining the presumption of readerly mastery or entitlement to satisfaction and at the same time pleading for patience for a tale with a

distinctly dissatisfying resolution. In the mixing of those meanings, the term gentle performs the violation of high and low for which the volume as a whole would be indicted by reviewers, even as it indexes the shifting usage of the term. In a similar way, the speaker of “The Idiot Boy” cries out twice: “O gentle muses!” half invoking and half rebuking the traditional source of poetic inspiration in a poem whose subject is anything but, thereby registering what Mary Jacobus identified as the work’s dual axes of tradition and experiment (*LB*, 101).

More commonly, however, Wordsworth appears to pull back from these social contexts, instead exemplifying a Romantic tradition focused on the gentleness of the non-human world, a tradition that also includes William Cowper, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Dorothy Wordsworth, and John Clare. Dorothy Wordsworth often uses the term in her reports of the weather. She writes in her journal of “a very warm gentle morning” one day in May 1802 (101); at the beginning of that year she recorded “a sharp frost” followed by “a mild gentle Thaw” over the first days of January (55). In William’s corpus a prominent example is at the beginning of *The Prelude* in its 1805 draft: “Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze” (*Thirteen-Book Prelude*, I.1). Another significant instance appears in the sonnet “It is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free,” composed in that gentle year of 1802 and published in *Poems, in Two Volumes*. Here, “the gentleness of heaven is on the sea,” but the line is subsequently altered so that “the gentleness of heaven broods o’er the Sea,” making gentleness not a quality of the tender world but a force that hangs over it (*P2V*, 151). While the theological arc of the sonnet is clear, at times it seems to bend back towards earth, so that it is not God that broods over the bent world but gentleness itself, in a formulation that could equally imply divine watchfulness or merely a serious sky. Reuven Tsur calls this syntax “a conspicuous device to direct attention *away from* the objects and concepts *to* their felt

qualities” so that gentleness “is perceived as a diffuse but intense quality infusing the whole perceptual field” (136-7). In these cases, Wordsworth’s gentleness is an aspect of his environmentalism, and in its aversion to categorical distinctions, an anticipation of what Heidegger would subsequently call *Gelassenheit*, the quality of letting things be.

Even where Wordsworth identifies a gentleness of attitude or act, gentleness feels less than intentional, more an aura around human activity than a quality fully belonging to it. This is the memorable command that concludes “Nutting”:

move along these shades

In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand

Touch,—for there is a spirit in the woods. (*LB*, 220)

Much like “Simon Lee,” “Nutting” ends with a shift from recited tale to present tense address. In this case, it’s a way to refocus the poem from the chaotic violence of a marauding child to a plea for milder contact—while misdirecting any sense of self-correction by directing these last lines at a maiden, and concluding them with a pretty piece of pantheism. When Geoffrey Hartman speaks of Wordsworth’s “monitory gentleness,” he has in mind the soft but firm pressure of the natural environment on “a mind led from stage to transcendent stage” (*WP*, 53). Its signature is a mood in which the affections gently lead us on from corporeal perception to reflective thought. In other words, “Nutting” is a necessarily retrospective poem, whose gentleness comes too late for the child depicted. It is a gift, so to speak, of the delay; we are dealing with tranquil recollection here, and the kind of narrative logic that plots an unbroken line through a series of breaks and shocks. The name for this logic in Wordsworth is childhood: a capacity to reinvent the world over and over, and yet to



register all these reinventions not as determinate events (although some will stick vividly in the mind), but as inevitable and necessary conditions for living.

One important source for Wordsworth's natural gentleness is James Thomson, whose long poem *The Seasons* begins with an invocation not far from that of *The Prelude*, "Come, gentle Spring, Ethereal Mildness, come" (2), and ends with a hymn to nature. Spring's gift is milder weather; it is gentleness that differentiates the northern from southern winds, and more broadly, divides temperate Spring and Autumn from the intensities of Summer and Winter. The gentleness of the mild seasons that give the poem its structure and its ethos. Gentleness also performs another significant function:

When Autumn's yellow Luster gilds the World,  
And tempts the sickled Swain into the Field,  
Seiz'd by the general Joy, his Heart distends  
With gentle Throws; and, thro' tepid Gleams  
Deep-musing, then he *best* exerts his Song. (199-200)

Thomson places his solitary poet apart from "general Joy," not exiling him from others but drawn into private contemplation. As Ralph Cohen observed, for Thomson "gentle strife with nature or poetic tradition is essential for some kinds of creativity," and the best writing takes place "in this condition of gentle uneasiness" (240). Rather than oppose poet to literary tradition, or society, in agonistic conflict, Thomson advocates a tension that is not so far from harmony, a tension that anticipates the gentle shocks felt by the sensitive Wordsworthian solitary, at once immersed in and floating above the phenomenal world.

