THE SENSATION OF LANGUAGE:
JANE AUSTEN, WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, MARY SHELLEY

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A familiar critical narrative of Romanticism describes its preoccupation with the inadequacy of language to signify the elusive experience of the mind and spirit. In *The Sensation of Language*, I shift focus from the word as a representation of the immaterial world to its material impact, on the reader or writer, as physical sensation. My chapters show how Jane Austen, William Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley adapted materialist ideas of the origin of language and revised sentimental models of feeling in response to the problems of linguistic mediation. I argue that these writers addressed concerns about the authenticity of language and emotions by conceiving words as agents of immediate physical sensations, and thus sources of newly visceral sympathy.

I begin with an introduction on eighteenth-century philosophy of language and sentimental literature and theory. While John Locke claimed that words derive from sensory experience, the “cult of sentiment” placed sensation and emotion at the center of moral judgment and the reading experience. But for later philosophers like Lord Monboddo, sense perception was degraded by embodiment, and, by the late eighteenth century, sentimental literature was stigmatized as clichéd, emotionally inauthentic, and feminine. My subsequent chapters examine each writer’s attempt to develop a “genuine” language of sensation. Austen replaces the compulsory tears and feminine fragility of the sentimental novel with prose that imitates rapid motion in her juvenilia, or that immerses us in Anne Elliot’s stoic sensory experience in *Persuasion*. Across *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Prelude*, Wordsworth conceives his poetry as transmitting sensations such as rhythm, sound, and motion. In this way, he attempts to correct the taste for a poetic diction estranged from authentic emotion, and to engage his readers’ sympathy for the rural poor. In the teeth of Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy that prioritizes the imagination over physical experience, Shelley’s fiction from *Frankenstein* to “Transformation”
reforms sympathy as sensations shared through language. As I chart this movement away from conventionalized sentiments and towards simple sensations, my project offers a fresh materialist view of Romantic-era language and its critique of sentimentalism.
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Introduction: Language as Sensation

The focal word has acquired a feeling of reality—it heats and burns, makes itself be felt. If we do not grasp it, it seems to grasp us, as with a hand of flesh and blood, and completely counterfeits an immediate presence, an intuitive knowledge.
—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from MS. Egerton 2801, f. 145

The most famous of Romantic friends, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, had the habit of walking while composing poetry. Their gaits set the pace for their recitations. As William Hazlitt observed, Coleridge’s chant was more “varied” to match his fondness for “uneven ground,” while Wordsworth’s was “more equable, sustained, and internal” in keeping with his preference for the “straight gravel-walk.” The poets’ sensations of motion become the rhythms of their language, which then become the pace and sound of the listener’s sensations. Wordsworth describes the feeling of this ambulatory composition in the 1805 version of The Prelude: “Along my veins I kindled with the stir, / The fermentation and the vernal heat / Of poesy” as “I sauntered, like a river murmuring,” composing. Poetic language is a sensation felt along the young Wordsworth’s veins, inspiring poems in time with the sauntering rhythm of his walk. His repetition of sounds, in sync with his meter, reflects this “stir” of language. “Stir,” “fermentation,” and “vernal heat” repeat their “ir” or “er” sounds on metrically stressed syllables, while the “saunter[ing]” and “murmuring” of the following line repeat these sounds on mostly unstressed syllables. It is the internal motion of language that drives Wordsworth’s external motion, its muted echo. “When, to the attractions of the busy World” (begun 1800; publ. 1

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1815) demonstrates that poetry could also transmit this motion to the reader. As Wordsworth’s brother repeats the poet’s verses across the deck of a ship, their rhythm determines his pace. Hazlitt was not alone in spotting a connection between the rhythm of Wordsworth’s body and his poetry: Wordsworth self-consciously draws attention to language that comes from, imitates, transmits, and even is physical sensation.

This presentation of language as sensation extends across genders and genres in the Romantic era. Jane Austen shows that Elizabeth Bennet’s pacing as she eagerly reads Mr. Darcy’s letter matches the rapid succession of sentences on his pages in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). A word jumble game played with children’s alphabet blocks in *Emma* (1815) raises a blush that, in turn, gives the decoded word, “blunder,” new meaning. Mary Shelley refers to *Frankenstein* (1818/1831) as “my hideous progeny” in her 1831 introduction to the novel, equating her writing with the pained body of Victor Frankenstein’s creature. The narrator of her short story “Transformation” (1830) describes how a word “stung” him “like a serpent.” As Coleridge observes in the epigraph to this chapter, words can have such a powerful effect on our bodies that we feel their grasp on our skin.

I argue that the idea that words could impart physical sensations—of motion, rhythm, sound, pleasure, or pain—was a significant preoccupation of some of the most influential Romantic-era writers. This interest has fallen out of notice, in favor of a focus on the mind, or on the failures of language as a medium for experience. For critics like M.H. Abrams, Ernest Lee Tuveson, and Harold Bloom, Romantic-era poets find redemption from their post-Enlightenment dependence on the material world through their reflections on the actions of the mind or

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imagination. For post-structuralist critics following in the tradition of Paul de Man, these poets are fascinated with the inevitable failure of arbitrary language to refer to a world beyond signs. De Man argues, for example, that the “Romantic image” fails to be literal like a material object, and that the fact that words are arbitrary signs for things, rather than natural or divine expressions of the essence of things, makes them incapable of communicating the mind without distortion or “defacement.” These critical accounts respectively attend to moments that emphasize the mind and the distance between words and things at the expense of ignoring moments that reflect on the physical impact of language.

In so doing, these traditions echo the biases of Romantic-era language theory that elevated the actions of the mind over sensation. In the late eighteenth century, Olivia Smith reminds us, distinctions between the “refined language” of the mind and the “vulgar language” of “the sensations and the passions” reinforced class divisions, elevating one over the other on the basis of its supposed moral, emotional, and intellectual superiority. To ignore the insistence with which many writers claim that words are agents of sensation is to repeat this class-inflected privileging of mind over body. Another tradition of criticism, including Smith, highlights the physicality of Romantic-era presentations of language. Christopher Ricks examines John Keats’s

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interest in the “ways in which language . . . can embarrass,” particularly through the embodied phenomenon of the embarrassed blush.10 Jerome McGann describes how Lord Byron evades the “mediations of language” with a “verbal immediacy” that is an immersive “environment for sensations and feelings,” and considers the role of the “sensible and material” aspects of words for poets including Wordsworth.11 Turning to Romantic-era neuroscience, Alan Richardson illuminates the importance of an “embodied mind” for Austen, John Keats, and Wordsworth, underscoring the latter’s interest in an “embodied approach to language.”12 Where Richardson works outward from an embodied source of words, William Keach considers statements that words themselves “are things”—from Coleridge’s claims for the “material efficacy” of language to Byron’s vision of his texts as physical print commodities—and the ways in which they do and do not conflict with John Locke’s theory of arbitrary signs.13 Extending these explorations of words as embodied, active, or material things, I want to bring a fresh focus to language as a source and agent of sensation.

In this chapter, I trace the emergence of presentations of language as sensation from eighteenth-century philosophy of language and sentimental fiction, poetry, and theory to the Romantic era. As Garrett Stewart observes, philosophy “can help find in literary writing a tacit

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philosophy of language.” It is in this spirit that I turn from the philosophy I discuss here to the implicit philosophies of language in the writing of Jane Austen, William Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley. Materialist philosophy in the tradition of John Locke at once posed a central problem of language and suggested a solution: words represent an individual’s ideas of things, which makes them subject to miscommunication, but they also originate in and clearly describe sensory experience. This materialism was embedded in a politics of embodiment; theorists of language often associated animal, primitive, foreign, or lower class bodies with sensation and passionate expression. Meanwhile, sentimentalist philosophers made feeling central to moral judgment, and sentimental literature popularized a reading experience based on the emotional effects of language. But the former often equated the culture of aesthetic taste with “natural” moral feeling, and, by the late eighteenth century, critics stigmatized the latter as clichéd, emotionally inauthentic, feminine, and dangerously similar to pornography. As Lockean materialism and sentimentalism gave rise to anxieties about the authenticity of words, emotions, and sympathy, the Romantic-era writers I discuss turned to simple sensations, rather than conventionalized sentiments or ideas. I argue that Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley revised the earlier models in order to simultaneously practice and theorize a “genuine” language of sensory immediacy that extends sympathy to the lower class, feminine, or inhuman persons associated with embodied existence.

Language from the Senses

When Hans Aarsleff described the philosophy of Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, itself heavily indebted to Locke, as an important influence on Wordsworth he challenged prevailing

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conceptions of this philosophy as “irrelevant or opposed to [Wordsworth’s] thought.” Critics who have followed Aarsleff continue to grapple with an assumed opposition between “Romanticism” and Enlightenment materialist philosophy. As Aarsleff argues, Locke’s claim that individuals hold different ideas for the same words “virtually preclude[d] all hope of perfect communication,” creating a “problem” that required “rectification,” or the social correction of our understanding of words through the “context of shared experience,” across the century from Condillac to Wordsworth. I sketch a connection between Romantic-era formulations of language as sensation, a form of rectification, and the Lockean idea that the closer words are to describing simple sensory experiences, the more likely we are to understand and agree on their signification. For later philosophers from David Hartley to Johann Gottfried Herder, as for the writers who occupy this study, Locke’s connection between sensory experience and verbal meaning opened up the possibility that words might achieve this clarity not by signifying (as in Locke) but by causing sensory or emotional experiences themselves. Against the grain of an anti-materialist “Romanticism,” I argue that the Lockean notion that words derive from sense perception provides a philosophical foundation for Romantic-era concepts of language as sensory experience.


16 For example, Keach reminds us that William Blake’s and Coleridge’s antipathies to Locke “are so powerfully embedded in received notions about Romanticism” that it may “shock” readers that Wordsworth and Percy Shelley “shared little if any” of their distaste. Keach, “Romanticism and Language,” in The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism, 2nd ed., ed. Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 105, doi: 10.1017/CCOL9780521199247.005. See also Richard Marggraf Turley, who argues for Condillac’s influence on John Keats: “Condillac, heavily influenced by Locke’s materialism, is usually thought of as being opposed to Romantic thinking in every way” (124).

17 Aarsleff, From Locke to Saussure, 27, 375-76.
Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) sets out a theory of linguistic arbitrariness that radiates through eighteenth-century philosophy of language from Condillac to Herder, and, at the end of the century, John Horne Tooke. This theory marks out two boundaries of critical importance for this study: those between words and physical things, and between one person’s language and another’s. Locke argues that the separation between words and things is twofold: words represent, “by a perfectly arbitrary Imposition,” an individual person’s ideas, which, in turn, represent things. With only an arbitrary, artificial connection to reality, the socially shared word is subject to different individual usage; for Locke, the central problem of language is to ensure that our words more closely correspond to shared ideas, and ideas to things. Yet Locke’s language is not wholly estranged from the material world: we get our first ideas from sensation (I.ii.15), and we derive abstract words “from sensible Ideas” (III.i.5). This origin of language facilitates a shared understanding of words, ideas, and things. Whereas words for abstract or “complex” ideas, such as “moral Words,” have seldom, in two different Men, the same precise signification (III.ix.6.1), words that represent “simple Ideas” based on sensory experience are “least of all liable to be . . . mistaken” (II.xxxii.9). So, he continues, “it is seldom, that any one . . . applies the Name Red, to the Idea of Green; or the Name Sweet, to the Idea Bitter” (II.xxxii.9). We can verify that the ideas behind these words are the same by comparing their references to our senses with other people’s references to their own senses. Though the idea of “redness” mediates the connection between the word “red” and the

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18 On John Horne Tooke’s views on and uses of Locke, including his perception of their political alignment, see Olivia Smith, 132-33, 137.
19 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (1690), 5th ed. (London, 1706), II.xxxii.8; III.ii.4, 5, 8, Eighteenth Century Collections Online. All future references will refer to this database as ECCO. Italics removed in all quotations from Locke’s *Essay*.
20 See also Locke, II.xxviii.19-20.
sensation of seeing the color, in Locke’s theory the closer words are to sensations, the more likely we are to share an understanding of them.21

This connection would become a mark of authentic language not only for Locke but also for Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley. Austen begins her career by contrasting the clichéd performance of emotion in sentimental novels with language that describes, and often imitates, simple sensations of motion or appetite. When, in “Love and Freindship” (comp. 1790), Laura reports that, “whilst the rest of the party were devouring Green tea and buttered toast, we feasted ourselves in a more refined and Sentimental Manner by a confidential Conversation,” sense distinguishes itself from nonsense on the basis of sensation.22 Where Austen contrasts empty sentiment with the satisfaction of “devouring” appetite, Wordsworth’s preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800/1802) opposes the artifice of poetic diction with “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation.”23 In Shelley’s The Last Man (1826) and “Transformation,” it is the physical pain of words with the force of animal bites that stands against deceptive linguistic performances. For Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley, sensory experience offered a guarantee of authenticity that redeemed language from the artifice of literary convention.

As in Shelley’s words that bite, these writers expanded beyond the representation of sensory experience to consider language itself as a source of this experience; they did so in ways that echo the associationism of David Hartley and Edmund Burke or the onomatopoeic theory of

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21 Condillac picks up and amplifies this point, extending it to ideas of reflection by suggesting that “new names” for these ideas will assume meaning by “placing other people in the same circumstances in which we found ourselves, thus making them entertain the same reflections we made.” Condillac, Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge (1746; English trans. Thomas Nugent, 1756), trans. and ed. Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 200, ProQuest Ebook Central. For Condillac, then, there is an even broader range of language for which we can ensure shared meanings.


Herder. Locke was wary of how we come to associate words with ideas until “the Names heard, almost as readily excite certain Ideas, as if the Objects themselves . . . did actually affect the Senses” (III.ii.6). For him association is tainted with the illusion of a correspondence between word, idea, and thing. In his *Observations on Man* (1749), however, Hartley expands this associationism into a larger theory. He describes in detail how sights, “Tastes, Smells, Warmth or Coldness . . . leave Traces, or Ideas, which will be associated with the Names of the Objects” until ideas of these sensations “rise up” with the sound of the word (272). Such associations are not limited to speech; reading “has the same Effect . . . and also extends the Ideas and Significations of Words . . . by new Associations,” particularly with “other Words” (269). While spoken language is the primary means of building synesthetic associations between the sounds of words and other sensations, these associations, at the very least, carry through to writing. Wordsworth, in particular, saw the potential for poetic repetitions to form such associations. As if elaborating on Hartley’s claim that “Coldness” can “leave Traces” on words, Wordsworth’s “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” (1798) associates the feeling of coldness with long “o” of “cold” until (in Hartley’s words) it “rise[s] up” with the vowel sound in lines that describe this feeling, such as “Oh! then how her old bones would shake!” (42).

Our associations with words raise emotions as well as physical sensations, and Burke’s affective theory of language offered another solution to the Lockean problem that words might not match ideas, one which Wordsworth and Austen embraced and Shelley problematized.25

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24 David Hartley addresses the “Confusion” that “arises from the different Associations transferred upon the same Words,” but to him “it seems possible, and even not very difficult, for two truly candid and intelligent Persons to understand each other upon any Subject.” Hartley, *Observations on Man* (London, 1749), 1: 283, Google Books.

25 As Stephen K. Land notes, the popularity of Burke’s version of the sublime in the late eighteenth century fanned the influence of his linguistic philosophy on the period’s writers, including Wordsworth and Coleridge. Land, *The Concept of Form in Eighteenth-Century Semantic Theory* (London: Longman,
Burke draws a direct line from words to emotions, bypassing images or ideas. He takes up the example of words like “honour” that are too abstract to conjure up a “representation,” or image, and, he adds, “hardly cause . . . any real ideas”; he then extends this to include more concrete words like “horse” on the basis that we generally do not call their images to mind. The “power” that words have over the passions comes instead from our emotional associations with them (150-52). Words are the best “tokens” of the passions and therefore their effects result from our “sympathy” for others rather than from “imitation,” from generating the “effect of realities” rather than from images (157-58). This extends earlier eighteenth-century moral sense theory (which I explore later in this chapter), in which morality is described as a “sense” rather than a judgment, to a non-representational theory of language. For Burke, what defines words comes from our emotional reactions to them; language itself becomes a source of moral feeling and a means of social sympathy. In his theory, words have an immediate emotional force akin to that of real experience—affective associations are one way, in Coleridge’s phrase, words achieve a “feeling of reality.”

Wordsworth transforms this theory into one of the emotional efficacy of poetic repetition. In his note to “The Thorn” (1800), repeated words are not just “symbols” of passions, but “things, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion.” Together with his meter, it is a process of affective association by verbal repetition that “convey[s] passion to Readers who are not accustomed to sympathize” with persons like the narrator of “The Thorn.” In Austen’s Persuasion (1817), it is the affective associations of words, such as those concerning

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1974), 40. For more on Burke, as well as Dryden, in the context of Lockean representationalism, see Land, 30-50.
her beloved Captain Wentworth, that draw Anne Elliot’s interest. For Shelley’s Frankenstein, however, these associations present a central predicament of being human: “we are moved by every wind that blows, and a chance word or scene that that word may convey to us” (71). Like Burke, these writers see words as active agents on the emotions with the power to move us to sympathy or to Shelleyan “melancholy” (70).

Whereas the sensory and affective force of association requires repetition, Herder theorizes a pre-existing, onomatopoeic correspondence between words and sensations. Though Herder argues that language is not arbitrary, as Tristram Wolff remarks, he does not “collapse linguistic units with referents” or, in other words, he does not collapse Locke’s distinction between word, idea, and thing. Herder describes a motivated process of forming words based on onomatopoeia, in which we find the “distinguishing mark,” such as the bleating of a sheep, that characterizes an object. Within this theory, Herder seeks to explain why words sound. Hearing is, in his evocative phrase, “the sense of language” (144), and language itself becomes a union of the senses through sound. In Herder’s formulation, words both come from sensory experience and express it in a kind of aural synesthesia:

[The sense of feeling’s] epithets—such as hard, rough, soft, woolly, velvety, hairy, rigid, smooth, prickly, etc., which all concern only surfaces and do not penetrate—all sound as though one could feel them. The soul, caught in the throng of such converging sensations and needing to create a word, reached out and grasped possibly the word of an adjacent sense whose feeling flowed together with the first. (141)

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What Herder describes as “converging sensations” within the soul amounts to a synesthetic translation of the sense of touching something “rough” into its expression through rough speech sounds, which then recall the feeling of the rough touch. Both touch and sound have texture, and this shared quality allows words, as sounds, to represent and impart rough sensations. This amounts to a new kind of onomatopoeia that, beyond simply representing inarticulate sounds, represents sensations from other senses. Language itself becomes a kind of sense by synesthetically connecting the reader or hearer with the sensations to which words correspond.

Though it is unclear whether or not any of the authors in my study read Herder’s essay, Wordsworth and Austen share, and further develop, his synesthetic approach to onomatopoeia. As in the example that begins this chapter, Wordsworth evokes the bodily motion of walking in the rhythmic emphasis of meter. He also uses onomatopoeia for bodily sounds and textures, as in the “burring” of Johnny Foy’s lips and the rustling of fricatives that describe Betty Foy’s “bustling” in “The Idiot Boy” (1798). In *Persuasion*, Austen highlights the correspondence between verbal and physical weight through Mrs. Musgrove’s metrically stressed “large fat sighings.”

Where Herder shows how sonic texture and motion evoke feelings such as tactile sensation, visual movement, and taste (141-42), Wordsworth and Austen present speech sounds as expressions of bodily motion and weight. Taken together, Locke, Hartley, Burke, and Herder offered Romantic-era writers models of language that come from sensory experience and incite both physical sensations and emotions.

**An Embodied Politics of Language**

To present language as a source of sensory experience was a political move in itself. Within philosophy, language was frequently categorized on a scale from the relatively disembodied

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“civilized” speaker to the overtly embodied and linguistically imprecise or inarticulate “savage,” animal, lower class, or racial other. Whereas Lord Monboddo’s push against Lockean materialism reinforced class boundaries by sorting the language of the mind from that of “vulgar” sensation, Condillac and Thomas Sheridan’s recognition of a “natural language” of animal cries blurred the line between the human and the animal. Accounts from Sheridan, Rousseau, and Herder that validated a language of sensation did so at the expense of classifying more “sensual” speakers along racial lines, and, relatedly, speaking from writing. In their different ways, Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley challenged or expanded on these accounts, elevating embodiment, and the persons associated with it, as part of modern literature.

Monboddo’s *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (1773-1792) provides a potent reminder of the political stakes of embracing sensory experience as an origin for or product of language. To Monboddo, Locke’s sensory ideas confuse “perceptions of sense” or physical sensations, with ideas, which are constructed solely by the mind “genuine and pure, without any mixture of body.”[^31] He contrasts “merely passive” sensory perception that is “debased by its necessary connection with flesh and blood” with the “active and self-moving” mind (46). It is only the “vulgar” whose ideas remain confined to those of sensation into adulthood (96).

Monboddo’s prudishness, Olivia Smith details, was part of a larger late eighteenth-century movement including the grammarians Bishop Lowth and James Harris, as well as Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary*, that “justified class division” by connecting “the vulgar language” with being “morally and intellectually unfit.”[^32] The contrasts Monboddo makes between active and passive, mind and body, the “self-moving” and the “connect[ed]” also carry social implications beyond those of class. Women, like the lower classes, were associated with overt embodiment, as

[^31]: James Burnet, Lord Monboddo, *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (1773-1792), 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1774), 1: 47, 54, ECCO.
[^32]: Olivia Smith, 2-29.
well as obedient (often sexual) passivity. The “self-moving” mind, in turn, values isolated independence over the dependencies of physical and social connection. Despite, or perhaps because of, his implicit exclusionary ideal of masculine, upper-class independence, Monboddo’s Platonic notion of an “active” mind opposed to mere bodily dross prefigures a major critical tradition of “Romanticism” as a literary movement of the mind, as well as Austen criticism in which the novelist is all cool, disembodied style.

Yet Wordsworth strives to make the “flesh and blood” speech and sensations of “Low and rustic life” (Preface, 1800: 747, 743; 1802: 747, note 182-89) the materials of his modern poetry. In its focus on the “vulgar” lower classes, Lyrical Ballads aims to “refute false means of social differentiation” by changing the “relation of language” not only to “thought,” but also, and primarily, to embodiment. In a similar move, Austen chooses for a heroine the vigorously embodied Elizabeth Bennet, who shocks Mr. Bingley’s sisters by walking to Netherfield over three miles “in such dirty weather”; the length of the walk and the dirt on her clothes are overt and even vulgar evidence of embodiment. Shelley’s most famous creation is her deformed creature, whose excessive body, originating from scraps of humans and animals, defies the security of categorization. The narrator of The Last Man, Lionel Verney, composes his narrative while becoming, at his own appraisal, a “half-naked savage”: Shelley maintains that our basic embodied state underlies even the act of writing. Monboddo’s disapproval throws the

33 On how Wordsworth and Coleridge “appropriate a given theory’s vocabulary”—key words from Monboddo, James Harris, and Samuel Johnson such as “‘Permanent’, the ‘language of flesh and blood’, ‘universal’, ‘artificial’ and ‘arbitrary’”—and then change the meaning, see Oliva Smith, 217.
34 Olivia Smith, 219.
democratizing potential of Locke’s theory into relief, and reminds us of the connotations of “vulgarity” that Romantic-era investments in language as sensation, which champion the connection to “flesh and blood” he dismisses, risked. Though Austen’s gentry are far removed from Wordsworth’s impoverished cottager Goody Blake, and still farther removed from Shelley’s deformed creature, these writers’ shared investments in the body and its sensations are, in varied degrees, moves towards social equity.

As Shelley’s example gestures towards, beyond class or gender, degree of embodiment, and of embodied versus articulate language, marked the boundary between the human and the animal, “civilized” and “savage.” At the time it was common to describe early human cultures as more like animals than “civilized” people, and the word “animal,” similarly, was used to refer to the early stages of individual human life. Thus Mary Wollstonecraft refers to the fetal Fanny Imlay as a “lively animal,” and Percy Shelley observes that “the savage is to ages what the child is to years.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau asks how “Savage man” could have made “progress” towards knowledge and language “scattered in the Woods among the Animals,” though in possession of “the most energetic and the only language he needed before it was necessary to persuade assembled men”—“the cry of Nature.” Philosophers of language, including Rousseau, drew a clear line between the human and the animal at the use of articulate signs, but the idea of


“the cry of Nature” as an inarticulate language that we share with animals blurred this line. While the elocutionist Thomas Sheridan upholds this distinction—“the faculties of speech” distinguish man from “brutes”—he elevates the “inarticulate sounds” of natural cries to the status of a “language of the passions” above “mere words” in its “power in exciting sympathy.”

Though it maintains the distinction between articulate humanity and the rest of the animal kingdom, this prioritization of affect over the articulation of ideas gives animals access to this more valued and sympathetic language at the same time that it raises the status of embodied expression in speech.

The passionate embodied expression that characterized the “natural language” of animals and early human cultures translated into two further divisions, between different races and between speaking and writing. In his Essay on the Origin of Languages (1781), Rousseau argues that the languages of southern climates, “where nature is bountiful,” originated in passion, while northern ones formed from need (survival being more difficult in a cold climate). As a result, the former aimed to “make someone feel something” and were “sonorous, accented,” and “frequently obscure because of their power”; the latter concentrated on making the listener “understand” and were “dull, harsh,” and clear (47-49). Through such myths, philosophers from cold climes describe their own languages as comparatively dull, passionless, and lifeless if conceptually precise, while they entertain fantasies of luxuriantly embodied others whose speech

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39 Richardson offers a similar assessment of how, as in philosophies of language such as Herder’s, “Wordsworth’s generation inherited a thoroughly naturalistic approach, alive to continuities as well as distinctions between human and ‘animal,’ learned and instinctive communication systems, prizing the emotive as well as the rational aspects of language, and increasingly grounding linguistic behavior in human physiology rather than a disembodied mind” (75-76). But he neglects the different status of speaking and writing in theories like those of Herder and Rousseau.

40 Thomas Sheridan, A Course of Lectures on Elocution (London, 1762), 3, 102, ECCO.

is tantalizingly sensuous and affective. They frequently map this division between an embodied language and one of cold clarity onto speaking and writing. As Nicholas Hudson observes, eighteenth-century philosophers advanced a trend of “distrust of written language” that sharply departed from the century before it, including Locke.  

Philosophers in this camp include Rousseau, Herder, and Sheridan, who enshrine the passionate expression and immediacy of speech, with its full bodily participation, at the expense of distanced, unemotional writing. Sheridan even claims that attempts to better understand the passions have failed because of an overestimation of the “power of writing,” when in fact the task could only be accomplished by the “living voice,” not the “dead letter” (xii). Speech becomes the source of emotional, embodied, and living expression that engages the senses and elicits sympathy, while writing is, by comparison, unemotional, distanced, disembodied, and dead.

At the same time that this theory disembodied writing, in the immediate impact of Sheridan’s language of feeling we can see the spoken counterpart to Romantic-era presentations of written language as sensation. For Olivia Smith, it is *Lyrical Ballads* and John Horne Tooke’s *Diversions of Purley* (1786-1805) that “first placed primitive and civilized languages on an equal footing,” as opposed to primitivists like Hugh Blair, or Rousseau, who merely elevated the “Concrete terms” and “emotional expressions” accepted as the “essential difference” of primitive

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43 See, for example, Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, 21-22. Hudson’s account of this phenomenon also includes Lord Kames, Thomas Reid, and Monboddo (344).

44 Rousseau and Herder directly connect the difference between writing and speaking back to nationality. According to Rousseau, northern “tongues are better suited to writing than speaking,” whereas “Oriental” languages “lose their life and warmth” in writing (*Essay on the Origin of Languages*, 49). Herder remarks that in Hebrew writing vowels are omitted because “they could not be written. Their pronunciation was so alive,” they simply “eluded containment in letters” (95).
language. Though Sheridan repeats this myth of “savage” difference (155-56, 168-70), his theory values a “natural” mode of speech over “an artificial method” as part of modern elocution (4). One way to phrase his central problem is that “the meanest of [the illiterate vulgar], when impassioned, delivers himself better than our most eminent orators” (174). Whether in elocution or animal cries, we feel the body’s inarticulate expression of emotion in our own bodies.

Sheridan claims that the eloquence of the body bypasses words, and particularly exceeds the capacity of writing. Yet he argues for the “most expressive” power of tears (114), in part, through examples of this power taken from literature, citing Milton, Dryden, and Shakespeare (115). In this way, he inadvertently suggests that such an impact is possible in writing, if only by representing bodily signs. Wordsworth and Shelley up the ante by foregrounding the place not just of the body in their writing, but also that of its natural or animal expressive force, usually considered to be outside the domain of articulate language, or at least of writing. As we have seen, Shelley identifies writing with her part-animal, part-human creature’s body and Lionel Verney’s “savage” near nudity. For Wordsworth, as Richardson observes, the rhythmic and emotional expressiveness of “natural language” . . . flow[s] into articulate language” through meter, repetition, interjections (such as his Idiot Boy’s “burring”), and apostrophe. Beyond his inclusion of such subjects as the “Animal Tranquility and Decay” of his “Old Man Traveling” (1798), Wordsworth’s liberal use of onomatopoeia, from the whirring lips of “The Idiot Boy” to

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45 Olivia Smith, 27. On the “embodied universalism” (such as Wordsworth’s) that questioned the “differences between the ‘savage’ and ‘civilized’ mind” see also Richardson, 75.

46 Richardson, 80-81. Richardson places Wordsworth within a tradition of theorists including Rousseau, Herder, Charles Bell, and others who “view articulated speech as absorbing the ‘natural’ language of cries, expressions, and imitative gestures,” or, like Erasmus Darwin, viewed this “natural language” as the signs for the passions (75-81). He neglects to note Herder’s and Rousseau’s connection between this “natural language” and the speech, rather than writing, of particular peoples. He does, however, suggest some overlap in remarking Rousseau’s connection between meter and “natural cries” (79).
the boy of Winander’s imitation of owls, refuses neat distinctions between articulate language and inarticulate bodily sounds.

Yet the eighteenth-century turn against writing anticipates post-structuralist claims that Romantic-era poetry is obsessed with its own separation from the material world, lived experience, and even life itself. A key text for this criticism is Wordsworth’s “Essays upon Epitaphs” (comp. 1810); the third “Essay” describes language that is not “an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it,” and thus has the power to poison the mind as “a counter-spirit.”

Reading this passage, de Man argues that this “evil language . . . is in fact all language,” and “Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament.” In this way, de Man elides the distinction Wordsworth explicitly makes between language that is “incarnate” and language as a “counter-spirit,” minimizing the context of the passage as part of Wordsworth’s critique of the artificial poetic diction popularized by writers such as Alexander Pope and John Dryden (“Essays,” 84). De Man bases his argument on a false equivalence between the “incarnation” of the body and clothing, citing their common “accessibility to the senses” and claiming that each represents language as figurative and thus “not the thing itself but the representation.”

Wordsworth’s argument is not with “accessibility to the senses” or with the distance between the figurative and the literal world, however, it is with the wrong kinds of sensations. Artificial

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47 See also Walter J. Ong’s argument that typographic cultures conceive of words as “things, ‘out there’ on a flat surface,” while to an oral culture words are “events” or “actions,” “and hence…necessarily powered” and always in an embodied rather than “simply verbal context.” Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 32-33, 67.
49 De Man, “Autobiography As De-Facement,” 80-81. See also Frances Ferguson on Wordsworth’s theorization of a language “indissolubly related” to death, as represented by his focus on their combination in the epitaph, in *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 30, 33.
50 See, for example, de Man’s claim that Wordsworth’s “most violent language is saved . . . not for Alexander Pope, but for language itself” (“Autobiography As De-Facement,” 79).
poetic diction or language as “counter-spirit” erodes the “solemnity and pensiveness” appropriate to epitaphs, teaching readers to want “only to be tickled and surprised” (84). Language, and written language in particular, is not “dead” except where artificial convention kills it.

For Wordsworth, as for Austen and Shelley, written language is as alive, incarnate, and agential as Sheridan and Rousseau envision speech. Their concepts of language as sensation double as impassioned defenses of writing. In their insistence that written words can sound with a sense of voice or make the reader feel their rhythms, they also refuse to make hard and fast distinctions between speaking and writing. Part of this refusal may come from personal interest: whereas Sheridan, as an elocutionist, and Rousseau, as a philosopher committed to his own primitivism, had personal interests in elevating speech over writing, the writers who occupy this study were novelists and poets first. With the saturation of printed materials in Romantic-era Britain, it is not surprising that writers would look for ways to reach readers’ sensations through print rather than, like the elocutionists, in spite of it. This refusal to separate embodied speech from writing is, finally, political: it amounts to a refusal to distinguish the animal, “savage,” feminine, or lower-class domain of the body from the “civilized” territory of modern literature.

Beyond this debate, Locke, Hartley, and Burke provided ready examples of theories that were not based on sharp divisions between writing and speaking. Garrett Stewart reminds us that this approach bears out in the physiology of reading: “Silent reading locates itself . . . in the conjoint cerebral activity and suppressed muscular action of a simultaneously summoned and silenced enunciation,” a phenomenon he later terms “secondary vocality” for this “suppressed but potent aurality.” Even as silent readers, a physical engagement with the text, at the level of muscle movements and the aurality of the “inner ear,” is part of our experience. Austen,

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Wordsworth, and Shelley had their own potent reminder of this fact. The “transmission of feeling” (to borrow Adela Pinch’s phrase)\textsuperscript{53} between readers through sentimental literature, which I discuss in the next section of this chapter, showed them that writing could be as physically and emotionally impactful—even dangerously so—as speech.

The Sense of Morals and the Sentimental Reader

While eighteenth-century materialist philosophy offered a model of language based on sensory experience, sentimental theory and literature centered moral judgment and the reading experience on sensation. Although recent criticism on the sentimental novel has done much to reclaim it from marginalization, much remains to be said about the work of words in moral philosophy and affective reading.\textsuperscript{54} By contrast with the revulsion against “appetite and need” in Monboddo’s anti-materialist philosophy of language, Olivia Smith and Alan Richardson respectively describe Wordsworth turning towards the “commonality of human experience” and “widely if not universally shared features of life in a human body” for the basis of his poetic language.\textsuperscript{55} I chart a similar trend against bodily need within sentimentalism, and a corresponding move towards common embodied sensations across the writing of Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley. Sentimental philosophers elevated feeling as the barometer for a “moral sense.” But as they did so, they conflated the culture of aesthetic prestige with “natural”


\textsuperscript{54} Reading Wordsworth’s early poetry, Pinch discusses this work in terms of how the poet uses “conventional images” from sentimental verse as a means to explore the intersection of the “transmission of feeling and the transmission of poetic language” (75). Tuveson includes moral sense theory as part of his narrative of how the imagination becomes a “means of grace” in the Romantic era, but language itself is not his central concern (42-55).

\textsuperscript{55} Olivia Smith, 217; Richardson, 84, 91. The quotation from Richardson describes cognitive semantics (84), which, he argues, shares a similar perspective to Wordsworth’s thought on language and philosophers such as Herder.
moral value, and prioritized the sentiments of the imagination over the sensations of the body. Sentimental fiction and poetry then exploited this theory of moral feeling to popularize a reading experience that foregrounded physical and emotional effects. Yet such sentiments were the exclusive domain of tastefully embodied characters and, as other critics have shown, by the end of the eighteenth century their impact became contaminated by cliché and by fears concerning their sensitization and sexualization of young female readers’ bodies.56 This lurid reputation linked sentimental writing to even more explicitly embodied genres, such as pornography and dramatic performance. Facing the problems attached to sentimentalism, Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley attempted to reauthenticate a language of sensory immediacy by turning from refined and standardized sentiments towards simple, common sensations.

