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Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation, 1787–1842
(Humanities-Ebooks; 2nd rev. ed., 2015)
by Richard Gravil

RICHARD GRAVIL'S STUDY OF BRITISH ROMANTICISM and its cross-Atlantic currents in early American writers such as Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, and Hawthorne, must be characterized as a fundamentally Wordsworthian project in its temperament, thinking, and articulation. Gravil's commitment to what can only be seen as a form of constancy to an ideal can be traced in his great study of Wordsworth's poetic career, *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation, 1787–1842*. Drawing upon various lines of scholarship cast out over decades of scholarly activity, the book as a whole remains true to a core set of ideas about how Wordsworth saw himself as a poet set aside for, or called to, a specific poetic vocation, a vocation rooted in the natural, the particular, the everyday—in the radically localized predicament of human experience at a specific time and place. The various chapters of *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation* are drawn from previously published material; moreover, this collection is a revised and enlarged version of an earlier edition of the work. The book can be characterized by its single-minded focus upon Wordsworth's "self-consciously bardic vocation," his clear, and carefully cultivated, sense of being a poet representative of a people, a "national poet" (29). The stated task of the book is to "celebrate his unity in multeity and the integrity of his career," and to show Wordsworth's "Mastery of a wider variety of poetic forms … than any other poet in English" (28). The critical task that Gravil sets for himself here is in one way straightforward, since one would not insist upon claiming a radical development or transformation in Wordsworth's poetic style over the course of his career.

Rather, Gravil is claiming for Wordsworth an integrity of poetic vision, grounded in a philosophy of nature that remains unchanged despite the shifts in political and social commitments over the span of his life. The claim that Wordsworth masters a greater variety of poetic forms is seen as a more ambitious claim, and one more difficult to prove, given the strong center of gravity that his stylistic form suggests. And mastery of these poetic forms must be grounded in the thematics of the mundane, in Wordsworth's "human-centered mythopeia," which attempts to render the ordinary aspects "of the common day" as open to liminal realms of experience, accessible through the operations of love and imagination. Wordsworth's naturalism is multi-leveled, intersecting with realms that have a recuperative effect on experience, and exist in a kind of natural trinity; they are the "realms of innocence, realms of the blessed, and realms of the heroic dead, or, in the familiar triad, 'Paradise and

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groves/ Elysian, Fortunate Fields"' (22). These three realms derive from Wordsworth's early experience—as lived and literary, as personal and historical—and provide the source of unity for Gravil's singular argument that Wordsworth's "self-consciously bardic vocation" (29) animates the full scope of his poetic career, and informs an understanding of his poetry as a form of vision, or recognition, of nature's secret life, felt inwardly and deeply. Just as Wordsworth's personifications spiritualize or divinize nature, thereby reviving an idea that had become lifeless under eighteenth century conventional imitations of classical ornamentation and decoration, so does Gravil make a Wordsworth, grown too familiar under the title of poet of nature, appear revitalized by new energies emergent out of experiences of lasting feeling that are actualized, or educed, or deepened, by an active engagement with literary texts that provide vital forms of inspiration. Gravil's high argument is a steep one, made steeper by the rather flat, though not unvaried, ground upon which he stakes his claims.

The book is divided into four parts, with the first three concerned with exploring the three realms that Wordsworth's poetry was meant to give access to: the realm of innocence, the realm of blessedness, and the realm of the heroic dead. Part Four attempts to show that the final social and political claims the later Wordsworth set forth publicly remain true to his earlier poetic vision of these three realms, while the Epilogue presents a lengthy reading of the *Intimations of Immortality* ode as a kind of coda for Wordsworth's poetic career, in which nature alone figures as the final scene for locating all spiritual truths, with mortality's weight bearing the burden of carrying the soul into immortality. It is no surprise then that Gravil's mode of exposition runs, for the most part, in the direction of specificity and concreteness. This is not to say that philosophical and theological ideas are treated superficially, but that they arise out of Wordsworth's own poetic language as presented by the critic. And this is one of the strengths of the book as a whole. The interpretative approach is not freighted with theoretical baggage or bogged down with ideological entanglements; a largely phenomenological mode of reading is deployed that is sensitive to historical concerns, while preserving Wordsworth's own agency as a writer in the context of the various discourses of contemporary British culture. Gravil's style is companionable while erudite, meditative while instructive, enacting a form of writing that makes the reader see and feel and think one's way within Wordsworth's poetry. The rhetorical progress of Gravil's argument maintains a remarkable equilibrium, synthesizing the colloquial and conversational on the one hand, with the learned and eloquent on the other. He maintains an argumentative stance throughout, a pleasant experience, at least for this reader, who found humor in the midst of seriousness, and assertions stated with surety that never cross over into pedantry.