To follow this loose genealogy a little further, William Collins's "Ode Occasioned by the Death of Mr. Thomson" positions Thomson as nature's priest, even a "druid." Collins uses this bardic terminology to connect Thomson with "a specifically Celtic (and largely invented) past," Deborah Elise White has argued, making "a specifically British effort" to reconcile an archaic, Scottish poetic imagination with an imagined English modernity in a "mournful labor of reconciliation between poetry and progress" (40-41). If this poem is, as White suggests, an attempt to claim Scottish mysticism for British ends, it also engages in some natural supernaturalism of its own, figuring Thomson as a spirit said to lie in "Vales, and Wild Woods," and anticipating Wordsworth's many lyrics in which poetic subjects die into nature (Collins, 55). Collins elegizes a poet who died out of place (in Richmond and not Roxburghshire), and attempts to gently reconcile his shade to life in the South East of England:

Remembrance oft shall haunt the Shore  
When Thames in Summer-wreaths is drest,  
And oft suspend the dashing Oar  
To bid his gentle Spirit rest! (54)

Collins makes the memory of Thomson the operative force; his spirit makes the English river sacred (thereby synthesizing Scottish and English culture), and that same force that supposedly compels travelers of the Thames not to break the water's surface.

Collins's ode was clearly in Wordsworth's mind when composing his own "Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at evening," which would subsequently become "Remembrance of Collins." Whether consciously and in the moment depicted, or only

retrospectively in the poem, Wordsworth seems to have followed Collins's command to see the Thames and observe the dead, but the body in question is Collins's own. Wordsworth's allusion to the suspended oar in Collins's poem is widely noted, but another echo is Wordsworth's invocation to the river itself: "Glide gently, thus for ever glide, / O Thames!" (*LB* 105). Collins's image of the boat gliding on its own momentum is transposed here into the river itself gently gliding, "That in thy waters may be seen / The image of a poet's heart" (*LB* 105). Wordsworth's allusion, Kurt Fosso has suggested, makes the poet "a thoughtful 'witness' to grief and its acts of memorialization" (50). Here too, allusion both memorializes and transforms: by making the Thames into a figure for the "gentle Spirit," and coming close to invoking the gentle river as itself a kind of poet, Wordsworth uses Thomson's gentleness in a third way, to harmonize not time nor territory but the music of moving water and human speech.

Beyond the particular poems, this series of allusions suggests that alongside the synchronic, socio-historical meanings of gentleness in a given year or century, literary gentleness advances through diachronic arcs, as writers pass along not only their language of gentleness but their gestures and techniques. Each has their own ideological aims, and in this sense their gentleness is part of their efforts to reshape the world, just as it is, Wordsworth suggests elsewhere, for those "schemers more mild" among the more martial French Revolutionaries (*Thirteen-Book Prelude*, X.718). Yet each of these poems is equally an act of homage and desired reciprocity, a work of mild repurposing of the sort Cohen found in Thomson.

### III

Having converged on my interwoven themes of gentleness, water, and elegy, I will spend the last part of this essay at full magnification—a history of minutes and hours, not decades and centuries—considering gentleness in Wordsworth’s Boy of Winander passage. This famous sequence of hooting and listening traces both visual and auditory drama:

sometimes, in that silence, while he hung  
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize  
Has carried far into his heart the voice  
Of mountain torrents, or the visible scene  
Would enter unawares into his mind  
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,  
Its woods, and that uncertain Heaven, receiv’d  
Into the bosom of the steady Lake.  
*(Thirteen Book Prelude, V.406-413)*