In the early eighteenth century, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson developed theories of a “moral sense” both natural to human beings and fundamentally social. Shaftesbury’s *Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit* (1699; revised 1711) compares the objects of the moral sense—behaviors and actions—to those of the physical senses.57 Unlike the physical senses, the moral sense requires an understanding of “a publick

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57 Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit* (1699; revised 1711), in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (London, 1711), 2: 28-29, ECCO. Italics have been removed.
Interest” (30-31), and this requirement makes it suspiciously exclusive for something “natural” (41-42): the “mere Beast, Idiot, or Changeling” are outside the realm of virtue, as is the anti-social “Creature” with a defective moral sense (30-31, 34). Hutcheson departs from Shaftesbury in aligning the moral sense more closely with the physical senses, as opposed to “Reflection and Reason,” but maintains the connection between this sense and the “publick Good.”  

In making sympathy central to the moral sense, David Hume emphasizes social value further still.  

“When I see the effects of passion,” Hume writes, “my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion, as is presently converted into the passion itself” (204). While the idea mediates between signs of another person’s emotion and the viewer’s sympathetic emotion, unlike in Locke’s theory of language, we ourselves feel the original feeling, and thus the effect of a good on someone else. Hume internalizes the public good on which our moral sense relies; social good becomes an immediate feeling. Under these theories, social abjection may all too easily become moral failure.

Despite their claims that the moral sense has a basis in natural feeling, these theorists mediate the moral with aesthetic culture in ways that evoke the political charge of overt emodiment. In comparing the moral sense to the physical senses, Shaftesbury notes a similarity between our perception of “Beauty or Deformity” and right or wrong (28-29). Shaftesbury envisions moral virtue as a “Beauty” of the “Heart” (30), vice a deformity, and Hutcheson repeats this strain (111, 116). For Hume, sympathy is equally the driving force for the moral sense and the “sense of beauty”—someone else’s land appears beautiful to us because of our

58 Francis Hutcheson, An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue (London, 1725), 245, 110-11, ECCO. Italics have been removed.

59 David Hume reasons that, since we take pleasure in the good of other people through sympathy, sympathy “produces our sentiment of morals in all the artificial virtues,” such as manmade standards of justice, as well as “many of” the “natural virtues,” such as generosity. Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature (London, 1740), 3: 207-9, ECCO. Volumes 1 and 2 published 1739.
sympathetic perception of its owner’s enjoyment while objects that “produce pain” are “deform’d” (205). The categories of moral “beauty” and “deformity” equate moral right or wrong with physical beauty or deformity. We may see implicit critiques of these ideas of moral “deformity,” and particularly of Shaftesbury’s socially incompatible “Creature” or morally incapacitated “Beast” and “Idiot,” in Wordsworth’s “Idiot Boy” or Shelley’s deformed and socially abject “creature” as they confront the problems of predicking moral virtue on social and aesthetic value. Austen, too, demonstrates the intolerance of “taste” for “unbecoming conjunctions” of large bodies and melancholy sentiments in *Persuasion* (49). Each of these writers undermines the claims of sentimentalism to draw its moral and aesthetic standards from nature by exposing the cultural biases of these standards against bodies in bad taste.

It is Adam Smith’s more explicit rejection of excessively embodied sensations in his theory of sympathy that clarifies the scope and stakes of these critiques. More deliberately than Hume, Smith distinguishes our sympathetic feelings from what others feel. We imagine only “what we ourselves should feel in the like situation” of someone else; the senses “never did and never can carry us beyond our own persons,” and it is thus “the impressions of our own senses” that we feel.\(^60\) Whereas for Locke the senses are a bridge between people—something that is largely the same for each person and easy to communicate—for Smith they separate us. The more embodied the sensation, the more difficulty we have in sympathizing with it: “Such is our aversion for all the appetites which take their origin from the body,” like hunger, that “all strong expressions of them are loathsome and disagreeable” (53, 51). While the “imagination is more ductile,” and we readily sympathize with “A disappointment in love, or ambition,” our bodies “can be but little affected by the alterations” of other people’s bodies (55). Smith presents materiality as an insuperably solid barrier, as opposed to the (only figuratively material) ductility

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\(^60\) Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London, 1759), 2, ECCO.
of imagination. He frames this difference as an inherent one, but in fact his assessment reflects the culture of taste, through which “individuals were taught to regulate themselves, and their motivating appetites.”\footnote{Denise Gigante, \textit{Taste: A Literary History} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 7. Like moral feeling, “taste was at once instinctual \textit{and} guided by certain fixed rules that . . . philosophers set out to identify” (7).} When Austen foregrounds appetite for food or fast motion in her juvenilia, Wordsworth attempts to transmit the feeling of cold “chattering” teeth in “Goody Blake and Harry Gill,” or Shelley describes how a worldwide plague revalues the animal life of the body in \textit{The Last Man}, they reform sympathy around the common sensations of bodily need rather than the discriminations of taste.

Sentimental fiction and poetry literalize the aesthetic biases of theorists, particularly those against bodily needs, in the beautiful, emotionally responsive bodies of heroines, and it is this convention of embodiment that Austen especially, as well as Shelley, critiques. In the late eighteenth century, sentimental novels frequently center on the body of a heroine—in her \textit{Elegiac Sonnets} (1784-1797) the keenly feeling, if not physically described, body of Charlotte Smith’s autobiographical speaker has an analogous role—which propels the narrative and serves as the primary source of the reader’s identification.\footnote{On the similar role of the eponymous “man of feeling,” Harley, and the “Harley-figure” as “an object used for the production” of feelings in the reader, as a “tool . . . of his own emotions,” and as a “container” for sentiment in Henry MacKenzie’s sentimental novel \textit{The Man of Feeling} (1771), see Ildiko Csengei, “‘I will not weep’: Reading Through the Tears of Henry MacKenzie’s \textit{Man of Feeling},” \textit{Modern Language Review} 103, no. 4 (2008): 959, 964, 967, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost. Laurence Sterne’s mid-century sentimental novel, \textit{The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy} (1759-1767), makes explicit connections between its narrative and the bodies of its characters. Quoting Samuel Johnson, Deidre Shauna Lynch describes Tristram’s “problems with . . . ‘the equality of words to things,’” with matching linguistic style to content, and how his “anxieties about textual expenditures play themselves out on human bodies” in figurative and sometimes bawdy expansions and contractions. Lynch, \textit{The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 24-26. Ross King explores the “textual compensation for bodily loss,” such as Uncle Toby’s war wound, that “inevitably fail[s]” in the novel when language “reduplicate[s]” this loss in “\textit{Tristram Shandy} and the Wound of Language,” \textit{Studies in Philology} 92, no. 3 (1995): 293-94, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost. Though King notes that language has “the power to \textit{act}” on the body in the novel, he finds that this is, as in J.L. Austin’s idea of the performative utterance, only “under certain...
tears and swoons of sensibility, are themselves aestheticized literary clichés. The heroine of Radcliffe’s Gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Emily St. Aubert, possesses “elegant symmetry of form, . . . delicacy of features, and . . . blue eyes, full of tender sweetness.” The eponymous heroine of Fanny Burney’s sentimental debut *Evelina* (1778) has “too much beauty to escape notice.” Her beautiful body acts as the physical counterpart and guarantor of the moral beauty of her sensations. So, too, Emily St. Aubert has “a degree of susceptibility too exquisite to admit of lasting peace,” enough to prompt her father to teach her how to control her emotions and gain the habit of “cool examination” (5). The heroine’s sensibility, manifested in her delicate beauty, comes with an emotional and physical fragility that, in turn, provides repeated proof of this physical, emotional, and moral sensitivity as she becomes overwhelmed and faints. The conventions of the sentimental heroine set up the following equation: moral beauty requires the external evidence of physical beauty, which requires damaging delicacy.

Austen’s opposition to this equation is as plain as her heroine when she describes Catherine Morland’s elation at being called “almost pretty,” and demonstrates the character’s robustness in a childhood of “cricket” and “boys’ plays.” In *The Last Man*, Shelley makes the stakes of this delicacy plainer still: while every character who exhibits it dies, the sole survivor possesses “savage” hardiness.

Through their identification with the heroine’s body, readers absorb training in sensory and affective reading (if also in cliché), which paved the way for Romantic-era presentations of

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language as sensation. After Evelina’s letter recounting how she took pistols from the depressed Mr. Macartney, her guardian Mr. Villars reports that “The pistol scene made me shudder: the courage with which you pursued this desperate man, at once delighted and terrified me” (218). Mr. Villars’s demonstration of a physical and emotional reaction explicitly shows readers how to respond not only appropriately, but also conventionally—the scene teaches us to read for specific feelings such as, for this Gothic moment in a sentimental novel, terror. In Radcliffe’s *Udolpho*, Emily similarly models a tearful response to expressions of sensibility when her father details his “enthusiasm” for nature (15). Alongside these direct demonstrations, the movement of Radcliffe’s prose in moments of suspense, such as a scene in which Emily looks behind a mysterious black veil, evokes her heroine’s physical motions and rising terror. Radcliffe prefigures Wordsworth and Austen’s association of physical with verbal motion as she imitates Emily’s “faltering steps,” pauses, “timid hand,” and overwhelmed faint in the halting rhythms of the passage (248-49). However effective in themselves, such scenes of conventional feeling became clichéd by repetition. Charlotte Smith’s sonnets illustrate this problem as they elevate the sentiments to explicit subjects in themselves; Smith describes her sonnets as “vehicle[s] for a single sentiment.” This implies that the idea of the “sentiment”—its conventional form—contains or drives the expression of the speaker’s feelings, and motivates the reader’s reading. In his edition of Smith’s poems, Stuart Curran notes that she “established” what now reads as conventional, but admits that her “reiterated sorrows are somewhat

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66 Csengei observes such instruction in Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling*, which “trains the reader to read emotionally” and uses Harley, the eponymous man of feeling, as a “tool” to create sentimental readers (952-68, 957).
67 Charlotte Smith, Preface, *Elegiac Sonnets* (Chichester, 1784), vii, ECCO.
numbing.” Like the heroine who faints, the repetition of standardized sentiments could eventually result in insensibility instead.

As these sentiments became stale they elicited not only insensibility, but also laughter and critique. The conventionality of sentiments, the fact that they “might be detached from their original owner” and taken up by anyone else, threatened their sense of authenticity until, in the 1790s, Hester Thrale Piozzi documented how certain “pathetic passages . . . induced ‘genuine uninstructed Laughter’ even in children.” Just as standardization “detached” the sentiments from any particular person, critics on opposite ends of the political spectrum were quick to note their detachment from a moral sense. Critics associated the affective impact of sentimental novels with potentially dangerous arousal; sentimentalism, they claimed, sexualized female readers and glossed over unseemly male appetites. Wollstonecraft describes how “sentiment and taste varnish the enormities of vice” in male lust, while “the stupid novelists . . . work up stale tales . . . in a sentimental jargon, which equally tend to corrupt the taste, and draw the [female reader’s] heart aside from its daily duties.” The conservative Hannah More strikes at the core of the problem in sentences that, while they address writing on women’s education, are equally applicable to sentimental literature and theory. More criticizes authors who devote themselves to “inspire sentiment, and to reduce all moral excellence into sympathy and feeling” because “These softer qualities were elevated at the expence of principle,” and young women who actually had them were encouraged to develop them “to their hurt.” By the time Austen began writing her early parodies and Wordsworth started composing the Lyrical Ballads, both the clichés of

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69 Festa, 21.
70 Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (London, 1792), 271, 425-26, ECCO.
sentimentalism and its central premise, that sentiment indicates moral virtue, were no longer plausible.

As Wollstonecraft implies, sentimental writing shares similarly sensational ends with pornography, though the specific sensations they describe and transmit are (contrary to Wollstonecraft’s equation of them) different. They also share a problem with clichés and a consequent dulling of impact. Bodies drive the events in pornography more bluntly than sentimental and Gothic heroines drive their narratives. John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-1749) dwells on the “small rubied line in sweet miniature” of a vagina, “transports . . . too violent to observe any order,” eyes that “darted fires,” and the eponymous heroine’s “ungovernable longings” to mark an appropriate reader response. Radcliffe describes a mysterious black veil and raises chills in her reader; Cleland describes a vagina and fires different sensations. The key in both cases is moving the reader to a conventional set of responses, which, as Fanny directly acknowledges at the beginning of the second volume, has its limits of verbal expression: she expects her reader to be “cloyed and tired with the uniformity of adventures and expressions, inseparable from a subject of this sort” (129). Words like “ecstasies” lose their “due spirit and energy” by repetition in writing, though not in the similarly repetitive “practice of pleasure,” creating “disgust” (129). These words, it seems, require the pleasures of real bodies to sustain their impact, and writing, for Cleland, is no “practice”—the words on the page do not have the force of bodies.

Whereas pornographic narratives depend on detailed descriptions of bodies and their pleasures, dramatic performance presents perhaps the most literal form in which to embody the

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72 Here I am indebted to Festa’s observation that, though a “moral tone” bolstered the novel’s respectability, “Not unlike pornography, sentimentality . . . is appraised . . . for its performative efficacy” (17, 15).
words on a page. Writers like Sheridan and Joanna Baillie oppose the directness of physical expression in performance to written language. In his chapter on tone, for example, Sheridan writes: “Let any one who has been present at a well acted comedy, only reflect, how very different the sentiments, characters, and humour have appeared, in the representation, from what was conveyed to him by the mere perusal of the words in his closet” (110). Plays require the tones and gestures of speech to bring their true content to light and to raise the reader’s level of comprehension above the “mere perusal” Sheridan terms silent reading. In the “Introductory Discourse” to her Series of Plays on the passions (1798-1812), Baillie similarly elevates performance, citing its power to “strike and interest” those who “will not” or “cannot read” as opposed to the volume “whose elegant and harmonious pages are admired in the libraries of the tasteful and refined.” Baillie’s cool dismissal of the “tasteful and refined” reader’s admiration within a private library is not far from Sheridan’s “mere perusal.” Yet her contrast between tasteful writing and language that “strike[s] and interest[s]” takes part in the move against false, disembodied taste and towards language that is an agent of sensation that I discuss in the writing of Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley. Despite Sheridan’s and Baillie’s investments in separating dramatic performance from silent reading, as with Sheridan’s elocution more generally, the impact they see in spoken language is a reversed mirror image of written language of sensation. The written and the spoken also overlap in performers’ demonstration and embodiment of how readers, like actors, can experience written language in their own persons.

Sentimental literature demonstrated that the physical and emotional effects of writing did not require the speaking actor’s body; writing alone could reach even the bodies of silent readers. Austen’s description of the robust, and therefore unlikely, heroinism of Catherine Morland; the

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74 Joanna Baillie, “Introductory Discourse,” A Series of Plays: In Which it is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind (London, 1798), 66, ECCO.
“equable” rhythms of Wordsworth’s poetry; and Shelley’s animal, fanged language build on sentimental models of sensory and affective reading at the same time that they critique sentimentalism’s emotional excesses, aesthetic biases, and exclusion of distasteful embodied sensations. Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley turned from standardized sentiments that had become stale and theories of moral feeling that excluded basic bodily needs to simple sensations that we hold in common—like rhythm, hunger, cold, and animal life.

The Sensation of Language

In the following chapters, I argue that Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley adapted the models of materialist philosophy and sentimental feeling in order to reauthenticate language through the immediacy of sensation. At the same time, they critiqued the aesthetic and social hierarchies embedded in theories of language, the moral sense, and social sympathy, inviting readers to feel with the female, poor, disabled, or inhuman persons associated with primitive or distasteful embodied existence. My first chapter contests an influential critical tradition, from the nineteenth century through D. A. Miller and beyond, that detaches Austen and her work from the body and its sensations. Miller proposes that a disembodied narrative voice is the height of “Austen Style” and of “Style itself,” as well as the author’s abstract escape from the “social abjection” of her embodiment as a spinster.75 Reading the juvenilia, Pride and Prejudice, Emma, and Persuasion, I argue that Austen’s fiction presents language as an embodied sensation and pleasure. In a lively critique of the sentimental novel’s insistence on extreme feeling to the point of insensibility, the language of the juvenilia foregrounds and imitates vigorous physical motion and appetite. Through the speed of sentences, chapters, and even a pun on verbal and physical “motion” the

young Austen makes clear that her language itself imparts a sense of swift motion, which critiques the languid steps of fainting heroines. The prose of the subsequent novels imitates, reflects upon, and transmits more mannerly but still robust sensations. Whereas in *Persuasion*, for example, the lovelorn Anne Elliot flirts with sentimental stereotype, Austen redeems her with genuine sensations, especially Anne’s sense of words as sounds that she physically grasps. In this way, Austen invites us to sympathize with women whose lively sensations extend beyond swooning sentimental cliché.

To bring this sensory immersion into poetry was, as I show in my next chapter, William Wordsworth’s project. Like Austen’s critics, Wordsworth’s often neglect his interest in sensation, focusing instead on his “poetry of mind.” I take literally his claim to reform “poetic diction” through what he calls “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation,” as spoken by “flesh and blood” speakers (Preface, 1800: 741, 747; 1802: 747, note 182-189). Clichéd sentimental tears were not the “vivid sensations” he wished to impart: Wordsworth’s famous “Ode” (1807) ends with a meditation on “Thoughts . . . too deep for tears.” Considering *Lyrical Ballads* and the 1805 *Prelude* alongside lesser-known works such as the “Essay on Morals” (comp. ca. 1798), I argue that Wordsworth adapts sentimental models to convey “more equable” sensations of sound, rhythm, and motion. As he associates the sounds and rhythms of language with the feeling of cold or the even rhythm of a horse’s gallop, Wordsworth roots his poetry in common, shared sensations. He elicits readers’ sympathy for the authentic feelings of the poet and the rural poor by evoking these sensations.

Mary Shelley’s focus on abject, excessive, inhuman, or animal bodies dismantles the aesthetic biases underlying sentimental theories of sympathy. Critical discussions of language in

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Shelley’s writing typically center on the failure of signs to connect us to other people. By contrast, I argue that Shelley critiques Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy for its failure to achieve this connection. Whereas Smith’s theory prioritizes the imagination over physical experience, Shelley’s language as sensation achieves a more direct, inclusive, and visceral sympathy. I mark out this interest in her first and most famous novel *Frankenstein*, her later novel *The Last Man*, and her short story “Transformation.” In this fiction, words have the force of animal bites, and the inhuman body of Frankenstein’s creature drives plots and embodies Shelley’s prose. Shelley suggests that animal, excessive, or inhuman bodies are the authentic, if aggressive and pained, sites of language and sympathy.

Austen’s words as sounds, Wordsworth’s words as the sensations of rural life, and Shelley’s active, animal Gothic words demand that we notice and reflect on the way language makes our sensory experience and engages our sympathy. At times they show that the phonetic component of writing can impart a sense of sound, at others it is the medium of print or the movement of a sentence paced with commas that impresses the reader with motion and emotion. These writers present and theorize language not just as a sign for ideas or sentiments but also as an event. In this model, reading is both a mediated, virtual experience of characters’ lives and an immediate physical experience of its own, while sympathy comes from these sensations shared through language. This overturns earlier theories of the moral sense and social sympathy, in which moral feelings were mediated by the imagination, ideas, social value, and aesthetic taste. These means of sympathy, together with philosophies that dismiss “vulgar” embodied language, devalue the body and its appetites in favor of more cerebral, socially regulated, and implicitly upper-class standards of feeling. Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley ground sympathy in the body through their use of language as an agent of immediate sensation. In so doing, they turn away
from refined and conventionalized sentiments, towards marginalized, overtly embodied persons that get hungry or cold, are poor or female, deformed or inhuman. As Wordsworth suggests, language as sensation encourages readers to feel with persons with whom they “are not accustomed to sympathize” (Note to “The Thorn,” not paginated).

It seems newly urgent to think about the physical force of language in a political climate that has fostered a rise in hate speech, including the march of scores of white supremacists with torches, gathered as if to storm the castle in a film adaptation of *Frankenstein*. Together Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley remind us that words are physical agents that affect our bodies, not just as sources of pain, but also of pleasure and sympathetic connection. Their versions of language as sensation aim to reach outside the jargon of social cliques and aesthetic tastes to engage our shared world of sensory experience. Through the rhythm of words, the pace of sentences, or the sounds called up in onomatopoeia, such language offers the hope that we can feel along with our most abject creatures.
Chapter 1: Jane Austen’s Devouring Plans

There is a version of Jane Austen in which the novelist appears to have no body. This sense of Austen’s pristineness reflects a critical tradition that detaches Austen from the body except in its tidiest forms. Charlotte Brontë describes *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in terms of emotional and physical constraint, declaring “I should hardly like to live with [Austen’s] ladies and gentlemen in their elegant but confined houses.”¹ To Claudia L. Johnson, “Austen’s desubstantiation” is the hallmark of “her reception from 1817 until the present,” and she traces this line from Henry Austen’s “Biographical Notice” in 1817 to D.A. Miller’s study of Austen in 2003.² Miller goes so far as to identify a “truly out-of-body voice” not only as “Austen Style,” but also as “Style itself.”³ The “secret” of such “impersonal” style is that it comes from Austen’s “social abjection” from the marriage plot: it is “the injured utterance of a woman and spinster.”⁴ From Austen’s fiction, Miller shifts to the author herself and the real, socially curbed body from which she attempts to escape in disembodied, impersonal language. But what happens when we consider that for Austen language itself might be a physical sensation and source of pleasure, with force that comes from or acts on the body?

Miller assumes that the socially abject, unmarried female body felt abject, yet social designation does not wholly determine lived experience. As Austen knew, marriage was a bodily gamble for women who risked death with every pregnancy and became dissolved in their

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⁴ Miller, 27, 38, 74.
husbands’ bodies under coverture. She remarked the damage marriage did to women's bodies in a letter advising her niece Fanny Knight to be patient in her husband hunt and consider that, “by not beginning the business of Mothering quite so early in life, you will be young in Constitution, spirits, figure & countenance, while M“ W“ Hammond is growing old by confinements & nursing.”5 For Austen here, marriage is synonymous with bodily decline, and being single, at least for a time, with bodily vigor. The rapidly aging body of a woman in an early marriage contrasts with the physical enjoyment in Austen’s joking portrait of herself as an older spinster: “as I must leave off being young, I find many Douceurs in being a sort of Chaperon for I am put on the Sofa near the Fire & can drink as much wine as I like.”6 The witty, wine-soaked declaration of the thriving unmarried Austen is far from Miller’s “injured utterance.”

Its frank embodiment is far from the discriminations of sentimentalism as well. Shaftesbury describes a “moral sense” that distinguishes “Regularity or Irregularity” in “Behaviour and Actions” just as we perceive physical “Beauty or Deformity”; Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy rejects “all [strong expressions of] the appetites which take their origin from the body,” including “Violent hunger,” as “indecent.”7 The heroines of sentimental and Gothic novels from Fanny Burney’s Evelina to Ann Radcliffe’s Emily St. Aubert embody these theories in beautifully regular, delicate figures and feelings of sensibility rather than appetite.8 The feelings that the “cult of sentiment” enshrined as part of a “natural” moral sense did not include the unlovely sensations of bodily needs. By the 1790s, critics across the political spectrum

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6 Austen to Cassandra Austen, 6-7 November 1813, in Jane Austen’s Letters, 261.
7 Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit (1699; revised 1711), in Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times (London, 1711), 2: 28-29, Eighteenth Century Collections Online. In all future references this database will appear as ECCO. Italics have been removed. Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments (London, 1759), 53, 51, ECCO.
8 As Johnson remarks, “no hyperconventional heroine worth her salt” ever feels hungry (Cults and Cultures, 21).
objected to the clichés and excesses of this culture. The radical Mary Wollstonecraft critiques “sentimental jargon” and the feminine “delicacy and sensibility” that values a “distinguishing taste and puny appetite,” while the conservative Hannah More objects that young women of sensibility are encouraged to cultivate it “to their hurt.” Though Austen most directly addresses sentimentalism in her fiction, anti-materialist philosophy of language shares in its distaste for bodily needs: reacting against John Locke’s privileging of sensory experience as the original source of ideas and words, Lord Monboddo associates ideas based on sensation with the “vulgar.” In the light of sentimentalism and its discontents, as well as Monboddo’s anti-materialism, Austen’s oenophilia appears daringly physical.

Another line of criticism tells the story of this physicality in her fiction. This line includes Jillian Heydt-Stevenson’s *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions* and John Wiltshire’s *Jane Austen and the Body*. Heydt-Stevenson looks at “the physical dimension of consciousness” in the novels, and Wiltshire’s conspicuously titled examination focuses on the

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12 Johnson observes that there is “a countertradition in Austenian reception stressing her vigor rather than her attenuation” (*Cults and Cultures*, 51).

body through the lens of health.\textsuperscript{14} Both draw attention to the way the body, neither repressed nor omitted, animates Austen’s canon of work. \textit{Persuasion} (1817), in particular, has become something of a touchstone for criticism on Austen and embodiment. This status reflects the division between embodied and disembodied Austens together with another critical separation, between Austen’s last complete novel and what comes before it. For Miller, \textit{Persuasion} is Austen’s “headlong fall” from the grace of a fabulously nobody narrator “into . . . personal abasement” that comes from the connection between Austen, the abject “near-spinster” Anne Elliot, and the crippled “near-novelist” Mrs. Smith.\textsuperscript{15} To A. Walton Litz, by contrast, this novel is Austen’s “most successful effort” to send a “sense of physical life into the language and structure of a novel.”\textsuperscript{16} Both sides of the critical impasse on Austen’s embodiment address the way her fiction uses language. On one side, Brontë assumes that Austen’s writing describes and expresses only primly restrained bodies, and Miller views language at its most stylish as a means


\textsuperscript{15} Miller, 73-74.

\textsuperscript{16} A. Walton Litz, “\textit{Persuasion}: forms of estrangement,” in \textit{Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays}, ed. John Halperin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 225. Litz places \textit{Persuasion} on a continuum: it is the “most successful” in comparison with the earlier novels, in which the heroines “are acutely conscious of their physical lives” (224-25); however, he does not include an extended analysis of the various expressions of physicality within this continuum. Alan Richardson raises the stakes to argue that the “sense of physical life” Litz notes reflects new Romantic ideas of “embodied cognition,” including a material brain and a mind integrated with the body, in “Of Heartache and Head Injury: Reading Minds in \textit{Persuasion},” \textit{Poetics Today} 23, no. 1 (2002): 141-60, esp. 142-44, 151-53, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/27897. See also Heydt-Stevenson’s assessment of Austen’s “melding of the physiological and psychological” (203); and Adela Pinch’s analysis of how the novel “explores what it feels like to be a reader” in terms of the “presence of other people,” particularly as experienced through sensation or “bodily life,” and the impact this presence has on the mind, in “Lost in a Book: Jane Austen’s \textit{Persuasion},” in \textit{Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 137-63. See also Antonina Harbus’s extension of the concept of an embodied mind to \textit{Emma} in “Reading Embodied Consciousness in \textit{Emma},” \textit{SEL} 51, no. 4 (2011): 765-82, doi: 10.1353/sel.2011.0040.
to an abstract escape from embodiment with all its potential abjection.\footnote{On Austen’s “work of abstracting,” see Miller, 27-28.} On the other, Litz frames language as a tool for achieving a “sense of physical life,” rather than as an agent in its own right. What remains to be worked out in detail is how Persuasion relates to the rest of the Austen canon and its engagement with sentimentalism, and how the physical body in Austen’s writing relates to language itself.

Returning to Austen’s witty vision of spinsterhood comfortably situated upon a sofa with unlimited wine, I argue that this coincidence between physical enjoyment and the pleasure of language—or rather, language as physical sensation and pleasure—is a central element of Austen’s style. I examine the place of what I call “language as sensation”—language that mirrors a character’s motion, or imparts the sensation of touch or sound to readers—across Austen’s career, from the juvenilia to the targets of Brontë’s criticism, Pride and Prejudice and Emma (1815), before finally turning more extensively to Persuasion. The juvenilia overturn the conventions of sentimental novels with the aggressive physical activity of Austen’s prose, which describes and imitates her heroines’ eager appetites and swift motion. In Pride and Prejudice, Austen moves away from the aggression of the early parodies to identify Elizabeth Bennet’s irregular, commonplace body and its sensations, as opposed to the regular forms of convention, with authentic language. Emma’s word games enact the social circulation of words as material objects that carry sentimental performance, miscommunications, or (especially as embodied in the circulation of the blush) genuine physical and emotional force. In Persuasion, Austen advances this force to language as sensory immersion, particularly through the sensation of words as sounds, and finally reauthenticate sentimental cliché by restoring these sensations to writing. Throughout her career, Austen reforms sentimental conventions with a language of common bodily sensations, inviting her readers to sympathize with the ordinary feelings of
women that get dirty and hungry, are swift and healthy, or grow older. For Austen, language is intimately connected to the body: her fiction presents an implicit materialist philosophy of language, and her style centers on an emphatic enjoyment of embodied life.

The “Devouring Plan” of the Juvenilia

Sentimental philosophers claimed that moral feeling was natural, but Adam Smith’s theory that we are unable to sympathize with bodily appetites in fact reflects the culture of aesthetic taste. The training for taste in the eighteenth century is “a metaphorical endeavor—a taste for this or that,” which is part of a “civilizing process in which individuals were taught to regulate themselves, and their motivating appetites.”18 The sentimental heroine’s body is one of taste that represses appetite, turning rough sensation into refined sentiment. At the same time, “the association of . . . body with female” meant that “to give in to the dangerous pleasures of appetite” was to risk “effeminacy.”19 From the beginning, Austen discounts this risk, and a fusion of language and sensation drives her style, though its expression shifts emphasis in the course of her career. In juvenilia including “Lesley Castle” (comp. 1792), “The Beautifull Cassandra” (comp. ca. 1787-90), and “The Visit” (comp. ca. 1787-90), Austen dismantles sentimental convention through prose animated by the active satisfaction of appetite and fast physical motion. In this way, she makes aggressive physicality, rather than taste, the metaphor of choice for early Austenian aesthetics.20 Though the juvenilia are rarely discussed in Austen

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19 Gigante, 14. Conversely, the man of taste also risked effeminacy if he lacked “the bullish appetites of John Bull” (15).
20 On how “Austen’s early work sides with the body and its vigors, particularly as these give the lie to restrictive, high-blown notions of female delicacy,” being “intensely physical and raucously oral,” see Johnson, Cults and Cultures, 21-22.
criticism, they most prominently display the lively connection between language and physical sensation that grounds Austen’s later fiction.

Austen’s parodies subvert sentimental convention by substituting language that describes or imitates exuberant physical activity instead of tearful sentiment. “Lesley Castle” juxtaposes its unsentimentally hungry heroine, Charlotte Lutterell, with her sister Eloisa’s sentimentally tragic love plot. Austen’s joke is to make this plot the catalyst for Charlotte and her mother’s appetite: the “Devouring Plan” to eat the feast prepared for Eloisa’s wedding. Eloisa’s fiancé has been dangerously injured, leaving Charlotte to lament that “the Match is broke off, and all my Labour thrown away” for the wedding dinner (110). Never mind any broken hearts, Charlotte’s response is all for broken dinners:

‘Good God!’ (said I) ‘you don’t say so? Why what in the name of Heaven will become of all the Victuals! We shall never be able to eat it while it is good. However, we’ll call in the Surgeon to help us—. I shall be able to manage the Sirloin myself; my Mother will eat the Soup, and You and the Doctor must finish the rest.’ Here I was interrupted, by seeing my poor Sister fall down to appearance Lifeless upon one of the Chests, where we keep our Table linen. (110)

Charlotte’s sentences begin in overwrought sentimental performance—“Why what in the name of Heaven will become of,” “We shall never be able to”—but they end in a tragedy of cooking. One sister’s wasting away in grief and convulsions that subside “to an almost perfect Insensibility” is the other’s “lamentations on the dreadful Waste in our provisions” (111). While Eloisa’s grief deprives her body of sensation, Charlotte’s results in the vigorous activity of devouring a wedding feast, embodied in her transition to active and imperative verbs—“I shall . .

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. manage,” “Mother will eat,” “You . . . must finish.”

Austen’s wit favorably contrasts the latter’s capacity with the former’s incapacity, eliciting sympathy for the sensations of physical and verbal activity, and especially of appetite, over the languor of aesthetic taste. As Austen substitutes active verbs describing the satisfaction of appetite for words of sentiment, she associates her concise and lively prose with Charlotte’s physical activity.

In “The Beautifull Cassandra,” Austen imitates such activity through the rhythm and pace of her sentences and chapters. This particularly compact parody features twelve chapters comprising no more than a few sentences each, the fourth of which reads: “[Cassandra] then proceeded to a Pastry-cooks where she devoured six ices, refused to pay for them, knocked down the Pastry Cook and walked away.”

This rapid paratactic succession of active verbs gives each roughly equal value, and, in so doing, makes clear that vigorous physical action is the plot. The chapters frequently end with a version of “and she walked away,” and when Cassandra comes upon a handsome and accomplished young man in the street, where a conventional novel might begin a love story, she moves on (42). As we will see, whereas Cassandra devours ices, Anne Elliot devours Wentworth’s letter at the end of Persuasion—Austen moves from an iteration of embodiment in language that relies on the simultaneous imitation and description of the act of devouring food to a more direct representation of devouring language as a physical experience. The plot here is Cassandra’s charge through town, and Austen’s style, which mirrors Cassandra

[22] On Marianne Dashwood’s blend of activity and passivity, as well as the relationship among “hysterical illness,” language, and desire in Sense and Sensibility (1811), see Helen Small, Love’s Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800-1865 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 94-96.

[23] Austen, “The Beautifull Cassandra” (comp. ca. 1787-90), in Catharine and Other Writings, 42. In Northanger Abbey (1817), the unheroic younger Thorpe sisters spend a similar day where they “ate some soup, and bespoke an early dinner, walked down to the Pump-room, tasted the water,” went shopping, then ate ices and dinner. Austen, Northanger Abbey, in Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon, ed. James Kinsley and John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 85.
and imparts a similar sensation of motion in its own charge through verbs and chapters, is embodied in its heroine’s eager physical movement.

This motion is characteristic of the early parodies, in which Austen’s animated language has the force of, and often drives, the violently active bodies it describes. Everywhere one turns, characters “kick one another out of the window” in evidence of their growing intimacy (“Frederic and Elfrida”), or a heavily tautological argument about whether or not cheeks can be too red nearly results in a fistfight (“Jack and Alice”). In the first case, Austen foregrounds bodies in violent motion, and in the second, the frustrations of a circular verbal argument about bodies incite an exuberant physical reaction. In “The Visit,” a deceased grandmother’s strange power of speech propels the narrative and its physical comedy: Lord Fitzgerald apologizes for the shortness of his guest’s bed, remarking that his grandmother’s speech impediment caused her to keep little company, and she therefore “suit[ed] all her Beds to her own [very short] length.” Not only does this absent grandmother’s physical difficulty with spoken language result in beds that conform to her body and cramp others’ bodies, it also determines the inadequate number of chairs in the drawing room, which in turn requires two ladies to seat two gentlemen in their laps. Austen’s own pun summarizes the collision of physical and verbal action here and throughout the parodies. In response to Willoughby’s proposal to “circulate the Bottle,” Sophy says, “A very good motion, Cousin; and I will second it with all my Heart” (51). Just as, in the double meaning of “motion,” the physical movement and boozy pleasure of passing a bottle unites with a verbal proposal, in the parodies unruly bodily and verbal action are one.

To the young Austen, language has the physical force of swift and eager motion, drives it, or is this motion, and the overall aesthetic is one of pleasure in the sensation of energetically

24 Austen, “Frederic and Elfrida” (comp. ca. 1787-90), in Catharine and Other Writings, 5; “Jack and Alice” (comp. ca. 1787-90), in Catharine and Other Writings, 16.
25 Austen, “The Visit” (comp. ca. 1787-90), in Catharine and Other Writings, 48.
embodied prose. As the juvenilia subvert the expectations generated by sentimental convention, they rejuvenate language by describing, imitating, and transmitting simple physical sensations to the reader. In so doing, they transfer sympathy from the sentimental heroine’s body, which represses bodily need in favor of tasteful delicacy, to the indelicately embodied motion and appetite of Charlotte Lutterell and Cassandra. In this early work, aggressive embodiment is a sufficient counter to sentimental convention, but its imitation of physical movement with verbal motion prefigures the prose of the later novels, especially *Persuasion*. It also anticipates William Wordsworth’s similar association between the rhythm of walking and that of poetic meter in poems including *The Prelude* (1805/1850) and “When, to the attractions of the busy World” (begun 1800; publ. 1815). This synesthetic connection between different senses recalls David Hartley’s theory of how our sensory associations with words “rise up” with them, as well as Herder’s idea that speech sounds convey the texture of other senses. Though there is no record of Austen reading Hartley, much less Herder, her association between physical and verbal motion presents a similar perspective on language. Austen makes such associations an action of her writing throughout her career. In the rest of this chapter, I trace the development of Austen’s devouring plan from the juvenilia’s rambunctiously physical use of language to the mature novels, in which the more mannerly but still robust body parallels linguistic expression.

