Richard Gravil[1]

reads

Wordsworth's Monastic Inheritance: Poetry, Place, and the Sense of Community

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by Jessica Fay

In the last sonnet of the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* of 1822, Wordsworth writes of the Church in England as a 'Stream' that has endured 'while nations have effaced | Nations, and Death has gathered to his fold | Long lines of mighty kings'—a stream 'whose living Waters, less and less by guilt | Stained and polluted, brighten as they roll' (3: 28). Jessica Fay's theme is not quite Wordsworth's—the purification of religion by and since the Reformation—but rather the curious role played in that long history by monasticism. Her focus is on 'Wordsworth's subtle, complex and often conflicted thinking about the routines and legacies of monasticism' (2). Her detailed treatment of the varieties of monasticism, and Wordsworth's lengthy self-education in such matters, is assiduous and surely unprecedented. She maps the forty monasteries visited 'or studied' by Wordsworth between 1787 and 1841 and documents his approval of monasteries as (historically) places of refuge and centres of learning. His approval is directed largely at the Cistercian and Benedictine orders, though he also showed much greater sympathy than some contemporaries, such as Southey or Hallam, with St Francis and his mendicant Franciscans (24).

An opening vignette illustrating the conflictedness of Wordsworth position on monasteries concerns his troubled visit in 1841 to A. W. Pugin's newly built Mount Saint Bernard (1–4). Its abbot, Fay points out, confessed to have been inspired to the monastic life by the Solitary's beautiful encomium on monastic life in Book 3 of *The Excursion*, evoking 'The universal instinct of repose, | The longing for confirmed tranquillity, … | The life where hope and memory are as one'. But after his visit Wordsworth (in a letter to Isabella Fenwick) asked tetchily: 'Where are these things to stop[?]', adding that this 'is a question which anyone who has reflected on the constitution of the Romish church will naturally put to himself … and not without some apprehension of mischief' (LY, iv, 218). To such tensions Fay's argument is perpetually alert.

In short, Wordsworth warms to functioning monasteries when they are outgrowths of a national culture (the Grande Chartreuse, Vallombrosa, Laverna) but preferred his English monasteries (Furness, Tintern, Melrose, Dryburgh, Lanercost, Grace Dieu, Bolton and numerous others) to have mouldered to skeletal forms where liturgical performance can be imagined rather than heard, or, in the case of Furness, heard only in the song of a wren, or in some cases, such as St Herbert's cell on Derwentwater, exist only in

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[1] Richard Gravil, whose obituary is in this Bulletin, was Chairman of The Wordsworth Conference Foundation, author of *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation, 1787–1842* (2003), and with Daniel Robinson, co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth* (2015).

communal memory.

The dustjacket of this Oxford Monograph makes two major claims. The first is that this is the first extended study of Wordsworth's engagement with 'the material and cultural legacies of monasticism'. Jessica Fay's treatment of Wordsworth's knowledge of monasticism, through 'topographical, antiquarian and ecclesiastical sources' (among them, Whitaker's *History of Craven*, West's *Antiquities of Furness*, Nicolson and Burn's *History and Antiquities of Westmorland & Cumberland*, Cave's *Apostolici*, and Weever's *Ancient Funeral Monuments*) is indeed unprecedented and unlikely to be matched. The second claim on the dustjacket is that it 'grants poems such as *The White Doe of Rylstone*, *The Excursion*, and *Ecclesiastical Sketches* the centrality Wordsworth believed they deserved'—to which list one might fairly add the 'Essay Supplementary', the 'Essays on Epitaphs' and most importantly, *The Tuft of Primroses*. The book confines itself to 1807–22, a period inaugurated by a famous letter to Lady Beaumont, dominated by completion of *The Excursion* and *The White Doe,* theorised in the preface and essay of 1815, and culminating in *Ecclesiastical Sketches*.

