Marilyn Gaull's Eclectic Romanticism

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THE RECENT PASSING OF MARILYN GAULL leaves many Coleridgeans with a sense of profound loss. My own acquaintance with Marilyn began with membership in the Friends of Coleridge and attendance at the Coleridge Summer Conference in the early 2000s. Delegates to the conference, then held at pastoral Somerset's Cannington Agricultural College, felt her presence in the great lecture hall where we met in those days. In conversation over meals at the round tables, bustling with activity after plenary lectures, one immediately sensed her singular confidence and energy. Her presence in that hall mirrored her influence on the profession, especially through her monograph series, her book, and the journal she founded.

Many of the best books on Romanticism over the last fifteen years appeared in Marilyn's series with Palgrave Macmillan: "Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters." Indeed, longstanding members of the Friends of Coleridge wrote some of her most successful titles, including excellent monographs by Greg Leadbetter, Jim Mays, and Fred Burwick. The series description intimates something of the breadth of Marilyn's interests: "This series presents original biographical, critical, and scholarly studies of literary works and public figures in Great Britain, North America, and continental Europe during the nineteenth century." The list of topics covered is expansive, with authors and fields of study viewed in the widest lens, expanded further with the comprehensive aim to incorporate "anything that influenced, impinges upon, expresses, or contributes to an understanding of the authors, works, and events of the nineteenth century." In short, Marilyn's series welcomed the widest conceivable range of interests in the nineteenth century.

In this way, "Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters" extended the scope of her monograph, *English Romanticism: The Human Context* (1988).[1] Her work is an accessible and capacious study of the social and cultural environment—the "atmosphere"—of English Romantic literature. While not neglecting the major figures, Marilyn's work included what some might call "peripheral" individuals and topics as well, "for I believe that it is on such peripheries, on the edges of great events, that most people live and where most literature begins. It is there, in what we now call the environment or the context, that the most significant associations occur, those coincidences that stimulate creativity" (vii).

Indeed, the "human context," as the subtitle indicates, stands at the very heart of *English Romanticism*. In three sections, she unfolds the "human context" of English Romanticism, which she considers "a complex set of ideas and expressions, largely philosophical …" (x). People gave Romanticism its life, for the lives of people inspired literature. Politics, empires, business, fashion, and love were all subjects of interest. Romanticism is revolution and

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[1] Marilyn Gaull, *English Romanticism: The Human Context* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

reform, but also committees, clubs, and periodicals. The people, the "reading public," were those whose

> purchasing power gave them enormous and unprecedented influence over what could be written and published, and whose tastes were often inscrutable. Authors approached them with a mixture of wonder, fear, and contempt. This reading public, however, and the publishing industry it made possible, contributed as much to the shape of literary expression and the attitude of the authors as did the literary tradition itself. (10–11)

Marilyn's focus on "the human context" in *English Romanticism* brought culture, history, and what she calls the "experimental arts" all into focus. She not only provides biographical sketches of numerous figures—vignettes that open up the range of interests and personalities—but also central works and a dazzling array of literary forms. The final section may be most important, for while her treatment of Romantic theater or the gothic could be anticipated, her discussion of a common life in poetry, painting, and the natural sciences reflects a fresh exploration of the "inner life," imagination, and the Romantic "belief that human energy, intellect, and vision" could participate in broad societal change. In the end, the human again. The closing paragraph of *English Romanticism*, written in Marilyn Gaull's characteristic style, explains role of the mind in the Romantic quest for knowledge:

> To artists and poets during the Romantic period, to philosophers, historians, and scientists as well, the human context, the expression of the human mind through nature, the assertion of the imagination over all that is meaningless, lifeless, and inert, the simultaneous perception of natural objects, the unseen principles that shape and govern them, their history, potential, relationships, origins, ends, and analogues, the fullness and diversity of the living world both within and without, the 'capacity to imagine what we know,' as Shelley claimed, constitute their common pursuit, constitute the "poetry of life." (375–76)

Whatever blind spots and generalizations *English Romanticism* may contain, the book reveals both the fascinating reach of the period and the eclectic breadth of Marilyn Gaull's interests. Alan Bewell's review of *English Romanticism* rightly praises the impressive range of her writing:

> *English Romanticism* shares with many recent books on the Romantic period a profound belief that individual writers cannot be understood apart from their historical context. … The result is a book of enormous scope, which attempts to provide its readers with "the historical, social, cultural, political, economic, intellectual, philosophical, artistic, and scientific backgrounds of the literature they are studying" (vii). … I know of few books in which the authors have attempted to become conversant

> and to bring into focus such an extensive amount of material. … An extraordinary aspect of *English Romanticism* is that it maintains this rich condensation of general arguments and particular insights for over four hundred pages. As at once an introduction, an encyclopedia, and a reader's guide to Romanticism, the book will be invaluable to general readers, undergraduates, and graduate students.[2]

Still, as noteworthy as her Palgrave series and book may be—and these are significant contributions, to be sure—Marilyn's influence will continue to be felt most in the journal she founded: *The Wordsworth Circle* (est. 1970). A journal instituted "to facilitate communications among colleagues," *The Wordsworth Circle* publishes anything that contributes to a deeper understanding of Romantic studies and its afterlives. Over the course of decades, *The Wordsworth Circle* published proceedings of the Wordsworth-Coleridge Association, reviewed selected new books in the field, and published articles on "literature, art, architectures, science, politics, religion, music, language, philosophy, aesthetics, law, publication, translation, domestic and public life …" The range of subjects and forms is impressive, to say the least.

Marilyn's vocation as an editor and publisher can be detected in the unyielding "Submission Guidelines" for her journal.[3] There in the "Submission Guidelines," something of Marilyn's firm editorial voice can be heard in the advice she stipulated for potential authors. She was, of course, always a teacher, and enjoyed a successful career at William and Mary, Temple University, New York University, and the Editorial Institute at Boston University. From students and colleagues alike, Marilyn demanded clarity and precision. Pronouns without antecedents were forbidden. The memorable line, "The Jane Austen 'it is a truth universally acknowledged' is a truth nobody acknowledges at all" is not merely a lively quip but also sound counsel. And while she could be unbending in her insistence upon crisp sentences that eliminated jargon, identified agency, and barred generalizations, she did so with a most noble editorial purpose: to build a community of writers and readers. For Marilyn, good writing requires collaboration: "Literary criticism is not a zero-sum game: for you to be right, everyone else does not have to be wrong."

When I was a young academic, Marilyn wisely advised me to build an audience for a long and joyful career. To do so, she explained, would require me to become an entirely different writer. Even the most experienced writers could be left mortified and withered by her editorial remarks. She did not need our approval, and, though her criticism stung, those who heeded her advice were improved by her guidance. I recall spending hours on an abstract only to receive a response within minutes of delivery with the most incisive

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[2] Alan Bewell, "Review of *English Romanticism: The Human Context*, by Marilyn Gaull," *Wordsworth Circle* 20.4 (1989): 192–95. Much the same could be said of her splendid edition of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (2005).

[3] The "Submission Guidelines," with their good advice, remain available online for prospective authors: https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/journals/twc/instruct?mobileUi=0&. Marilyn also founded *Editorial News* for the Council of Editors of Learned Journals, an organization she helped to establish and for which she served as President from 1978 to 1980.

commentary on almost every line. I listened and learned from her and, through it all, she believed in me and so many others, mentoring us for a lifetime of collaboration and participation in a community she helped to foster.

Marilyn Gaull encouraged the formation of just such a community in her work as a publisher. In several iterations, over years of email correspondence, I came to appreciate the concept, but *The Wordsworth Circle* "Submission Guidelines" once again best capture the idea:

> In entering the long conversation of literary scholarship and criticism, acknowledge how your work connects to the others in the conversation, what it contributes. It is a small profession, a long life, and building community (which is what *TWC*, indeed all publication exists to do), depends on cooperative writing, on inclusive readings, on both/and hypotheses … On a practical level, your audience usually consists of those who are in your field. They may be the ones who are asked to peer-review your essay or book, or to review your book after it is published, or to support a grant application, to be an outside reviewer for awards or promotion. It is good sense to acknowledge their work and avoid attacking them in footnotes. At the very least, you will offend the only audience that is really interested in your work.

Marilyn Gaull's eclectic romanticism was indeed inclusive. She mentored her authors, championed our voices, and will be remembered for her contributions to the field. We write in conversation with those who have come before us—we stand on their shoulders—and surely Marilyn is one such giant.

Three giants of our world at the Coleridge Summer Conference, Cannington 2010