**The “Common-place Face” of *Pride and Prejudice***

For Charlotte Brontë, Austen’s most enduringly popular novel presents merely an “accurate,” curtly rhyming “common-place face” that is the negation of a “vivid physiognomy” (To G.H. Lewes, 12 January 1848, 10). “Indisputably ‘commonplace’ engraved portraits of Elizabeth

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Bennet,” B.C. Southam observes, “face the reader on the title-pages of Bentley’s 1833 edition of *Pride and Prejudice*.” Begun as “First Impressions” (comp. 1796-97) only four years after Austen wrote “Lesley Castle,” *Pride and Prejudice* moves away from the parodies’ aggressive rebuttal of sentimental conventions. Austen revises these conventions through Elizabeth Bennet’s “common-place face” (which deviates from the aesthetic standards of heroines), her witty reformulations of sentimental cliché, and an emphasis on language that imparts commonplace sensations. Whereas “The Beautiful Cassandra” embodies the swift motion of its heroine by careening through sentences, Elizabeth reproduces the pace of Darcy’s letter in her own motion. She and Darcy finally internalize each other’s writing and speech; their physical and emotional transformations take shape according to the patterns laid out in their language. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen’s style is no longer one of language as exuberant physical motion, but of physical and verbal irregularity.

Whereas Lydia Bennet’s raucousness would suit the aesthetics of the juvenilia, *Pride and Prejudice* requires the more moderate, but still physically energetic, body and less aggressively parodic wit of Elizabeth for its purposes. It is not unbridled motion or appetite that distinguishes Elizabeth’s embodiment, but its lack of distinction. Contrary to the aesthetic standards of “regularity” that distinguished Shaftesbury’s moral sense and that sentimental heroines embodied, Elizabeth’s figure is irregular. As Darcy realizes that the face he thought only “tolerable,” with “hardly a good feature,” is actually “rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes,” he reevaluates Elizabeth’s body, moving from displeasure

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28 On Wordsworth and Coleridge’s turn towards the “commonality of human experience” in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as opposed to Monboddo’s “refined” language, see Olivia Smith, 217. See also Alan Richardson on Wordsworth’s move towards language grounded in common “features of life in a human body” in *British Romanticism and the Science of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 84, 91, ProQuest Ebook Central.
at its deviation from “perfect symmetry” to pleasure in this “light and pleasing” difference.\footnote{Austen, \textit{Pride and Prejudice} (1813), 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed., ed. Donald Gray (New York: Norton, 2001), 9, 16.} Elizabeth’s asymmetry flouts the standards of taste, but Darcy’s regard for her “dark eyes” is so obviously clichéd that Caroline Bingley easily mocks him. Darcy could not have Elizabeth’s portrait painted, she quips, “for what painter could do justice to those beautiful eyes” (36). Darcy coolly replies that her eyes’ “colour and shape, and the eye-lashes . . . might be copied,” but “It would not be easy, indeed, to catch their expression” (36). Whereas it is the beautiful symmetry of the sentimental heroine’s figure that acts as the guarantor of her expressions of sensibility, it is the “expression” of Elizabeth’s eyes that makes her commonplace face “uncommonly intelligent.” In this way, Austen upends the sentimental equation between the regularity of bodies and feelings, associating uncommon expression with the irregularity of commonplace bodies.

Elizabeth’s wit similarly throws aesthetic standards off-kilter. To quell her mother’s bragging about Jane’s previous poetically inclined suitor, Elizabeth takes over the report:

“And so ended his affection . . . . There has been many a one, I fancy, overcome in the same way. I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!”

“I have been used to consider poetry as the \textit{food} of love,” said Darcy.

“Of a fine, stout, healthy love it may. Every thing nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away.” (31)

The movement from Elizabeth’s joke to Darcy’s model of poetry as the “food of love,” itself a revision of Shakespeare’s music as the food of love in \textit{Twelfth Night}, back to Elizabeth’s joke
implies that the joke replaces poetry as the food of love. The lines to which Darcy eludes themselves concern the insensibility that comes with repetition: “If music be the food of love, play on; / Give me excess of it, that surfeiting, / The appetite may sicken and so die.” For the speaker, lovesick Orsino, an “excess” of music drives away love just as the repetition of sentimental conventions, as in the sonnet, eventually deprives them of impact. Elizabeth’s wit reverses this formula—one does not destroy authentic feeling through the overconsumption of poetry, but through starving weak feelings by indulgence in a sonnet. Whereas Wordsworth opposes the artifice of poetic diction with his poetry of “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation,” Austen opposes this diction with Elizabeth’s joke. Austen’s transition from the standard poetic diction of the sonnet to Elizabeth’s revisionary wit parallels Darcy’s shift from a standard aesthetics of the body to admiration for the “uncommon” intelligence that animates both Elizabeth’s face and wit. By launching a similar critique of conventional language, Austen reinforces her critique of conventional bodies, and suggests that the two are linked.

From this parallel revision of aesthetic standards, Austen turns to a revisionary strategy reminiscent of the juvenilia: the transformation of verbal motion into sensations of commonplace physical motion and emotion in the key plot moment of Elizabeth’s reading and then rereading of Darcy’s letter. She first reads this letter the day after she rejects him, “with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of knowing what the next

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32 On how sentimental conventions finally inspired the rejection of laughter rather than tears in the late eighteenth century, see Festa, Sentimental Figures of Empire, 21.
sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before her eyes” (134). As in the juvenilia, Austen associates verbal with physical motion, but here it is Elizabeth’s ordinary movement that imitates that of Darcy’s sentences, as opposed to the parodies’ verbal imitation of its heroines’ rambunctious motion. Her eagerness is not just for plot, Andrew Elfenbein observes, it also comes “from the typographical presentation of [Darcy’s] sentences, which physically run together,” connecting “the next sentence” to “the sense of the one before her eyes.”

In this context, we may take “sense” to mean both “meaning” and “sensation”; as, in Heydt-Stevenson’s words, Elizabeth’s “eyes sprint” over the page, “incapacitate[ing] cognition,” this first reading primarily produces the latter. This momentum results in a forceful physical recoil as Elizabeth puts the letter “hastily away” and then, like the Beautifull Cassandra herself, “walk[s] on” (135). Austen’s sentences of free indirect discourse echo the epistolary urgency of Darcy’s sentences and the emotions that those sentences produce: “He expressed no regret for what he had done which satisfied [Elizabeth]; his style was not penitent, but haughty. It was all pride and insolence” (134). These short sentences, frequently interrupted by the pauses of punctuation, evoke the short emotions they describe. The press of Darcy’s sentences on the page impresses Elizabeth with a sensation of physical and emotional urgency. Garrett Stewart extends this interaction to Austen’s reader as well: the “reader collaborates in the writing,” which has an “active,” perhaps even “kinetic,” force on the “material body” as the “site of reading.” Through the novel’s unmediated presentation of the full letter, both Elizabeth’s and the reader’s bodies collaborate in the physical form and quickly developed narrative of Darcy’s writing.

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35 Heydt-Stevenson, 72.
Unlike Cassandra, Elizabeth returns to her plot, taking up the letter again with the slower physical and emotional movements of rereading. As Elizabeth rereads, she makes herself "examine the meaning of every sentence," comparing Darcy’s “account” with Mr. Wickham’s “own words” (135). She moves from plot to the sentence to the word and back again, gradually finding that, concerning Wickham, “every line proved more clearly” Darcy’s side, while Darcy’s criticism of her family “struck her too forcibly for denial” with its “justice” (135, 137), landing with the force of a physical blow. For Heydt-Stevenson, Elizabeth’s “physical movement” is key to her “mental revelation”; “the truth . . . ‘unfolds’ before her as she folds and unfolds the letter.” This movement reflects the rhythm of rereading: the flow of Elizabeth’s deliberations coincides with physical “pausing” in her reading, until, having reread, the emotional impact of the letter results in the motion of “wandering along the lane for two hours” (136, 138).

Elizabeth’s shift in emotion and opinion occurs through a shift in the rhythm with which she reads, and paces about, Darcy’s words.

It is this movement from verbal to physical motion and emotion that shapes the novel’s love story. Elizabeth is “in a fair way of soon knowing” Darcy’s letter “by heart” (140), which organ, as John Beer remarks, was known by then for its role in circulation and could serve as a physical site of emotion, as well as a “centre of being.” To know something “by heart” may be a cliché, but Austen reauthenticates it by literalizing it; following the physical impression of Darcy’s writing on Elizabeth’s bodily rhythm and motion, “by heart” hints at a rhythmic and visceral circulation inward. Darcy, in turn, confesses how Elizabeth’s words in rejecting his proposal “have tortured” him, and, when they meet again at Pemberley, Elizabeth observes that she had not “seen his manners so little dignified, never had he spoken with such gentleness”

37 Heydt-Stevenson, 72.
From first moving him emotionally, Elizabeth’s speech shapes how Darcy holds his body, his word choice, and his tone. Through their shared impact, Austen equates the physical presence of speech with that of writing. In each case, by associating the emotional impact of words with commonplace sensations of motion or rhythm, Austen reauthenticates even the sentimental cliché of learning a letter “by heart.” Where the juvenilia embody violent physical activity in their raucous prose, subverting sentimental conventions through the blunt force of their opposites, *Pride and Prejudice* reforms these conventions by describing, imitating, and imparting commonplace sensations. In this way, Austen elicits readers’ sympathy for irregular, commonplace embodiment, rather than sentimental ideals.

**The Circulation of Language in *Emma***

*Pride and Prejudice* associates authentic language with commonplace bodies, and demonstrates how verbal motion transforms physical motion and emotion. *Emma* includes a broader range of experiments with such physical forcefulness, and complicates the notion of authentic language. If, as Claudia Johnson argues, *Emma* pits “a counterdiscourse of ‘true feeling’” against “gallantry,” the novel makes the body and its sensations a critical factor in this truth. Words are in physical circulation in this novel as riddles and word games that cast language as an object passed, sometimes in confusion, from person to person. Where Austen critiques sentimental performance through Mr. Elton’s manners and riddle, Jane Fairfax’s circulatory blush in response to a game with letters of the alphabet redefines and authenticates the meaning of the word she receives. While it is this physical and emotional circulation that certifies the

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authenticity of words, Austen makes clear that the social circulation of language is still subject to confusion. The novel finally associates language and persons that can weather such errors with its unsentimentally robust heroine. In *Emma*, language is a circulatory push and pull between words and the bodies that give them physical form and invest them with, complicate, and feel their meaning.

Through Mr. Elton’s manners and language, Austen exposes the artifice of sentimental performance. As a suspicious John Knightley says, “when [Mr. Elton] has ladies to please every feature works” and, as Emma Woodhouse observes when Mr. Elton feigns concern for Harriet Smith’s health, “His face lengthened immediately; and his voice was the voice of sentiment as he answered.” Mr. Elton presents the signs of sensibility, which unites physical and emotional sensations, but the abstraction of his “voice of sentiment” is a form of disembodiment, and, unlike D.A. Miller, Austen is wary of this style. Whereas the deviation of Elizabeth Bennet’s irregular body from the standards of taste serves as a guarantee of its authenticity, Mr. Elton’s strict adherence to these standards wipes even his voice of personal expression. This sentimental performance is nowhere more evident, and satirizable, than in Mr. Elton’s charade. Emma invites him to write his own riddle as “the only security for its freshness” (52), but what he delivers is full of stale clichés:

41 In my discussion of Mr. Elton’s charade I draw from and refine my earlier consideration of it, and of *Sanditon*’s Sir Edward Denham, in terms of gallantry, misreading, an “emptiness” of feeling and meaning, and the abstraction of “Woman” from any particular woman in Megan Quinn, “‘but you would give him Cowper’: Jane Austen and Reading William Cowper” (M.Phil. thesis, Cambridge University, 2009), 28-30, esp. 33-39. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar see the importance of riddles in the novel with an emphasis on their representation of “civil falsehoods,” while Emma must find out “the ambiguous nature of discourse.” Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 158-59.
To Miss-----.
CHARADE.

My first displays the wealth and pomp of kings,
Lords of the earth! their luxury and ease.
Another view of man, my second brings,
Behold him there, the monarch of the seas!

But, ah! united, what reverse we have!
Man’s boasted power and freedom, all are flown;
Lord of the earth and sea, he bends a slave,
And woman, lovely woman, reigns alone.

Thy ready wit the word will soon supply,
May its approval beam in that soft eye!

(52-53)

Emma, solving the riddle as “courtship” (53), is willing to think Mr. Elton is so in love that he thinks Harriet possesses “ready wit” and misreads a coded overture to her friend. As she finds out, however, the charade’s description does not come from sincere affection, but a sentimental pattern that provides a bank of idealized descriptions for general use. It’s only when Emma, not Harriet, receives Mr. Elton’s proposal that she decides that “in fact it suited neither; it was a jumble without taste or truth.” (95). The problem with both Mr. Elton’s physical and verbal performances is that they suit the regular contours of a sentimental ideal rather than the irregular ones of a particular person.

While the circulation of Mr. Elton’s riddle illustrates the estrangement of sentimental performance from authentic sensations and persons, Emma and Frank Churchill’s word games stage the novel’s interest in the physical effects, and even embodied circulation, of language in miniature. Letters from a child’s alphabet are scattered over the playing field, offering a range of possible arrangements and communications, and the characters form and decipher scrambled words from them that often combine multiple meanings. Where Emma and Frank, two of the novel’s master plotters, “were rapidly forming words for each other, or for any body else who
would be puzzled,” Frank uses the game to send the word “blunder” Jane Fairfax’s way, describing his earlier accidental reference to knowledge received through their secret letters (239, 240). Mr. Knightley notes this: “The word was discovered; and with a faint smile pushed away” by Jane, and after Harriet says the word out loud, “there was a blush on Jane’s cheek which gave it a meaning not otherwise ostensible” (240). The words, as physical objects—blocks of letters—go from one body to another, inviting as much bodily response as mental. Language acts with material force of its own that is not entirely under the players’ control, producing physical reactions such as Jane’s “faint smile,” push away, and blush. Interpretation requires attention to these bodily reactions as much as to the words themselves—Jane’s blush does not merely reveal a meaning for the word “blunder,” the blush “gave it a meaning.”

In the confusion of verbal circulation between people, it is the sensation of physical circulation visible in the blush that authenticates the meaning of the word “blunder.” Yet in *Emma*, “blunder” repeatedly signifies a failure in the circulation of language, recalling an apt if obsolete meaning, “To mix up or mingle confusedly.” On her visit to Mrs. Elton, Emma thinks of Mr. Elton’s “Compliments, charades, and horrible blunders” (186). Jane rhapsodizes on the absence of “blunder[s]” in the postal system, only to be subjected to Frank’s “own blunder” of misplacing rather than sending his reply to her agonized declaration that their engagement is ended (204, 304). The bodily circulation of Jane’s blush offers one means of correction for such blunders by imparting meaning to “blunder.” In her study of the blush, Mary Ann O’Farrell extends the physical impact of the blush to Austen’s reader as she describes how its circulation within bodies evokes its circulation “between bodies.”

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“pressures within the social and textual spaces” they live in: they learn “to blush for parts of the social body or the reddening text,” and, by placing their bodies in the text, find the text places itself in their bodies. In the circular connection between the word “blunder” and Jane’s blush, Austen ties the circulation of the blush to the circulation of words, connecting authentic language to the sensations of fictional and real readers alike.

As in Jane’s blush or Elizabeth’s reading of Darcy’s letter, at times it is the force of a physical blow that marks authentic language, but in Emma the relationship between words and feelings remains complicated by blunders. The opposite of Mr. Elton’s sentimental performance is Knightley’s directness: he tells Emma “nothing but truth,” and it is the “truth of” his question, after Emma’s rudeness at Box Hill, “How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates?” with which Emma is “most forcibly struck. . . . She felt it at her heart” (296, 258-59). It is this feeling at Emma’s center of circulation and emotional life that validates the “truth” of Knightley’s words. Yet Austen reminds us that this direct line from words to emotional truth to physical effects is rare. Despite Knightley’s emphasis on truth and disapproval of mystery, his feelings for Emma have remained a mystery for most of the novel. Austen reflects on such omissions when she considers Emma’s concealment of Harriet’s affection for him from Knightley and its effects on Emma’s behavior during his avowal of love:

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language and the body because its interpretation requires “imagining it as the writing of the body” (3). See also O’Farrell’s chapter on Persuasion, in which she sees Anne Elliot’s return to sensation from “numbness” through “mortification” and the heightened complexion it causes (28-57).


45 On a similar phenomenon in William Wordsworth’s poetry and prose, see Pinch’s chapter on “Female Chatter: Gender and Feeling in Wordsworth’s Early Poetry,” in Strange Fits of Passion, 72-110. For Pinch, the preface to Lyrical Ballads “suggests that literary feelings are always extravagant”—they always spill over the boundaries between bodies—with “both poetic form and words themselves” working as catalysts for these feelings (75). She describes such a bodily exchange occurring in Wordsworth’s verse, particularly the Lyrical Ballads, and ties “the transmission of feeling” to “the transmission of poetic language” (75).
Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken; but where, as in this case, though the conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not, it may not be very material.—Mr. Knightley could not impute to Emma a more relenting heart than she possessed, or a heart more disposed to accept of his. (297)

Here “complete truth” is not only rare, but not quite “human.” The important part of communication is in the “feelings,” in the “heart,” not the “conduct.” Whether verbal or bodily, the exact signs used are important insofar as they convey a generally accurate sense of the feelings beneath them. Austen enacts this point in providing indirect discourse of Emma and Knightley’s conversation rather than showing us their dialogue. In subordinating language to genuine feelings and withholding it in key emotional scenes, Austen reformulates sentimental convention by rejecting its requirement for the performance of feeling in standard words, or any words.⁴⁶

Across the novel’s experiments, language is at once subordinate to feeling, a means of deceptive sentimental performance, and a powerful agent of physical and emotional sensations. In Emma, the only one of Austen’s novels named for its heroine, Emma’s unsentimentally robust body and her endurance of mishaps in the circulatory game of language offer a final balance between linguistic authenticity and its blunders. Reading Mrs. Weston’s claim that Emma is “the

⁴⁶This subordination of language to feeling differs from the sentimental “faith [in] intuitive understanding” of “Looks and gestures,” which act as “guarantees,” that Wiltshire describes in Sense and Sensibility’s Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood (33). This faith is in “displays of sensibility” rather than “underlying feelings” (Quinn, 8). The limit case for Emma’s presentation of authentic language is Miss Bates’s long-winded prattle, which carries genuine feeling but runs on so long that it presents a physical impediment to her listeners’ or readers’ attention. While Miss Bates does not challenge the novel’s claim that feeling authenticates language, she does show that feeling alone may lose listeners. On the reader’s sympathy with Emma in her impatience with Miss Bates’s speech, see Susan Wolfson, “Boxing Emma; or the Reader’s Dilemma at the Box Hill Games,” in Re-reading Box Hill: Reading the Practice of Reading Everyday Life, ed. William Galperin, Romantic Circles Praxis Series (April 2000), 5, 12, https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/boxhill/wolfson/wolfson.html.
complete picture of grown-up health” (29), Wiltshire argues that Emma’s mistakes of communication are part of “her capacity to transgress and recover,” which “makes her embody that [spiritual and physical] health which is the keystone of the novel’s structure.” Unlike Jane’s delicate body and “most distinguishing complexion” that makes her, as Frank says, “So peculiarly the lady” (329) and so conventionally a sentimental heroine, Emma’s hardy body, though “regular” of feature, has a “bloom of full health” that has no place in sentimental narrative (29). It is Emma’s health that withstands the blunders of sentimental performance and linguistic circulation, as well as the strike of Knightley’s words. Where *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates how language incites physical motion and emotion, *Emma* shows how the problems of its social circulation might be rectified, as in Jane’s blush or Emma’s “capacity to . . . recover,” by physical circulation. Like Emma’s body, Austen’s language is robust—it recovers from cliché to circulate with the pulse of genuine sensations.

**The Sense of Language in Persuasion**

During the fateful concert in Bath at which Anne Elliot realizes that Captain Wentworth still loves her, she good-humoredly translates an Italian love song for Mr. Elliot. “Towards the close of” the first act, Austen writes, “in the interval succeeding an Italian song, she explained the words of the song to Mr. Elliot.” Though the moment is interstitial, literally part of an

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47 Wiltshire, 151-52. For more on the role of health, particularly that of the heroine, and the “sociolect” of illness in the novel, see Wiltshire’s chapter “Emma: the picture of health,” 110-54. Gilbert and Gubar provide an earlier reading along similar lines: they describe “the sickness of [Austen’s] social world” and how “ill Jane Fairfax” and others “define the boundaries of the state” of Austen’s “most successful characters,” who find a way to avoid “fainting into silence” and “self-destructing into verbosity”; their success is tied to speech (183).

48 On how Jane serves as Emma’s “antithesis” and the people of Highbury interpret Jane according to “the site of her body,” which can “signify either propensity to ill-health or beauty and distinction,” see Wiltshire, 135-36.

intermission and easy to pass over in the text, Anne’s remark on her translation poses a significant contrast between the “meaning” of words and the “sense” of the song. “This,” Anne tells Mr. Elliot, “is nearly the sense, or rather the meaning of the words, for certainly the sense of an Italian love-song must not be talked of,—but it is as nearly the meaning as I can give” (131).

In Austen’s time, the noun “sense” encompassed meanings covering the senses and sense perception, reason, and emotion, including the combination of emotional and physical sensitivity known as “sensibility.” Here the “sense” of the song refers to an “essence” beyond denotative meaning, and Anne’s coy assertion that this sense “must not be talked of” either suggests that the clichéd love song is nonsense, or that its value comes from the emotional and sensual resonances of “sense.”

The latter sense of “sense” is particularly poignant when, after enduring the consequences of her own sensible rejection of Wentworth, Anne is close to regaining his love and her satisfied, blooming sensibility. The story of *Persuasion* is this transition from “good sense” to “sense” as sensory pleasure, and a redoubled emphasis on the capacity of language to impart sensation characterizes the novel. It contains by turns, and sometimes at once, the parodic exposure of sentimental aesthetic form of the juvenilia and the more balanced style of the later novels. In an infamous scene comparing the aesthetics of Anne’s and Mrs. Musgrove’s bodies, Austen underscores the correspondence between physical and verbal idioms as she critiques the conventions of bodies in good (or bad) taste. If it is the interaction between language and bodies that determines meaning in the earlier novels, as in *Emma*, then *Persuasion* extends this point to connotations that come from the senses as it immerses us in Anne’s sensory experience,

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51 *OED Online*, s.v. “sense, n,” esp. definitions I.1.b. and II.15.b.
especially in the sounds that form words and Wentworth’s “speaking” letter. In her most mature novel, Austen most fully inhabits sentimental convention in order to reanimate it as she restores sound to writing, with language that remains in the body as sounds.

*Persuasion*’s mixture of aggressive parody and more subtle revision of sentimental convention appears in a key scene for Austen criticism, especially for critics interested in the body. The novel displays and spoofs one standard of language and the body in Mrs. Musgrove’s “large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody had cared for” (49). The phrase “large fat sighings” is frequently read as a slip on Austen’s part, through which the author’s meanness becomes visible. Wiltshire sees it as a “capitulat[ion] to that crude reading of the body as a decipherable text which the novel examines and repudiates almost everywhere else.”\(^\text{52}\) Here he is in company with Miller, for whom the passage is one of the novel’s “little fits of pique” that represent Austen’s fall from the godlike style of “No One” to a “characterizable” point of view.\(^\text{53}\) These readings call attention to the forcefulness, apparent lack of subtlety, and even violence of Austen’s wit, which recalls the boldness of the early parodies. There is certainly some justice in this: Austen emphasizes Mrs. Musgrove’s fatness through not one but two adjectives, which in turn prepare us to receive the plural noun “sighings” with all the sense of mockery it can deliver.

More broadly, in the context of Austen’s famous economy of language, to elevate Anne’s thin and quietly stoic heroine at the expense of an emotionally incontinent fat woman would appear to coincide not only with the conventions of the sentimental heroine but also with a writing style in which less is so often more.

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\(^{52}\) Wiltshire, 195. On how Austen is “continually teased by the evident plausibility of the equivalence” between the body and character, and how she shows “the instinct…to see handsomeness as integrity” is a “trap” when it comes to *Pride and Prejudice*’s Wickham, see Wiltshire, 56, 163. See also Heydt-Stevenson on how the “novels focus on how well one can decipher the individual through his or her physicality and on the degree to . . . which social rubrics should control the . . . female body” (19).

\(^{53}\) Miller, 69.
I want to qualify this judgment. If the ridicule of “fat sighings” is Austen’s, then so is the next paragraph’s reflection on the tasteful intolerance for “unbecoming conjunctions.” Directly following the sentence describing Mrs. Musgrove’s “fat sighings,” Austen’s narrator glosses the unfairness and inevitability of judging the body in bad taste:

Personal size and mental sorrow have certainly no necessary proportions. A large bulky figure has as good a right to be in deep affliction, as the most graceful set of limbs in the world. But, fair or not fair, there are unbecoming conjunctions, which reason will patronize in vain,—which taste cannot tolerate,—which ridicule will seize. (49)

Austen describes and deconstructs the “ridicule” of “unbecoming conjunctions” that characterizes the phrase “large fat sighings.” The “crude” reading Wiltshire describes is not, then, Austenian aesthetics of either the body or language; it is a mixture of indulgence in and critique of sentimental aesthetics, particularly its equation of physical and emotional beauty. Mrs. Musgrove’s “fat sighings” highlight both the attraction and the logical fallacy of the taste for graceful feeling bodies. Heydt-Stevenson sees this mix of ridicule and respect in terms of an exchange between Mrs. Musgrove and Anne, who are connected in this scene through their positions on the sofa and their grief (one for a lost son, the other for a lost love). As Heydt-Stevenson says, “unbecoming conjunctions,” such as that between Mrs. Musgrove and Anne, “problematic meanings” and “destabilize . . . tidy truths” by “emphasizing context” that, in this case, “render[s] each half of the conjunction absurd or indeterminate at the same time,” so that Mrs. Musgrove’s sighs place Anne’s “melancholia in serious danger of looking ridiculous”—and, *vice versa*, “Anne’s own regret” might “elevate Mrs. Musgrove’s.” Applying this reading,

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54 Heydt-Stevenson, 183-84.
55 Heydt-Stevenson, 181, 184.
when we hear from the narrator of *Persuasion*, that “the agitations of Anne’s slender form, and pensive face, may be considered as very completely screened” by Mrs. Musgrove’s figure, the sentence ironizes not only her size, but also the sentimental stereotype of Anne’s slender, pensive “agitations” (49).

Austen’s critique goes beyond this exchange between Anne and Mrs. Musgrove; the absurdity and worth of each exists outside their association with each other. Anne is guilty of her own form of excess. She is pining, and that the “agitations” of her “slender form” should need to be “screened” by the bereaved Mrs. Musgrove’s body is not just an equalizer between the two, it is the ultimate sendup of Anne’s sentimental wallowing. Not only does Anne’s emotional and aesthetic credit redeem Mrs. Musgrove, Austen style does too. Wentworth has “consideration for all that was real and unabsurd in the parent’s feelings” (49). *Persuasion* confirms this worth, putting forth the Musgroves as examples of parental goodness in their daughters’ marriages, as well as granting Mrs. Musgrove the good sense to give Anne her “real affection” (156). She has value in the novel as a kind and affectionate person in her own right, beyond what her conjunction with Anne gives her. As Austen carefully notes, this emotional authenticity is betrayed by a body “more fitted by nature to express good cheer” than “sentiment” for a lost son (49), while Anne, who possesses a “graceful set of limbs,” demonstrates the emotional force and aesthetic appeal of a body and verbal idiom working in concert and under the grammar of taste.

If to show that Mrs. Musgrove’s fatness discredits her sincere utterance while Anne’s graceful limbs reinforce her aesthetic appeal does not seem fair, this is precisely Austen’s point.

The language attached to Mrs. Musgrove and Anne solidifies this point as it follows along the lines of their bodies, at once unifying them in their different forms of excess and demonstrating the physicality of Austen’s language. Underscoring the connection between Mrs.
Musgrove’s figure and aesthetic convention, the gesture of “large fat sighings” and the words themselves, with their heavy three consecutive stressed syllables, echo the excess of her physical size as they nullify her grief. In a different way, Anne’s word resembles her body’s simultaneous excess and nullity. For her father and her sister, Anne’s “word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne” (5). Mrs. Musgrove takes up space, both on the sofa and with her sighings, and this discredits her utterances, while Anne has so little physical and verbal heft in her own family that her word, like her body, fades away.

By analogy to “Personal size and mental sorrow,” personal size and verbal heft have “no necessary proportions,” but the parallels between the categories of body and language draw attention to their mutual dependence in the aesthetics that the novel explores, and in its own style. Far from a “capitulation” to a standard of taste that dictates a correspondence between graceful bodies and graceful roles in a narrative, *Persuasion* balances parody of this aesthetic with its inclusion as part of the novel’s theory of how styles of language and the body reflect, impact, and amplify each other. The embodied language that conveys the correspondence between Anne’s skinny body and verbal weightlessness does so no less successfully than comically, and in so doing it simultaneously forms and comments upon its own style. At the same time that Austen’s linguistic materialism—where Herder maps tactile texture onto speech sounds, she maps the sensation of physical weight onto verbal emphasis—divides Mrs. Musgrove and Anne into separate aesthetic categories, it also presents another “unbecoming conjunction.”

Though in different proportions, Anne’s verbal and physical heft, like Mrs. Musgrove’s, registers in the material scale of simple weight, or body mass.

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Anne’s shape is more along the lines of aesthetic taste than Mrs. Musgrove, but she too
deviates from convention: at twenty-seven, and past her bloom, she is old for a heroine. Perhaps
more than any of Austen’s other novels, the narrative of Persuasion follows the sensory
experience of this heroine, and its language becomes a means for the reader to inhabit Anne’s
body.\(^{57}\) Where the heroine of a sentimental novel might faint with an excess of sensory and
emotional stimulation, Anne remains conscious, if with senses confused, disoriented, and
overwhelmed. When she first encounters Wentworth after an eight-year absence, “a thousand
feelings rushed on Anne” and “Her eye half met Captain Wentworth’s; a bow, a curtsey passed;
she heard his voice—he talked to Mary, said all that was right . . . the room seemed full—full of
persons and voices—but a few minutes ended it” (43). As Margaret Russett points out, the
passage imitates the “flow of perception through asyndeton, parenthetical interjections, and the
dissociation of ‘persons’ from ‘voices.’”\(^{58}\) Austen’s language demonstrates Anne’s sensory and
emotional disarray through the brief clauses and frequent syncopations of dashes and
semicolons. Anne’s disorientation comes through in the passivity of “a bow” and “a curtsey”
passing without agents, and her sensory overload appears in the repetition of “full” and the
fixation on individual senses that fall short of their usual capacity—her eye “half” meets
Wentworth’s, she hears his voice but appears not to register the details of his dialogue. Distinct
tones, gestures, and words blur into an impression of bodies, voices, and emotions. The “rapid

\(^{57}\) Pinch also notes the novel’s “emphasis on sensation,” especially in Anne and Wentworth’s courtship
and an interest in speech as sound or “noise,” interpreting this focus in terms of the “presence” and
“pressures of others,” including Anne’s “heightened awareness” of Wentworth and the larger world (145-
56).

Architecture Source, EBSCOhost. On the loss of “normal perceptual form,” including “particular
utterances,” in this passage see also Pinch, 155. Litz analyzes another passage, in which Wentworth
removes a child from Anne’s neck, in similar terms to Russett’s and my own, writing that “the passive
construction, the indefinite pronouns, and the staccato syntax all imitate the effect of the incident upon
Anne’s mind” (228-29).
and nervous syntax” that Litz sees as “designed to imitate the bombardment of impressions upon
the mind”59 is thus the formal mirror of Anne’s senses. It is a style that draws us in, too. In the
“rapid and nervous” rhythm of the prose, the reader may participate in Anne’s bodily experience
as she reads. Though pitched at a different pace from the swift sentences of “The Beautifull
Cassandra,” or from Elizabeth Bennet’s rapid reading, the movement of language here has a
physical effect on the reader. As in Wordsworth’s replication of the rhythm of his gait in poetic
meter, Austen’s verbal motion replicates the sensations that it describes, allowing the reader to
come as close as possible to stepping into Anne’s body by mirroring her embodied experience.

This immersion in Anne’s sensations has an exemplary verbal form in the word as sound.
As Adela Pinch observes, “spoken language is often apprehended as sheer sound” in the novel.60
These words as sounds command attention as sensations, at times even more than through the
information they convey. For example, Austen depicts the nullity of the Elliots’ trivial and
relentless boasts of their distinguished relatives through their repetitive, oppressive sounding in
Anne’s ears: “our cousins Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret;” “our cousins, the Dalrymples,”
sounded in [Anne’s] ears all day long” (105). Elsewhere the meaning of words determines
sensory experience by prioritizing certain sounds over others, and for Anne, the most resonant
words are those connected with Wentworth: “Such she believed were [Mr. Elliot’s] words; but
scarcely had she received their sound, than her attention was caught by other sounds immediately
behind her, which rendered every thing else trivial. Her father and Lady Dalrymple were
speaking [of Wentworth’s looks]” (133). Words register as a hierarchy of sounds—the most
powerful of which “[catch]” one’s “attention,” the least of which are “trivial,” merely
“received”—determined by personal interest; in this case, Wentworth and his body trumps all.

59 Litz, 228.
60 Pinch, 149.
This interest recalls Edmund Burke’s affective theory of language, in which words evoke our emotional associations with them, rather than ideas or images. Austen extends the effects of this affective associationism to an impact on our sensory experience of speech sounds across time. Words remain in Anne’s body as sounds, particularly when they are spoken by Wentworth himself:

After waiting a few moments [Wentworth] said—and as if it were the result of immediate feeling—“It is a period, indeed! Eight years and a half is a period!”

Whether he would have proceeded farther was left to Anne’s imagination to ponder over in a calmer hour; for while still hearing the sounds he had uttered, she was startled to other subjects by Henrietta . . . (159)

The contrast between this interrupted conversation with Wentworth and the previous one with Mr. Elliot is notable. Whereas Anne “scarcely had received [the] sound” of Mr. Elliot’s words when she abandons comprehension of them to attend to sounds concerning Wentworth, she is “still hearing the sounds [Wentworth] had uttered” while Henrietta is speaking. The emotional value Anne places on speech sounds shortens or lengthens not only the amount of time she attends to them, but also the time she hears them. The sounds Anne values the most do not simply fade away; thanks to aural memory, she is “still hearing the sounds” of Wentworth’s words after he has said them, preserving them, at least for a time, as repeated sensation. Wentworth, too, tries to record Anne’s words. A conversation between Anne and Captain Harville is interrupted by “a slight noise” coming from Wentworth: “It was nothing more than that [Wentworth’s] pen had fallen down, but Anne was startled at finding him nearer than she had supposed, and half

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inclined to suspect that the pen had only fallen, because he had been occupied by them, striving to catch sounds, which yet she did not think he could have caught” (165).