Taking the visual register first: the “visible scene” is composed of rocks, woods, and the sky reflected on the lake (whether all these things are reflected, or only the “uncertain heaven,” is not wholly clear). Reflections on water are perilously close to illusion in Wordsworth, from the case of Lyulph’s Tower in the *Guide* to the triple reflection in the “Ode to Lycoris” (See Freer, 194). The reflected image is a projection from elsewhere and a screen that stops us seeing into the depths. In the Winander passage, the visual elements are pulled in two opposing directions by the grammar of the sentence: they pass easily into the mind of the boy, and yet are received (almost hydraulically pulled) much deeper, into the bosom of the lake. This could be one more aspect of the reflective illusion (where the height of the heavens appears as the depths of the lake, not its surface image), but it also hints, at least to a knowing

reader, at something foreboding: a living boy slipping towards Abraham's bosom. As Francis Ferguson has noted, the "bosom of the lake" is a favorite location for Wordsworth in his *Guide to the Lakes*, and asking readers to take nature's perspective often means asking them to occupy "the place at which one cannot stand without, oneself, being absorbed into the steady bosom of the lake" (143). This is a kind of baptism by immersion, or else an invitation to drown. Yet all its force is suspended: "the visible scene / would enter unawares." This is one example of what I've described previously as unremembered experience: the wide range of unnoticed impressions, neither consciously appreciated nor traumatically repressed, that come to consciousness (and to writing) in Wordsworth only after the fact (Freer, 35-66). If you think that the whole visual scene is a reflection, then it could be said to enter "unawares" because the boy is looking at the lake and unknowingly seeing everything around him. But even if you suppose only the sky to appear in the lake, what Wordsworth describes is a scene so gentle that it does not attract conscious notice but embeds itself silently in the mind of a figure so actively immersed in the world that he does not come to the knowledge of his own senses.

Turning to the auditory register, similar sensory evasions occur: "the voice / Of mountain torrents" bypasses the ear entirely, carried into the heart by "a gentle shock of mild surprize." The voice is carried into the heart *by the shock*, seemingly not the cause of the shock but its consequence. The expected stimulus-response arc is subverted; the effect precedes its anticipated cause. The line's form only underscores this, deferring the object of the sentence by syntax and lineation, but also by metaphor (presenting the mountain torrent's sound as a voice delays our registration of the sound as that of water). To be gently shocked is to register the environment all too deeply, not as sense impressions of some external thing but as an

alteration within oneself, all heart and guts. When it comes, it is as if we always already knew it was coming, as if gentleness is Wordsworth's name for being towards death.

Given that readers receive their own gentle shock shortly, when Wordsworth announces that this is the story of a boy long buried, you could say that surprise comes twice. Readers are not wrong to feel surprised; as Geoffrey Hartman put it, "all the signs pointed to life" ("Reading," 90). Yet surprises do happen: open water can look deceptively calm while concealing strong currents, and people can look deceptively calm when drowning. Since Paul de Man's essay "Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric," many readers have felt there to be something implicitly deceptive about lyric. But unlike the "defensive motion" De Man describes, through which lyric conceals its rhetorical qualities (261), the gentleness of the Winander passage is an explicit accomplishment of technique, clearly visible in the deft use of lineation and tense, verbal and aural foreshadowing, and moments of retrospective noticing, in which things softly and almost silently fall into place. Wordsworth uses lyric means to increase narrative surprise (see Miller), just as he uses talk of gentleness to soften, but not deaden, the passage's double shock. While clearly different from the practiced gentleness of the merchant, Wordsworth's technique can look less like a kindness than a compositional strategy. At the same time, it is the very idea of strategic, calculated gentleness that Wordsworth's writing works to call into question.

There is risk in Wordsworth's gentleness, but not the risk of the existential leap envisaged by Dufourmantelle. To let ourselves be gently shocked is to entertain the Wordsworthian bargain in which reflections are taken for wonders, rather than written off as tricks of the light or mind. To entertain such gentleness is to favor aesthetic phenomenology over defensive epistemology; to risk the idea that in the right circumstances gentleness can be a way of

encountering the world anew without revealing anything previously unknown.

