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Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815–1845
(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019)
by Tim Fulford

In *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815–1845*, Tim Fulford offers a rich, suggestive, and compelling account of a Wordsworth we have misread—or, more likely, failed to read in the first place. His goal is "to allow us to read [the later poems] again, alongside the earlier work and in their own right—and to place in literary history a different Wordsworth—a wholler Wordsworth, not predicated on youth" (8). Fulford's Wordsworth is not only "not predicated on youth," but in significant ways he is predicated on and created by age. This Wordsworth is a formally innovative poet, one who consistently returns to, revises, and rejuvenates earlier poetry (Fulford considers poetry from as early as 1799) in order to renovate fixed forms (for example, the poet's preoccupation with the sonnet beginning in the 1820s in relation to narrow rooms and orbicular spheres) as well as to fashion new hybrid genres later in his career. Important examples for Fulford include the "memorials" generated by the tour sequences of the 1810s through the 1830s (many of which poems Fulford characterizes as "spots of space") and the "Evening Voluntaries" first published in 1835 in *Yarrow Revisited*, which Fulford argues is a uniquely Wordsworthian grafting of the blank verse effusions of the 1790s and an earlier tradition of nature meditations, the result being what he terms "conversation poems in couplets" (243).

Whether composed (or re-composed) in the 1810s or the 1830s, this is the poetry of a "twilight zone" in which Wordsworth can "image to himself his present relationships to his past and to the most fundamental sources of his art" (159), as Fulford remarks in the course of a brilliant reading of "Enough of Climbing Toil" (first published in 1820 before being significantly revised for the 1827 *Poetical Works*). It is a "self-consciously secondary poetry," one in which Wordsworth "makes verse a reflection of aspects of the world . . . that are seen to reflect, and so represent, what is gone or never was" (264, 265). Another way to characterize this impulse would be to suggest (as Stephen Gill observed specifically of the late "Musings near Aquapendente") that Wordsworth's poetry beginning in 1815 reflects a dual commitment "to record youth's achievement and to celebrate experience in age."[2] Integral to Fulford's achievement in *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815–1845* is his consistent ability to follow this dual course, re-appropriating the poetry (and poetics) of Wordsworth's youth in vital readings of the later poetry that show the older Wordsworth creatively departing from his past, rather than sterilely repeating it in

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[2] Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 405.

increasingly dessicated forms.

In considering the relation between early and late Wordsworth, 1815 is in many ways the fulcrum. The year after the commercial and critical failure of *The Excursion*, it marks the publication in two volumes of the first collected *Poems*, Wordsworth's first sustained attempt at rehabilitating and controlling his public image (in the wake of Francis Jeffrey's sustained and scathing attacks in *The Edinburgh Review*). Wordsworth went on to publish the career-altering collection, *The River Duddon* (1820),[3] the five-volume *Poetical Works* (1827), *Yarrow Revisited, and Other Poems* (1835), *Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years* (1842), and the final collected *Poems* of 1845, all critical markers in Fulford's consideration of Wordsworth's public persona as he collected and re-collected himself beginning in the 1810s. 1815 is also of course the year after the end of the inevitable point of reference (and departure) for Fulford's study: Geoffrey Hartman's *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814* (Yale UP, 1964). Fulford's title initially seems to suggest that he will pick up where Hartman left off, and complete the story that Hartman (and the predominant strain of Wordsworthian criticism after him) either did not or could not write. But this is not the case: Fulford's concerns are not Hartman's. Whereas Hartman concentrated on the *poetry* initially written between 1787 ("The Vale of Esthwaite") and 1814 (*The Excursion*), Fulford examines poetry from the 1790s through the 1840s, with the dates in his title referring first-and-foremost to Wordsworth's *publications* between 1815 and 1845 (from the first collected edition to the final one issued during Wordsworth's lifetime), and the poet's management of his public image (his branding, as it were) during these later years. As Fulford has remarked elsewhere, "Wordsworth became a strategist for success in print, one who re-collected his poems again and again so as to gain authority and sales in the book market of his day."[4] Throughout the present study, Fulford deftly positions Wordsworth as an increasingly public and "professional" poet, in the sense that he was self-consciously producing and re-producing himself for the marketplace: creating the taste by which he thought he was to be enjoyed by future *readers*, all the while catering to the tastes of the public *consumers* of the day.