Of sound’s “special relationship to time,” Walter J. Ong observes that “no other sensory field totally resists a holding action, stabilization, in quite this way.”62 But Austen describes Anne holding onto sounds, hearing them again after they have sounded, and Wentworth, similarly, trying to hold onto her speech as it fades on its way to him. To describe words as sounds that one catches or has in one’s ears is to emphasize the sonic things that the body holds, placing them on the line Ong draws between powerful, necessarily bodily transitory sounds—“events”—and written “things.”63 This turns speech sounds into tangible things that can be “caught,” or that we can at least strive to catch as Wentworth does, uniting the forcefulness of speech with the graspable thingness of writing. In a plot that centers on the revival of a past love, “holding” sound works partly as an apt metaphor for this restoration of the past and partly as an analogy for the preservation of sound, voice, and their embodied contexts in writing. Calling our attention to words as sounds may alert us to our own sounding out of the words we are reading—“our cousins Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret” sound in our ears as we read of them sounding in Anne’s. Like Wentworth, we find ourselves trying to catch, or hold, elusive sounds, he the sounds of Anne’s words, we the sounds of Austen’s.64

63 Ong, 32-33, 67. In Ong’s account, the typographic cultures conceive of words as “things, ‘out there’ on a flat surface” while to an oral culture words are “events” or “actions,” “and hence…necessarily powered” (32-33). “The oral word,” Ong remarks, “always engages the body” as it “never exists in a simply verbal context” (67).
As we try to catch the sounds of the novel, we also try to feel what Anne feels: Anne’s physical experience is the narrative center of *Persuasion*, and this is nowhere clearer than when it immerses us in her perception of sound.65 Austen exploits what Ong describes as the experience of hearing: “I am at the center of my auditory world, which envelopes me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence. . . . You can immerse yourself in hearing” but not sight.66 By focalizing her narrative not just through Anne’s physical sensations in general, but through her sense of hearing in particular, Austen encourages our own sensory immersion in Anne’s body and in the language of the novel. In so doing, she calls attention to the equivalence between these two forms of immersion—sensory and linguistic—and especially to the way we experience language, whether written or spoken, as sound. Words as sounds have their own sentimental history: Austen amplifies what Henry Mackenzie produces in *The Man of Feeling* (1771) when, after hearing from his servant that his beloved Miss Walton is engaged, Harley “stood with his eyes fixed on the ground, and the last words of his intelligence vibrating in his ears.”67 This eponymous “man of feeling” (whatever the gentle ironies) presents the bodily

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65 On noise as a representation of the “mechanized aspects of social life,” with its character “types” or copies, and as a protective screen for “self-expression” and introspection in Austen’s novels, see Lynch’s chapter on “Jane Austen and the Social Machine,” in *The Economy of Character*, 207-49. See esp. 239-42, where Lynch examines *Persuasion*’s treatment of social noise and the “nonsignificative aspects of language,” arguing that “real feeling” becomes “a language of undertone,” while Anne’s piano playing and reading simultaneously participate in the dynamics of the “crowd” and create space for private individual reflection. Lynn Festa analyzes noise, silence, and listening in Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), including their formal representation, and concludes that Austen focuses on sounds occluded by or received as “noise” to “challenge the established order” that determines what is “heard as meaningful.” Festa, “The Noise in *Mansfield Park,*” *Persuasions* 36 (2014): 151-64, Literary Reference Center, EBSCOhost. See also Pinch, 146, 149, 155-56.

66 Ong, 72.

experiences of a figure of sentiment; through the peculiar endurance through time of Anne’s love story, Austen personalizes this trope. Her extended attention to words that reproduce, or are, sensations reveals language as an agent of physical sensation, sensory immersion, and embodiment.

This connection between language and the body, the written and the auditory, culminates in Austen’s conclusion of *Persuasion* with the version that has Wentworth’s letter to Anne (which is not in the draft ending). It is in this letter, particularly its clichés, that Austen most fully inhabits and reclaims sentimental convention. The draft ending omits not only the letter, but also Anne and Captain Harville’s discussion of the correlation between male and female bodies and their feelings. Here Anne and Wentworth’s reunion is achieved chiefly by “a silent, but a very powerful Dialogue;—on his side, Supplication, on her’s acceptance.—Still, a little nearer—and a hand taken and pressed—and ‘Anne, my own dear Anne!’—bursting forth in the fullness of exquisite feeling” (182). The punctuation conveys the rhythm of this “silent dialogue” to us: the many dashes and commas allow the reader to experience some of the dialogue’s silence. And the absence of agents in the sentence—Wentworth does not “supplicate,” “supplication” describes him, nor does he take Anne’s hand, a hand is “taken”—creates a sense of quiet through its passivity, as if subjects performing verbs would be too loud. That Austen cordons off Wentworth’s final exclamation between two dashes gives it the feeling of a sudden auditory interruption that punctuates the quiet rhythm of the previous clauses and the rests between them. Yet for all this verisimilitude, as Wiltshire remarks, it is Austen’s language that must convey “The power of the ‘dialogue’ . . . and therefore this moment, however appropriate . . . is bound to

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seem perfunctory.” Complicating Emma’s subordination of signs to feelings, the paradox is that the “powerful” language of silent physical gesture requires words for narration.

Austen makes the necessity of language to communicate even bodily sensations in writing explicit in her revised ending, which includes Wentworth’s letter. To read his letter, Anne “succeed[s] to the very spot where he had leaned and written” (167), physically occupying the same space his body occupied as he wrote the letter she is reading, as if she were stepping into its ghost and reliving its experience as she reads. The letter itself amplifies this bodily exchange as it records Wentworth’s close listening to Anne and Harville’s conversation:

I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach. You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone for ever. I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own, than when you almost broke it eight years and a half ago. Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you. Unjust I may have been, weak and resentful I have been, but never inconstant. You alone have brought me to Bath. For you alone I think and plan.—Have you not seen this? Can you fail to have understood my wishes?—I had not waited even these ten days, could I have read your feelings, as I think you must have penetrated mine. I can hardly write. I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me. You sink your voice, but I can distinguish the tones of that voice, when they would be lost on others.—Too good, too excellent creature! You do us justice indeed. You do believe that there

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68 Wiltshire, 191.
is true attachment and constancy among men. Believe it to be most fervent, most undeviating in

F.W. (167-68)

Wentworth describes his writing as speaking, investing his letter with the intimacy, individuality, and sounding of a voice. This is one cliché in a letter full of them—“You pierce my soul,” “I am half agony, half hope,” stilted literary language such as “Tell me not” and “Dare not,” professions of constancy akin to those Austen gently ironizes in Anne earlier in the novel—but these clichés are brief and to the point, in short sentences without embellishment, and Austen presents them wholly without irony. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth ribs Darcy for only speaking if he can “say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the eclat of a proverb” (63), describing language that has power whether or not it is attached to an individual person. The clichés that make up Wentworth’s letter gain power only through their embodiment in his person and voice. His words have force because one particular person utters them and he invests them with the same sensory immersion we see in the language the novel uses to narrate Anne’s experience. The irony and restraint of the previous pages and the previous novels, combined with the simplicity and sensory immersion of the prose, the sounding of voice, and the ghost of Wentworth’s body here, give the letter’s conventional phrases new force as they bring a sense of individual physical presence into writing.

As Wentworth “speak[s]” to Anne through this letter, a sense of his voice filters in through the conversational turn and punch of short, abrupt sentences like (paradoxically) “I can hardly write.” Though, as Elizabeth says of her claim to the greatest happiness, other people have said they “can hardly write” before, the sounding word *is* a nearly overpowering event for Wentworth—he drops his pen, he keeps his letter short. Through a linkage at once sonic and
plot-based, we believe that Anne pierces Wentworth’s soul because we know his feelings are “precious”; in this sounding, his feelings reflect the sound of “pierce.” As with Anne’s preservation of the sounds of his speech through aural memory, Wentworth’s ability to hear the tones of her voice “when they would be lost on others” retrieves the seemingly irretrievable—lost love and sound—and signifies powerful attunement to Anne’s voice and body. Just as Anne dwells in her ear when she attends to sounds connected to Wentworth, he listens “in silence”; sound or lack of sound are felt in or as a container for the body. Anne and Wentworth are most palpably present within their own bodies through their experience of language as sound, and this, the novel suggests, is exactly how we inhabit their bodies too. Anne’s movement into the space that Wentworth’s body occupied represents what the novel invites us to do as we read with her—stepping into Wentworth’s body through his words, the rhythm of the short explosive sentences, and the sense of a voice that sounds with them. 69

Austen carefully calls our attention to the relationship among language, sound, and sympathetic experience of a character’s sensations in order to theorize this relationship even as she uses it to create a sense of physical presence. Recently, Russett has touched on this phenomenon in terms of *Persuasion*’s interest in mediation, whether in the form of language, perception, or time. Russett writes that the “project” of the novel, and of this chapter, is to “simulate the experience of immediacy.”70 But she sees Austen’s choice of summarizing Anne and Wentworth’s conversation after their reconciliation rather than providing dialogue as a reminder of writing’s mediation. This reminder, and its exposure of “the technical means” behind such simulated immediacy, “forecloses” the identification that allows us to feel as if we

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69 On the letter’s “stops and starts” as evidence of how it is “closely structured on Anne’s conversation,” its collapse of the boundaries between “reading and feeling” and “speaking and acting,” and how it “ensures that readers read with Anne” see Lynch, 244-45. Pinch also discusses how the letter highlights “authorial rustlings,” readers’ sensations, and the “doubling” of Anne’s experience in ours (159–60).
70 Russett, 430.
could “hear [these characters’] voices.” As Russett points out, Austen does call attention to the “technical means” that she uses to create a sense of physical presence. Where Russett describes this in tension with the novel’s simulation of immediacy, however, I would suggest that, while Austen highlights the mediacy of language between our experience and that of a fictional character, she also makes a case that it is language itself, rather than its representation of characters, that excites the reader’s immediate physical sensations. Just as Wentworth’s letter is simultaneously an immediate source of sensation for Anne and a means of mediating between reader and writer, Austen’s writing is an immediate source of sensation for her reader.

Austen is responding, whether directly or not, to eighteenth-century philosophy that, as Nicholas Hudson points out, advanced a “distrust of written language.” These philosophers included Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Herder, and the elocutionist Thomas Sheridan, who elevated the passionate expression of speaking, with its full bodily participation through tone and gesture, at the expense of writing. For them speech becomes the source of emotional and embodied expression that engages the senses and elicits sympathy, while writing is comparatively unemotional, disembodied, and even dead. By using a letter to demonstrate the experience of occupying someone’s absent body and hearing someone’s absent speech, Austen insists, even more forcefully here than in Elizabeth’s reading of Darcy’s letter, that the way writing works, and the way her style works, is through producing physical sensations in the body of its reader.

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71 Russett, 430.
73 Hudson’s account of this phenomenon also includes Lord Kames, Thomas Reid, and Monboddo (344). See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Essay on the Origin of Languages (1781), trans. John H. Moran, in On the Origin of Language, 21-22; Herder, 92-95; and Thomas Sheridan, A Course of Lectures on Elocution (London, 1762), xii, ECCO. Sheridan, for example, claims that attempts to better understand the passions have failed because of an overestimation of the “power of writing,” when the task could only be accomplished through the “living voice,” not the “dead letter” (x-xii).
from Anne reading Wentworth’s letter to the novel reader following along with her. In exposing this to our notice, Austen develops the feeling of embodiment that language creates into a theory. In other words, Austen’s language does not just describe sensations, nor does it simply rely on representations of characters’ feelings to create them in the reader. In the rhythm of Wentworth’s letter, or the poignant nearness of “pierce” and “precious,” Austen invites us to observe the way language itself generates sensation.

Sitting down to read, Anne’s “eyes devoured the . . . words” of the letter (167) and after reading it Anne feels “an overpowering happiness” (168) that echoes Wentworth’s experience of hearing her conversation with Harville. Finally Anne, “faded and thin” (5) in body and word for most of the novel, gets to eat something. In this novel where the figure that is Anne’s body falls so much within the waifish lines and language of sentimental fiction, her return to a “spring of felicity” through “the warmth of her heart” (178) and in her body, “Glowing and lovely in sensibility and happiness” (173), marks a spring for embodied language. That this happy ending arises through Anne’s inhabitation of Wentworth’s body in reading his letter, and then her felicitous revival of her own, draws our attention to the way our own sympathetic experience of the characters’ sensations creates the happiness of this ending, felt perhaps in our own glowing sensibility. The parallel between the “overpowering” effects of Wentworth’s writing on Anne and Anne’s speech on Wentworth unites sound with writing, bringing the sounding event and the verbal thing together at the same time that the plot brings together its hero and heroine. In a story where love remains through time and separation, sound and the body that senses it find a way to remain in writing.

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For Austen, language always gets physical. It follows the curves of characters’ bodies, draws us in to experience their physical sensations, and gives a letter a sense of a speaking voice and the writer’s physical presence. This observation calls for a new definition of Austen style. Austen’s is not the disembodied style of spinsterhood elevated to the stature of godliness that D.A. Miller suggests; rather, the physicality of her language indicates an enjoyment of the bodily pleasure of words. Austen’s utterance is not injured but robust. Her territory throughout is the way language affects, effects, and comes from physical sensations. This unites Austen’s last complete novel and the juvenilia—two segments of her career that critics often see as outliers in the Austen canon—with the earlier novels. In considering language as an agent of ordinary sensations, rather than standardized sentiments, Austen critiques and revises sentimental conventions, as well as anti-materialist theories of language and writing. Rather than the conventional sentiments of tearful, delicate heroines, Austen invites readers to feel along with the commonplace, even potentially “vulgar,” embodied sensations of swift motion in the juvenilia, the rhythms and motions of Elizabeth Bennet in reading, Emma’s words that drive physical circulation, and Anne’s words as sounds.

This sense of language also suggests a provocative connection between Austen and Romantic-era contemporaries with whom she seldom shares a critical volume, such as Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge could have been describing Wentworth’s

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letter when he writes in the manuscript note with which I began my introduction: “The focal word has acquired a feeling of reality—it heats and burns, makes itself be felt. If we do not grasp it, it seems to grasp us, as with a hand of flesh and blood, and completely counterfeits an immediate presence, an intuitive knowledge.” As William Keach remarks, “Despite Coleridge’s self-consciousness about the rhetorical figure . . . the emphasis is on words themselves, not on writer or reader, as active agents.” While Austen foregrounds the mediacy of linguistic representation in order to uncover the word’s own immediate sensory impact, Coleridge finds in language an “immediate presence” that physically “makes itself be felt,” which even his doubts cannot dispel. Austen’s interest in language as sensation is also consonant with the project of my next chapter: Wordsworth’s commitment to “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation,” as spoken by “flesh and blood” speakers (Preface, 1800: 741, 747; 1802: 747, note 182-89). As in Anne’s attention to words as sounds according to their emotional resonance, Wordsworth represents words as affective agents, describing them as “things, active and efficient,” that are “not only . . . symbols of the passion[s]” but “part” of them, with their own emotional force. Austen’s critique of the sentimental judgment of bodies in bad taste finally anticipates the interests of my last chapter on Mary Shelley’s more radical exploration of these exclusions through deformed, inhuman, and animal figures. Recognizing these connections not only puts Austen in surprising company, it also helps us locate her and her style just where she preferred to be: enjoying the pleasure of fine prose as one relishes wine.


76 Keach, 30.

In the opening paragraph of the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth outlines the aims of his poetry in terms of sensation. His claim to write in “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation” suggests that this state is both the subject of his language and the shaper of it. In this chapter, I explore what “sort of” sensations Wordsworth selects for his poetry and how his language transforms from a record of “vivid sensation” to a source of it. Wordsworth describes the process of composing as a “selection” from this language of sensation, which he then “fit[s],” as if following the curves of a body, “to metrical arrangement.” In turn, the poems impart a specific “sort” and “quantity” of pleasure to the reader. This is, at least in part, an embodied pleasure: both poetry and prose, Wordsworth asserts, “speak by and to the same organs” (749), and elsewhere he describes his “wish to keep my Reader in the company of flesh and blood” persons as opposed to personifications of abstract ideas (747). Wordsworth claims that his poetry comes from, embodies, and speaks to “flesh and blood,” but he does not describe in direct detail how he gets from the one to the other, or what specific kinds of sensations he wishes to impart.

Wordsworth’s argument for an embodied poetry stands against philosophers such as Lord Monboddo who objected to this bodiliness. Monboddo opposed John Locke’s claim that words and ideas derive from sensory experience, and this opposition was, as Olivia Smith reminds us,

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1 William Wordsworth, Preface (1800), in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 741. Unless otherwise noted, all references are to the 1800 preface. References to the 1802 appendix are from this edition; all references to poems in *Lyrical Ballads* are to the 1798 texts in this edition.
part of a conservative justification for class hierarchy based on separating the “refined from the vulgar language.” The “vulgar,” by Monboddo’s standard, have “clear conception[s]” only of words for sensations, while the “idea of the man of science” is “abstracted from every thing material.” In company with Monboddo, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s criticism of the preface in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) rejects materialism in favor of the more abstract language of mental reflection. Coleridge takes issue with Wordsworth’s choice to depict the language of “Low and rustic life” (743), arguing that the real language of a rustic man “would furnish a very scanty vocabulary” that centers on “his bodily conveniences.” “The best part of human language, properly so called,” he writes, “is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself” (51). Though Coleridge does not see Wordsworth’s poetry as a faithful representation of rustic language, he objects to the idea that the “best” language comes from this class on the basis of what he considers its excessive embodiment.

Had he lived to see the 1850 publication of *The Prelude*, Coleridge would have liked the subtitle for the poem addressed to him—“Growth of a Poet’s Mind”—and this emphasis on mind still colors Wordsworth’s critical reputation. William Keach concedes that the poet’s lack of

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3 James Burnet, Lord Monboddo, *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (1773-1792), 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1774), 1: 96, Eighteenth Century Collections Online. All future references to this database will refer to it as ECCO.

4 On Coleridge’s trajectory from his early agreement with the linguistic ideals of Wordsworth’s preface to his later resemblance to Monboddo, see Olivia Smith, 208-10, 215, 217, 225.


6 Though *The Prelude* received its title after Wordsworth’s death, this subtitle reflects his own earlier descriptions of the poem. In his preface to the 1814 edition of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth writes that the poem “conducts the history of the Author’s mind to the point when he was emboldened to hope” that he could perform his poetic work. Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 3: 5. Wordsworth’s letter to Thomas Noon Talfourd (ca. 10 April 1839) refers to his “long poem upon the formation of my own mind.” Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Volume VI. The Later Years, Part*
objection to Locke may “shock” his readers, acknowledging a critical assumption that
“Romantic” poets oppose materialist philosophy.⁷ For post-structuralist critics, ironically, the
problem of Wordsworth’s language is more specifically one of failure to broach the material
world. Frances Ferguson finds that the poet’s emphasis on epitaphs “establishes the sign of
mortality at the origin of language,” which effectively suspends words between embodiment and
disembodiment.⁸ Paul de Man describes Romantic poetry as a failed attempt to transcend the
figurative and “become entirely literal” like a natural object.⁹ As these critics oppose the
figurative to the literal, personification to the person, they describe Wordsworth’s failure to unite
his language with the material world in terms that recall and invert his claims to keep his reader
“in the company of flesh and blood.”

In the teeth of this post-structuralist narrative, Smith sees Wordsworth revaluing the term
“flesh and blood” in a turn towards poetry of the “commonality of human experience.”¹⁰ More
recently Alan Richardson has described Wordsworth’s “embodied approach to language”—his
interest both in its neurophysiology and in “extrasemantic, ‘natural’ features of language” such
as rhythm, repetition, and interjections—as “attuned” to “basic,” “widespread features” of

¹⁰ Olivia Smith, 217. On the relationship among consciousness, pleasure, sensation, and a potential
“common grounding in experience that connects [poets] with their readers” in Wordsworth’s poetry, see
Stuart M. Sperry, “Wordsworth and the Grounds of Human Consciousness,” in The Cast of
Consciousness: Concepts of the Mind in British and American Romanticism, ed. Beverly Taylor and
physical and emotional life. While Keach recovers Wordsworth’s consideration of words themselves as things, Adela Pinch and Susan Wolfson examine the relationship between his poetics and women’s bodies. Pinch discusses how, rather than “rejecting” the conventions of sentimental literature, Wordsworth uses “conventional images of women’s suffering” as a “medium through which the transmission of feeling and the transmission of poetic language produce and reproduce each other.” Yet, as Pinch recognizes, Wordsworth found sentimental fiction “too immediately exciting.” The 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* criticizes, along with conventional poetic diction, the “outrageous stimulation” of “frantic novels” and “idle and extravagant stories in verse” (747), implicitly rejecting the emotional excesses of sentimental and Gothic literature. The 1802 appendix stresses that poetic diction arbitrarily, and thus deceptively, connects words with feelings, estranging poetic language from natural passions (761-63). Instead of the hyper-conventional sentimental tear, Wordsworth’s “Ode” (1807) aspires to “Thoughts . . . too deep for tears.”

11 Alan Richardson, “A beating mind: Wordsworth’s poetics and the ‘science of feelings,’” in *British Romanticism and the Science of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 74, 79-82, 87, 91, ProQuest Ebook Central. Richardson contextualizes this “embodied approach” in terms of the focus on “‘natural’ features of language”—such as those that derive from “natural cries” or early, rhythmic language—in the philosophy such as Herder’s and neuroscience such as Erasmus Darwin’s; non-dualistic ideas of an “embodied mind” in the Romantic era; and recent cognitive semantic theory that considers linguistic categories as “motivated” by “everyday human needs” (79-81, 87, 74, 67-68, 71, 83-91). On Coleridge’s criticism of Wordsworth in relation to Monboddo, see Richardson, 82.
13 Pinch, 75, 105, 87.
14 Pinch, 87. For Pinch, the very immediacy of sentimental affects is the problem, and Wordsworth finds a solution in the “regulation of excitement” through meter, which “makes a representation inexhaustibly rereadable” in contrast to his avoidance of rereading *Clarissa* (86-88).
If not sentimental tears, Gothic extravagance, or the artificial feelings of poetic diction, then what more “widespread” sensations does Wordsworth’s poetry impart and how does it impart them? I argue that Wordsworth revises sentimental models for the “transmission of feeling” by returning, like Locke, to the simple sensory experiences we share, such as the motion of walking or the sound of chattering teeth.\textsuperscript{16} The test of Wordsworth’s poetics is whether it comes from and reproduces these experiences; the former guarantees authentic feeling and the latter marks an authentic poetry capable of reforming readers’ feelings. I examine this poetics across the historically proximate 1805 \textit{Prelude} and \textit{Lyrical Ballads}, texts usually seen as distinct phases of Wordsworth’s career despite their overlap in composition, together with lesser-known works such as the “Essay on Morals” (comp. ca. 1798). As I show, \textit{The Prelude} delivers a narrative of poetic composition that comes from the poet’s sensations—of the invigorating breeze, of emotionally and rhythmically even walking—and then conveys these sensations to the reader through the text’s corresponding rhythm, motion, and images. The onomatopoeias of “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” and “The Idiot Boy” (1798) replace the conventional thrills of sentimental or Gothic poetry with the sensations associated with inarticulate bodily sounds. In so doing, Wordsworth elicits readers’ sympathy, not for cultivated sentimental heroines or heroic supernatural adventures, but for “vulgar” embodied sensations. He offers a phenomenology of writing and reading that is fundamentally circular: Wordsworth’s “real language” at once arises from, imitates, and imparts “flesh and blood” sensations.

\textsuperscript{16} In so doing, I expand Richardson’s and Smith’s considerations of the importance of “common” experiences to Wordsworth’s poetic language to further understand what these experiences include, how Wordsworth communicates them, and how they reform sentimentalism. Richardson argues that, for Wordsworth, language is “produced and processed neurophysiologically” (82), but he does not explore the specific sensations of this physiology within the poems in much detail. On the pleasures of the experiences described in Wordsworth’s poetry, including those of sound, motion, visual landscape, and rhythm, and Wordsworth’s association of them with meter and line, see Sperry, 64-65, 68-69.
“Motions of delight”: Embodied Narrative

A recent essay in which C.R. Stokes takes up embodiment in *The Prelude* begins with the question, “How often do we conceive of Wordsworth as possessing a body?” Yet the poems I consider here demonstrate that Wordsworth conceived of *himself* as possessing a body. *The Prelude*, alongside its narrative of “the growth of a poet’s mind,” tells the story of this body and its role in poetic composition. “When, to the attractions of the busy World” (begun 1800; publ. 1815) demonstrates how one story of this body, the poet’s rhythm, becomes his reader’s. Language, whether written or spoken, becomes a source of immediate sensory experience as Wordsworth’s meter transmits his motion and as he describes the sensation of poetry in his bloodstream or, as in his “Essay on Morals,” in the heart. This alternate story of the body charts a circular course: the influence of language on the beat of Wordsworth’s circulation, and of physical sensations on his poetic composition, circulate through his poetry and become the impact of language on his reader.

I begin where *The Prelude* begins, with the motion of the breeze against Wordsworth’s body. The sensation of this breeze both literally (“I breathe again,” he writes) and figuratively inspires the opening enraptured burst:

> Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
> That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
> And from the sky; it beats against my cheek,
> And seems half conscious of the joy it gives.18

What Wordsworth offers us here, and what M.H. Abrams and Jonathan Wordsworth elide in their symbolic readings of the “corresponding mild creative breeze” (1.43) that the poet feels, is

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a playfully Lockean materialism. The trope of the “mild creative breeze” necessarily comes after the touch of the literal breeze. This is the order of things that Locke follows when he claims that abstract words “had their first rise from sensible Ideas,” and thus “Spirit, in its primary Signification, is Breath.” Though, as Richardson remarks, Wordsworth does not share Locke’s distrust of metaphor, the beginning of The Prelude alludes to the Lockean idea that language develops from sensory experience to abstract ideas. This suggests that, for Wordsworth as well as Locke, physical sensation is primary to abstract sense. The literal inspiration of “breath” leads to and helps us understand the figurative inspiration of the “spirit.” What Geoffrey Hartman calls “the untraditional muse of the epic’s opening” is, then, the physical sensation of the breeze.

Not only does Wordsworth’s narrative begin with a sensory inspiration, but he also evokes the contact the breeze makes with his body through the alliteration of metrically stressed plosive “b” words that are key to the meaning and action of the lines—the “blessing” flows through the “breeze” that “blows” and “beats” both in sound and meaning. At the same time, the breeze’s rhythmic “beating” recalls and models the physical impact of meter. By associating

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20 John Locke, An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding (1690), 5th ed. (London, 1706), III.i.5, ECCO.
21 For Richardson, Locke’s suspicion of metaphor and “abstract terms,” which led to William Lawrenc’s etymological reduction of “spirit” to “breath” and mind to body, is reason to align Wordsworth’s views on language with the more metaphor-friendly materialism of Herder or later cognitive linguistic theories of how this “Mind-as-Body Metaphor” is “motivated” by “shared features” of embodiment (84-87).
23 Wordsworth weakens this alliteration in the 1850 Prelude, which eliminates the words “blows” and “beats.” Instead, the breeze “fans my cheek” with a gentler fricative and, from an “it,” becomes “A visitant” with masculine pronouns who, with more elevated poetic diction, “Doth seem half-conscious of the joy he brings / . . . from yon azure sky” (1850, 1.2-4, emphasis mine). These changes emphasize the breeze as spirit more than as sensation, but the former still develops from the latter—the alliteration of the opening line remains the same and Wordsworth must feel the breeze on his cheek before he can recognize it as a “visitant.”
the sensation of the beating breeze with the beating sounds and rhythms of words, Wordsworth presents words as bearers, or secondary forms, of this experience. To borrow a term from Percy Shelley, Wordsworth’s poetry is “vitally metaphorical” because it “marks the before unapprehended relations” of the sensation of the breeze and the sensation of language.

Wordsworth underscores the importance of this original sensation when he returns to the breeze at key structural moments within his poem. At the beginning of Book 7, he recalls how he “first poured out” his “glad preamble to this verse” while “Saluted by that animating breeze” (7.1-4). “Saluted” combines the sense of a greeting with the “strike” or kiss of the breeze’s touch, and this sensation at once “animates” Wordsworth’s body, drives his pouring out of verse, and imparts him with an anima, a soul. Wordsworth reminds us here that soul and word follow sensation. Speaking of the poem’s discussion of “man’s unhappiness and guilt” (11.1),

Wordsworth again turns back to the breeze at the beginning of Book 11:

Not with these began
Our song, and not with these our song must end.
Ye motions of delight, that through the fields
Stir gently, breezes and soft airs that breathe
The breath of paradise, and find your way
To the recesses of the soul…

(11.7-12)

Wordsworth repeats the beating “b” sounds of the opening breeze, but here these plosives shade into sibilants as the “breath” of the breeze affects the “recesses of the soul”: Wordsworth evokes the transition from “breath” to “spirit” through a shift from harder to softer sounds. Like similar

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26 OED Online, s.v. “salute, v,” esp. definitions 1.d; 2.a, b, and e “To kiss, or greet with a kiss” (obsolete, last quotation from 1716); and 5.b, accessed 26 April 2018, http://www.oed.com.
lines from the “The Idiot Boy”—“And with the owls began my song, / And with the owls must end” (445-46)27—these define the boundaries of Wordsworth’s story. Where “The Idiot Boy” begins and ends in onomatopoeia for the sounds of owls, The Prelude describes pleasure that is, first, physical, as in the rhythmic touch of breezy “motions of delight,” and then emotional and spiritual as this delight reaches “the recesses of the soul.”28 If the aim of poetry is to impart the right kind of pleasure to the reader by recounting a state of “vivid sensation,” these returns to the opening breeze tell the story of how the poet’s pleasurable sensations inspire his poetry’s narrative form and, through the beating of his lines, his reader’s sensations. These sensations are, more specifically, those of rhythm, motion, and affective “delight” arising from the touch of the breeze, which become the percussive sounds, rhythm, and “motions of delight” of language. As Wordsworth circles back to the breeze, he enacts the circular motion from sensation to language, and from physical motion to emotion.

Even as the motions of the breeze return as a source of figurative and literal inspiration, the body in the motion of walking—the “amble” of the “glad preamble”—becomes the mode of Wordsworth’s composition and part of his poetics. Wolfson highlights the connection between Wordsworth’s walking and his meter, relating John Wilson’s memory of “Wordsworth inhabiting this sound [of metrics] himself, ‘pacing in his poetical way’ (the habit and path of sound as one).”29 William Hazlitt, too, describes the similarity between Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s respective styles of recitation and their gaits in composing:

27 I am indebted to the note to these lines in the Norton edition of The Prelude (note 1, page 416) for bringing my attention to this correspondence.
28 As in the opening lines, after “Ye motions of delight,” the corresponding lines of the 1850 Prelude employ less sensual language to describe the breeze: its motions “haunt” the hills rather than stirring the fields, and have “subtle intercourse with breathing flowers” rather than breathing the breath of paradise (12.9-11).
There is a *chaunt* in the recitation both of Coleridge and Wordsworth, which acts as a spell upon the hearer, and disarms the judgment. . . . Coleridge’s manner is more full, animated, and varied; Wordsworth’s more equable, sustained, and internal. The one might be termed more *dramatic*, the other more *lyrical*.

Coleridge has told me that he himself liked to compose in walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches of a copsewood; whereas Wordsworth always wrote (if he could) walking up and down a straight gravel-walk, or in some spot where the continuity of his verse met with no collateral interruption. 30

Though the trajectories of the poets’ careers color Hazlitt’s 1823 recollections of their younger selves, Wordsworth’s even walking as he composes strikingly corresponds to his even recitation. The “equable” rhythm and “internal” expression of Wordsworth’s recitation appear to depend on his bodily motion. In the rhythm of the poem, Wordsworth reproduces that of his own body, which then reproduces this rhythm in his chant. The effects of this poetic practice extend beyond rhythm: the narrative epiphanies of the “walking poem,” in which category Roger Gilbert includes parts of *The Prelude*, “tend to be more provisional and contingent” because they take place in this continuous, rhythmic flow. 31 In walking poems, the walker’s muscle movement is “an importunate reality”; the aim is a “coincidence of language and bodily sensation” and of “kinesis and mimesis” through the verbal motion of “feet and lines,” “words and sentences,” and

Wordsworth’s “pacing of walking, thinking, writing the turns of the verse line, and reading” as “parallel courses or traces,” see also Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 213.


“thoughts and images.” The continuous rhythm and “straight” motion of Wordsworth’s gait may shape not only the meter of his verse and his recitative chant, but also his narrative, images, and line endings.

In Book 4 of The Prelude and his shorter poem “When, to the attractions of the busy World,” Wordsworth demonstrates how this “coincidence of language and bodily sensation” works. With affectionate irony, he describes his younger self composing poetry during rambles with Ann Tyson’s dog: “Along my veins I kindled with the stir, / The fermentation and the vernal heat / Of poesy” and further on in the passage, “I sauntered, like a river murmuring / And talking to itself” (4.93-95, 110-11). The sensation of language rhythmically pulsing “along” the veins shapes the poet’s gait, which then, in turn, shapes his language. What Wordsworth describes here is the rush of chemical excitement and the elevated pulse we feel in our bodies as we experience strong emotion, which underscores the physical motion of emotion, of being moved. This recalls Wordsworth’s note to “The Thorn” (1800), where he describes “the interest which the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of the passion, but as things, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion.” Keach remarks of this note that it is “passion” that “makes words take on the force of things.” I would add that, once we associate it with a particular passion, the word becomes an “active” thing through moving passion. In this way, language causes Wordsworth’s excitedly warming and quickening pulse. Wordsworth’s poetic composition is even more circular than Hazlitt implies. The poet feels the thrill of language in his veins before the body and its “sauntering” rhythms become part of the language

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34 Keach, Arbitrary Power, 28.
of his “murmuring” verse. Language itself has a vital part in setting the pulse that Stuart Sperry observes in Wordsworth’s connection between meter and the “underlying rhythms of life,” as in the shared mother-infant “pulse,” which forms a “common grounding” between poet and reader. In Wordsworth’s poetics, words both move and are moved by the body: they circulate in and are circulated by the pulse of bodily circulation.

As Wordsworth describes his younger self the tone is one of gentle comedy, but this self-consciously moderates his youthful passion rather than invalidates it. Ann Tyson’s dog, like the calming influence of nature throughout the poem, serves as this moderating force, walking on ahead and doubling back to alert Wordsworth when he encounters another person. “Punctual to such admonishment,” Wordsworth writes, “I hushed / My voice, composed my gait, and shaped myself / To give and take a greeting” rather than face “piteous rumours” that he is “crazed in brain” (4.116-18, 119, 120). Under the dog’s chastening presence, the young Wordsworth sheepishly transitions from composing poetry in time with his gait, like one “crazed,” to composing his gait to form a socially acceptable greeting. Wordsworth’s language echoes this turn to self-consciousness through the pauses at the line break after “hushed” and before “composed” and “shaped.” At the same time that this anecdote is comical, its narrative of composition emphasizes how the poet’s body and his poetry take shape according to the inward sensations of language in the bloodstream, the feeling of the breeze, or the rhythm of walking rather than the outward demands of social performance. In these episodes, Wordsworth’s language develops from and imparts inward sensations as opposed to the external signs, such as

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35 Sperry, 73, 60, 74; for more on this shared pulse and the common rhythms (including breathing and heartbeat) Wordsworth connects with meter, the human heart, and external nature see 62, 64-65, 68-70. Sperry also observes the connection between Wordsworth’s pacing and his composition in this scene, but for him it has a more external emphasis: “the measured sounds of river, animal, and man seem to fuse within the creative trance and ensuing flow of numbers” (71). It is Ann Tyson’s dog who “connect[s]” Wordsworth with external rhythms (71).
tears, mandated by sentimental literature. I want to suggest that such moments constitute a sensory and immediate version of what Hans Aarsleff describes, using a term for the Lockean concern of socially correcting the match between words and ideas, as a “rectification” that “make[s] the internal external without the loss that ends in ‘falseness or affectation,’” a move Wordsworth achieves through the “primal language” of “referents” for “simple [rural] tasks.”

This “rectification,” by definition, should extend to the social world of Wordsworth’s readers, and, from the young Wordsworth’s internal circulation of language in the bloodstream, the mature poet moves outward to circulate these sensations socially, through the pulse of his poetry.

