This new reading of Wordsworth’s poetry by leading critic David Simpson centers on its almost obsessive representation of spectral forms and images of death in life. Wordsworth is reacting, Simpson argues, to the massive changes in the condition of England and the modern world at the turn of the century: mass warfare; the increased scope of machine-driven labor and urbanization; and the expanding power of commodity form in rendering economic and social exchange more and more abstract, more and more distant from human agency and control. Reading Wordsworth alongside Marx and Derrida, Simpson examines the genesis of an attitude of concern which exemplifies the predicament of modern subjectivity as it faces suffering and distress.

David Simpson is G. B. Needham Distinguished Professor of English, University of California, Davis.
This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those “great national events” that were “almost daily taking place”: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion, and literature were reworked in texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Biographia Literaria*; gender relations in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Don Juan*; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of comment or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of “literature” and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

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WORDSORTH, COMMODIFICATION AND SOCIAL CONCERN

The Poetics of Modernity

DAVID SIMPSON
For Margie
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