While the public, published Wordsworth is one of Fulford's central concerns, it is not the only line of argument organizing his study. Equally if not more important is Fulford's attention to Wordsworth's renovations and innovations in form and genre. The Wordsworth under consideration here is rarely writing anything resembling his "characteristic" blank verse of the 1790s and *The Prelude*, but instead experimenting with, among other possibilities, the sonnet (writing over 350 of them after 1820), variations on ballad stanzas, ten-line stanzas of tetrameter couplets, pentameter couplets (both open and closed), "effusions" and "musings" and "memorials," and what Fulford aptly

[3] See *The Wordsworth Circle* 51.1 (2020), "Wordsworth and The River Duddon: Bicentenary Readings" (guest ed. Philip Shaw), esp. Peter Manning, "Wordsworth Reshapes Himself and Is Reshaped: *The River Duddon* and the 1820 *Miscellaneous Poems*," 35–53.

[4] Tim Fulford, *The Late Poetry of the Lake Poets: Romanticism Revised* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 201.

denominates "not-quite eleg[ies]" (291). Although the book is nominally organized in terms of individual genres, there is throughout a more subtle and pervasive attention to Wordsworth's consideration of the relations between form and history, of the ways that "historical pressures are refracted at the levels of form, style, genre, and prosody," and the reciprocal ways in which "form, style, genre, and prosody also shape historical interventions" (8). This vocabulary then serves to inform the largest arc of Fulford's argument, his sustained attention to what he terms Wordsworth's creative preoccupation with "the complex and often troubling production of the present by the past" (93)—in other words, the prominent role played by memory (personal as well as cultural, textual as well as historical) in Wordsworth's poetry during this period, whether or not he went on to title the resulting works "memorials" (as in, for example, the 1827 "Memorials of a Tour in Scotland, 1814" or the 1837 "Memorials of a Tour in Italy"). In Fulford's reading, the "memorial" (as the genre and journal of a tour in verse) and the "evening voluntary" are Wordsworth's two most significant generic innovations (Wordsworthian experiments in genre-mixing). They are also the two most important locations for Fulford's sustained, incisive consideration of what he terms Wordsworth's "poetics of lateness" (5), in which what is most prominently at stake is the difficulty of the poet's choice in renewing and / or departing from his earlier creative practices and priorities when he is increasingly conscious of being late in both his career and his life. (These readings constitute a welcome and rewarding extension of Fulford's previous work in the chapters on Wordsworth in *The Late Poetry of the Lake Poets*.)

Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815–1845 is organized in four parts, each consisting of two chapters, followed by a brief but critical coda. The heading of Part One, "Producing a Poet for the Public," is in many ways germane for the entire study, foregrounding as it does Wordsworth's preoccupation with his public image and reputation throughout the years under consideration. Both chapters here concentrate on poetry that Wordsworth first published in the 1815 *Poems*, though in many instances he had initially written it earlier (sometimes much earlier). In Chapter One, "Learning to be a Poet of Imagination: Wordsworth and the Ghost of Cowper," Fulford analyzes "Yew Trees" (first drafted in 1804 but not published until 1815) in the context of its debt to and appropriation of Cowper's "Yardley Oak." Generically, Fulford doubly identifies "Yew Trees" as a rejuvenation of the classical inscription and, more importantly for Wordsworth's classification in 1815, as a "Poem of the Imagination." While there may not be any prescriptive formal criteria for this classification in 1815, it was an important marker for Wordsworth in the design of the *Poems*, as a decisive way to re-define himself—not the trivial, puerile poet maligned by Jeffrey, but a sublime poet of the imagination. Doing so enabled Wordsworth, as Fulford observes, "to give himself finally, aged forty-five, the authority that readers and critics had refused him" (15). Fulford develops his argument regarding the importance of the inscription for Wordsworth in Chapter Two, "The Politics of Landscape and the Poetics of

Patronage: Collecting Coleorton." Here Fulford positions the inscription in relation to the georgic, inflecting Wordsworth as the poetic laborer working for his patron, Sir George Beaumont (to whom the 1815 edition was dedicated), as he reworks (rather, re-inscribes) the landscape of Beaumont's country estate, Coleorton, in relation to his own site-specific inscriptions—and as a complicated negotiation of his own ambiguous position as a poet who thought of himself as independent all the while he was patronized by Beaumont. Poetically, what is most germane for Fulford's larger arguments is Wordsworth's development here (in both "Yew Trees" and the Coleorton inscriptions) of a new voice, one eliding first-person narration for a more formally restrained and "chastened poetry that works within self-imposed limits" (33)—a premonition of the later Wordsworth.