Dufourmantelle at her most Wordsworthian encourages us to “experience the world gently, as if our senses were raw” (*Gentleness* 93). Dufourmantelle’s “as if” speaks not to a kind of acting but to the technical feat of holding in abatement the smooth routines of mental defense that render the world safely predictable. I’ve said that Wordsworth’s gentleness is not a quality of character but an accomplishment of technique. We might also understand Wordsworth’s wider preference for understatement, suggestion, and rhetorical restraint as gentleness of style. But these qualities need to be understood not simply as a poet’s tactics but as part of a broader social and conceptual history.

Read against the enlightened gentleness exemplified by Montesquieu, Wordsworth’s belongs to a counter-tradition in the history of gentleness. By stressing forms of gentleness that one can neither willfully employ nor consciously grasp, he challenges the ethical vocabulary and voluntarist logic of gentleness understood as polite comportment and self-control. Quite unlike the cultured gentleness of the skilled traveler, it’s the gentleness long associated with sleep, identified consistently by Wordsworth and Coleridge, Keats after them, and Charlotte Smith before them, each one echoing the apostrophe of Shakespeare’s Henry IV in his nightgown: “O sleep, O gentle sleep, / Nature’s soft nurse.”<sup>5</sup> Such gentleness is never subject to conscious control. This helps to explain why it is not the women in Wordsworth who are the most gentle, as readers of the period might expect, but the old men. They are to the least extent creatures of will, they least enjoy control over their own bodies. The Old Cumberland Beggar distributes crumbs to the birds because he cannot prevent them falling from his hands. For the same reason, Wordsworth entirely bypasses the problem of authenticity posed by Blair: if gentleness is not an act of will, the problem of whether or not an act corresponds to some internal state or value simply falls away. Blair’s defense of gentleness is implicitly a

soft critique of the pure instrumentality of gentleness in Montesquieu; Wordsworth's does not raise questions of misuse but rules out utility as such.

In an essay on Leo Bersani, Jacques Khalip suggests that the arresting power of Bersani's sentences operate "as if immobilization occurred for the sake of an immobility or undecipherable stillness that made no concessions to revelatory truth" (61). Bersani's technique interrupts easy skimming and routine thought, not in order to railroad readers towards some other conclusion, but rather to hold up (in all senses) their expectation of grasping the truth like a possession. Thought becomes heterogeneous and unfamiliar. "To think noncoercively means thinking, however impossibly, from places where we are not," Khalip writes (63). This technique of suspension presents a way to think about that degree zero of gentleness we encounter in the Boy of Winander episode. Gentleness does nothing for the boy. It does not reveal the world to him, nor make him better. Nor does it even teach us, at his expense, how to be gentle. At most, Wordsworth's gentleness might be said to have made something thinkable by suspending the logic of wishfulness and will by which we habitually arrange the world. Here we see the distinction I've been developing most starkly: polite and commercial gentleness works by concealing its own reliance on technique: it becomes useless the instant it can be reduced to a dealmaking strategy and must be polished assiduously until it appears an ineliminable aspect of character. Conversely, Wordsworth's gentleness is openly dependent on technique, working through formal means to suspend the capacities that it might otherwise claim, so that at its most seemingly efficacious moments we witness gentleness almost cancelling itself out.

The retrospective action of Wordsworth's gentleness comes through most clearly in elegy: in poems designated as elegies, such as that for Collins, but also in the elegiac mode as it



operates in the Boy of Winander passage, and everywhere that form suspends the presumptions of agency, and where the notional distinction between human, animal, and inorganic thing dissolves. For Dufourmantelle, gentleness is “a state of grace that doesn’t last” (*Gentleness* 80). But elegiac gentleness does not save its recipients so much as bless their cold bodies. The recurrent thematic connection between gentleness, elegy, and bodies of water seems all but unavoidable if one knows that Dufourmantelle died in 2017 trying to rescue children from the sea. Romanticists will think also of the critic Thomas Weiskel, who died in similar circumstances, and of those lines of Wordsworth’s, composed after his brother John drowned in 1805: “I could have fancied that the mighty Deep / Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things” (*P2V*, 266).<sup>6</sup> Changes of heart rarely happen instantly nor smoothly, but this latter poem (“Elegiac Stanzas”) is one key moment in Wordsworth’s shift towards a more representational account of gentleness: the sea looked gentle and yet drowned his brother, hence the gentleness was a misapprehension or falsehood. In contrast to earlier efforts—and for understandable reasons—this poem is not able to entertain the thought of elegiac gentleness, with all its risk and indifference to life. That species of softness becomes a kind of youthful error to be mourned along with the poem’s nominal recipient. But the earlier form is crucial to the history of gentleness. In a world shaped by the interlocking operations of commerce and war, whose machinery is greased at key points by transactional, mercantile smoothness, Wordsworth’s non-willful conception represents a quiet but definite critique: of tough-minded realism, certainly, but equally of the instrumental gentleness that emerges in the easy speech of the merchant and the biopolitical kindnesses of state poor relief, and that culminates in the actuarial tables of modern risk analysis and the calculated restraint of the court-supervised payment plan. At a time when gentleness was said to accomplish so much, the Romantic counter-tradition I’ve been exploring constitutes a refusal of that logic of accomplishment.