Chapter 1 on 'The Creation of Taste' begins naturally enough with Wordsworth's response to the poor reception of *Poems, in Two Volumes*, and on the need for a great poet to teach 'the art by which he is to be seen'. It is a fine piece of argument and exposition, tenaciously exploring the religious element running through Wordsworth's poetical and critical writing, including the 'Essay Supplementary' of 1815, and his intemperate assault on Unitarianism in a famous letter to Catherine Clarkson in the same year, which Fay weaves into the close texture of her argument about faith and symbolism. Fay's stance is that Wordsworth is throughout this period a devout trinitarian and a transcendentalist, a position based on his statement to Lady Beaumont that 'to be without a feeling for poetry … is to be without love of human nature and reverence for God' (43), the argument in the 'Essay Supplementary' about the infinite encoding itself in the finite (56), a letter to Landor insisting plausibly that 'all great poets are … powerful Religionists' (57), and a more doubtful claim that the famous passage in *The Prelude* Book 6 about aspiration ('Effort, and Expectation, and Desire| And something evermore about to be') points to 'a future transfigured state' (51).

Textually, the chapter approaches *The White Doe* as 'an indirectly sacred text' (57) which Charles Lamb should be ashamed of himself for not reading with sufficient intellectual application. Wordsworth's romance, Fay argues, is intimately related to *The Faerie Queene* as an antidote to Catholic error, and the interpretive effort required in negotiating Spenser's allegory is comparable to that required in reading *The White Doe*. The focus, however, is not the poem itself, or its transcendently beautiful verse, but its battery of paratexts—a prefatory sonnet 'Weak is the will of man', the epigraph from Bacon, and most importantly, the Spenserian prologue poem 'In Trellis'd Shed' about William and Mary reading *The Faerie Queene*. Fay's detailed reading of these texts exemplifies the thoughtful attention Wordsworth's poetry demands and

attempts to energise. But it does rather marginalise the seven Cantos of Wordsworth's remarkable poem, which having been led up to in Chapter 1, then disappears until chapter 3.

Instead, Chapter 2 addresses 'Quakerism, Cultivation and Coleorton', and in particular the issue of why Wordsworth, who by 1809 has become a churchgoer and sees the national church threatened by Methodism on one side and Catholicism on the other (86), nonetheless seemed sympathetic to Quakerism. Wordsworth had read Thomas Clarkson's three-volume *Portraiture of Quakerism* (a work perhaps inspired by the fact that of twelve founding members of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade nine were Quakers). Also, such poems as the 1798 lyric 'The Tables Turned' espouse Quakerish attitudes to the spirit's ability to commune for itself with nature, as indeed does the Wanderer in *The Excursion*. If Quakerism and Monasticism seem antithetical, the Quakers subjected their members to irksome moral disciplines enforced by a structured hierarchy, and appeared to such figures as Charles Lamb, Clarkson and William Penn to practise a purified version of monasticism—one might almost say a spilt monasticism—or, as Fay puts it, a 'modernised coenobitic discipline'. From this theme the chapter moves to the impact on his work of a lengthy residence at Coleorton, where Wordsworth encountered both Grace Dieu Priory, home of Sir George Beaumont's poetical ancestors, and Thomas Dunham Whitaker's *History of Craven* (1805). Whitaker not only provided much detail of monastic life, but offered a challenge no poet could ignore. Having told of the legendary white doe, Whitaker remarks: 'had the milk-white doe performed her mysterious pilgrimage from Ettrick Forest to the precincts of Dryburgh or Melrose, the elegant and ingenious editor of the Border Minstrelsy would have wrought it into a beautiful story' (Whitaker, 450).

Chapter 3 on 'Legacy, Memorialisation, and Inheritance' addresses an immense range of concerns, including an elegant argument for the thematic unity of *The Tuft of Primroses*, despite its apparently disparate themes—the eponymous 'tuft', Grasmere Vale and its stands of memorial trees, the Grande Chartreuse and the monastic community at Pontus. The argument is based partly on West's *Antiquities of Furness* which situates Furness in a tradition that originated with St Basil of Caesarea. Basil, intellectual hero of *The Tuft of Primroses*, was born in Cappadocia in the fourth-century and founded the tradition of coenobitic monasticism—theologically strict, but communitarian in its practice. That he was a strict Trinitarian and scourge of heresies (particularly those of the Celtic theologian Pelagius to which Wordsworth arguably subscribed) is something of an irony, but Wordsworth's veneration of him and the tradition he founded at his mountain retreat in Pontus, shows the poet's respect for aspects of Catholic and Orthodox faith and practice on condition that they do not threaten the Reformed and 'purified' faith of England. He is venerated in the Tuft partly as 'An intellectual Champion of the faith' and partly for his indirect legacy in England, having inspired those 'Piles that rose | On British lawns by Severn, Thames and Tweed' and now stand ambiguously