For Gravil, Wordsworth's natural religion is bound up with the availing sense that his poetic identity is derived from his British ancestry, in which his Cumbrian lineage comes to be associated with Celtic and Welsh roots—poetic,

literary, historical, and political. Wordsworth saw his poetic career as a locally determined endeavor, and as a defense of Celtic/British culture against English barbarism. Here the British bard and the native druid coalesce to give shape to Wordsworth's poetic vocation as one that is inherited, not earned:

> Wordsworth's bardic vocation is authenticated by a mythic poetic education amounting to election. … [H]is vocation expresses itself in an unparalleled nature poetry, declaring the life of mountains and rivers, rocks and stones and trees. It involves the creation of elysian elegies, codifying the tribe's experience of loss and endurance, and lamenting the aged and the fallen. … Eventually it means researching and recording the spiritual history of the race, chanting the genealogy of the tribe, uniting the living and the dead, and binding the present and the past in natural piety. (90)

Much of this argument is made indirectly, since Druids are not an explicit subject of Wordsworth's poems. Rather, Gravil argues that Wordsworth's lifelong interest in Welsh history and literature is owing to its druidical and bardic elements: "Motifs of the bardic strain and of the druidic conjoin in an evocation of the invisible world…." (104). These are combined with classical models from Virgil's representation of Elysium in the *Aeneid* and Orpheus' descent into the underworld in the *Georgics*. The result is the articulation of a poetic vocation in which the spiritual is wholly naturalized, and the natural spiritualized, as Gravil states: "The claim that 'The world of shades is all my own' manifests greater self-recognition than any other self-imaging line in Wordsworth's poetry until, perhaps, *Tintern*'s 'a worshipper of Nature' or *The Prelude*'s 'I became a patriot'. Indeed as the appropriate talisman of his poetry it outlasts either of these" (97). The spadework of uncovering Wordsworth's preoccupations with druidic and Virgilian depictions of the underworld provides the interpretive groundwork for Gravil's readings of major poems from 1793 to 1807.

Gravil's major concern, which is deeply woven into these readings, is to show the ascendancy in Wordsworth's poetry of a pagan form of spirituality at work over and above, or perhaps more appropriately, at work below, a Christian one, whereby "Christianity becomes a kind of naturally evolving native faith" (116). On *Yew-Trees*, Gravil states: "[T]emporally the imaginative landscape of the poem is one in which the Christian world—even one as primordial as the Anglo-Saxon—yields to something much more primordial" (104–5). *Lines upon the Wye*, a title Gravil insists upon rather than the misnamed *Tintern Abbey* (a point I can still see him emphatically making, framed by Helm Crag in the distance), dramatizes the active principle in matter, as the term "God" is marginalized, appearing in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* in quotation marks to reveal its nominal status. Gravil reads Wordsworth here as a materialist, summarized in a kind of loose poetic syllogism:

> When Wordsworth recognizes in the 'language of the sense … the anchor of our *purest* thoughts', he summarizes in one of the most subversive syntactical associations in English poetry the promotion of nature, with all its republican associations clustered about it. … To gloss the apotheosis of the natural being enacted in this series: thought is anchored in the material; nature is both supportively human and instructively superhuman … and 'soul' is located somewhere in the nature / mind / sense continuum Wordsworth is elsewhere committed to. The effect is to redefine God: you cannot, as the putative author of 'The Recluse' ought to have known, have a material soul and an immaterial God. (195)

The democratization of the love of nature and love of humanity, through which both loves become indissolubly bound, is one of the more felicitous aspects of Gravil's argument, and one which he takes up successfully in his readings of poems such *The Discharged Soldier, Michael, Resolution and Independence*, and *We Are Seven*. It is the claim Gravil most stands by, even for the later Wordsworth. But while Wordsworth's claim to be "a worshipper of nature" surely contains more of a druidical than a Christian form of natural piety, the conclusion that materialism leads to a denial of a Christian God clearly does not follow, as the examples of Hartley, Priestley, and the young Coleridge each attest. Indeed, at other points Gravil articulates a less rigidly oppositional, and more relational, view of the relationship between paganism and Christianity, as he states: "God, in Wordsworth's poetry, is often required to co-habit with deities of other, if lesser, orders, and with spirits of undistinguished modes" (58). It would appear that Wordsworth's early animism is more flexible and (ensem)plastic than Gravil otherwise claims; with the tensions maintained, Wordsworth's early religious sensibility gains a deeper authenticity.