Part Two, "Spots of Space: Materializing Memory," brings to the fore Fulford's interest in the later Wordsworth's intense preoccupation with a poetics of memory. While Chapter Three, "Memorials of Scott-land," explores what Fulford calls the "revisionary genre" of the tourist memorial (generated by Wordsworth's tours of Scotland in 1814, 1831, and 1833), Chapter Four, "Textual Strata and Geological Form: The Scriptorium and the Cave," is organized around a dense, exciting reading of the blank verse nature meditation "Enough of Climbing Toil" (which takes many important bearings from the "strata" of the poem's compositional history between 1799 and 1827). These chapters are crucial for Fulford's arguments about place and memory, or "spots of space," as he formulates it, "significant place[s] in which the past could be retrieved" (93). It is in the context of thinking about the ways in which place(s) can remediate the past that Fulford argues that Wordsworth's "memorials" constitute a new genre. "A hybrid of traditional forms and dispassionate contemporary witness" (98), the memorials of the Scottish tours allow Wordsworth to cast a critical eye on the local and national legacies of violence often commemorated—and mystified—in Scottish and Scott-ish poetry (whose popularity and sales Wordsworth envied). As a genre, the memorial is simultaneously a meditation on a spot (and its history), and a critique of what Wordsworth increasingly viewed as a mystified, "pseudo-medieval" valorization of the Scottish past—an ideology of what Fulford terms "minstrelsy and bardism," or "the mediation of the past through idealized, invented poet-figures who were imagined singing ballads and romances for a feudal lord" (100). This is the critical and generic context in which Fulford approaches "Yarrow Visited" (situated in relation to "Yarrow Unvisited" and "Yarrow Revisited") as well as "The Brownie's Cell," another poem initially occasioned by Wordsworth's 1814 tour. (A "brownie" is a spirit that might haunt houses, streams, or waterfalls; the "cell" in question is a ruin on one of the islands in Loch Lomond [115].) A "lyric memorial" that departs from "the romanticization of Scottish history as nostalgia for feudal society" (124), "The Brownie's Cell" is, according to Fulford, "a poem of belated witness" (124) to the history and folklore which it simultaneously commemorates and critiques. (In this regard, it is also an important manifestation of Wordsworth's emerging

poetics of lateness.) It is also a formally unique poem in Wordsworth's oeuvre, a ten-line stanza consisting of five tetrameter couplets—although, asymmetrically, the first line of each stanza is in pentameter (reminiscent, for Fulford, of the unusual stanzaic structures James Hogg often deployed).

In Part Three, "The Politics of Diction," Fulford takes aim at "the many critical verdicts that convict the later Wordsworth of stylistic ossification" (175) through readings of Wordsworth's poetry of the 1820s and 1830s as responses to "the challenge of a new generation's Wordsworthianism" (177): the sensualization of his own "nature poetry" by Keats and Byron (Chapter Five, "The Erotics of Influence") and the re-politicization of the *Lyrical Ballads'* poetic manifesto by Ebeneezer Elliot in his 1831 *Corn Law Rhymes* (Chapter Six, "Wordsworth and Ebeneezer Elliott"). In "The Haunted Tree" (published in *The River Duddon* collection), Wordsworth's revival of the mythology of the classics shows him to be a more Ovidian poet than heretofore recognized. And in two poems from *Yarrow Revisited* ("Humanity" and "The Warning"), Wordsworth published, according to Fulford, "some of the most explicitly political writing of his entire career" (193). While these brief chapters do not make arguments on the same scale as those in Parts One and Two, they nonetheless do advance the through-line of Fulford's argument regarding Wordsworth's ongoing reclamation of his earlier poetry—namely that this project entailed far more renovation than restatement.

Part Four, "Late Genres," is the real tour de force of *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815–1845*. It is here, as well as in the Coda, "Elegiac Musing and Genre Mixing," that Fulford really clinches the arguments regarding the "poetics of lateness" (5) that he has been suggestively assembling since the introduction. Indeed, these chapters in many ways mark the culmination of arguments that Fulford began prosecuting in his readings of Wordsworth in *The Late Poetry of the Lake Poets*, where he argued that in seeking to "come to terms with what he inherited from the visionary insights of his earlier verse," the question for Wordsworth was "how to cope with the legacy of the past [rather] than how to relive his youth," which was necessarily also a question of "how to reappraise the significance of those insights." To put this in more pointed terms, "how to write a poetry that both honoured the ambiguous legacy of those spots of time and legislated a way of living after them."[5] The key term here is "after," which highlights the nature of the belatedness informing so much of Wordsworth's most powerful (yet also most delicately balanced) poetry beginning in 1815. It additionally underscores Fulford's perceptive, productive development of several of Peter Larkin's insights into the "after-presence" and "after-dimension" that characterize the belatedness of the later Wordsworth. (In several important ways, Larkin rather than Hartman is Fulford's most important critical point of reference in this study.) In concluding his reading of "Enough of Climbing Toil" as "a late, twilight poetry," a "post-climactic text invoking, without trying to repeat, old spots of time and without trying to find