In “When, to the attractions of the busy World,” Wordsworth describes this mature version of composition, in which the rhythm of the poet’s body becomes his reader’s.

Wordsworth conducts a vain winter’s search for “A length of open space,—where to and fro / My feet might move without concern or care” under a grove of trees when, returning to the grove in the spring, he finds an “easy line” already “impressed” by his sailor brother, John, who visited and, now again at sea, left behind this trail.

John stamps this path “In that habitual restlessness of foot / With which the Sailor measures o’er and o’er / His short domain upon the Vessel’s deck” (65-67). Wordsworth’s placement of a line ending after “to and fro” evokes the back and forth motion the phrase describes, while the iamb “My feet” and the new path “impressed” by his

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brother’s “foot” remind us that Wordsworth’s metrical feet reflect the rhythm of bodily ones. In turn, John’s steps “measure” his time and the space he traverses “o’er and o’er” just as the regular repetition of meter measures out and keeps time for the “short domain” of poetic lines. The space of the grove and the pace of a body in repetitive motion map onto textual space, metrical time, and the repetition of poetic lines: they are not just metaphors for one another, but similar motions. In this way, Wordsworth compares his brother’s inhabitation “in” his “habitual restlessness of foot” with his own poetic vocation. He establishes sympathy between himself and his absent brother by identifying the sailor’s pacing with the poet’s metrical pace.

On Wordsworth’s return to this path, he imagines his brother “Muttering the Verses which I muttered first” as he paces “to and fro the Vessel’s deck” while the poet, under the grove that “murmurs with a sea-like sound,” moves “for aught I know, / Timing my steps to thine” (100, 102, 105-7). As Wordsworth’s brother repeats his poetry, the “to and fro” of the poet’s lines and rhythms become the “to and fro” of John’s body, and the poet then reproduces his brother’s reproduction of his own original rhythm. Keeping the same time unites the brothers across space, and Wordsworth reflects this union in his vowel sounds: the long “i” of “Timing” and Wordsworth’s “I” echo in and sympathetically yearn towards the “thine” of John’s time. The onomatopoeic repetition of the “murmur” of the sea and the grove, as well as the brothers’ shared “muttering,” draw together John and William in an embodied sympathy. Language comes from, reproduces, and finally becomes sensation as John mutters what William muttered, and William paces in time with John; the physical movement of walking becomes the movement of poetry and vice versa. Wordsworth imagines that as he and his brother keep time they share “a

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39 It is easy to see evidence here for Gilbert’s claim that in the walking poem the movement of lines and metrical puns on “feet” formally reflect the movement of the walk (26, 29). Writing on the scene of composition with Ann Tyson’s dog from The Prelude, Sperry also observes Wordsworth’s “deeply felt analogy between the linear and metrical foot” and his equation between the visual lines of a landscape and poetic lines (71, 68-69, 72).
store / Of undistinguishable sympathies” in the hope of seeing each other again at Grasmere (107-8). From the circulation of poetic language within the young Wordsworth’s bloodstream, the mature poet considers how this internal circulation can be socially circulated through shared sensations. Consequently, the narrative of the poem becomes less a linear plot than, like poetic lines and the Wordsworth brothers’ paths, a series of repetitions that circulate “to and fro” between body and language, poet and brother, past and present.

Though Wordsworth’s brother adopts the poet’s rhythm as he recites aloud, it is with this framework for the transmission of sensation in mind that I read Wordsworth’s written metrical translations of “level” riding and walking in *The Prelude*. Recounting a trip with school friends to the ruins of an abbey, Wordsworth imitates their bodily motion with his meter:

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Oh, ye rocks and streams,
And that still spirit of the evening air,
Even in this joyous time I sometimes felt
Your presence, when, with slackened step, we breathed
Along the sides of the steep hills, or when,
Lighted by gleams of moonlight from the sea,
We beat with thundering hoofs the level sand.
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(2.138-44)

The pauses, marked by commas, leading up to and surrounding “with slackened step” and “we breathed” imitate the motion of the boys and their horses as they slow their pace and then pause. The pounding of hooves on the sand creates a physical grid to match the metrical pounding of words on a page describing the action of hooves beating impressions into sand. While the final line unites the boys with their horses through their joint motion in the pronoun “we,” its even iambic pentameter figures the beat of this level line as a translation of their pounding gallop on the “level sand.” Wordsworth’s initial emotive “Oh” signals that this beat is

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40 The boys are giving their horses a breather (note 9, 72). Along with the lines on Wordsworth’s walks with Ann Tyson’s dog, these lines remain substantially similar in the 1850 *Prelude*; in these passages, each version tells substantially the same story of poetic composition. On how these early books are “full of episodes informed by the sounds and rhythms of youthful activity” including this beat, see Sperry, 67.
a retrieval of the past into the emotional and physical present of poetry. This recollected past “beat” of hooves is almost poetic meter itself; that it becomes the poem’s meter again suggests Wordsworth’s circular return to simple bodily sensations for his poetic patterns.

This particular rhythm gathers emotional as well as physical force as Wordsworth repeats versions of the final line throughout The Prelude to suggest the same evenness of body and mind. It becomes the rhythm of the poet’s restoration to his “former self” after being dazzled by the finery at Cambridge—“Oft did I leave / My comrades, and the crowd, buildings and groves, / And walked along the fields, the level fields” (3.97-99). After visiting his teacher’s grave, he thinks of its epitaph and how pleased his teacher would be that he is a poet, “Thus travelling smoothly o’er the level sands” (10.507), and exactly repeats the original line (10.566). In the preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth writes that the familiar regularity of meter helps poetry to achieve an “overbalance of pleasure” by “tempering and restraining [any] passion” from becoming overpowering or painful (755). His “level sand” refrain shows how meter not only regulates the passions negatively, through restraint, but also positively, through imparting physical and emotional sensations.

Wordsworth thus implies that the rhythms of his poetry have the same effect whether in writing or speech, silent reading or oral recitation. As J. Douglas Kneale observes, “voice and letter” in Wordsworth’s poetry, “far from being discrete or hierarchical,” have an “alternating priority.” On the one hand, the young Wordsworth is “smitten” (7.611) by the sight of a blind beggar and his written story as with a physical blow. The “written paper,” attached to and describing the beggar’s body, has enough emotional force to “turn round” Wordsworth’s mind

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41 On this “tempering” force in terms of sexuality, continuity, and identity, see Sperry, 66, 70.
“As with the might of waters” (7.614, 616-17). On the other hand, Book 6 describes how the “living voice” makes language “a nature to the heart, / To tell us what is passion, what is truth, / What reason, what simplicity and sense” as opposed to the “dangerous craft of picking phrases out” from classical languages (130-34). This reflects Wordsworth’s larger poetic project, as he says in the 1802 preface, to use “a selection of the language really spoken by men” against poetic diction that, according to the 1802 appendix, connects words to “feelings and ideas with which they had no natural connection whatsoever” (750, 761).43 Where the beggar’s writing has the “might” of a circulatory force of nature, making Wordsworth’s mind circle back to it, the “living voice” is the means by which we internalize language in the circulatory organ of the “heart” and distinguish the circulation of natural expressions of appropriate feeling.

In another turn of this “alternating priority” (Kneale’s term) between writing and voice, however, Wordsworth’s “Essay on Morals” envisions a kind of writing that resembles the “living voice” in its impact on the heart and mind. As John Beer reminds us, in Wordsworth’s time, though “already compromised by sentimental usage,” the “heart” still retained biblical associations with “a place,” “the true locus of moral action” and “centre of being.”44 Citing eighteenth-century knowledge of the heart as a circulatory organ, Beer notes the importance of the heart for Wordsworth as “an actual physical resource” and as a source of physical evidence for emotions.45 In the “Essay on Morals,” Wordsworth describes this center as both “heart” and “mind” when he evaluates the moral philosopher’s impact on the habits behind our actions:

45 Beer, 11.
Now, I know no book or system of moral philosophy written with sufficient power to melt into our affections[? s], to incorporate itself with the blood & vital juices of our minds, & thence to have any influence worth our notice in forming those habits of which I am speaking. Perhaps by the plan which these authors pursue this effect is rendered unattainable. Can it be imagined by any man who has deeply examined his own heart that an old habit will be foregone, or a new one formed, by a series of propositions, which, presenting no image to the [? mind] can convey no feeling which has any connection with the supposed archetype or fountain of the proposition existing in human life?\(^46\)

According to Thomas Sheridan, the only solution for the moral philosopher’s dilemma lies in understanding the passions through the living voice; where treatises fail, elocution could successfully spread “a general spirit of good sense.”\(^47\) Though at times Wordsworth might seem to agree with Sheridan, in the “Essay on Morals” he conceives a style of writing with the “power” to change readers’ emotional and moral habits. Wordsworth’s repetition of “in” prepositions and prefixes—“melt into,” “incorporate” with “blood & vital juices,” “influence,” “in forming”—argues for a physical internalization of writing, embodied in the flow of our “affections” and bloodstream.\(^48\) This process “in forming” the affections both forms from the inside, from “in human life” (it requires language that reflects our common embodied and


\(^{47}\) Thomas Sheridan, A Course of Lectures on Elocution (London, 1762), xi-xii, ECCO. On Sheridan’s valuation of the living voice over writing, its broader significance, and eighteenth-century reading theorists who disagreed with Sheridan’s emphasis on the living voice over writing, see David Bartine, Early English Reading Theory: Origins of Current Debates (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 77-88, 111-29.

\(^{48}\) This physicality is not merely metaphorical, as Richardson recognizes when he includes the passage as an example of Wordsworth’s engagement with a “biological approach to mind” (71).
emotional life) and flows inside, or influences, from the outside (the external force of this language incorporates into the physical core of the reader’s heart).

Instead of the philosopher’s abstract “series of propositions,” for language to influence the internal flow of circulation and habits it must appeal to the senses through the more concrete and mimetic “image.” These “images” need not be visual descriptions exclusively. Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, discussing his own version of Locke’s theory that language derives from sensory experience, describes how, for abstract words, “The imagination endeavored to find, in objects that struck the senses, images of what occurred inside the mind.” For Condillac, language translates the physical strike of sensation into “images” of more abstract mental impressions. “Images,” then, may refer to sensory experience more broadly. Wordsworth’s written “real language” both presents “images” of sensation and, through them, strikes with its own sensory immediacy. Though, as I show in my next section, sound is an important part of this immediacy, it extends not just, or even primarily, to sound, but also to the motion, rhythm, and pauses of meter and line, of walk, pulse, and breath.

With this in mind, we can begin to make sense of Wordsworth’s claim to “make / Breathings for incommunicable powers” that are for the most part “far hidden from the reach of words” (Prelude, 3.187-88, 184-85). “Breathings” refers back to the pause between lines that precedes it, which emphasizes the role of rhythm in Wordsworth’s poetics. Recalling his earlier echo of the Lockean idea that “spirit” is originally “breath,” Wordsworth’s “breathings” also suggest that his poetics of sensation communicates by making the internal “powers” of the soul accessible to the senses. Wordsworth’s return to “in” and “en” sounds—“incommunicable,” “far hidden”—recalls his descriptions of language that influences and is influenced by bodily

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circulation. “Incommunicable” at once carries the sense of “impossible to communicate” and communicable only internally. Wordsworth’s “breathings” are poetic sounds, rhythms, and motions that evoke the internal bodily sensations of circulation such as breath or heartbeat.  

We can see this at work in the boy of Winander’s “mimic hootings” to owls that alternately respond with “quivering peals / And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud” or silence (5.398, 401-405). Wordsworth recalls that

Then 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 . . .

(5.406-410)

The boy’s close listening occupies his whole body with the sensation of silence as if literally “hung” suspended; “in that silence” the boy’s sensations are of his own embodiment.  

Wordsworth’s hanging line ending enacts this state of suspension in the body for his reader. In the boy’s “gentle shock of mild surprize,” a tactile sensation that grabs him (literally “sur-prizes”), the impact of Wordsworth’s language is writ small. After the soft “g” and “l” of “gentle,” the beat of the meter shocks us with the hard “ck” of “shock,” and the boy’s sensation of “gentle shock” becomes that of language, and then is ours. Prising the boy from his suspension “in” silence, this shock carries natural sounds “far into his heart,” which echoes

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50. Under this model, the well-known passage of “Tintern Abbey” (1798), in which “we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul” through our “breath” and the “motion of our human blood” becoming “Almost suspended” (44-47), is comprehensible as an event dependent on slow bodily rhythms rather than a complete absence of these rhythms.

Wordsworth’s descriptions of language that becomes a “nature” to or “incorporates” into the heart. As this episode and Wordsworth’s narratives of poetic composition show, the incorporation of natural sounds, language, emotions, and sensations within the poet’s or the boy’s heart circulates outward, through the shocks of poetic language that reproduces these embodied sensations, to the reader. Once internalized in the poet’s or the boy’s body, this language becomes the carrier of their sensations across bodies. Wordsworth’s poetics is circular, built on repetitions and recollections, because it flows from and affects the circulatory motions and rhythms of the body. Where Jane Austen connects the circulation of Jane Fairfax’s blush to the word “blunder,” and language to the sensations of readers more generally, Wordsworth presents his poetics as a relay between physical and linguistic circulation.

“His lips with joy they burr”: Embodied Onomatopoeia

Whereas the episodes from *The Prelude* I discuss above both describe and transcribe the motion of Wordsworth’s walk, “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” and “The Idiot Boy” transcribe inarticulate sounds through onomatopoeia.⁵² They also hold a prime place among Coleridge’s complaints against Wordsworth’s “real language” and its basis in “Low and rustic life.”⁵³ His criticism of “The Idiot Boy” specifically refers to its use of onomatopoeia: though a “fine poem,” it fails to preserve the reader from “the disgusting images of ordinary, morbid idiocy” and “even by the ‘burr, burr, burr,’ uncounteracted by any preceding description of the boy’s beauty, assist[s] in recalling them” (44-45). Coleridge’s distaste for the recollection of these “images” highlights the effectiveness with which the onomatopoeia makes Johnny Foy’s body seem

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⁵² According to Gilbert, the walking poem is “transcriptive” of an experience “rather than descriptive” (8).
⁵³ Coleridge’s criticism of “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” is directed at Wordsworth’s claim to represent “Low and rustic life” more generally than at the poem in particular. He finds that, though “pitched at a lower note,” the “feelings are those of human nature in general”; they are not specific to rustic life (44).
vividly present. His connection between this particular onomatopoeia and a body in bad taste reflects larger associations between embodiment and language in eighteenth-century philosophy. While Condillac and Johann Gottfried Herder theorized that the earliest names for animals came from onomatopoeia for their cries, John Horne Tooke dubbed onomatopoeia’s close cousin, the “brutish inarticulate *Interjection*” such as “oh” and “alas,” the “miserable refuge of the speechless.” Inarticulate cries were thus associated with the early stages of human development and, more negatively, with a “brutish” pre-linguistic form of embodiment.

Wordsworth stoutly defended “The Idiot Boy,” which he “wrote…with exceeding delight and pleasure.” Though he reveals he did not have in mind a boy “disgusting in his appearance” (357), he argues that this “disgust” is found “little” or not at all “in the lower classes of society” but belongs to “false delicacy” and a lack of “comprehensiveness of think[ing] and feeling” (356). With the overt embodiment of his inarticulate burring, Johnny Foy represents a natural, as opposed to artificial, human state, and a nascent poetic joy in sounds that Percy Shelley associates with children and “savage” peoples (“Defence,” 635-37). Countering the “false delicacy” that rejects the natural but aesthetically unpolished body takes part in Wordsworth’s larger project against the false taste for poetic diction and “extravagant stories in verse.” Both “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” and “The Idiot Boy” respond to poetic convention through the overt bodiliness of their onomatopoeia. “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” replaces Gothic thrills and sentimental tears with the motion of chattering teeth and the feeling of bodily cold; in “The Idiot

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Boy” supernatural adventure becomes the adventure of the boy’s onomatopoeia. With their onomatopoeias, these poems prioritize language that transmits and thus communicates through the shared event of ordinary physical sensations.

Goody Blake’s curse, which causes Harry Gill to feel permanently cold, suggests both Wordsworth’s debt to the sensational impact of Gothic writing and his determination to redefine this impact in terms of the everyday power of language on the imagination, the body, and social sympathy. Erasmus Darwin’s account of this “true story,” as Wordsworth subtitles the poem, explicitly places it within Gothic literary conventions. A farmer (Wordsworth’s “Harry Gill”) waits to catch someone taking sticks from his hedges when “an old woman, like a witch in a play, approached.” She curses him as Goody does, and the “already shivering” farmer becomes cold for the rest of his life (359). As Darwin makes clear, the farmer interprets the old woman as if she were on the stage, an association that Wordsworth notably omits. What is for Darwin an “insane idea” (359) arising from Gothic conventions is for Wordsworth a demonstration of “the truth that the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous” (Preface, 757). This imaginative power is a compulsive version of Adam Smith’s sympathy, in which we imagine “what we ourselves should feel” in another’s situation. But Wordsworth problematizes this imaginative sympathy: Smith

57 For Pinch, this curse “dramatizes the affinities between Wordsworth’s understanding of the autonomous affective powers of language and the associationism of David Hartley” in which “words can become repositories of sensations of pain” (90). The “immediacy,” “authority,” and “authenticity” of Goody’s curse arise from its origin in her “suffering,” which gives the curse, more than the “imagination” Wordsworth cites in the preface, the power of “seizing and entering the body” (92-94).
58 Erasmus Darwin, Zoonomia; or, the Laws of Organic Life (1794-1796), 2nd ed. (London, 1796), 2: 359, ECCO.
59 Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments (London, 1759), 2, ECCO.
argues that our bodies are “but little affected” by what happens to other people’s bodies, so we sympathize more with imaginative feelings, like ambition, than physical sensations like hunger, or cold (55, 53, 51). Harry Gill’s curse results from his failure to sympathize with an old woman suffering from the cold rather than an extraordinary Gothic event; the imaginative power of Goody’s words rectifies this failure by making her unimaginative, embodied sensations his own.

Not only do Goody’s words impact Harry Gill’s imagination and change his body, they shape the poem’s onomatopoeic language and, finally, the reader’s sensations. This begins with the onomatopoeia of the opening lines:

Oh! what’s the matter? what’s the matter?  
What is’t that ails young Harry Gill?  
That evermore his teeth they chatter,  
Chatter, chatter, chatter still.  

(1-4)

Goody’s language makes Harry’s teeth and Wordsworth’s onomatopoeic line “Chatter, chatter, chatter still.” As Wolfson observes, Wordsworth “infects the balladeer” with Harry’s malady, as the onomatopoeia of “chatter” echoes in the opening “Oh! what’s the matter? what’s the matter?” Even the repeated, tongue-twisting plosives of “What is’t that” imitate the sound of a shivering stutter. In this way, Wordsworth transcribes the repetitive sounds of chattering teeth.

For Pinch, the transmission of Goody’s suffering to Harry Gill represents “the passing on of [the] poetic convention of meter”: the line “Chatter, chatter, chatter still” “approaches [the] sheer rhythm” of Wordsworth’s meter, which has an effect on the reader resembling that of “imagination on the body of Harry Gill.” I want to suggest that it is not only, or even primarily, the conventions of sentimental feeling for female suffering, meter, or Gothic thrills that Wordsworth transmits here, but ordinary physical sensation.

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60 Wolfson, Romantic Interactions, 130.  
61 Pinch, 98, 89-90.
Beyond the effect of what Wordsworth calls the poem’s “impressive” meter (Preface, 757), his onomatopoeic lines convey the sound and motion of chattering teeth. The onomatopoeia of “chatter” imitates the choppy sounds of teeth chattering with its plosive “t” and the aspirant “ch,” which also mimics the sharp inhalation of breath of someone shivering. Wordsworth augments the effect of the stop-and-start rhythm of his onomatopoeic sounds through the frequent pauses, marked by commas, between them. Garrett Stewart observes that even silent reading “latently engages the somatic or muscular activity…whose acoustic result phonetics is designed to chart.”

In a time when it was still common for people to read aloud to each other (and, as Hazlitt observes, Wordsworth’s chant acted “as a spell upon the hearer”) the link between the language of a poem and the reader’s bodily reproduction of its motions, rhythms, and sounds would have been clearer still. For both the silent and the audibly chanting reader, the muscle movements required to form Wordsworth’s chattering lines—repetitively opening, closing on the “t” of “chatter,” and opening again—physically reproduce the motion and sensation of chattering teeth. Recalling that, in the note to “The Thorn,” words are “active” agents of the passions that implicitly gain emotional momentum as we “cling to” and repeat them (1800, 1: not paginated), “chatter” emphasizes, with increasing insistence, not passion but sensation.

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62 Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 7, http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft3r29n8sp/. Stewart later reports that “a considerable weight of scientific evidence” exists to support this claim for “the latent mouthing of the reader’s body” (129). As he recounts, Ake W. Edfeldt’s *Silent Speech and Silent Reading* surveys “decades of elaborate mechanical and electrographic experiments designed to test the muscular response (of larynx, pharynx, tongue, palate, lips, and so on) during silent reading” and concludes that “reading is a kind of blocked or inhibited speaking” (129).
Though some contemporary readers were repelled rather than compelled by the poem, Wordsworth elicits participation in, and thus sympathy with, the sensory experience of chattering teeth as the reader’s muscles take on the rhythm and voiced or unvoiced sounds of Harry’s chattering, shaking along with Wordsworth’s lines. Referring to the lines “Yet still his jaws and teeth they clatter, / Like a loose casement in the wind” (115-16), Pinch remarks that this “involuntary voice of the body,” though “beyond the deceptions of willed speech,” is “no more capable of producing meaning than” a window pane. But the meaning Wordsworth attempts to communicate in his “chattering” is simply this sensory experience. Onomatopoeia is beyond the “deceptions” of most speech in the Lockean sense that we tend to share the same understanding of words that represent simple sensory ideas, as opposed to the different ideas more abstract words may call up in different people. At the same time, though it does not claim to express the essence of the thing it names as in the Adamic language theory Locke rejected, Wordsworth’s onomatopoeia stands against Locke’s argument for a “perfectly arbitrary Imposition” of words on ideas (III.i.8, italics removed). Like his circulation from language to the body and back again in his narratives of composition, Wordsworth’s onomatopoeia embraces a circular form of meaning in which words come from sensations and then reproduce them.

The circularity of this onomatopoeia amounts to a mix of motivated, as opposed to arbitrary, language and what Jacques Derrida and Gérard Genette refer to as “remotivation.”

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63 For example, an anonymous reviewer, who objects more generally to the idea that poetic language can come from the “conversation” of “the lower classes,” bitingly comments that some lines from the poem “never cost [Wordsworth] any labour in the composition,” in the New London Review 1, no. 1 (January 1799), 33, 35, ProQuest. Almost a decade later, Richard Mant mockingly repeats Wordsworth’s “chatter, chatter, still” in The Simpliciad: A Satirico-Didactic Poem (1808), 299, ProQuest, Literature Online.

64 Pinch, 94.

65 As Richardson argues, “Wordsworth could reject the older model of a divinely ordained, Adamic language linking words absolutely to objects of nature, without accepting the notion of an entirely arbitrary semantic system”; he specifically notes the relevance of Herder (84). On arbitrariness and Romantic-era writers’ statements that words are things, see Keach, Arbitrary Power, 1-45.
Wordsworth both uses words that directly imitate sounds, as in the interjections and rhythms that Richardson notes evince “natural” or “motivated” aspects of language, and artificially builds associations between non-imitative sounds and sensations. Genette most clearly defines remotivation as an “artificial” mimesis, rather than a natural correspondence between the sounds or etymological sense of signs and their signifieds, in language that, as Socrates argues in Plato’s *Cratylus*, “ought to be and could be mimetic, but . . . is not.” As Anca Parvulescu argues, and as Wordsworth demonstrates, remotivation can be the work of poetic repetition: the poet Velimir Khlebnikov “exploits the idea that if one repeats” the Russian word for laughter “enough times . . . one summons ‘the real thing,’” imparting “Something of the very sound” and feeling to readers by building an “affective correlation” between the “occlusive, guttural” sounds of the word and the thing. By the time *Lyrical Ballads* was first published, there was precedent for both motivated and remotivated theories of language. Herder formed a motivated theory of language based on onomatopoeia, in which the “distinguishing mark” of an object, such as the “bleat” of a sheep, becomes the first word for it, and, in words like “rough,” verbal sounds correspond to

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66 Richardson, 91, 81, 87. Richardson also associates Wordsworth’s thought on motivated language with that of cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff and Eve Sweetser, particularly “mind-as-body’ metaphors” (as in emotionally “touching”) and “basic-level categories” of experience (74, 84-85, 88-89).

67 Gérard Genette, *Mimologics*, trans. Thaïs E. Morgan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1995; original French version Éditions du Seuil, 1976), 50. Jacques Derrida objects to Ferdinand de Saussure’s rigid insistence on linguistic arbitrariness, asking, “If arbitrariness and unmotivation can” encroach on even “‘authentic onomatopoeias,’” then “why couldn’t a remotivation draw in the alleged arbitrary sign?” Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986; original French version Éditions Galilée, 1974), 93-94. For an example of the way Derrida remotivates “glas” in his book, see 119. He does not give a precise definition, though Anca Parvulescu, whose work introduced me to the concept, glosses the concept as “an affective correlation between the sound of the signifier and that of its elusive signified,” in *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 2, 11. Echoing a particularly suggestive phrase from Derrida (93) for my argument about words, such as Mr. Knightley’s in *Emma*, that “strike” the listener, Parvulescu writes of Derrida’s concept that “Remotivation works on words whose sound ‘strikes the ear’ in certain ways and exploits an affective investment in this sound” (11).

68 Parvulescu, 1-2. Parvulescu presents Khlebnikov’s remotivation in similar terms to my argument about language as sensation—he attempts to move readers to a “less civilized,” implicitly more embodied, laughter (2).
sensations from other senses. There is no record of Wordsworth reading Herder, but he may have read, or at least heard about, the Cratylus, in which Socrates observes that certain letters voiced with “great expenditure of breath . . . are used in the imitation of such notions as ψυχρὸν (shivering).” Wordsworth also read and admired David Hartley’s Observations on Man (1749), which argues for a kind of remotivation through our associations between words and the sensations their objects produce, until the associated sensations “rise up” with the word. In “Goody Blake and Harry Gill,” the onomatopoeia of “chatter” is motivated insofar as it imitates chattering teeth. It is also remotivated through repetition and metrical stress that heighten the mimetic effect of the word.

Wordsworth further extends this remotivation to vowel sounds, creating a kind of assonantal onomatopoeia as he associates particular phonemes with the sensation of coldness. Goody, the speaker tells us, lived “on a cold hill-side, / And in that country coals are dear, / For they come far by wind and tide” (30-32). These long “o” and short “i” sounds radiate through the poem in connection with descriptions of Goody’s and Harry’s cold bodies:

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70 Plato, Cratylus, in The Dialogues of Plato, trans. B. Jowett, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1892) 1: 323-89 (372), Google Books. Although in Thirty Great Myths About the Romantics (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015) Duncan Wu is unable to confirm Wordsworth’s reading of Herder (88, note 25), it is possible that Coleridge talked about him (Richardson, 66). Wu suggests that Wordsworth “probably” read Thomas Taylor’s translation of the Cratylus by 14 December 1809 in Wordsworth’s Reading, 1800-1815 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 167-68. His volume originally belonged to Coleridge, who may have discussed it with him, but the purchase date is uncertain, and Wordsworth’s own Greek may have been too weak to read Plato in school.

But when the ice our streams did fetter,
Oh! then how her old bones would shake!

Now, when the frost was past enduring,
And made her poor old bones to ache . . .

When her old bones were cold and chill . . .

He went complaining all the morrow
That he was cold and very chill . . .

(41-42, 57-58, 62, 105-6, emphasis mine)

The repetition of the word “cold” associates its long “o” sound with the meaning of the word, which transfers through the combination of descriptive context and assonance to Goody’s cold “old bones.” We can hear the cold of “chill” through the repetition of its short “i” in the “wind,” the “cold hill-side,” and even, finally, in the last name of the cold anti-hero. Hartley claimed that “Pains from intense Heat and Cold” would be “transferred [in miniature] upon the Words, and other Symbols, which denote” the “Objects and Circumstances” associated with these pains (143). Wordsworth makes this associationism an action of his poetry as he shifts the reader’s association of the feeling of coldness with the words “cold” and “chill” to the vowel sounds of these words. Just as Hartleyan associationism works through repetition, Wordsworth’s assonance associates the sensation described with vowel sounds until the latter calls up the former. It also, finally, evokes the social and economic motion of this sensation: the “coals” necessary to fight the cold come to Goody’s “cold hill-side” only by the expensive, and thus punishing to the poor, route of “wind and tide.” The full range of onomatopoeia in “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” thus encompasses the sound, motion, social circulation, and overall sensation of cold.

72 Here I am indebted to Pinch’s connection between Goody’s curse and the importance of heat and cold in Hartley’s theory of how “words can become repositories of sensations of pain” (90).
The movement of sensation between bodies in the poem, working from Goody’s curse to Harry Gill’s body and from Wordsworth’s poem to his reader’s body, suggests the dangers of possession only to reject them, instead unequivocally embracing an ethic of somatic sympathy. Writing on the note to “The Thorn,” Wolfson observes that the way Wordsworth “collapse[s]” signified and signifier in the note “indicate[s] hysteria as the passion-principle of poetry”; this is the pathology that “infects the balladeer” in “Goody Blake and Harry Gill.” The possession of a reader by a tale of female suffering also recalls the contemporary critical fear that Gothic and sentimental literature were dangerous sources of arousal that could supplant the overheated reader’s judgment. Yet the poem, despite its direct representation of these dangers as visited on Harry Gill’s body, finds possession remarkably unproblematic. To the contrary, its closing admonishment to farmers—“Now think, ye farmers all, I pray, / Of Goody Blake and Harry Gill” (127-28)—ominous as it is, does not give a warning against the dangers of bodily possession through language so much as against those of withholding sympathy.

Wordsworth tasks himself as a poet with helping his reader to achieve this sympathy: the note to “The Thorn” describes his effort to get the reader to sympathize with the language of a speaker (himself possessed by repetitive language) with whom they “are not accustomed to sympathize” (1800, 1: not paginated). This project to mold readers’ emotions itself follows in the tradition of sentimental writing and reading. But sentimental reading often required external performance: Paul Goring describes the “overt emotionalism” of the “social consumption” of sentimental novels “made to elicit tears,” while Lynn Festa remarks that in the late eighteenth century.

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century sensibility “ossifies into a set of conventional gestures and fashionable expressions.”

The sympathy that Wordsworth’s onomatopoeia invites is one based on sharing everyday internal sensations (felt in the mouth and ear or on the skin) rather than externalized sentiments (displayed through tears). Instead of Smith’s imaginative sympathy for the sentimental trials of love, performed in novels by beautiful and refined heroines, we find the basic bodily needs and sensations of the rural poor. In an attempt to make readers sympathize with such “unaccustomed” subjects, Wordsworth replaces the Gothic frisson of terror and the sentimental tear with chills of plain cold and the chattering motion of quivering muscles.

With the onomatopoeias of “The Idiot Boy,” Wordsworth turns from involuntary sensations of cold and chattering teeth to voluntary inarticulate sounds. As Mary Jacobus shows, the poem parodies Gothic adventure ballads, and the onomatopoeia of its opening lines alludes to the line “Halloo! halloo! away they go” from William Taylor’s 1796 translation of Gottfried Bürger’s “Lenore.” In “Lenore,” the narrator uses this interjection to exclaim on the speed of the heroine’s midnight ride with her ghostly lover; Wordsworth recasts this human interjection and its supernatural context as the everyday uncanny of owl onomatopoeia:

The owlet in the moonlight air,
He shouts from nobody knows where;
He lengthens out his lonely shout,
Halloo! halloo! a long halloo!

(3-6)

In Wordsworth’s poem, the uncanny speed of the ghostly rider that Taylor’s narrator halloos in “Lenore” becomes the uncanny overlap between an animal shout and a human interjection. Unlike “chatter,” the interjection and noun “halloo” often does not indirectly represent or imitate

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a sound, but directly represents the sound itself—at least, it does when people say it.\textsuperscript{77} As a representation of the cry of owls, the word imitates the owl’s cry, but retains its sense as a human sounding. As Dorothy Wordsworth’s Grasmere Journal (13 June 1802) makes clear, this interchange between human interjection and onomatopoeia for an animal cry creates a linguistic uncanny. An owl’s “first halloo was so like a human shout,” Dorothy writes, “that I was surprised when it made its second call, tremulous & lengthened out, to find that the shout had come from an owl.”\textsuperscript{78}

Alongside Dorothy’s recollection of this uncanny owl cry, Horne Tooke’s resistance towards interjections reminds us that such words already blend human signification with the inarticulacy of the “brutish” animal cry. In this mix of owl onomatopoeia and human cry, Wordsworth defies clear distinctions between the two, and he further connects this sounding to the unambiguously articulate signs that surround it. This extends beyond the “continuities . . . between human and ‘animal’” Richardson observes in ideas of how “articulated speech . . . absorb[ed] the ‘natural’ language of cries” through imitative rhythms and interjections, to non-imitative language.\textsuperscript{79} The “owl” in “owlet” itself resembles the first syllable of the “halloo” that it makes, while the “moonlight air” in which it cries echoes the last syllable. Wordsworth transcribes the owlet’s cry through these vowel sounds, remotivating the vowel “o” and

\textsuperscript{77} Though Dorothy and William Wordsworth are not alone in using “halloo” to denote owl sounds, the word primarily specifies a human cry. See Samuel Johnson, who does not include animal versions of this cry in his definitions or quotations, in \emph{A Dictionary of the English Language}, 8\textsuperscript{th} ed. (Dublin, 1798), 1: s.v. “halloo, interj, v.n, v.a,” ECCO. See also \emph{OED Online}, s.v. “halloo, int, n, and v.” and “chatter, v, 3,” accessed 26 April 2018. For another non-human exception to this rule, see \emph{OED Online}’s quotation from Joel Barlow’s 1807 \emph{Columbiad}, “And with hallooing blast Shake the vast wilderness,” s.v. “hallooing n. and adj.” derivatives to “halloo, v,” accessed 26 April 2018. For earlier and later examples of “halloo” as onomatopoeia for owl cries, see the anonymous \emph{Advice from Parnassus} (London?, ca. 1722), 24 and Robert Bloomfield, \emph{The Farmer’s Boy} (London, 1800), 92, ECCO. Elsewhere, Wordsworth uses “halloo” to describe owl calls in his lines on the boy of Winander.


\textsuperscript{79} Richardson, 81, 76.
diphthong “ou,” so that the repetition of “ou” from “out” to “shout” represents the action of
“lengthens out his lonely shout” sonically, while the repeated long “oo” sounds of “Halloo!
halloo! a long halloo!” enact what the line describes. The adventure of these opening lines is that
of language that sits on the line between inarticulate sound and speech, animal and human, and
thus calls attention to the inarticulate, embodied sounds in words.

At the end of the poem as well as the beginning, the “strange adventures” (351) that the
speaker’s muse refuses to tell turn out to be those of onomatopoeia. Through Johnny’s “very
words” (459), we find in the poem’s final lines that he mistakes the onomatopoeic shout of owls
for a strange rooster call:

“The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
“And the sun did shine so cold.”
—Thus answered Johnny in his glory,
And that was all his travel’s story.

(460-63)

Johnny imitates the sound of owls with what readers would recognize as the appropriate
onomatopoeia, but, drawing from his daytime experience, he attributes it to the cock.80 For
Jacobus, through Johnny’s “wonder” at “seeing nighttime sights and sounds in daytime terms,”
as in his mix-up of “conventional labels,” Wordsworth shows us how he “takes from moon and
owls their familiarity and makes them marvelous.”81 This wonder applies not just to the
strangeness of the moon and owls, but also to the act of transcribing sensations in language.