Gravil is on surer ground in his deeply penetrating account of irony in *We Are Seven*, in which the Christian idea of a conventional heaven upon which the boorish narrator perversely insists gives way to a more natural and material sense of the communion of the dead held innocently by the little girl of the poem; or in the "mythopoetic" Lucy (236), wherein the entire cycle of poems confronts the facticity of death, the reality of which we all must face. Death is perhaps the most potent democratic force in nature, a law that cannot be usurped by anyone; Gravil's brilliant readings display the ways the love of nature then opens up, and links together with, the love of humankind, discerned in the shaded realms of innocence, blessedness, and the dead that appear throughout these early Wordsworth poems. The full force of these ideas and their far-reaching impact upon English literature that follows is clearly revealed in a new and deeply insightful manner in these generous and perceptive readings, a point Gravil makes about the reform in thinking, feeling, and imagination that these poems have generated: "His explorations of the pathos of humanity, in 1798 and 1800, amplified as they were in 1807, not only open up a vision of human possibility, but precipitated—in the imaginations of Gaskell, George Eliot, Hawthorne, Dickens and Hardy—a fundamental

democratization of man's perception of man" (176).

Part Four, which is devoted to navigating the various channels of Wordsworth's slow decline into conservatism, is less successful. Here Gravil sees the bard's turn away from an allegiance to France as staking its claim on a British idea of manliness, against "both effeminate ministers and licentious 'democrats'" (325). Wordsworth's ideas of freedom then are seen to evolve, but are still set up in opposition to an enemy, this time from within: "Freedom … is conspicuously *British*; rapine, avarice, and emasculation are *English*" (320). In a section humorously, but somewhat bitterly, entitled "Wordsworth's long Striptease," Gravil attempts to give an account of Wordsworth's alliance with the Tories, which he chooses to articulate in lengthy forms of personal self-revelatory verse. His assessment is terse: "It is hard to interpret this strategy" (345). The best Gravil can do is argue that "Opposition to Napoleon made him a reluctant fellow-traveller with the Tories long before he became one" (346). This final period of Wordsworth's life is summed up, for Gravil, as productive of "works addressed to a land 'mournfully cast down'" (346). Gravil appears at times embarrassed by Wordsworth's brand of political apostasy. Nevertheless, his approach to Wordsworth's shifting political allegiances strikes a nice balance between new historical, or simply historical, contextualization, and affirmation of the authority of the poet to engage with his historical milieu by speaking for himself in language he himself chooses. Gravil's sympathies with Wordsworth the radical and democrat are on display in a herculean effort to save the poet from his embarrassing drift to the right.

For Gravil, the Wordsworth of 1793–97 and 1842 agree on grounding the source of societal relations in family and village, on personal and local relations rather than abstract rights, which nevertheless does not preclude the demand that the state bears "responsibility for the welfare of its citizens," as a right of law (352–53). "Between *Salisbury Plain* and *Guilt and Sorrow* much has changed, but social responsibility for the creation of scarcity has not" (353). If Gravil does not see Wordsworth as retrograde in his politics, he does consider its expression to be backward looking, with Wordsworth continually returning to representations of the past in his later poetry in an attempt to remain consistent with his earlier radical beliefs. Gravil's readings are like a man returning to the site of a trauma in order to exorcise demons or rehabilitate the self in a kind of therapeutic dialogue, but seem more like a compulsion to repeat. Here, summation takes the place of a critical explanation of the terms by which Wordsworth might have seen himself in unity with his prior poetic (and politically engaged) selves. Though it may appear as egregiously non-committal in its refusal to condemn the poet's later politics, the concluding sentence to this section is refreshingly human in its sympathies: "In 1842, forty-four years after asking the 'gentle reader' to identify with Simon Lee, despite his one eye, his faded jacket and his swollen ankles, Wordsworth was still inviting his audience to see things 'kindly'" (375). Political exigenciegs come and go, and political allegiances with them, Gravil seems to be saying, but human feeling and human kindness are perennial, more deeply human, and

more capable of forging lasting unity than the divisions incurred from engagement in party politics. It is a moral lesson worth taking to heart.