[5] *Late Poetry of the Lake Poets*, 201–2.

new ones" (170), Fulford cites in support an insight of Larkin's regarding the late Wordsworth as a poet who (in Larkin's terms) is attuned less to the climactic (the spot of time, the visionary gleam, et cetera) than to "a post-climactic sphere [which] must be consolidated in some way, even by inviting meditation on loss, old age or on death, the pure past."[6] This sense of an "after" dimension is precisely what Fulford so effectively listens for in his analysis of Wordsworth's meditations on form and history in Chapter Seven, "Narrow Cells and Stone Girdles: Sonnet Form and Spiritual History," then in his consideration of Wordsworth's "lateness" in Chapter Eight, "Evanescence and After-Effect: The Evening Voluntaries."

Along with his analysis of the memorial as a genre in Chapter Three, Fulford's examination of the "Evening Voluntaries" in Chapter Eight constitutes his most original formal argument. This group of seven poems (published for the first time in *Yarrow Revisited*) is for Fulford "a new genre," one in which Wordsworth explored the unexpected perspectives brought on by age (242). An arresting formal improvisation, they produce, "from the hybridization of the nature-meditation [Wordsworth] learned from Cowper and Coleridge with the couplet style of such poets as Finch and Gray, a revitalization of poetic tradition" (243). The result is a poetry of "lateness," "belatedness," and "secondariness" in which Wordsworth can write freely about what is gone (or perhaps what never was), and in so doing create a sequence which Fulford reads, cumulatively, as "a set of variations considering the poet's calling in the process of evoking the scenes that call him into verse in the here and now" (276). "Lateness" variously suggests "the virtue of chastening bliss" as well as the "relief that decline brings from the heated business of life at its noon," and allows Wordsworth in his sixties to "configure a poetic relationship to being belated not just to the loss of fulness but also to past poetry that had already lamented and defined that loss so powerfully" (267, 271, 272). Fulford's readings throughout this chapter are subtle, nuanced, and exciting. He attends variously to the sonic patterning of individual couplets, the poems' allusive relations to poetic tradition, and the valedictory aspects of the fifth Voluntary's meditation on Coleridge, all in the course of a compelling argument that the "Evening Voluntaries" are "perhaps the most profound meditations on life and on poetry-making from the viewpoint of age not just within Wordsworth's own oeuvre but in English poetry up to that time" (287).

Together with Chapter Eight, the Coda on Wordsworth's "sublime elegism" (293) beautifully clinches all of the main lines of Fulford's arguments—not only on lateness but also on formal innovation (here, Wordsworth's "not-quite eleg[ies]") as well as the poetics of memory along with Wordsworth's public persona and the management of his publications. In the late "Musings Near Aquapendente" (a tour memorial that at times doubles as an elegy for Walter Scott), Wordsworth questions his vocation in a formulation that resonates in

[6] Peter Larkin, "Wordsworth's 'After-Sojourn': Revision and Unself-Rivalry in the Later Poetry" *Studies in Romanticism* 20 (1981): 409–36 (412).

important ways throughout Fulford's entire book. "Why," Wordsworth asks,

> Why should Poesy
> Yield to the lure of vain regret, and hover
> In gloom on wings with confidence outspread
> To move in sunshine? (ll. 85–88; cited 294)

This is in many ways a fundamental question for Wordsworth throughout his writing life, audible as early as *The Prelude* and the Intimations Ode (if not earlier). But it takes on particular plangency when Wordsworth recognizes himself to be late in his career: as Fulford rephrases it, "how not to hover in gloom when the regions that sustained one's poesy have been darkened by death" (294)? Across the arc of *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815–1845*, Fulford offers us a poet who did not yield "to the lure of vain regret," but who in fact outspread his wings across the thirty years that followed the publication of the first collected *Poems* in 1815. This Wordsworth "hovers" between past and future, and the poems of these years, in Fulford's handling, "articulate a liminal state, poised between before and after, and articulate a way of being toward an ending not yet reached" (287). Exactly in this regard, Fulford might have considered a subtitle: *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815–1845: The Poetics of Lateness*.