80 See OED Online, s.v. “tu-whoo, int. (and n.),” accessed 26 April 2018. The word is not in Johnson’s
Dictionary, but it does appear as onomatopoeia for owl sounds in a song from Shakespeare’s Love’s
Labour’s Lost, ed. William C. Carroll, the new Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge
This song was reproduced in many eighteenth-century song collections such as The Charmer, 2nd ed.
(Edinburgh, 1752), 225 and in the ubiquitous Elegant Extracts, ed. Vicesimus Knox (London, 1791), 2:
11, ECCO. Coleridge repeats this onomatopoeia in a moment of night and day confusion in Christabel
(Part I begun 1798, publ. 1816)—“the owls have awaken’d the crowing cock; / Tu—whit!——Tu—
81 Jacobus, 262, 265.
While the onomatopoeia of “to-whoo” projects human speech sounds onto the owls’ inarticulate cries, Johnny utters it not in accordance with convention (he does not know that owls “to-whoo” at night) but simply, and accurately, in imitation of the sound he heard, by contrast with his inaccurate use of non-mimetic conventional signs to denote nightlife. His adventure is in finding speech sounds to represent the strange animal cries he heard. Here onomatopoeia is not, as Tooke says of the similarly inarticulate interjection, the “miserable refuge of the speechless,” but instead Johnny’s triumphant transcription of a sensory experience made wonderful by the strange context of his limited vocabulary. “All his travel’s story,” and its wonder, is this transformation of sensation into verbal description.

These adventures are those of the poem as well. It is, like the island in The Tempest, full of noises, specifically noises that imitate living and loud bodies. Betty Foy’s body is not only busy taking care of Susan and Johnny, it is also busy making noise that translates into onomatopoeia. As she readies Johnny for his ride, the speaker asks, “Why bustle thus about your door, / What means this bustle, Betty Foy? / Why are you in this mighty fret?” (7-9), and, when she reaches the doctor’s house, “She lifts the knocker, rap, rap, rap” (258). The repetition of the word “bustle,” along with the accompanying friction of fricative “th” and “s” sounds in “thus” and “this,” associates these sounds with the rustling of her body. This onomatopoeia recalls the similar mixture of friction and repetition of the following lines from “Lenore”—“And brush, brush, brush, the ghostly crew / Come wheeling ore their heads, / All rustling like the witherd leaves” (201-3). The technique that connects the exciting supernatural crew of Taylor’s translation to the world of physical sensations here associates the everyday sounds of Betty Foy’s body with Wordsworth’s alliteration. Her “bustling” and her “fret” seem welded together in the sound of her name, which embodies the feeling of fretfulness. “Foy” is also “faith,” and Betty’s
fretful faithfulness to her boy, bound up with him as much through rhyme as through emotion, is what finally unites “Foy” with “joy” when “happy Betty Foy” finds her boy safe and “Her limbs are all alive with joy” (403, 401). The center of Betty’s faith and fretting, her boy, sounds in her last name and its rhymes. Where Wordsworth’s consonantal onomatopoeia rustles with Betty’s fretful bodily noises, he affectively associates this rhyme with the joy of Betty Foy’s connection to her boy: these sounds gather sense and sensation, as if by accretion, through repetition. In this way, the words of Wordsworth’s poem produce, as well as imitate, physical and emotional sensations.

By far the most idiosyncratic of the poem’s bodily noises, at once the expression and source of Johnny’s joy, is the target of Coleridge’s objection: Johnny’s burring. This emphatically embodied onomatopoeia repeats throughout the poem, sounding in other words and carrying Johnny’s joy in it along the way:

His lips with joy they burr at you,
But, Betty! what has he to do
With stirrup, saddle, or with rein?

For Johnny has his holly-bough,
And with a hurly-burly now
He shakes the green bough in his hand.

Burr, burr—now Johnny’s lips they burr,
As loud as any mill, or near it,
Meek as a lamb the pony moves,
And Johnny makes the noise he loves,
And Betty listens, glad to hear it.

Away she hies to Susan Gale:
And Johnny’s in a merry tune,
The owlets hoot, the owlets curr,
And Johnny’s lips they burr, burr, burr,
And on he goes beneath the moon.

(19-21, 59-61, 107-16)
This sound comes not just, or perhaps at all, from Johnny’s voice, but from that specific and visible part of his body, his lips. His joy in this noise spills out into the rest of the poem through both its repetition and its echoes in other words—“stirrup,” “hurly-burly,” “curr.” Like “to-whoo,” “burr” is a verbal imitation of an inarticulate bodily sound, in this case that of whirring lips. But in pronouncing or silently reading the boy’s “burrs” the reader either fully or latently reproduces part of the motion of the boy’s lips as they close on and open after the “b.”

Meanwhile, the onomatopoeic whirring of the “r” sounds of “burr” and its echoes, combined with the pounding iambic pentameter, offers the reader a sensory experience similar to both the noise Johnny loves and the emphatic joy with which he loves it. Wordsworth even transmits Johnny’s emphasis on his favorite noise through his meter, which stresses each single use and the final word in every sequence of “burrs,” suggesting a rhythmic increase in volume. It is as if we are physically present bystanders in the poem, hearing the friction of Betty’s bustle and the joyful whirring of Johnny’s burring as it fades in and out through the emphasis of the meter and its repetitions in the other words. The sameness and difference of these repetitions gives Wordsworth’s onomatopoeia a sense of motion, like that of bodily sounds, from background to foreground, louder to softer, here to there. Though we do not actually hear these things, Wordsworth’s imitation of them calls attention to a different form of sensory immediacy: what we do hear and sense, if not aloud then in the “suppressed but potent aurality of silent reading,” is the friction, motion, and whirring sounds of Wordsworth’s language.

Johnny’s “burring” provides the Oxford English Dictionary’s first instance of the verb “burr,” though the definition the dictionary gives does not capture the action of the boy’s lips: “To pronounce a strong uvular r” or, nearer the mark, “to utter the syllable burr or something

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82 Garrett Stewart, Deed of Reading, 42.
like it.” That the boy’s lips burr rules out the uvular r, instead suggesting the sound of whirring lips. The verb “curr” is also a sparsely exampled word. These uncommon usages underscore Wordsworth’s investment in onomatopoeia as a domain of overt embodiment, whether that of animals, Johnny’s lips, or chattering teeth. As Jacobus remarks, Johnny is “Closer to the nonhuman than the human world” yet “especially full of life” and happiness. To a conservative philosopher like Monboddo, this embodied state is “vulgar” and thus not fully human; to Percy Shelley it signifies the primitive but poetic engagement with the outside world of a child or a “savage” (“Defence,” 635-37). Johnny’s mix of “burring” and speech, as well as Wordsworth’s use of onomatopoeia, walks the line between a “natural language” of inarticulate cries and human language.

In foregrounding Johnny’s joyful “burring” as vitally embodied rather than “brutish” (Horne Tooke’s word), and repeating the sounding of onomatopoeia in the sounds of nonimitative signs, Wordsworth makes the case for this embodiment as part of a modern poetics. The expressive movement of Johnny’s lips prefigures the embodied “rhythmic and intonational” state of the “semiotic” that Julia Kristeva describes as at once pre-existent to and synchronic

83 OED Online, s.v. “burr, v. 3. 1,” accessed 26 April 2018. For a more accurate definition of Johnny’s noise, see “burr, v. 3. 3,” “To make a whirring noise,” the first quotation for which dates from 1838. Johnson’s Dictionary includes no applicable definitions of this word. A preliminary, though not exhaustive, search for “burr” in ECCO and Literature Online yielded examples of this onomatopoeia, though not necessarily for whirring lips, but did not provide evidence that this usage was common. See, for example, “Hem! hem! burr-r! (Makes a noise to frighten. . . .)” in Thomas Augustine Arne’s musical The Cooper (London, 1772), 26, ECCO.
84 OED Online, s.v. “curr, v,” accessed 26 April 2018. Johnson’s Dictionary includes no applicable definitions. A preliminary search on ECCO does not suggest that this onomatopoeia was a dominant usage.
85 Jacobus, 263.
86 On the overlap between Johnny’s “burring” and “natural cries,” see Richardson, 81.
87 On the insistence of the preface that “readers can learn about their own minds by examining the language” of Johnny Foy, which “refute[s] false means of social differentiation” and refuses to dismiss such persons as “uncivilized” and therefore irrelevant to a modern audience, see Olivia Smith, 219.
with, but fundamentally opposed to, the symbolic order of verbal signs. For Wordsworth, however, there is no such opposition between sensation and language in general, only between sensation and artificial poetic diction. With his use of onomatopoeia in both “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” and “The Idiot Boy,” Wordsworth commits to a language that not only arises from sensory experience, but that is also a source of vivid sensation, such as the emphatically embodied persons it represents might experience. As Johnny’s final account of his story shows us, he is not speechless; the “burr” of his lips is no “miserable refuge” but the sound and source of a joyful sensory experience. Through onomatopoeia, it becomes the joy of language, and of Wordsworth’s reader.

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Matthew Arnold writes that Wordsworth “make[s] us feel,” and John Keats asserts that Milton “did not think into the human heart, as Wordsworth has done.” These readers testify that Wordsworth’s “real language of men in a state of vivid sensation” is as much a source of “vivid sensation” as a product of it. Wordsworth draws upon the model of “transmission of feeling,” to borrow Pinch’s term once more, from sentimental and Gothic literature, but instead of tears of sentiment or chills of terror, which readers often externalized, he transmits internal physical sensations, such as rhythm, motion, and sound. Aarsleff claims that “one can see Wordsworth’s entire problem as centering on rectification,” on making the “internal external” without

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88 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, introduction by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984; original French version Éditions du Seuil, 1974), 28-29. See also Terry Eagleton’s brief summary of this theory in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, anniversary ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 163. Richardson remarks a similar contrast to the one I describe between Kristeva and Wordsworth here between Horne Tooke’s idea that “natural cries” are “displaced by the rise of symbolic language” (81) and the poet’s parallels to philosophies, such as Herder’s and Rousseau’s, that describe continuity between “natural cries” and speech.

“affectation” through the natural and rural subjects of his language. I argue that Wordsworth’s rectification of “real language” centers on matching words with authentic physical and emotional sensations. This rectification happens through embodied circulation: words must circulate and be circulated by the blood, move and be moved by our steps, or sound in our (inner) ears in order for writing to circulate these sensations. By circulating the sensations of cold old women, idiot boys, and equably pacing poets, Wordsworth attempts to engage readers’ sympathy for the socially marginalized, all too natural body and its paces, needs, and joys.

Looking back to my previous chapter, we can see that Wordsworth’s conception of language as physical sensation, and its revision of sentimental literary form, places him in the company of Jane Austen, with whom he is rarely associated. Though Goody Blake may seem worlds away from Austen’s gentry, the novelist and the poet share a sense of language that circulates within and across persons as motion, sound, and rhythm. Both engage in the social work of making marginal bodies and their sensations—whether Goody’s cold or Anne Elliot’s unfashionable age—not just sympathetic but the stuff of modern literature. In his commitment to transmitting the sensations of overtly embodied persons, from Harry Gill’s and Johnny Foy’s to the owls’, Wordsworth also anticipates the concerns of my next chapter: Mary Shelley’s preoccupation with language that comes from and acts with the force of excessive, deformed, inhuman, or animal bodies.

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90 Aarsleff, 375-77. Contrary to the centrality of sensation in my argument concerning Wordsworth’s “rectification,” however, Aarsleff argues that “The mind’s activity is the fundamental postulate of the philosophy on which Wordsworth based his critical theory” (377).
Chapter 3: Mary Shelley’s Adder Stings

The most brilliant but unreasonable expectations were formed by the people of Paris respecting the *Savage of Aveyron*, before he arrived. . . . many persons eminent for their superior understanding . . . thought that . . . they should very soon hear him make the most striking observations concerning his past manner of life. Instead of this, what did they see?—a disgusting, slovenly boy, affected with spasmodic, and frequently with convulsive motions, continually balancing himself like some of the animals in the menagerie . . .

—Jean Itard, *An Historical Account of the Discovery and Education of a Savage Man* (English translation, 1802)

In the same year that Wordsworth published the third edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Jean Itard’s account of a wild boy, found living alone in the woods without the power of speech, was translated into English. Itard describes how, like the readers of a sentimental novel, the people of Paris expect to hear a “striking” and sympathetic tale. When instead they find a boy without language, they see the “disgusting” body of a “slovenly” animal and lose interest; the culture of taste excludes such a body from their sympathy. Though Itard later discovers that the boy, whom he names Victor, possesses a “language of action,” in which he uses gestures to demonstrate what he wants, he notes that “Many persons see” in such non-verbal communication “only the common instinctive actions of an animal” (106). The knot of problems that Itard’s report presents—how we distinguish between the human and the animal, language and instinct, the object of sympathy and that of revulsion—would become central preoccupations of Mary Shelley’s fiction. But why does Shelley talk so much about people who are inhuman, animal, or “savage,” and why does she identify them with her writing or with language itself?

In the Romantic era the “animal” encompassed a complicated array from non-human animals to the early individual and historical stages of humanity, each defined according to their

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1 Jean Itard, *An Historical Account of the Discovery and Education of a Savage Man, or of the First Developments, Physical and Moral, of the Young Savage Caught in the Woods Near Aveyron, in the Year 1798* [by E.M. Itard] (London, 1802), 16-17, Google Books.
capacity for feeling and communication. When Itard recounts a previous observer’s conclusion that Victor’s senses were “very inferior to some of our domestic animals” (20), the implicit contrast is between household pets, livestock, or working animals and wild beasts. The “natural language” of animal cries presents a similar scale, with humanity distinguished by the use of articulate signs. While Thomas Sheridan extols the “power in exciting sympathy” of animal cries as a “language of the passions,” he notes that we are most sympathetic to the cries of other people and to those of “distresse[d]” animals that are, by sound or domestication, close to humans.² Human responsiveness to this distress was at the center of rising concern for the humane treatment of animals, with Jeremy Bentham changing the question from one of language—“Can they talk”—to one of feeling—“Can they suffer.”³ While Mary Wollstonecraft suggests that sympathy for animal cries constitutes “humanity,” Percy Shelley raises the stakes to advocate for vegetarianism on the basis of human and animal pain.⁴ These judgments of the place of animals relative to humans, and humans relative to their treatment of animals, center on the keenness and communicability of sensation.

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⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from Real Life* (London, 1788; reissued, 1791), 9-14, ECCO. Citation refers to the 1791 volume. Wollstonecraft devotes the first three chapters to “The Treatment of Animals.” Percy Shelley, “A Vindication of Natural Diet” (1813), in *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley*, with an introduction and notes by Bruce Woodcock (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), 577, 573-74.
At the same time that the capacity for feeling divided animal from human, “savage” from “civilized,” sentimental theorists argued that such feelings were natural. Despite finding that “Savage man” is “stupid” and, like animals, his senses associated with “delicacy”—taste and touch—are coarse, Jean-Jacques Rousseau claims that pity is a “Natural virtue” endemic to savage man, and contrasts his peacefulness with civil “miseries.”5 In describing moral feeling as natural, Rousseau follows in the tradition of Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson who, as we have seen, theorized a natural moral sense analogous to the physical senses. Yet they described this sense using terms from the culture of taste based on ideal or abject embodied states, such as “moral beauty” and “deformity.”6 This abjection of the distasteful body comes to the fore in Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy, in which we imagine what our own sensations would be in another person’s situation. In this model, we sympathize more with feelings originating in the imagination, like love, than with bodily “appetites,” like hunger.7 As sentimental theorists claimed a natural basis for moral feeling and aesthetic taste, they glossed over or devalued the basic needs and sensations of bodies.

Cases like that of the wild boy of Aveyron challenged these claims for a union of the natural, the aesthetic, and the moral. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft argues that the sentimental perception of women as natural aesthetic objects, exemplified by Rousseau’s vision of natural education as “render[ing women] pleasing” in


Emile: or On Education (1762), reduces women to an animal existence, and the men who desire them to “animal appetite.” 8 She further opposes “sentiment and fine feelings” to “the simple language of truth” (50), finding in “the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste . . . epithets of weakness” used to maintain this state (6). Wollstonecraft collapses the distinction between animal appetite and the “fine feelings” or “soft” language of sentimental aesthetics. Yet she joins Smith in a devaluation of bodily appetite. The extremes of those reduced by circumstance to bodily necessity would have complicated both Wollstonecraft’s criticism and sentimental theorists’ claims to draw from nature. Such persons included not only women and the disabled, but also slaves whose captors rationalized that they were animals, lower-class laborers, and, as Gillen Wood reminds us, the many hungry, homeless, and diseased victims of the climatic changes caused by the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora. 9

Shelley wrote her first novel as the effects of this natural disaster spread abject bodily need across the European countryside. It is with the limit case—for language, and for sympathy—of the abject, deformed, or excessive body that she spends the most time. Critics including Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar have recognized Shelley’s interest in this body, likening her writing of Frankenstein (1818/1831) to its creature’s form as they picture the author in her own workshop of piecemeal, “deformed” creation. 10 But accounts that focus on the relationship between the body and language tend to do so in terms of failure or estrangement. Margaret Homans proposes a stark gender binary: the creature represents the literal referent of

8 Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (London, 1792), 51, 9, 159, 405, ECCO.
the body, and thus femaleness, through which Shelley enacts a “literalization of [male] literature,” whereas Victor Frankenstein exemplifies male Romantic desire for language and rejection of the body.\(^{11}\) Peter Brooks finds a prototype for Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of arbitrary language in the lack of connection between the words the creature hears and the objects he sees.\(^{12}\) Brooks’s creature realizes language is the only thing that can make up for the disfigured signifier of his body, which it briefly does with the blind De Lacey, but it ultimately fails to connect him with others and he is “condemned to the order of words that does not match the order of things.”\(^{13}\) Both Homans and Brooks see the absence of sympathy for the creature as a reflection of the isolation of language from the physical world. Reading about the creature offers the advantage of De Lacey’s blind audition, however, and the possibility of language that enables sympathy for this body.

I argue that, instead of presenting the failure of signs to achieve social sympathy, Shelley critiques the culture of sentimentalism, particularly its projection of aesthetic bias on the natural and the moral, for this failure. Shelley revises concepts of nature, language, and sympathy through her presentation of animal bodies, by which I mean the embodied state persons share with animals. I consider a cross-section of Shelley’s work that approaches this body from three different perspectives. *Frankenstein* associates the emotional and physical impact of language

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with its part-animal, part-human creature’s body. Through Lionel Verney’s transition from an animal existence, in which he experiences words as painful “adder’s stings,” to a sentimental narrator, *The Last Man* (1826) posits that the animal life of the body underlies even sentimental romance and, finally, writing itself. With its exchange of human and inhuman bodies, “Transformation” (1830) shows how the language of sentimental display becomes a Wordsworthian “counter-spirit,” disconnected from the body, while the authentic, incarnate word gains the physical force of animal fangs. Finally, Shelley makes the case that the aggressive, animal body is the authentic natural force driving that most human thing, language. In turn, the common bodily sensations her language imparts are the source of a newly visceral sympathy.

**Sympathy and Sensation in *Frankenstein***

As she composed *Frankenstein*, Shelley’s reading included John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*. Reflecting this course of reading, the problem of the novel is how to reconcile a Lockean epistemology of language derived from simple sensory experiences with the culture of sentimentalism. Critics writing on sympathy in *Frankenstein* have noticed its importance to and in the form of the novel. David Marshall argues that Robert Walton’s letters frame the enclosed stories of Frankenstein and his creature within “the problem of sympathy,” as defined by moral philosophers including Rousseau, as one of “likeness.” For Jeanne M. Britton, the novel as a whole becomes a mode of “compensatory sympathy” that makes up for the exclusions of in-person “physiologically

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immedia[te]” sympathy. Building on Marshall, I examine how, as Walton’s search for sympathy develops along the lines of race, class, and taste, it undermines claims for a union of the natural, aesthetic, and moral in the sentimental theory of sympathy. Despite his linguistic mastery, the creature’s piecemeal body, made partly out of scraps of animals, places him outside the boundaries of sympathy for the characters who see him in the novel, and complicates those of human language. Instead of serving as a “compensatory” form of sympathy, I argue that Shelley’s novel associates the force of her narrative and her language with this body, which itself exists only in words, and with physiological immediacy more generally. In so doing, she reverses the hierarchies of sentimental and linguistic theories that place the human imagination over animal sensation, suggesting that a more equitable sympathy comes from sharing these sensations through language. For Shelley, language comes from a piecemeal body—it is both human and, like humans themselves, animal.

Robert Walton’s letters describe his desire for a sympathetic and sympathizing friend in terms that complicate sentimental theorists’ categorization of such responsiveness as both natural and moral. As Walton writes to his sister, “I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me; whose eyes would reply to mine,” a man “gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own.” Eyes that “reply” fall within the natural, embodied language of the passions that theorists like Sheridan described. But this responsiveness is also, as in Mr. Darcy’s admiration for Elizabeth Bennet’s eyes, a

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17 On how the Lockean “problem” that “ideas and notions being private, they are . . . absolutely incommunicable except through” socially “shared” language and its “communal context of shared experience” that achieves the “rectification” matching words and ideas, see Hans Aarsleff, From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History (London: Athlone, 1982), 375-76. I argue that what achieves this is the shared sensory experience of language.
sentimental cliché. Behind those eyes, Walton describes a man of feeling with all the class and aesthetic markers that go with that status; his wishlist of refined sensations, “gentle” manners, “cultivated” education, and good taste makes clear that the sympathy he requires does not simply derive from a natural body language or moral sense but from sentimental culture.  

This insistence on the natural morality of an aesthetic form echoes theorists from Shaftesbury to Smith, and appears even more markedly in Friedrich Schiller’s “On Naive and Sentimental Poetry” (1795-1796). Schiller claims that “sentimental taste” in nature, a kind of sympathy, “is not aesthetic, but moral, for it is communicated by an idea and not immediately produced by observation” and is therefore only really felt by “moral minds.” What Walton’s desire for a refined friend recalls and critiques is this interpretation of class and aesthetic markers, embodied in the sympathetic eyes of the cultivated man of feeling, as signs of a natural “moral mind.”

A sympathy defined within the boundaries of this culture of taste has little room for difference. As Marshall observes, Walton, Frankenstein, and the creature each seek “someone who is like himself,” a “semblable.” While Walton’s vision of eyes that “reply” to his own implies a body attuned to his own sensations, its echo of Eve’s exchange of “answering looks / Of sympathy and love” with her reflection in Paradise Lost indicates that this sympathy, like

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19 On the culture of bourgeois exclusion and the creature’s exemplification of the “national, sexual or racial ‘other’” within it, see Adam Komisaruk, “‘So Guided by a Silken Cord’: Frankenstein’s Family Values,” Studies in Romanticism 38, no. 3 (1999): 409-441, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25601402. Cynthia Pon also notes that Walton’s “criteria for friendship . . . are keywords of an established, privileged order” in “‘Passages’ in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein: Toward a Feminist Figure of Humanity?,” Modern Language Studies 30, no. 2 (2000): 35, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195378. See also Jones on the creature’s similarly class-based preference for the De Lacey’s: “The Creature’s sense of beauty is class-encoded” and “reflects the very ideology that must exclude him” (280).

20 Friedrich Schiller, “On Naive and Sentimental Poetry” (1795-1796), in Friedrich Schiller: Essays, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993), 180-81. Though it is not documented that Shelley read this essay, she was familiar with Schiller and read his Der Geisterseher (1789) in 1816 (Journals, 671). Percy Shelley did not record reading the essay either, but Thomas Medwin reports that he listed Schiller among the authors in a “good library” in his Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley (London, 1847), 2: 31, Google Books.

21 Marshall, 197.
Smith’s model in which we imagine what we would feel in another’s situation, is a reflection of the self.\textsuperscript{22} Percy Shelley’s “On Love” (comp. ca. 1818; publ. 1828) describes this desire for likeness as love: “something within us . . . thirsts after its likeness” in a person whose “eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt [their beams] into our own.”\textsuperscript{23} Yet he finds that others’ “external” resemblance has “misled” him, and his “language [is] misunderstood like one in a distant and savage land” (503). Like his wife’s creature, he is rejected as a “savage” by a love based on likeness. In this tradition, Walton searches for a man whose eyes not only look into his but that look like his. Through this reflective gaze, Mary Shelley shows it is the culture of taste, rather than nature, that bounds the sympathy of sentimentalism, and its imaginative basis further limits it to the self. The “interest” of Smitean sympathy is self-interest.

As Walton applies this standard of sympathy to the crew of his ship, we see how the body’s marks of class and race trump even genuine natural moral responsiveness. The most notable example of this is the ship’s master, who Walton acknowledges is “a person of excellent disposition,” “gentleness,” and “mildness” who not only “will not hunt” because “he cannot endure to spill blood” but is also the “heroically generous” star of his own short love story (9). On finding that his beloved’s heart belongs to someone else, he facilitates and finances her marriage to his rival. The master’s gentleness and humane treatment of animals recall the vegetarian ideals of Percy Shelley, while his refusal to treat a woman as property harkens to the \textit{Vindication}. Yet, Walton writes to his sister, “‘What a noble fellow!’ you will exclaim. He is so; but then he has passed all his life on board a vessel, and has scarcely an idea beyond the rope and

\textsuperscript{22} John Milton, \textit{Paradise Lost}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., ed. Scott Elledge (New York: Norton, 1993), IV.464-65. On the “exclusionary attitudes” of a “selfhood that homogenizes” in the novel, as in Goethe’s \textit{The Sorrows of Young Werther} (1774), a sentimental novel that the creature reads, where the hero fails to see his beloved beyond a “projection of his own imaginative mind,” see Komisaruk, 409, 423, 411, 427.

the shroud” (10). The master’s lack of ideas beyond his manual labor nullifies the value of his natural moral responsiveness. He is too natural, too uneducated and embodied, the savage to Walton’s sister Margaret Saville’s homophonic “civil.” Shelley’s pun reminds us that Walton writes from and to a civilized, rather than natural, standard. Walton’s expectations for his crew reflect this standard; as he says with surprise, “some feelings, unallied to the dross of human nature, beat even in these rugged bosoms” (9, emphasis mine). Walton expects the coarse bodies that come from his crew’s hard work to indicate, and potentially produce, emotional coarseness, like a callus that inures them to sensation. In this way, Shelley demonstrates how the rejection of sensations arising from the body rather than the mind becomes a failure to imagine the feelings of another. Under the model of imaginative sympathy, class outweighs what the master is and what he values: the embodiment of the lower classes, women, animals, and the natural.

Shelley’s 1831 updates to the novel intensify Walton’s dismissal of the master by substituting the following: “but then he is wholly uneducated: he is as silent as a Turk, and a kind of ignorant carelessness attends him, which, while it renders his conduct the more astonishing, detracts from the interest and sympathy which otherwise he would command.”24 The comparison of the Russian master to a “Turk” consigns him to the derisively vague otherness of this racial slur. By Walton’s standards, the master’s ignorance, silence, racial otherness, and “carelessness” are one and the same; that he is non-European and uneducated makes it impossible for Walton to imagine him as a man of feeling. Even when the crewmen’s stories show them to be natural men of feeling, they lack the European bodies and cultivated taste that sentimentalism requires, leaving Walton’s association between “the dross of human nature” and “rugged bosoms” intact.

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It is not surprising, then, that from Walton’s perspective Frankenstein’s silence and emaciated wreck of a body present a far more sympathetic spectacle. After Frankenstein boards Walton’s ship, “Two days passed…before he was able to speak” (13) and, Walton later notes, he “has gradually improved in health, but is very silent” (14). Both the master’s and Frankenstein’s silence provide blank surfaces for the imaginative projection of sympathy, but Walton dismisses the former as uneducated and foreign while he embraces the latter. Of Frankenstein, Walton remarks,

I never saw a more interesting creature: his eyes have generally an expression of wildness, and even madness; but there are moments when, if any one performs an act of kindness towards him, or does him any the most trifling service, his whole countenance is lighted up . . . with a beam of benevolence and sweetness that I never saw equalled. (13)

Shelley carefully links Frankenstein to the ship’s master through their silence and, in calling Frankenstein a “creature,” she connects him to his own. While the master refuses to spill the blood of animals or to commodify his beloved, Walton’s first view of Frankenstein shows him with only one sled dog left alive (the others run or starved to death) and, as Komisaruk notes, in the 1831 version of the novel Frankenstein regards Elizabeth as a “possession” (197). Walton’s predisposition to read a cultured European body sympathetically leads him to view Frankenstein as an “interesting,” or sympathetic, “creature” in contrast to the master and to the creature’s deformed body. This “interest” unites the range of connotations available at the time, from sharing, affecting, concerning, or moving and the related power of influence to the self-interest.

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26 On Elizabeth’s commodification, see Komisaruk, 418.
implicit in Smith’s sympathy or Percy Shelley’s love.\textsuperscript{27} His sympathy transforms Frankenstein’s emaciated body tinged with “madness” into an attractive object: rather than a natural response to the expressive body, then, imaginative sympathy enables the projection of cultural bias onto it.

At the center of Frankenstein’s interesting tale of distress and the novel’s nested narratives is a challenge to this supposedly natural economy of sympathy in the form of the creature’s performance of uneasily part-human and part-animal embodiment. Non-human animals make up part of the creature’s creation, as Frankenstein recounts how he “tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay” and, in addition to “the dissecting room,” “the slaughter-house furnished many of [his] materials” for the creature’s body (35). This piecemeal makeup stands as a reminder of the bodily needs and suffering, themselves reminders of the animal within the human, which the biases of imaginative sympathy exclude. His hybridity places the creature in a position akin to “savage” man, and we first see the creature’s body through Walton’s eyes as that of an apparently “savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island” (12). The sentimental aesthetics that exclude this body thus surround it both culturally and textually. The creature, who exists only in language, embodies Percy Shelley’s description of others’ rejection of his language as if that of a “savage” in “On Love.”

Language, as well as the body, is subject to the exclusions of imaginative sympathy. The language the creature learns from the De Laceys recalls Edmund Burke’s theory that words achieve their “effect” primarily through their emotional associations, rather than the ideas or images they represent.\textsuperscript{28} Abstract words like “virtue” are “mere sounds” that do not call up “any

\textsuperscript{27} Samuel Johnson, \textit{A Dictionary of the English Language}, 8\textsuperscript{th} ed. (Dublin, 1798), 1: s.v. “interest, v.a, v.n., n,” ECCO.
\textsuperscript{28} Edmund Burke, \textit{A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful} (1757), ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 152-55. As Brooks remarks, “what language first reveals to the Monster is human love” (209). The creature’s “discovery of language implies Rousseau’s argument . . . that language springs from passion rather than need” (209). This was a
real ideas,” but instead evoke emotional associations (150), and this is largely the case for more concrete words like “horse” or “red” as well (152, 155). So it is that words are the most powerful “tokens” of the passions, through which we are “brought into sympathy” with others (158). Realizing that the De Laceys communicate their “experience and feelings” in “articulate sounds,” the creature grasps this affective power (83). “I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers,” he recounts, “This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it” (83). Through watching the De Laceys the creature discovers that words are things that not only create physical sensations (sound), but also have physical and emotional force (through affective associations and sympathy for the speaker). In his observations of the family, Marshall observes, he “displays all the characteristics of . . . natural sympathy.”29 As in the case of the ship’s master, however, possessing natural sympathy is not enough. The creature’s words require a sympathetic listener, which he only briefly finds with the blind De Lacey patriarch, until his son Felix violently ends their conversation at sight of the creature’s hideous body. The problem of language under a model of sympathy based on identification is that its impact is circumscribed by cultural biases that exclude coarse, ugly, or animal bodies. For this language to be affective, the animal body speaking it must be concealed, whether in a tasteful human form or by blindness.

Though, as readers, we are in much the same position as the blind De Lacey, Frankenstein’s account of hearing the creature’s tale effectively uncovers this body for us. He demonstrates that not only does the creature’s physical deformity cancel out the sympathy that

markedly racial model of language, however, that applied to the sensuous people of southern climates, from which Walton assumes the creature has come. See also Jones, 276. On Condillac’s concept of the “role of emotion” and sympathy in language, its influence on Rousseau and his connection between language and “alienation,” and their influence on Shelley, see Jones, 268-72.

29 Marshall, 196.
his language creates, it also inspires revulsion at that very sympathy. According to Frankenstein, the creature’s tale reveals his “fine sensations” (112), and “His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him, and sometimes felt a wish to console him; but when…I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened, and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred” (113). What turns Frankenstein’s feelings of compassion into “horror” is the recognition that what “moved” him is the “filthy mass” of the creature’s moving body. In other words, what produces horror is identification with the sensations of a body outside the boundaries of sentimental aesthetics.³⁰ Frankenstein experiences, in Julia Kristeva’s terms, the abjection an other infringing on the space of the self, he is in one of the “fragile states where man wanders in the territories of the animal.”³¹ Frankenstein reacts here to a rift in the culture of feeling that exposes the seams connecting the natural and the cultural, human and animal, self and other. His sympathy entails an implicit recognition of the cultural, rather than natural, basis of sentimentalism, and of the authentically, if distastefully, natural or animal in his own body.

In opposition to language that affects us based on imaginative sympathy, then, Shelley identifies the language of her novel with the creature’s piecemeal body, and with bodily sensations more generally. As many critics have noted, Shelley equates her writing with the creature when she wittily “bid[s]” her “hideous progeny,” the novel, to “go forth and prosper” in her 1831 introduction (191). Where Frankenstein quite literally builds the creature out of scraps of humans and animals, Shelley figuratively constructs her plot and its language, which center on the creature, on the same base. As she repeatedly reminds us of the creature’s abject physical presence, Shelley exposes a problem in sentimental theory such as Smith’s: this theory claims to

³⁰ Marshall argues that the creature’s “likeness” constitutes his monstrosity and is what most horrifies Frankenstein; in combination with his difference, this likeness threatens “the system of human signifiers” (208-9, 211).
be a mix of nature and culture, like the creature, yet rejects our piecemeal, partly animal embodiment as unsympathetic, amoral, or immoral. If sympathy relies on and privileges the imagination, we cannot genuinely sympathize with another person’s physical sensations because we are, in effect, trapped within the range of our own sensory experience and within the scope of the more imaginative, and less bodily, passions. Noting this problem, Britton observes that the senses are the limit case for Smithean sympathy’s “potential for identification,” while the creature marks “the limit of the imagination’s capacity to overcome physiological difference and achieve sympathy” through a text.\(^{32}\) Rather than “overcoming” physiological difference, Shelley associates her language with the animal bodies, and thus with the physical sensations, that Smithean sympathy discards.

*Frankenstein* is undergirded and apparently undermined by physical sensations supposed to fall outside articulate speech. This, paradoxically, is part of the force of its language. Frankenstein’s vivisection of animals rebounds onto himself when he “suffer[s] living torture” (57) during Justine’s trial for William Frankenstein’s murder and, after her execution, he is “seized by remorse and the sense of guilt, which hurried me away to a hell of intense tortures, such as no language can describe” (65). His own torture of animals to make his creature causes torture that places Frankenstein beyond language, in the position of a speechless animal. In the last pages of the novel, when the creature encounters Walton, he echoes Frankenstein’s claim to this extra-linguistic pain with a difference. As he tells Walton, his change from a predisposition towards “love and sympathy” to “vice” and murder caused “torture, such as you cannot even imagine” (177). While there is a self-centered element to these competitive claims of misery that itself reflects the problems of imaginative sympathy, the creature makes clear that his, and Frankenstein’s, tortures exceed language because they are sensations outside the realm of

\(^{32}\) Britton, 8-9.
imagination, and, though Smith envisions partially sympathizing with a man upon the rack, outside sympathy. According to Frankenstein and his creature, the wordless body is the site of sensations beyond the culture of the sentiments and language.