Ultimately for Gravil, the "Genuine Liberty" experienced on Snowdon offers a final release, if not a resolution, to the tensions in his political positions, discovered in "a second mode of enthrallment" (368). For Wordsworth, "Imagination is morally neutral. That is why *The Prelude*'s climactic discussions of Imagination insists that while Imagination is one constituent of 'genuine liberty', it must be completed … by Love" (371). Wordsworth's revolutionary idea of Imagination discovered on Snowdon and presented in Book XIV of *The Prelude* is the symbol that expresses most clearly Wordsworth's political quietude in the 1830's and after: the poet has renounced violence as a means to political reform in favor of the enlargement of the mind through the revolution of perception and cognition effected by the active use of Imagination, ordered by the ideal of Love. Here Gravil attempts a subtle analysis of what he calls Wordsworth's "two-consciousnesses" (375), divided in his later years between a deep solicitude for the poor and disenfranchised, while siding with a more conservative approach to political and social reform that eschews violent revolution as a means to reform. Gravil's treatment of Wordsworth's "apostasy" to Jacobinism internalizes his struggle to remain socially and morally relevant, even as the form of his political reform expressed in his later poetical works remains one of imaginative representation rather than political praxis. Gravil's deft narration intermingles the biographical and the poetic, historicizing this struggle in ways that are far-ranging, drawing upon literary relationships, biographical elements, philosophical and religious speculations, and military, political, and social events. Despite what he sees as real failures incurred in the political realm, Gravil assures us that, in the face of complex social and political pressures, Wordsworth takes "responsibility" for his words and actions. The reader is left to determine the extent to which the poet in his bardic vocation remains true to himself, his principles, and his variously complicated loyalties and allegiances.

The Epilogue returns to its beginning, like Coleridge's "snake with its Tail in its Mouth," in an attempt to show how the *Intimations of Immortality* ode gathers up and reiterates Wordsworth's earlier pagan piety. Here the classical origins of Wordsworth's thinking on the afterlife, encountered in Virgil's Elysium and the Ossian myth, is given a more pronounced expression than the druidical. For Gravil, "Wordsworth's sense of an afterlife seems to evolve from a somewhat heterodox Judaeo-Christian position in childhood, through adolescent Ossianism, towards a quasi-pantheistic content with sharing in the life of things, of which one of his greatest expressions is *A slumber did my spirit seal*" (383). Once a pagan, always a pagan, is the claim here, though the term "quasi-pantheistic" should give us pause. Gravil's reading of the *Intimations* is at points agnostic concerning the precise spiritual meaning of the *Ode*: "Of all Wordsworth's poems this one seems to depend most upon ideas outside itself, and one's interpretation of its various cruces will differ considerably depending

on whether one looks elsewhere in Wordsworth's work, or to Vaughan's very helpful and briefer analogue, *The Retreat*, or to philosophers of Coleridge's persuasion—to Plato's the *Phaedo*, for instance, or the *Enneads* of Plotinus" (397). Nevertheless, Gravil senses something in the poem that marks a break with pantheism, be it classical or druidical: "While the premise that we come 'from God who is our home' is entirely compatible with Wordsworth's core pantheism, the notion that Nature is a prison-house and that our only light is otherworldly constitutes such a break with almost everything in the *oeuvre* prior to 1804, that it leads us to an *impasse*" (397). Both soul and "God" appear to participate in a transcendent realm above nature, a disturbing possibility for Gravil, or at least Gravil's view of Wordsworth's religious sensibility. Gravil suggests that the language in the poem that refers to a higher moral and supernatural power can only be interpreted by "guesswork—or an implied invitation to construct [an] argument from desire" (397). This is of course true for Gravil's reading as well, which makes this final chapter so poignant in its articulation. Perhaps Gravil's most important insight is to make clear the central idea of Christianity—belief in a personal God—as a necessity for hope in the survival of the individual soul, and with it, the possibility of the endurance of love. It is this belief that the natural supernaturalism of paganism failed to offer, as Gravil affirms.

The theme of returning to the origins of Wordsworth's religious sensibility is centered on a suffering Wordsworth, whose experience of death and mourning remain central to his poetic practice. The courage to confront death, and the challenges to our sense of meaning and purpose that the death of others deals to us, remains the central concern of Gravil's writing on Wordsworth, bringing with it a deeper sense of poignancy. This is a mark of the greatness of Gravil's scholarship: that it never lost sight of the deepest of human concerns. In this sense, Richard Gravil remained true to his Wordsworthian ideals. He, and Wordsworth, deserve the last words in this posthumous review, which also are the last words of Gravil's great defense of Wordsworth's poetic achievement:

> Wordsworth himself may have made do with thoughts of 'Life continuous, Being unimpaired', but he knew there were limits on what could be 'recommended to faith' (*FN* 161), and it is, after all this poet's heart-easing business to console and reconcile. Whatever our structure of belief regarding what Whitman called 'the impenetrable mystery of the afterwards'—whether we await translation in some way to heaven (*FN* 160), or embrace the thought of our 'dissolution', or welcome a return to 'breathless Nature's deep abyss'—we can all agree that
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> > The clouds that gather round the setting sun
> > Do take a sober colouring from an eye
> > That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality. (403)