## IV

Having traversed this brief survey, it's possible to designate gentleness as a limit or edge concept. Although it uncontroversially names certain qualities (softness, restraint, tenderness), one cannot employ the term without also presupposing the relations between character, will, and action. Gentleness must attach itself to some force, and coexist with that force, be it force of will, force of economic incentive, or force of nature. Far from being exemplary behavior at the center of a discourse of good conduct however, it conditions understanding of conduct as such. It is an open question whether gentleness is invariably an ethical concept: it is very clearly normative in the cases of women's conduct books, or instructions for the aspiring gentlemen. In the Romantic tradition I have been sketching it can appear not at all normative, and yet it makes a different conception of ethical life thinkable by bringing into view the limits of instrumental and even willful conduct. In the lightest of Romantic examples, gentleness exists at the phenomenological limit as a kind of elegy for action: for the touch that only brushes over you, the look that passes without notice.

I have already hinted at my final point in this brief exploration: Romantic gentleness can be understood as a kind of gift. Where gentleness is not an inherited disposition or a learned behavior but an encounter with otherness, the other who calls forth gentleness from me might be said to give the gift of gentleness. Put more abstractly, what the Romantic tradition suggests is that there are aesthetic forms, ways of being, and environmental conditions that make an elegiac, non-instrumental, and ultimately impersonal gentleness possible, a gentleness that might even amount to "a certain ignorance ... of the other's soliciting" (Bersani and Dutoit, 40). These forms and modes are legible as counterexample and as

critique, but they might also be said to give us the gift of our own momentary immobility: when we hang almost suspended between apprehension and action, as in the lines “with gentle hand / Touch,” or when we hold back from responding for a moment longer than anticipated.

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<sup>1</sup> “Rereading Wordsworth, Revisiting Winander,” MLA 2023. I’m grateful to Nancy Yousef and Alexander Regier for organizing the panel, to the respondent Branka Arsic, and to those in attendance for their questions and comments.

<sup>2</sup> Among the dedications to the first collected edition of *The Spectator* we find the observation that gentleness is the first step towards greatness (5:179).

<sup>3</sup> Terjanian for her part traces this connection back to Montaigne’s reference to “the ‘sweet and gentle exchange’ that comes of interaction with ‘beautiful and honest women’” (12).

<sup>4</sup> According to William Alexander, for instance, connection with women inclines men to reason and obedience, and “thus the stern severity of the male is softened and rendered agreeable by the gentleness peculiar to the female nature,” because, he later asserts, “though men govern by law, women may almost always govern by the arts of gentleness and soft persuasion” (1:489, 505). In *Decline and Fall* Gibbon describes one such application of “female gentleness” by the wife of Maximinus Thrax (1:279).

<sup>5</sup> “O gentle Sleep! do they belong to thee, / These twinklings of oblivion?” (*P2V*, 140); “Oh sleep! it is a gentle thing, Beloved from pole to pole!” (Coleridge, *LB*, 779) “O gentle sleep!” (Smith, 20); “O sleep, O gentle sleep, / Nature’s soft nurse, how have I frightened thee” (Shakespeare, 190).

<sup>6</sup> See the note from the introduction to Weiskel’s difficult and compelling posthumous work, *The Romantic Sublime*: “Professor Thomas Francis Weiskel of the Department of English at Yale drowned with his daughter Shelburne Heidi while the two were skating and sleighing on the lake below their house in Leverett, Massachusetts, on December 1, 1974” (xi).