Yet similar sensations drive Frankenstein and his creature to lament their removal from an animal existence into a linguistic one. As Frankenstein describes his ascent up the “terrifically desolate” Montanvert after the tortures of Justine’s trial and execution, he complains about the heightened sensibility that comes with humanity and language:

> Alas! why does man boast of sensibilities superior to those apparent in the brute; it only renders them more necessary beings. If our impulses were confined to hunger, thirst, and desire, we might be nearly free; but now we are moved by every wind that blows, and a chance word or scene that that word may convey to us. (70-71)

In his wish for an escape from human “sensibilities,” Frankenstein draws a recursive loop between language that raises passions and passions that call up language. This recalls not only Burke’s theory that words affect us through eliciting our emotional associations with them, but also Wordsworth’s echo of this theory in his note to “The Thorn” (1800), where words become “things, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion.” When, through language, the creature learns of his own marginal position within human society, he similarly regrets his “knowledge” and wishes he had never “felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst, and heat” (90). Though Frankenstein and his creature describe extreme pain as beyond language, the opposite is also true: language creates sensations that exceed bodily appetites.

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To understand this apparent contradiction, we may turn to Percy Shelley’s “A Vindication of Natural Diet” (1813), which similarly laments man’s ability to “communicate his sensations” because it elevates him above “his fellow animals,” indirectly causing the pain and disease that arises from eating animals (573). Both Shelleys associate language and the sympathy it enables with a hierarchy of human over animal or embodied life that causes suffering. Mary Shelley’s solution to this problem is to identify the language and plot of her “hideous progeny” with the very animal sensations, embodied by her creature, that they are supposed to exclude, exceed, or inadequately express. In so doing, the novel privileges physical sensations in the teeth of Smith’s assertion that bodily appetites are less sympathetic than imaginary passions.

When we recall Homans’s claim that the creature, in representing the literal body, represents femaleness, Shelley’s identification of language with such a body not only unsettles the boundaries between human and animal, cultural and natural, but also those of gender. Schiller’s analysis of the kind of nostalgia for a natural, animal existence that Frankenstein and his creature express offers additional insight into these gendered implications. In “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry,” Schiller notes that “we often say that an animal, a landscape, a building—indeed, nature generally—possess a naïve character in contrast to human beings’ arbitrariness” (191). He does not approve this feeling, and his assessment could serve as a paraphrase for Frankenstein and his creature’s nostalgia. But his critique takes a gendered turn: “We then see in nonrational nature only a more fortunate sister who remained at home with her mother, while we stormed out into an alien world, arrogantly confident of our freedom” (192). As Shelley knew, in her Vindication Wollstonecraft faults women’s enshrinement as paragons of innocent sensibility, rather than rational beings, with abandoning them to an animal state. This plays out across the novel’s female characters, through the young Frankenstein’s treatment of Elizabeth as a
“favourite animal” (20) and through, as Komisaruk observes, the subjection of Felix De Lacey’s beloved Safie to marital barter.\footnote{Komisaruk, 439. On Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley on women, species difference, and sympathy, see Marshall, 199-200.} Haunted by the potential for an entire race of his creatures, Frankenstein “tore to pieces the thing” that would have become a female creature (130). In his violence, he physically enacts his rejection of the piecemeal combination of animal and human. Where Schiller contrasts, on the one hand, the woman and the natural with, on the other, arbitrariness, Shelley takes advantage of this binary to reconnect language with the authentically natural, if distasteful, animal, the bodily, and, implicitly, the woman. That this tale is at the center of a novel told by a female creature, socially marked as a piecemeal of animal and human, reverses the usual hierarchy of privilege, of who gets to tell the tale. Homans sees in this novel the story of male pursuit of language and rejection of the body, but I argue that it offers this alternative. Shelley at once develops a radical critique of sentimental theory and concept of language: in bypassing Wollstonecraft’s attempt to save women from an animal state through reason, she directly connects her words with the animal body, the “dross” of unpolished nature, and the sister who stays at home.

**Soft Feelings and “Adder’s Stings” in The Last Man**

Whereas the nested narratives of *Frankenstein* frame the creature’s piecemeal animal-human body within the sentimental culture that rejects it, eight years later, Shelley’s narrator Lionel Verney frames *The Last Man* as a narrative of his development from an animal existence to a man of feeling and back again. Critics follow Lionel’s arc from animal to human in varied terms: Ranita Chatterjee describes his change from “[bare] life to a biopolitical existence.”\footnote{Ranita Chatterjee, “Our Bodies, Our Catastrophes: Biopolitics in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*,” *European Romantic Review* 25, no. 1 (2014): 42, 37, 45, doi: 10.1080/10509585.2013.863494.}
Hutchings reads this narrative in terms of “pastoral discourse.” My perspective is on Lionel’s transition from an aggressive, animal embodiment and language to the “soft” feelings of sentimental theory and fiction. This begins with meeting Adrian, the incarnation of sympathy, and continues into Lionel’s love story with Idris. As Lionel embarks on his role as a sentimental hero, however, Shelley refuses clear distinctions between his old state and his new one, emphasizing an animal undercurrent to his sentimental narrative. With the rise of the plague, language and embodiment shift away from the sentimental and back to bodily necessity, and Shelley finally shows that Lionel writes his entire narrative as a near-animal “savage.” In The Last Man, while the plague strips humanity to the animal, embodied life that we hold in common, Shelley reveals that this embodiment underlies even the most sentimental narrative, and that we are, like Lionel, animals that write.

Like the creature, the young Lionel challenges sentimental theories of the natural as he uneasily blurs the boundary between the human and the animal. Rousseau imagines “savage man” as peaceful and inclined towards pity. To Schiller the naïve, natural state seen in the early stages of human existence—in children, “childlike” people, and classical poets—is “wholesome” and moral (186-87, 196). Lionel’s early narrative describes a natural state of aggression. Lionel writes, “My life was like that of an animal, and my mind was in danger of degenerating into that which informs brute nature.” At the same time that Lionel’s youth blurs the boundaries between human and animal, he elevates himself and the human just above an animal state—his life “was like” an animal’s, and his mind had not quite descended into “brute nature.” Yet Shelley’s repetition of “in”—“in danger of degenerating into that which informs brute nature”—

as both a preposition and a prefix indicates that the danger of “brute nature” extends to his interior makeup. This nature is something that “informs” or forms the inside, like the Lockean mind that the outside world prints as on a page. The animal that Lionel distances himself from through simile is either powerful enough to remake him from within or is already part of him (an “inform”). His natural state is both a source of strength and a potentially overwhelming force. Though, Lionel says, “my physical powers … flourished” and “my mind…was imbued with all the hardy virtues,” “passions, strong as the trees of a forest…were about to shadow with their noxious overgrowth, my path of life” (18). This recalls Victor Frankenstein’s consuming “passion” that is the “torrent” that ruins his happiness (Frankenstein, 21). Both describe passions as forces of nature, but where Frankenstein’s passion comes from the study of nature, Lionel’s comes from being part of that nature. Through Lionel’s unruly physicality and passions, Shelley depicts the natural, animal state as an aggressive embodied life force.

For the young Lionel, words share this aggressive physicality. Feeling that both Adrian and his father (England’s last king) neglected his family, Lionel resents Adrian’s move near his territory in Windsor. Praises of Adrian “were so many adder’s stings infixed in my vulnerable breast,” Lionel recounts, and, before he meets Adrian for the first time, he prepares himself with “a reproach…deemed calculated to sting [Adrian’s] very heart” (23, 25). Through Lionel’s passions, including his desire for “revenge” against Adrian (23), words become things with the physical impact of an “adder’s sting.” Here again Shelley’s repeated use of “in” emphasizes the way animal aggression is internalized in or internal to the body, but here this aggression is the force of language. Words sting Lionel’s “vulnerable breast”: they reach and incite painful sensations at his emotional and physical core. As Sheridan reminds us, animal cries were part of the “language of the passions.” With Lionel’s words as “adder’s stings,” Shelley raises the stakes.

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from saying that animals share this inarticulate language to declaring that articulate language is infixed with aggressively embodied, animal passions. Whereas Percy Shelley claims that “in the infancy of society every author is a poet, because language itself” is “vitally metaphorical,” Mary Shelley sees this state of language as aggressively vital.\(^{39}\) She revitalizes an old metaphor—the “agenbite of inwit” or the “prick of conscience”—to show that the sensation of language has the physical force of an animal bite.\(^{40}\)

Yet when Lionel meets Adrian, what infixes his heart and transforms his body is not the animal sting of words but the sympathy conveyed through Adrian’s voice and body. When Lionel recounts the effects of Adrian speaking to him with a “physiognomy expressive of the excess of sensibility and refinement” (25-26), he recalls the “most exquisite sensibility” and hearts that “beat time” of Smith’s ideal “virtuous and humane” sympathizer (\textit{Moral Sentiments}, 2, 37). His consequent transformation revises a key scene from Shelley’s first novel. “As he spoke,” Lionel writes, “his earnest eyes, fixed on me, seemed to read my very soul: my heart, my savage revengeful heart, felt the influence of sweet benignity sink upon it; while his thrilling voice, like sweetest melody, awoke a mute echo within me, stirring to its depths the life blood in my frame” (26). This “stirring” of “life blood” is a moment of corporeal animation no less than Frankenstein’s animation of his creature: where Frankenstein gives his creature life, Adrian awakens a sympathetic sensibility in Lionel that radiates through the veins of his body. Adrian sets Lionel’s blood going with feeling no less than Frankenstein gets the creature’s blood pumping with animal life. Whereas Robert Walton’s predisposition to sympathize with

\footnotesize{39} Percy Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” (comp. 1821; publ. 1840), in \textit{The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley}, 637.

is a wholly natural response, here Lionel’s encounter with Adrian’s embodiment of sympathy transforms his own body through changing its sensations, from the inside out. Lionel’s sympathy is neither entirely cultural (it is not learned, but instinctive) nor entirely natural (he responds to Adrian and the human culture he represents). Instead, this sympathy forms where culture and nature meet—the body.

After meeting Adrian, “Nothing harsh or rough remained to jar with the soft feelings” he “inspired” in Lionel, who “now began to be human” (29). For Lionel, to become “human” rather than animal is not only to gain access to “the intellectual and moral nature of man” (29), but to exchange “rough” sensations for “soft,” words as “adder’s stings” for the language of “soft feelings.” Yet the similarity of Shelley’s language in describing Lionel’s animal and human feelings—from “adder’s stings infixed in” Lionel’s breast to Adrian’s eyes “fixed” on him, the “influence of sweet benignity” that “sink[s]” on his heart, and a sympathetic “echo within” him—suggests continuity. Sympathy humanizes Lionel’s “savage revengeful heart,” but, like his previous near-animal state, it pierces the body in order to remake it from within and stirs his “frame” with the blood necessary for animal life. Both Lionel’s “savage” state and his transition to a cultured human one are “infixed” within or internal to him and both are vigorously embodied, excessively so according to Smith’s model of sympathy and to critics of the sentimental novel’s sensational impact on readers. Through the continuity of her diction and Lionel’s sensations, Shelley suggests that nature and culture share a basis in the physical sensations of embodied life.

The beginning of Lionel’s narrative as a man of feeling makes this hinted relationship between animal sensation and sentimental culture more explicit. As secretary to the Ambassador
in Vienna, Lionel’s description of his amours exposes the animal undertones to his new refined sensations, recalling Wollstonecraft’s criticism of love as an “animal appetite,” as he writes:

The sight of beauty entranced me, and attractive manners in man or woman won my entire confidence. I called it rapture, when a smile made my heart beat; and I felt the life’s blood tingle in my frame, when I approached the idol which for awhile I worshipped. The mere flow of animal spirits was Paradise, and at night’s close I only desired a renewal of the intoxicating delusion. (38)

Whereas Lionel’s “life blood” marks his transition from the animal to the sentimental earlier in the novel, here his “life’s blood,” tingling in courtship, is indistinguishable from his “animal spirits.” Though Lionel would distinguish the “mere flow of animal spirits” from the “influence of [Adrian’s] sweet benignity,” the combined connotations of blood flow, “intoxicating” liquors, and the soul in “spirits” together with Shelley’s continued repetition of “in”—“in my frame” and “intoxicating”—insist on continuity rather than difference. Both “animal spirits” and the soft feelings of sympathy are, Shelley suggests, physical sensations, albeit under different cultural brackets. In Smith’s terms, love, being imaginary and not physical, will in its disappointments “call forth more sympathy than the greatest bodily evil” (55). But Wollstonecraft, in her assessment of love in her Vindication, writes that men who admire “pretty” idols give up real sympathy and understanding for “voluptuous gratifications” that leave them “alone, unless when the man is sunk in the brute” (201). In company with Wollstonecraft, Lionel’s Viennese romances reveal the uncomfortably animal basis for some of the sensations associated with sentimental culture. This compromises Lionel’s transformation from a near animal to a man of feeling and his valuation of the latter above the former, suggesting an animal, bodily undercurrent to even narratives of refined, imaginative, and therefore sympathetic feelings.
Though his love for Adrian’s sister, Idris, eventually leads Lionel to deny his bodily appetites, his “mad idolatry” for her even before he sees her (51) reverberates with his previous “idol” worship and thus its “animal spirits.” Lionel’s self-denial for this love even approaches Austen’s parody “Love and Freindship” (comp. 1790): loitering in Windsor without money in order to be near Idris, but unwilling to ask for food or steal game, Lionel recalls how he “supped upon sentiment” (78). This type of sentimental narrative depends on a denial of our most bodily, and thus animal, appetites, but Shelley connects infatuation with “animal spirits.” In this way, she alerts us to how sentimental romance and sympathy depend on the simultaneous denial of and indulgence in bodily sensations. Just as Lionel’s appetite persists despite his refusal of food, his aggressive animal life remains despite his attempts to repress it under and distinguish it from more refined feelings.

With the rise of the plague, the animal life of the body, already undergirding Lionel’s love story, gains pride of place as sentimental narrative gives way. While the plague does not kill them, its progress coincides with the deaths of the most prominent sentimental heroines, Perdita and Idris, and hero, Adrian, which put an end to the novel’s major romances and embodiments of fine feeling. Perdita kills herself in order to rejoin her dead husband, and Adrian becomes one of the last survivors of the plague only to drown, implicitly because of “the weakness of his frame” (443). Though Idris’s trauma (she loses a child and nearly a husband to the plague) is a far cry from the fainting fits of affected sensibility, her death presents an extreme version of wasting away through emotional excess. As Lionel recounts, Idris’s “heart was broken” from anxiety for her family during the plague, and this produces a “life-consuming sorrow” in which “neither sleep nor appetite, the chosen servants of health, waited on her wasted form” (334). Her wasting progresses to the point that “each joint lay bare, so that the light penetrated through and
through,” and Lionel comments that “It was strange that life could exist in what was wasted and worn into a very type of death” (344). Idris ultimately freezes to death. Both Adrian’s weak but keenly feeling frame and Idris’s wasting recall Wollstonecraft’s critique of praise of delicate feminine sensibility as “epithets of weakness.” The culmination of Idris’s sensibility—her extreme devotion to her husband and children, together with her delicate body—is this consumption by emotion. This body is the “very type of death”: it is a trope of a body that runs on the “exquisite sensibility” of Smith’s exemplar of sympathy, or of a sentimental heroine, rather than an indelicately animal vigor.

Wollstonecraft praises “strength” (6) but critiques “animal appetite”; Shelley removes the stigma from the latter as a necessity of the former. With the decline and fall of the fragile sentimental body comes the rise of the animal body, leveling the human with the animal. For Lionel, “There was much of degradation in this…even vice and virtue had lost their attributes—life—life—the continuation of our animal mechanism—was the Alpha and Omega of the desires, the prayers, the prostrate ambition of the human race” (294). Though Lionel considers this loss of human values a “degradation,” the animal body that he tried to tame in his education becomes the supreme standard of value. The plague makes everyone, rich or poor, “all equal” (317), and it is this equality that Lionel implicitly rejects. A scene in which he contracts the plague from a “negro half clad” who holds him “with a convulsive grasp” enacts this rejection in terms of race (336). Trying to remove himself “with mixed horror and impatience,” Lionel falls on the plague victim and is “overcome” with nausea until he throws “the wretch from me” (336-37). While Lionel is attempting to avoid the plague, the associations between the “negro half clad,” slaves treated as animals, and “savage” man imply that it is the equalization of sentimental, upper class, European humanity with its others, as much as the plague, from which he seeks to escape.
Yet his own robust animal life is what saves Lionel’s life, both from the plague, of which he is the only survivor, and from drowning. In the swells that drown Adrian, an “instinctive love of life animate[s]” Lionel and he fights the waves as if they were a “lion about to enfang my bosom” (445). Shelley’s return to “in” and “en” prefixes acts as a subtle refrain throughout the novel, and “enfang” recalls the young Lionel’s sense of words as “adder’s stings,” reminding us that this aggressive animal life has always been “instinctive” in his body. Lionel survives an attack from a force of nature with the ferocity of a lion because this “love of life” is embedded in him. Whereas Lionel’s romantic forays in Vienna question the hierarchy of sentimental refinement over the animal body by equating them, the plague and its aftermath, as limit cases of human existence, overturn this hierarchy.

As the value of embodied life changes with the progress of the plague, the impact of language changes in relation to the body: words go from abstract icons disconnected from physical reality to material things that imprint the body with fear, and finally to weak things against the presence of plague-ridden bodies. When Raymond decides to return to the Greek army after being captured by the Turks, Lionel describes Perdita’s reaction in terms of a word that makes its first appearance in the novel—“One word, in truth had alarmed her more than battles or sieges. . . . That word, as yet it was no more to her, was PLAGUE” (174-75). The word “plague” is at first empty of meaning aside from the alarm it causes, in this case because it lacks a concrete connection with physical reality. Yet the typesetting in small caps for this first appearance of the word, whether Shelley’s own choice or the printer’s, marks it as an active keyword that will drive the rest of the plot.41 Within the world of the novel, Perdita’s emotional response demonstrates the affective, if not physical, impact of the word itself. This uppercase

typesetting gives the word its own sense of monumentality and forcefulness; it is an icon, a
signified in itself, and it foreshadows the physical impact of printed words about the plague.

When a sentence stating the appearance of the plague in France and Italy appears in “an
obscure part” in the newspapers (234), Lionel describes how the word, at first distanced from the
senses, becomes a larger than life part of Englishmen’s sensory experience once in print:

Before it had been a rumour; but now in words uneraseable, in definite and
undeniable print, the knowledge went forth. Its obscurity of situation rendered it
the more conspicuous: the diminutive letters grew gigantic to the bewildered eye
of fear: they seemed graven with a pen of iron, impressed by fire, woven in the
clouds, stamped on the very front of the universe. (235)

The printed word “plague” becomes a forceful physical thing. The fear that arises from the
“diminutive letters” also invests them with outsized proportions, making them appear
monumental. Not only do the letters seem “gigantic,” they remake readers’ perception of, and
seem even to determine, the very materials of their universe. Printed words seem both
“impressed by” forces of nature and impressed upon them. They are “graven” with the physical
heft of an iron pen, in turn inscribing plague victims’ fate “in” the “grave,” and they are “woven
in” or “stamped on” nature, reorganizing it through a fear that imprints readers’ sensations. This
fear of a bodily threat “bewilders,” or makes wild, the “eye,” as well as the perceptions, of the
reader. Where Frankenstein examines the relationship between a speaker’s body and his impact
on his listener’s sympathies, here Shelley demonstrates how the material inscription of print that
describes readers’ physical fate inscribes their sensations and perceptions, not unlike the painful
infixing of words as adder’s stings in Lionel’s breast. In the introduction to the novel, Shelley
“finds” the Cumaean Sibyl’s handwritten prophecy that imprints material leaves and the future
that is Lionel’s tale. Through the passions arising from the bodily threat of the plague, the word as printed thing imprints the reader’s sensory experience.

The monumental proportions of the printed word eventually pale in comparison to the bodily effects of the plague. Lionel compares reading about plague in books including Daniel Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* to seeing it firsthand, writing that “The pictures drawn in these books were so vivid, that we seemed to have experienced the results depicted by them. But cold were the sensations excited by words, burning though they were, and describing the death and misery of thousands, compared to what I felt in looking on the corpse of this unhappy stranger” (259). Though writing gives rise to powerful sensations in its readers, the abstractions of language cannot compete with the physical presence of a single body. As Shelley knew from reading Locke, words are most commonly and clearly understood when they come from sensory experience, but they are not coessential with the material things they represent. Shelley demonstrates that, though printed language has its own sensory and emotional immediacy, it is different in degree of intensity from that of the physical world. What the transformations of language she documents have in common is their definition in relation to the body—words either gain force through their emotional relevance to the physical world or they lose it by comparison.

Where Defoe fails, Shakespeare succeeds: Shelley reinforces her point that language gets its power from a fusion with the physical world through a performance of *Macbeth* during the plague. Lionel describes how “A shudder like the swift passing of an electric shock ran through the house” in response to a passage in which Rosse calls Scotland not “our mother” but “our grave,” a place “where violent sorrow seems / A modern extasy” (282). Here “our grave” echoes the earlier description of print “graven with a pen of iron”; once again, language seems to foretell, or engrave, the fate of the body. The correspondence between the physical realities of
the plague and Shakespeare’s words drives them home, and even makes a mediocre actor excel. “Each word struck the sense, as our life’s passing bell,” says Lionel. When Rosse tells Macduff about the death of his family, “truth now made” even the “inferior actor” playing Rosse, “trembling from apprehension of a burst of grief from the audience,” “excellent” (282-83). This is because “real anguish painted his features” (283). In turn, Lionel writes, “This shew of terror increased ours, we gasped with him, each neck was stretched out, each face changed with the actor’s changes” (283). What makes the actor’s words and gestures so moving is that they are not a performance but an authentic response to the common fate of actors and audience. While this union of language and the body intensifies the play’s impact, it also offers an alternative model of sympathy: the audience feels a shared bodily, as opposed to imaginary or performed, reality. Whereas the printed word “bewildered” the eye of each individual reader, creating a collective but separate experience, the audience reacts not only to the play but to each other, feeling the passage of each others’ reactions like that of an “electric shock.” As the plague elevates the value of our “animal mechanism” over sentimental culture, it foregrounds language and sympathy that draw on the shared animal life of the body rather than the performance of refined sentiments.

The end of the novel turns from the relationship between embodiment and language in general to concentrate on the act of writing. In Lionel’s tale, writing itself finally becomes the act of a person who, like Frankenstein’s creature, straddles the line between the human and the animal. Chatterjee remarks that “Lionel’s body devolves” into “living/animal life,” but, as I have argued, Shelley shows continuity rather than devolution between human and animal states, and at times foregrounds the importance of the latter. In the final pages of the novel, she emphasizes this continuity by describing how Lionel becomes more animal even as he

42 Chatterjee, 44.
undertakes the human task of writing. On entering a room in a palace at what he supposes to be
Forli, Lionel is surprised by his reflection:

What wild-looking, unkempt, half-naked savage was that before me? The surprise
was momentary.

I perceived that it was I myself whom I beheld in a large mirror at the end of
the hall. No wonder that the lover of the princely Idris should fail to recognize
himself in the miserable object there portrayed. My tattered dress was that in
which I had crawled half alive from the tempestuous sea. My long and tangled
hair hung in elf locks on my brow—my dark eyes, now hollow and wild, gleamed
from under them—my cheeks were discoloured by the jaundice…and were half
hid by a beard of many days’ growth. (455)

Lionel describes his own return to a “savage” human state, crawling out of the sea like a
primordial creature. He is “wild-looking” both in the sense that he appears wild and that what he
sees is a wild being looking out. As a “half-naked savage,” Lionel now resembles Frankenstein’s
part-animal, part-human creature; he has jaundiced skin and “elf locks,” the creature “yellow
skin” and “long locks of ragged hair” (*Frankenstein*, 37,175). Like the creature, he is repulsed by
his own reflection: each lacks the “sympathy and love” Milton’s Eve feels for her image, but
Lionel also fails to accept completely that, as God tells Eve and as the creature realizes, “What
there thou seest fair creature is thyself” (*Paradise Lost*, 4.468). Instead, Lionel directly contrasts
his “savage” state with his former humanity as “the lover of the princely Idris” and changes his
appearance. Concerned that in his state he “should be an object of fear and aversion” to another
survivor of the plague (455), Lionel cleans himself up. Unlike the creature, Lionel has the power
to change what repels him, but in so doing he merely covers his “savage” body in an aesthetic
mantle, repressing but not destroying the one beneath the other. Yet, when he is almost at the end of his story, Lionel finds, “my voice, unused now to utter sound, comes strangely on my ears. My person, with its human powers and features, seem to me a monstrous excrescence of nature” (467). In the end, it is not the animal or the bodily that are “monstrous” and excessive, but their human cloak. Humanity, which Lionel associates with sentimental culture, turns out to be a performance that merely covers up the aggressive animal life of our bodies. Most significantly, Lionel has become alienated from his humanity while writing—he has not yet finished with his narrative, which makes him, in his “savage” embodiment, an animal that writes.

Despite Lionel’s distinction between his savage state and his sentimental narrative, the former underwrites, as it literally writes, the latter. In The Last Man, as in Frankenstein, the power of language comes from the force of embodied life. Shelley’s later novel expands her experiments with language to print, dramatic performance, and finally writing, offering a comparative analysis of the impact of words on our emotions and sensations in relation to the physical world. This vision of language is ultimately subversive: Shelley links the embodied power of language to the leveling of class, race, sentimental human, and unruly animal life that the plague brings. Whereas Shelley aligns Frankenstein with its piecemeal creature’s body, here she demonstrates continuity between Lionel’s animal and sentimental states. Against the grain of Smith’s rejection of “animal appetite” from imaginative sympathy, Lionel’s sympathy for Adrian transforms his body at the level of its animal life, and the audience at Macbeth exchanges a sympathy based on embodied experience rather than imagination. Shelley suggests that our “animal spirits” are not something that must be overcome in favor of reason or imagination, but are instead the basis of life and of more equitable forms of sympathy, language, and writing. We return, if not to dust, then to the animal life prophesied in Shelley’s material Sibylline leaves.
Through *The Last Man*, Shelley reminds us that words come from animal bodies and that they can transform them with the force of “adder’s stings.”

**Sentimental Display and Fanged Language in “Transformation”**

Writing on Shelley’s short stories, A. A. Markley notes a “dismissive” strain in Shelley criticism then argues for an elevation—the stories are the “testing ground” for “experiment[s] . . . in the service of larger projects.”

I argue that Shelley’s “Transformation” uses this shorter form to condense and clarify, rather than prefigure or continue, the earlier novels’ explorations of language, embodiment, and sentimental aesthetics. In this tale the narrator Guido, impoverished by his own excesses, is exiled for attempting to abduct his betrothed and her father, magically exchanges his body with a dwarf for a chest full of treasure, and then must fight for the return of his body and betrothed. Through Guido’s story, Shelley describes the body and the word as surfaces for deceptive sentimental display. This display, an especially showy form of performance, turns the languages of love and beauty into Wordsworthian “counter-spirits,” with outer surfaces disconnected from and destructive towards inner moral or physical substance. The story juxtaposes this with an incarnate version of language that extends *The Last Man’s* words as “adder’s stings” into a power that transforms the bodies of characters and readers alike. In “Transformation,” I suggest, Shelley offers her most pointed critique of sentimental aesthetics.

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and her most direct comparison between language and the animal body, making words into either slippery sentimental surfaces or fanged things.

Guido embodies empty sentimental display, in which the body and the word become unstable surfaces subject to manipulation. As Guido says, he “loved display” and so, though he sells off his property to pay for his extravagant expenses and is “nearly a beggar,” he “would not return [home] in humble guise” to marry his betrothed, Juliet. Instead, he describes his ornate romantic flare: “One matchless Spanish jennet I despatched to my promised bride; its caparisons flamed with jewels and cloth of gold. In every part I caused to be entwined the initials of Juliet and her Guido. My present found favour in hers and in her father’s eyes” (8). Guido entwines the letters of his and Juliet’s initials not only with each other but with the material of his horse’s livery, knotting together the letter and the material in this chivalrous display. Juliet’s body and an animal body are also woven into this transaction, as the horse, physically covered with the stuff of sentimental romance, makes up the gift he hopes to exchange for Juliet’s person. Here Shelley literalizes The Last Man’s point that an animal body lies under sentimental romance. But, like Mr. Elton’s riddle in Emma, this aesthetic display signifies the absence of serious sentiment: it reflects Guido’s prodigality, and the emptiness of the purse behind his lavish show of wealth implies an emptiness of feeling.

Guido’s language is of a piece with his caparisons. When the Marchese Torella presents Guido to Juliet “as her betrothed,” Guido says that “The chamber became hallowed by a holy light as she entered,” yet, after “Admiration first possessed” him, “she is mine! was the second proud emotion, and [his] lips curled with haughty triumph” (9). From his impression of Juliet’s

45 On Byron’s portrayal of Haidée and Juan’s prodigality in Don Juan where, “In the hall’s embroidered border, words are literally, opulently materialized,” see also Keach, 234.
holiness and his feeling that admiration “possessed” him, Guido’s emotions transform into those of “proud” possession. His love for display and for power unite in his language of love, which he defines in terms of French gallantry:

I had not been the enfant gâté of the beauties of France not to have learnt the art of pleasing the soft heart of woman. If towards men I was overbearing, the deference I paid to them was the more in contrast. I commenced my courtship by the display of a thousand gallantries to Juliet, who, vowed to me from infancy, had never admitted the devotion of others; and who, though accustomed to expressions of admiration, was uninitiated in the language of lovers. (9)

Guido’s “art of pleasing the soft heart of woman” is pure performance, and it recalls Wollstonecraft’s opposition of the “sentiment and fine feelings” of love, which she describes elsewhere as an animal appetite, to “the simple language of truth” (50). His eagerness to possess and to exert this “art” on Juliet as he “initiates” her into “the language of lovers” implies that his double behavior, “overbearing” to men and deferential to women, is in fact two sides of the same coin. The common factor is manipulation; whereas women receive the sentimental language of false deference, men receive more directly “overbearing” language. Shelley would have been well aware of her mother’s description of men using “pretty feminine phrases” to sugarcoat female “slavish dependence” (Vindication, 7). Like these men, Guido uses a clichéd “language of lovers” to cloak in romance an animal appetite and the desire to possess women’s bodies. Just as Guido disguises his profligacy by draping a gift horse in sentimental ornaments, the performance that is “the language of lovers” disguises the source and motive of his language with aesthetic form.
This alienation of language becomes a Shelleyan version of Wordsworth’s language as “counter-spirit” through the doubleness of Guido’s descriptions of both Juliet’s body and the spring landscape. In his third “Essay upon Epitaphs” (comp. 1810), Wordsworth writes that language is a “counter-spirit” when words are not “an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it,” and as such they act like “those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on.” As Guido describes Juliet, “An irradiation of beauty was spread over her face” and, he continues, “Her form, her step, her voice—my heart weeps even now, to think of all of relying, gentle, loving, and pure, that was enshrined in that celestial tenement” (6). Guido claims that Juliet’s beautiful body matches her soul, but he figures “beauty” itself as separate from her body, “spread over her face” like a veil, while her body, in turn, is only a “celestial tenement” for her soul. Though the third “Essay upon Epitaphs” was still decades away from publication when “Transformation” appeared, Wordsworth’s concept of language as “counter-spirit” illuminates the sinister implications behind beauty that is clothing for and not incarnate with the body. As not only the author’s wife but also the editor of its first publication, Shelley knew Percy Shelley’s similar analogies in “A Defence of Poetry” (comp. 1821; publ. 1840), in which he contrasts language that is “vitally metaphorical” to conventionalized usage and celebrates authors whose “words unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth” (637, 639-49, emphasis mine). The sentimental ideal of beauty, and its language, wrap Juliet’s body without any connection to what is under it; this aesthetic and

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47 Percy Shelley also uses similar language in designating “reason” as “body” or “shadow” to the “spirit” and “substance” of “imagination” (“Defence,” 635).
its diction are unstable, impermanent surfaces with no natural or permanent connection to the character, or even the body, beneath them.

Guido’s description of spring connects to his aestheticization of Juliet through his comparison of her to a May rose—“The opening rose in May was not more sweet than this dear girl” (6). The doubleness of the May in which Guido decides to visit Juliet’s father and his reception by the Marchese clarify the moral danger of even apparently natural beauty. In Guido’s words, it was

a month of May in that garden of the world—the blossoms of the fruit trees were fading among thick, green foliage; the vines were shooting forth; the ground strewed with the fallen olive blooms; the fire-fly was in the myrtle hedge; heaven and earth wore a mantle of surpassing beauty. Torella welcomed me kindly, though seriously; and even his shade of displeasure soon wore away. Some resemblance to my father—some look and tone of youthful ingenuousness, lurking still in spite of my misdeeds, softened the good old man’s heart. (9)

On the one hand, this description does exactly what it seems to do on the surface, namely, it evokes a beautiful spring, calling up images of depth and texture in the blossoms that become obscured by “thick” foliage, of movement in the vines “shooting forth,” and of mood lighting in the firefly flickering in the hedge. On the other hand, the language implies instability, decay, and even fallenness, through the “fallen olive blooms” and the “fading” blossoms. This spring is, in Schiller’s terms, natural but, eerily, not naïve. The “surpassing beauty” of the season is not incarnate in the spring; it is a “mantle” that the earth wears, a piece of clothing that covers the thing beneath and rapidly consumes itself. Like Guido’s youthful body and resemblance to his father, the “mantle” of spring gives no reliable indication of content. Its association with this
language of clothing rather than incarnation, of beauty covering spring’s falleness or “youthful ingenuousness” covering Guido’s “misdeeds,” marks Juliet’s beauty, and the language of sentimental aesthetics more broadly, as alienated from moral, material, and natural substance. In this way, Shelley, like Wordsworth in the “Essays upon Epitaphs” or her husband in the “Defence,” problematizes artificial aesthetic conventions. For Alexander Pope, “True wit is nature to advantage dressed,” but for Shelley, the “advantage” of dress entails deception.48 Marshall notes that writers including Rousseau observed the “threat of misrepresentation and misinterpretation” that comes with the necessity of “representation” to sympathy.49 Shelley sharply critiques the equation of the aesthetic with the natural and moral in sentimental theory for allowing the manipulation, deception, and misperception of the material world.

The climax of this critique of sentimentalism, and of the story, is the exchange of bodies that occurs between Guido and the “misshapen dwarf” (13). In language that recalls his representation of spring as a “mantle,” after they exchange bodies Guido dreams of “the fiend, arrayed in my limbs, speaking with my voice, winning [Juliet] with my looks of love” and, on waking, describes the dwarf’s body as “the foul limbs I wore” (17). Like a fine piece of clothing, Guido’s body and its “looks of love” lend themselves to sentimental performance no matter whom they contain. Despite this description, and complicating the story’s vision of the body and language as clothing for rather than incarnate with inner substance, Guido fully becomes the dwarf. “I felt myself changed to a shape of horror,” Guido says, “At first I could hardly walk, so strange and out of joint were all my limbs; and my voice—it was that of the fiend” (16). On his way to stop the dwarf from marrying Juliet in his body, Guido stays away from populated areas, “for I was unwilling to make a display of my hideousness” (17). The dwarf’s limbs and

49 Marshall, 180-81.
“hideousness” become Guido’s; he is himself “changed to a shape of horror” that more accurately represents his aggressive passions than its previous deceptive beauty. For his body to be incarnate with its contents, it must be in an ungallant, inhuman form. In turn, his “soul-subduing humiliation” and injury in this not-quite human body transform Guido into what his own body looks like—a man of fine feelings, known finally by his courtesy as “Guido il Cortese” (5, 22-23). As Susan Wolfson notes, “Cortese” (“Courteous”) may pun on the “cortex,” or “external shell,” of a “public persona” (23, note 31). This suggests that Guido transforms into a sentimental exterior vacated of internal substance, and his loss of “strength” (22) implies that what he has lost is the animating force, comprising the “anima” that is his soul and the “animal” physical life, of his body. Through this exchange and final conversion, Shelley again invites us to see the unrefined body beneath sentimental form as the aggressive but vital force that is its authentic content.

The tale’s transformations finally strip away this form to expose the power of language and the passions as primarily deriving from and impacting the body. According to Guido, in the midst of his attempts to kidnap Juliet rather than accept Torella’s conditions for marrying her, “A horse driven to fury by a rider armed with barbed spurs, was not more a slave than I, to the violent tyranny of my temper” (10). Whereas the horse Guido gives Juliet literally underlies the sentimental aesthetics of the embroidered initials on its caparisons, here a horse whipped into “fury” becomes the metaphor for Guido’s passions. In this comparison, a human form and action (the violence of a rider’s “barbed spurs” or Guido’s temper and genteel bodily exterior) contain and incite animal passion. Unlike the horse, Guido is both “slave” and tyrant. David Hume claimed that “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” because our passions are
part of our “original existence.” Wollstonecraft joined in a tradition of arguing against this “slavery,” and wrote specifically against women’s alternate slavery to “sensibility” and tyranny over men’s appetites (Vindication, 115, 283, 97). Guido’s tyrannical temper is part of the corrupted culture of the sentiments, a form of sensibility that makes him both slave and despot. Animal “fury” is a natural, embodied passion in reaction to this tyranny.

Still more tellingly, after his exile from Genoa, Guido remarks, “Revenge!—the word seemed balm to me:—I hugged it—caressed it—till, like a serpent, it stung me” (11). Like Lionel Verney’s words as “adder’s stings,” the word “revenge” becomes a material thing that Guido can touch before it transforms into a figurative “serpent” that stings just as actively as a real one. This embodies Wordsworth’s theory, in his note to “The Thorn,” that words actively drive the passions, foregrounding the physical, as well as emotional, presence and agency of words. Notably, Percy Shelley describes “Revenge” as the “naked idol” of a “semi-barbarous age”; despite this passion’s “remote[ness] from moral perfection,” the true poet sees such “vices . . . as the temporary dress” of his “creations” that “cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty” (“Defence,” 641). For Mary Shelley, it is beauty that is a “temporary dress,” while morally imperfect words and authentic passions are wildly incarnate: like the horse’s (and implicitly Guido’s) “fury” against the violence of artificial barbs, language has a distinctly animal sting.

Himself an incarnation of the word-as-serpent, the dwarf embodies the power of language in a not-quite human form, while the oaths he and Guido make literalize the word’s power over the body. When Guido sees the dwarf “bestriding a sea-chest” from out of a shipwreck, he wonders what his shape might be: “A human being!—Yet was it one? Surely never such had

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existed before—a misshapen dwarf, with squinting eyes, distorted features, and body deformed, till it became a horror to behold” (13). Though Guido quickly switches to masculine pronouns, the dwarf is inhuman enough to start out as an “it” of questionable categorization, and this comes from his failure to fall into a conventional shape—the space of this single sentence describes him as “misshapen,” “distorted,” and “deformed.” Alongside this deformity is tremendous verbal power. The dwarf’s “voice could govern earth, air, and sea” (15), which he uses to create and then clear up a storm. Like the word “revenge”—and the dwarf advises Guido to “Revenge [him]self” (15)—the dwarf’s words sting Guido, who notes that “As [the dwarf] spoke, a thousand fanged thoughts stung me to the heart” (14). While the dwarf’s voice physically affects the outside world, his inhuman body and animal, “fanged” language impact Guido’s body through the passions. The dwarf’s inhuman body comes to represent the power of language, which, as he shows, comes from something that constantly threatens to fall out of human shape.

In turn, the power of the oath affects even the powerful dwarf’s body. As Guido writes, the dwarf “swore many an oath, and I adjured him by many a sacred name; till I saw this wonder of power, this ruler of the elements, shiver like an autumn leaf before my words; and as if the spirit spake unwillingly and per force within him, at last, he, with broken voice, revealed the spell whereby he might be obliged” to return Guido’s body (16). Where language performs in Guido’s sentimental displays, language is performative in the direct physical and spiritual effect of the oath or the sacred name, an impact that recalls the audience’s shared changes in sensation and expression in the Macbeth scene from The Last Man. Charlotte Sussman observes that the oath with which Guido and the dwarf exchange bodies “double[s]” the “marriage contract” between Guido and the Marchese Torella.\(^5\) I want to suggest that the oath doubles the marriage ceremony, one of J.L. Austin’s examples of performatives, as an utterance that, under certain

\(^5\) Sussman, 170.
conditions, “is the performing of an action.” Here the required conditions include finding the right words to force the dwarf to reveal the “spell,” which requires them to “mingle” their “warm life-blood” (16), as couples do on their wedding night. Though Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary defines the noun “spell” as “A charm” using “words of occult power,” the word also resonates with the verbal connotations of “To form words of letters.” The performative “spell” thus unites the word, the letter, and the act of forming the one from the other with the animal life of our bodies: to “spell” is to exchange and change one’s “life-blood.”

These oaths, and the dwarf’s magic, are spoken, and at first glance their animal bite does not seem to apply to written language. Unlike Lionel Verney, who writes his story as a “savage,” Guido writes his tale when he has become a courteous shell. Where the “mind of man” is “tameless” (14), and the passions and events that make up the tale are wild, Guido writes that his conversation with the dwarf is “Tamely written down” (15). “Tame” language establishes a counter-intuitive relationship between this conversation and Juliet’s beauty: Guido exclaims, “oh, these are tame words!” in lament over his inability to capture her beauty in writing (20). As we have seen, Guido’s sentimental vocabulary is not incarnate with this beauty; as a wild thing, it eludes sentimental culture. The power of spoken language, the passions, and Juliet’s beauty is ultimately that of a wild animal, and it seems that Guido cannot express this wildness on paper.

As the opening paragraph makes clear, however, the written tale itself exerts this power on the reader’s body, and, like the word-as-serpent, has a physical bite. Guido begins by remarking that he has “heard it said, that, when any strange, supernatural, and necromantic adventure has occurred to a human being, that being, however desirous he may be to conceal the

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same, feels at certain periods torn up as it were by an intellectual earthquake, and is forced to bare the inner depths of his spirit to another” (5). As Susan Wolfson’s note to the word “bare” says, it may pun on “bear” as in “to convey,” foreshadowing the conveyance of Guido’s soul to the dwarf’s and, in this “situation of addressing a listener” (5, note 2), pointing towards the analogous exchange of words, tale, and “spirit” between writer and reader. In yet another transformation, “bare” mingles to “lay bare,” as of clothes, with the dangerous meaning of “to unsheathe (a weapon),” or in a less common usage at the time, “to bare one’s teeth.” Guido’s writing threatens to become all too incarnate as his uncovered spirit gathers the force of a bared weapon ready to stab the reader, echoing the serpentine sting of the word “revenge.” Tale telling carries the risk of usurping, tainting, or wounding the reader’s spirit as it communicates the turbulence of the taleteller’s. The written word becomes a weapon like an animal fang and the spirit becomes a body that can be stabbed or bitten; both word and spirit become material things. Language escapes acting as a “counter-spirit” by becoming, not a surface for sentimental performance, but what it, finally, represents—an animal with fangs dangerously bared.

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Across her fiction, Shelley examines at least two versions of language, the body, and the relationship between the two. One of these represents sentimental theory and fiction; it appears in Robert Walton’s criteria for a friend, Lionel Verney’s transition into a man of feeling, and Guido’s display. The other draws on the vital and aggressive force of the body. In each text,

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54 OED Online, s.v. “bare, v. 1. trans,” accessed 26 April 2018. Google Ngram searches for “bared teeth,” “teeth bared,” and other variants do not provide evidence that this usage was common before 1850, and none of the few pre-1850 examples found were in the context of animal aggression (https://books.google.com/ngrams). Shelley’s epigraph from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1798), in which the mariner describes the “woful” bodily “agony” that compels him to tell his tale (5) and others to listen, reinforces this sense of physical threat.

55 On how each nested narrative in Frankenstein “touches its listener with the taint of monsterism,” see Brooks, 219.
Shelley critiques the claims of the former to be natural. *Frankenstein* reveals that the criteria of Smithean imaginative sympathy amount to a bias for the European, cultured body to the exclusion of the foreign, lower-class, deformed, female, or animal body. In *The Last Man* “soft feelings” enclose the weak, delicate body or indelicate animal appetites; the latter persist under Lionel’s performance as a sentimental hero and, despite his own disdain for them, save his life. Where both novels demonstrate how sentimental culture shapes our (sympathetic or revolted) interpretations of bodies and language, “Transformation” explicitly depicts these aesthetics as a display case, embodied by Guido’s courteous cortex.

Beneath the culture of these sentimental cases, Shelley identifies the animal life of the body with words that are incarnate physical agents, rather than hollow cases. Shelley’s depiction of the aggression of this language, through its animal fangs or the “animal appetite” underneath sentimental epithets, subverts sentimental concepts of the natural that devalue bodily appetites and needs. Instead she argues that the coarse animal body is the common, authentic, and natural source of our feelings, sensations, and even our language. It is these embodied sensations that form the basis for Shelley’s vision of sympathy. This sympathy comes from sharing sensations through language, leveling bodies rich and poor, male and female, human and animal. Despite its radical edge, Shelley’s vision of linguistic and emotional authenticity differs in degree but not in kind from those of Austen and Wordsworth: where Austen grants her ladies and her language an unsentimental robustness, Wordsworth makes a modern poetics of the sounds and rhythms of idiot boys, Shelley uncovers the aggression of this embodied language and its move against sentimentalism. Our “savage” embodiment remains underneath the sentimental culture that would exclude it, Shelley finally asserts, and it is also what animates our words, speech, and
writing with enough force that we feel them as sensation and see them reflected in our perceptions of the physical world.
Coda: Mapping Language as Sensation

In *The Sensation of Language* I have described how the idea that language directly imparts physical sensations became a trend in the Romantic era, particularly among Jane Austen, William Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley. These writers attempted to achieve more emotionally authentic communication with readers through language that has the immediacy of sensation. In so doing, they expanded on John Locke’s claim that we more readily achieve a shared understanding of words describing sensory experiences than those signifying abstract concepts. By inviting readers to feel with the overtly embodied persons who fell outside sentimental standards of taste, they also extended the range of social sympathy. As we have seen, Austen turns from conventional sentiments to language that moves with the speed of fast, appetitive heroines in the juvenilia, or sounds with personal voice in Captain Wentworth’s letter to Anne Elliot. Wordsworth reacts against the artifice of “poetic diction,” and in its place shows how his meter becomes the rhythm of his brother’s recitation and physical motion in “When, to the attractions of the busy World.” Shelley presents sentimental performance as a false front for a “genuine,” aggressively embodied language that, in *The Last Man*, imprints readers’ sensory perception with fear of the plague, or stings like an adder.

To foreground the place of these sensations within the language of modern literature was a risky venture. As in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s disgust with the onomatopoeic “burring” of Wordsworth’s “Idiot Boy,” some readers were alienated by, rather than drawn into sympathy with, the overt embodiment that this sounding evoked. Wordsworth, Austen, and Shelley enact and critique such rejections of socially abject bodies in their writing: Wordsworth, in Harry Gill’s calamitous failure to sympathize with Goody Blake’s suffering in the cold; Austen, in the unfairness of judging Mrs. Musgrove’s expressions of grief according to her physical size; and
Shelley, in Victor Frankenstein’s horror at being moved by the movement of his creature’s speaking body. As they associated their writing with the sensory experiences of these bodies, they worked against the grain of both anti-materialist theories of language that elevated mind over body and sentimentalist philosophy that prioritized sympathy for moral and physical “beauty” at the expense of bodily needs. Language as sensation risked the charge of vulgar embodiment, and rejections like that of Coleridge document the physical and emotional force of these ventures, if not their universal success in eliciting sympathy.

The experiments that Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley made with language as sensation not only look backward to Lockean philosophy and the “cult of sentiment,” but also forward to similar preoccupations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The eighteenth century began with Locke’s version of arbitrary language theory, the twentieth with Ferdinand de Saussure’s different iteration of this theory. As Hans Aarsleff shows, the former responded to the Adamic theory that words “name species and essences,” a form of which reappeared in the early nineteenth century, triggering another reaction against it that eventually led to the philosophy of Saussure.¹ These theories appear in cycles, and reflect a new sense of historical location at each turn. Where Locke’s version is embedded in his Enlightenment materialist epistemology, Saussure’s modern one does not share his interest in the primacy of sensory experience. Critical accounts of the Romantic era situate its writers in terms of both these turns in the historical cycle of arbitrary language theory. We already know one story of the relationship between the Romantic era and the Enlightenment: critics including M.H. Abrams and Ernest Lee Tuveson describe later poets’ reactions to the earlier secular, materialist philosophy as a turn towards the processes of the mind and imagination. Through the lens of Paul de Man and other post-

structuralist critics, we have also seen Wordsworth and Percy Shelley anticipating the traps of a Saussurean sign isolated from the material world.

Without denying the importance of the mind, the imagination, or the problems of signification to Romantic-era thought on language, I have argued that these are not the only stories that these writers tell us. I sketch a different history, one in which Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley present language as an agent of sensation and reform fellow-feeling around the common ground of embodiment, even at the risk of inspiring disgust. In turn, language as sensation prefigures a different tradition after Saussure. This tradition includes notions of language as motivated or remotivated in literary theory and neuroscience, as agents or events in philosophy, and as a crucial impact on lived experience in linguistics, disability studies, and debates about hate speech. I suggest here that Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley present language as sensation in ways that not only anticipate these later theories but also continue to offer fresh insight into how the motion, rhythm, and sound of words affect bodies as sensations, and, through them, compel or repel sympathy in our social world.

Motivated language in itself corresponds in sound or meaning to the thing it signifies; remotivated language, following Gérard Genette’s *Mimologics*, gains an “artificial” correspondence, imparted by the speaker or writer. The Romantic-era forays into these forms of non-arbitrary language that I have explored are not rejections of Lockean language theory so much as counterpoints to it. In tying these experiments to Locke, I depart from Aarsleff, who

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2 I draw on the definition of “remotivation” in Gérard Genette, *Mimologics*, trans. Thaïs E. Morgan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994; original French version Éditions du Seuil, 1976), 50; and on Anca Parvulescu’s description of remotivation as an “affective correlation between the sound of the signifier and its elusive signified” that calls up “Something of the very sound” and sensation for the reader in *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 2. As in the Romantic-era instances of language as sensation that I describe, Parvulescu argues that the poet Velimir Khlebnikov’s remotivation of the Russian word for laughter attempts to ground readers in the body—in her words, to move them “backward toward a less civilized laughter” (1-2). Like Aarsleff’s history of arbitrary language theory, Genette’s history of mimology suggests cyclical variations on similar concepts.
charts reactions and counter-reactions swinging between arbitrary and natural language theories, and from Alan Richardson’s account of how Wordsworth’s interest in “motivated” or “natural” language “build[s] upon” but primarily “resist[s]” Locke. I have argued, by contrast, that Romantic-era associations between words and sensations in fact depend on Locke’s materialist sense that words for sensory experience, though arbitrary, most clearly convey uniform ideas between people. Following Tristram Wolff’s assessment that Johann Gottfried Herder’s non-arbitrary and synesthetic theory of language, which associates speech sounds with other sensations, does not make the ultimate Lockean error of “collaps[ing] linguistic units with referents,” or words with essences, we may say the same of Wordsworth’s onomatopoeic “chattering” in “Goody Blake and Harry Gill.” Or, in the same poem, his remotivation of the long vowel “o” of “cold” by associating it with the sensation of coldness. Through repetition of this vowel sound in lines describing Goody’s coldness, such as “When her old bones were cold and chill,” the feeling we associate with the word “cold” transfers on to the “old bones” that share in its vowel sound and sensation, calling up the kind of sensory experience that Locke saw as a basis for easily communicable ideas. Austen’s link between the sounds of “pierce” and “precious” in Wentworth’s letter to Anne—“You pierce my soul,” their “precious feelings”—connects the sensation and sound of “pierce” with feelings that pierce in their preciousness. Rather than implying that words coincide with the essences of things, these authors, whether

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intentionally or not, effectively reframe the question of linguistic arbitrariness in terms of whether sounds resemble sensations.

This question has renewed significance under Saussure’s version of arbitrary signifiers. So Jacques Derrida complains of Saussure’s consideration of even onomatopoeia as only arbitrarily, rather than imitatively, assigned to a signified. He asks, “If arbitrariness and unmotivation can” encroach on even “authentic onomatopoeias,” in which the sound of the signifier or its inarticulate corollary is the signified, then “why couldn’t a remotivation draw in the alleged arbitrary sign?” Derrida’s irritation with Saussure lights on a problem that dates back at least to Plato’s Cratylus. To question the totality of linguistic arbitrariness, as Derrida’s defensiveness implicitly recognizes, is often to face accusations of a Cratylic belief in universally motivated language. In fact, Derrida’s call for exceptions to an absolute rule more closely resembles the intermediate, mutually corrective position—between Cratylus’s claims that words express the “nature of the thing” and Hermogenes’s argument that they are purely “conventional”—of Socrates in the original dialogue. The result of this antipathy for “Cratylism” is that such calls are often dismissed as fantasy, as in the alternately indulgent and ironic detachment of Genette and his translator Thaïs Morgan.

The term is a mixture of a straw man and a slur: J.A. Cuddon defines “Cratylic” as “Referring to the imagined innateness or ‘truthfulness’ of proper names,” and, unlike Genette,

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8 Plato, *Cratylus*, in The Dialogues of Plato, trans. B. Jowett, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1892), 1: 323-24, 383, 374-76, Google Books. Socrates takes the middle ground, agreeing with Cratylus that “words should as far as possible resemble things,” but adding that “resemblance . . . has to be supplemented by the mechanical aid of convention” (382) and, like Locke, insisting that “knowledge of things is not to be derived from names” but from things “themselves” (387). On Derrida’s occupation of a position between “conventionalism” and “mimologism” that resembles and “challenges” Socrates’s vision of this middle ground and other post-Saussurean mimologisms, see Thaïs E. Morgan’s prefatory “Invitation to a Voyage in Cratylusland,” in *Mimologics*, xxvi-xxvii, xxxii-xxxiii, l-li.
who recognizes Socrates’s intermediate viewpoint, sees Cratylus “successfully” defending his theory.\(^9\) “Cratylism” denotes an imaginative theory of language that is itself imaginary; the dialogue endorses neither the extreme position of Cratylus nor Hermogenes. When William Keach asks how the “material and sensuous dimension of language” was to be “valued” in the Romantic era given that it was perceived as “‘arbitrarily’ related to the conceptual or emotive content of words-as-signs,” he lights on the central opposition between an “imagined” Cratylic linguistic essentialism, which at times includes the valuation of this “material and sensuous dimension,” and the arbitrary sign.\(^{10}\) In designating arbitrariness as the domain of reason and the understanding that words do not reflect the essence of material things, Cratylism as that of a confused essentialist and materialist imaginism, this label threatens to subsume explorations of the ways in which words imitate or elicit sensations. As Olivia Smith has shown, this is a political conflict: eighteenth-century theorists like Lord Monboddo employed the term as part of their elevation of a “refined language” of the mind, and the upper classes, over the “vulgar” language of sensation.\(^{11}\) The slur of “Cratylism” reflects not only the dualism between arbitrary and motivated theories of language, but also that of mind and body, the intellectual and the sensory. It is no coincidence that critical accounts of Locke tend to forget the sensory origins of his own theory of arbitrary language.

Into this mind and body gap, neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran wonders if the brain’s processing of sensory information, including language, complicates the concept of arbitrariness. His interest centers on the association of a sound with a shape. When asked which of two shapes—one softly curved, the other jagged—is a “bouba” and which is a “kiki,” most people, 

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whether in India, China, or Ramachandran’s classroom in San Diego, say that the rounded shape is a “bouba” and the sharp one is a “kiki.”\textsuperscript{12} This assignment of sound to shape happens because “the gentle curves” of the first shape “metaphorically . . . mimic the gentle undulations of the sound \textit{bouba}, as represented in the hearing centers in the brain and in the smooth rounding and relaxing of the lips” \textsuperscript{(108)}.\textsuperscript{13} Ramachandran speculates that the bouba-kiki experiment demonstrates “a built-in, nonarbitrary correspondence” between “brain maps for sights and sounds” and “motor maps” of our movements in speaking (171-73).\textsuperscript{14} Like other non-arbitrary language theories, this one (which Ramachandran ventures almost in passing) raises the question of why this correspondence does not apply to all words. Even if we do not accept, as Ramachandran suggests, that language is motivated, it seems clear that some speech sounds mimic sensory data. Recall how the swift motion of Austen’s sentences in “The Beautifull Cassandra” match the rapid physical movement of her heroine. Both Austen, as a novelist, and Ramachandran, as a neuroscientist, are interested in the way linguistic and physical motion map onto each other. This insight amounts to the difference between asserting, in the words of Alexander Pope, that poetic sounds “seem an echo to the sense” and the idea that sounds do echo other senses, as we perceive them.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{13} Richardson compares Wordsworth’s thought on language to the different focus on metaphor in cognitive semantics, in which the “basic metaphorical schemata,” from physical (touch) to mental (emotional touch), “are ‘motivated’ by common features of embodied human experience” (84-85). For him the key figures are George Lakoff, Eve Sweetser, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner.

\textsuperscript{14} Ramachandran’s theory echoes Herder’s concept of speech sounds that convey the sensations of other senses, such as tactile texture. Richardson also notes similarities between cognitive semantics and the theories of Herder, Thomas Reid, and others (86); Ramachandran’s synesthetic metaphors are even closer to Herder’s theory.

\textsuperscript{15} Alexander Pope, \textit{An Essay on Criticism} (1711), in \textit{Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry}, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 365. Here I am indebted to Susan J. Wolfson’s consideration of the “way sound is not secondary to but implicated in sense, the way meaning is not just the scriptor of poetic form but implicated in and even produced by it.” Wolfson, \textit{Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 228. Wolfson explores a
At the root of Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley’s interests in language is a concern with its sensory and affective force as much as its imitative capacity. Their emphasis on verbal impact anticipates the speech act theory of J.L. Austin’s landmark *How to Do Things With Words* (developed from his 1955 William James Lectures; publ. 1962). We know Austin best for his concept of the “performative utterance,” and Romantic-era examples of such utterances abound, but Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley extend beyond them to include what Austin called “perlocutionary” objects and acts, and thus a much broader range of contexts in which words have force. When we consider Austin’s brief account of the historical context of his philosophy, this resemblance is unsurprising. The second paragraph of Austin’s book begins with this context: “It was for too long the assumption” in philosophy that a statement “can only . . . ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or . . . ‘state some fact.’”16 Austin positions his own ideas that words might do things within a larger “revolution in philosophy” that moves not only forward but also backward, to the Romantic era’s Immanuel Kant (3). Kant, Austin acknowledges, “was among the pioneers” in considering how utterances may “evince emotion or . . . prescribe conduct or . . . influence it in special ways” (3). As we will see, not only were such considerations anticipated in Romantic-era literature, the language as sensation explored throughout my study argues for an increase of attention to the sensory effects of words.

In Austin’s concept of the performative, “to say something” under certain favorable conditions, such as an earnestly meant “I do” in a legal marriage ceremony, “is to do something” (12, 1-38). Wordsworth and Shelley explore performative utterances through spoken curses and

oaths. When Goody Blake curses aloud for Harry Gill to be permanently cold, under the condition that he is predisposed to credit her curse, he becomes so. The oath that Shelley’s Guido exchanges with the dwarf in “Transformation” achieves their bodily exchange. Though Austin theorizes “speech acts,” his notion of the performative notably extends across both speech and writing, and so do examples from the Romantic era.\textsuperscript{17} Within Shelley’s story, Guido’s tale-telling “bares,” or (ominously) transfers, his soul to the reader under the condition of his supernatural emotional upheaval, acting as a written performativ.\textsuperscript{18}

Yet, in the case of Wordsworth’s “chattering,” it is the motion and sound of the onomatopoeia in the reader’s mouth that partially reproduces that of Harry Gill’s chattering teeth, rather than the specific formal circumstances of a performative.\textsuperscript{19} Instead this effect prefigures what Austin calls \textit{perlocutionary acts}: what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading,” or “surprising” (109). Or, since Austin recognizes that we cannot judge the perlocutionary act that occurs simply from the words said, we may consider the partial reproduction of Harry’s “chattering” as Wordsworth’s “perlocutionary object,” or intended effect (122, 118). Put into Austin’s descriptive formula for perlocutionary acts, by repeating the word “chatter” in lines such as “his teeth they chatter, / Chatter, chatter, chatter still” (3-4), Wordsworth attempts to recall, in his reader’s body, the motion and sound of chattering teeth.

\textsuperscript{17} Austin, 8.
\textsuperscript{19} Whereas performatives require “an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect” and thus involve ceremony (Austin, 26, italics removed), “perlocutionary acts are not conventional,” though they may use conventional means to achieve their ends (121-22). On how the “effects of meter upon the reader’s attention” in Wordsworth’s poem “are not unlike the effects of the imagination on the body of Harry Gill” in the poet’s view, see Adela Pinch, \textit{Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 88-89.
For Wordsworth, verbal repetition is an agent of perlocutionary acts: as in the note to “The Thorn,” repeated words are “things, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of,” and drive, the emotions.\(^\text{20}\) As we build emotional associations with words through repetition, they, in turn, propel those emotions. Much of the presentation and representation of language across the work of Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley concerns perlocutionary objects and acts. Austen names a novel *Persuasion*; though he anticipates resistance, Wordsworth explicitly attempts to interest his reader in the speaker of “The Thorn”; and Shelley shows how her creature’s speech “moves” his maker even against his will. Not only do these examples prefigure Austin’s concept, they make a case for an expansion of the verbs he uses to describe such acts. We might add to our perlocutionary vocabulary “moving” for the action of the creature’s speech on Victor Frankenstein (and “repulsing” for Frankenstein’s opposition to being moved), “pacing” for Wordsworth’s transmission of bodily rhythms through his meter, or “blushing” for Jane Fairfax’s blush at Frank Churchill’s word jumble in *Emma*. To read Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley is to shift perspective from Austin’s emphasis on perlocutionary acts that impact the mind to include what we might call perlocutionary sensations.

Moving outward from the impact of individual speech acts to the cumulative influence of the language we speak on, in Daniel Casasanto’s words, “cognitive mechanisms” that impact our “thoughts, feelings, and judgments,” we can see a similar opportunity to shift perspective.\(^\text{21}\) The concept of this influence arising from linguistic differences is known as linguistic relativity, or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis for its originators Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf.\(^\text{22}\)

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Linguists and other scholars who work in this field might discuss how the verbs available to us influence the particular information about motion that we convey, or how our “space-pitch metaphors,” such as English and Dutch speakers’ association between spatial height and pitch (or thickness for Farsi speakers), influence the “space-pitch mappings” with which we mentally represent pitch. The latter is, in effect, the opposite end of the phenomenon Ramachandran charts: instead of mental mappings of different sensations motivating speech sounds, language use motivates our mental mapping habits. This is the difference between sensory experience shaping language and the other way around.

It is not a far leap from linguistic relativity research to Wordsworth’s theory in his note to “The Thorn” that our reliance on particular words to express our passions makes them catalysts for them, or the lament of Shelley’s Frankenstein that “If our impulses were confined to hunger, thirst, and desire, we might be nearly free; but now we are moved by . . . a chance word or scene that that word may convey to us.” As Frankenstein melancholically recognizes, words open up new and emotionally fraught categories of experience. Through the lens of linguistic relativity, Austen’s description of Mrs. Musgrove’s “large fat sighings” (49) reveals itself as one instance of what one might call weight-stress mapping metaphors. Our concepts of metrical stress in English, in which stressed syllables carry the “weight” of emphasis, translates into an association

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between syllabic stress and physical heft. What Richardson notes, following David Miall, of cognitive linguistics applies equally here: within this “cognitivism,” theorists “tend to overlook the ‘affective and kinesthetic’ aspects of language” that were key in the Romantic era. What the earlier examples from Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley add to the investigations of linguists is a reminder that the “cognitive mechanisms” they examine are felt as physical as well as mental experience.

Whereas speech act theory and studies of linguistic relativity tend to focus on the effects language has on abstracted events or on cognition, disability studies and scholarly discussions of hate speech foreground the impact language has on people’s bodies. The overtly embodied persons to which Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley extend sympathy confront a recurring subject of disability studies that Ato Quayson terms the “excess of meaning” and “moral panic” attached to representations of disability. In particular, Shelley’s opposition of sentimental display to the disfigured body of the dwarf in “Transformation” (itself a figure for the moral disfigurement beneath the narrator’s handsome display) and to the underlying animal vitality of Lionel Verney anticipates Quayson’s claim that figurations of disability “force a reading” of the way their “aesthetic fields” always have “an ethical dimension.”

Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley’s use of language as sensation in connection with the socially marginalized bodies of women, the

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25 Richardson, 90-91.
26 Ato Quayson, Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3-4, 7-8, 12. On the excess of meaning attached to “vividly embodied” persons and the connections between disability and other forms of otherness, such as femaleness, see Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s influential Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 5-8, 11.
27 Quayson, 19.
disabled, the inhuman, and the poor “force a reading” of the moral problems that sentimental aesthetics entail.  

Disability studies complicates and expands on such concerns with the overlap between the moral and the aesthetic, and with the impact of language on embodiment. Yet, at times a disciplinary emphasis on the representation of disability, including its effects on real people’s bodies, paradoxically results in a disembodied view of language itself. For example, while David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder claim “disability inaugurates the act of interpretation” in our “attempt to bring the body’s unruliness under control,” they assess language as “lack[ing] the very physicality that it seeks to control.” Mitchell and Snyder’s dismissal of the idea that language might be a physical agent seems to me a missed opportunity. At the same time that Austen’s Persuasion represents the disabled Mrs. Smith as a realistically flawed person with remarkable emotional resources, its most powerful achievement is to make readers feel, in their own bodies, the rhythms and pauses of its socially marginalized heroine’s sensations through the physical force of its language. Returning to Coleridge’s distaste for the disfigured body that the “burring” of Wordsworth’s Johnny Foy called up for him, we can see how this sounding may have evoked equally forceful sympathy for others. In Shelley’s scene of a performance of Macbeth during the global plague in The Last Man, the shared bodily abjection of actors and

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29 For examples of this emphasis on representation rather than words as events in themselves, see Thomson, esp. 5-8, 15 and Mitchell and Snyder, esp. 1-2. An exception to this trend is Jay Timothy Dolmage’s examination of how the persuasive force of rhetoric shapes bodies in Disability Rhetoric (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014), esp. 2, 5, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1lj2n73m.4.

30 Mitchell and Snyder, 6-7.
audience gives the words of the play the force to move listeners physically and emotionally. When we consider the material impact of words, we see how writing can elicit a somatic sympathy (or its opposite, repulsion) as readers take up the syllables and rhythms of other people’s bodies. Alongside representation, this impact across style, word choice, and prosody becomes a matter for moral as well as aesthetic investigation.

Hate speech exists on the morally and socially negative end of the spectrum of language that acts as an agent of sensation, and one that Romantic-era writers attempted to counter with somatic sympathy even as they recognized the possibility for revulsion. The term “hate speech” originated in the United States in the mid-twentieth century (the first usage the Oxford English Dictionary lists is a reference to Adolf Hitler’s speech in the Syracuse Herald in 1938). Scholars who write on hate speech typically focus on defining what kind of harm this particular form of utterance causes and whether its legal regulation is an appropriate or effective solution. Jeremy Waldron’s The Harm in Hate Speech (2012) is at the center of this debate, animating reactions across journals for its claims, first, that hate speech constitutes an “assault” on the dignity of its targets (conversely unifying the hateful), degrading the environment in which we all live at the same time, and, second, for the benefits of regulation. Whether or not hate speech

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32 For an overview of recent scholarly debate about hate speech in relation to free speech across a wide array of fields, see Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan’s introduction to their edited volume, Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012), doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/ 9780199236282.003.0001.
should be regulated in the United States or, for that matter, in democratic states where such regulations do exist is, mercifully, beyond the scope of this study. But the writers I have discussed do consider speech that causes serious and widespread harm. As we have seen, Shelley describes words as “adder’s stings” that cause stabbing physical pain in the hearer or reader.  

For her, however, this painful force is that of words in general on particular individuals, rather than a particular but widespread convention within language. Wordsworth’s idea of language as a “counter-spirit” is much nearer to Waldron’s description of the harm hate speech causes. So near, in fact, that I will examine them side by side:

| Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not (recurring to a metaphor before used) an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them |
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| When this assurance [of social inclusion] is conveyed effectively, it is hardly noticeable; it is something on which everyone can rely, like the cleanness of the air they breathe or the quality of the water they drink from a fountain. . . . Hate speech undermines this public good . . . . not only by intimating discrimination and violence, but by reawakening living nightmares of what this society was like . . . in the past. In doing so, it |


Both Wordsworth, on the left, and Waldron, on the right, describe harmful language as a physical threat in our environment. It is a cumulative “poison”—for Waldron, a “slow-acting poison”; for Wordsworth, it has the destructiveness of “poisoned vestments”—which has the power to “derange” the thoughts of Wordsworth’s users of language as “counter-spirit,” to raise “living nightmares” and destroy “social peace” in Waldron’s community beset by hate speech. In this way, harmful language estranges people from themselves and from others. Wordsworth and Waldron each compare the “good” linguistic environment to the air that we breathe: an element that is both necessary for life and that we live in, move through, and take into our bodies. The larger levels of “language” or “speech” and the individual units of “words” have the power to either, for Wordsworth, “leave in quiet” or “lay waste” to an individual’s grasp on his own “right mind” and, for Waldron, to form or overturn “social peace.” Of course, Wordsworth’s language as “counter-spirit” does not refer to hate speech but to artificial poetic diction that he thought

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estranged readers from authentic and appropriate emotions. But his belief that aesthetic change can bring moral change, that language can be “incarnate” and “sink into the heart” (“Essays upon Epitaphs,” 57), offers hope for an antidote to other kinds of harmful speech. That Wordsworth’s language as “counter-spirit” resonates so clearly with Waldron’s harm of hate speech invites us to ask what solutions the Romantic-era writing I have examined can offer for our own “counter-spirits.”

To answer this question calls for a revision of the term “rectification,” which Hans Aarsleff uses to describe what he sees as Wordsworth’s attempt—following Locke, Condillac, and others—to correct for “the impenetrable subjectivity of ideas to which words are tied,” and thus the disjunction between words and the ideas of different people.36 When Wordsworth writes of the soul and the “heart,” he observes that his topic “lies” mainly “far hidden from the reach of words,” and his poetry “make[s] / Breathings for [these] incommunicable powers.”37 Facing the limitations of the ideas that words can communicate, Wordsworth communicates through the sensory experience of poetic language as “Breathings.”38 For Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley alike, rectification includes matching words with authentic aesthetic, emotional, and moral good. Each of these writers uses language that directly imparts sensation to the reader in order to achieve this rectification.

In this way, Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley show us a more immediate way to achieve social sympathy. They suggest that language as sensation bypasses the ideas, imagination, and

36 Aarsleff, 27, 375-76.
38 For Aarsleff’s Wordsworth, “Nature and the simple tasks of rural living afford the best referents” for rectification because they help form a “primal language” that can “make the internal external” without artifice (377). Richardson similarly notes Wordsworth’s use of meter and other “extrasmatic” aspects such as interjections or repetition as a corrective for the failings of language; meter “allows the rhythmic, passionate character of ‘natural language’”—which establishes reliable “connections among words, objects, and feelings”—“to flow into articulate language” (80, 87, 79-81, 74).
aesthetic biases that usually mediate between words and things, expressions of feeling and the response of sympathy. This language can make us feel with Austen’s vigorously and unconventionally embodied heroines, move with the rhythms of Wordsworth’s poetic meter and the walking gait it reflects, or receive the pang of Shelley’s tales of tortured and deformed bodies. In these presentations of language as sensation, each author develops an implicit materialist theory of language that builds on and beyond Locke, and a model of sympathy based in the common experience of embodiment rather than the lofty feelings of sentimentalism. We typically associate Romantic-era writers, especially poets, with transcendence, but Austen, Wordsworth, and Shelley ground their concepts of language in immanence. What they offer is the hope that we can achieve sympathy with the unfamiliar and the socially abject because we feel the same feelings, and move as they move, by mapping sensory experience onto the sensation of language.

39 See Richardson on how Romantic-era concepts of the mind, such as Erasmus Darwin’s and Wordsworth’s, break down the “conventionally gendered opposition between (masculine) transcendent reason and (féminine) embodied emotion” (71).
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