'in monument | Of revelation, nor in memory less | Of Nature's pure religion'. Among other themes, Fay considers Anglican parish communities as heirs to Catholic monastic foundations and juxtaposes Wordsworth's warm endorsement of the unity of Catholic Spain (in the *Cintra*) with his fears of what Catholic emancipation would do to England's security and social fabric. She argues that Wordsworth's oft-quoted passage on language as an 'incarnation' of thought, in the 'Essays on Epitaphs', arises from his two-year study of monasticism and stoutly rebukes the trivialisation of this famous passage by deconstructionists in the 1970s, who 'collapsed death, grief, sorrow, communal affection, and consolation into linguistic events or tropes, with Paul de Man proclaiming death as "a displaced name for a linguistic predicament"' (131). Bravo!

The White Doe of Rylstone now reappears as a poem about 'how the destruction of monastic life in England distorted and reshaped patriotism, familial loyalty and local attachment' (102), familial loyalty being extended into an argument about patrilineal inheritance. Monasticism is indeed present in the poem in the form of a ruined Catholic foundation, Bolton Abbey, where Francis, the Protestant hero of the poem is buried.[2] And cultural inheritance is also a major theme. But Whitaker' *History of Craven* is likely to have piqued Wordsworth's interest in this tale for reasons that have little to do with monasticism. Craven was in Clifford hands from the early fourteenth century, and the Cliffords of Brougham and Skipton were frequently in conflict with their Norton vassals at Rylstone. In Whitaker's words, 'Richard Norton in particular seems to have been a turbulent man, violently addicted to the old religion; while the Cliffords were dutiful subjects and favourers of the reformation' (Whitaker, 448). To enlarge on this from the standpoint of Wordsworth's local attachments, Sir Thomas Clifford of Brougham, Henry VIII's Warden of the West March, was killed during the Pilgrimage of Grace (1537), when Penrith's gentry rose against the Tudor authority, while Lady Ann Clifford, a favourite at Elizabeth's court in her childhood and one of Wordsworth's culture heroines, was also staunchly Protestant. When, in 1569, the ambitions of the Earls of Westmorland and Northumberland, Lord Dacre and the Duke of Norfolk (three of whom had extensive interests in Cumbria) threatened a return to civil war, the gentry of Penrith remained loyal to Elizabeth, to the Cliffords, and what Wordsworth calls the 'reformed and purified religion'. So the poem's theme of inheritance is intimately bound up with Wordsworth' own local attachments: the stance of Francis and Emily, one might argue, mirrors the generational change that had occurred in Penrith between the reigns of Henry and Elizabeth.

Fay concedes too much I think to those who complain of the poem's lack

[2] Emily Norton is not, as Fay states, buried under a yew at Bolton Priory but beside her mother in Rylstone Church. Also, Fay twice identifies Richard Norton as leader of the Rising of the North (32 and 102) but the poem clearly identifies the 'chiefs' of this insurrection as a cabal of discontented and cowardly aristocrats. Richard Norton, Esquire, is depicted as an honourable but misguided pawn, sacrificed (with his family) to the Earls' ambitions and their cowardice.

of action. As she shows, Francis Norton experiences the strains of an evolving lineage: the poem is sympathetic to what Wordsworth calls the awful 'sympathy of sire and sons' but Francis's greater loyalty is to his Protestant mother, sister, and Queen. At the heart of the poem are Francis's suspension of the authority of fathers, and, eventually, Emily's transcendence of the authority of brothers—which makes this (to my mind) a poem that needs no apologies for its lack of action. In *moral* action it has no peer among Romantic narrative poems.

In Chapter 4, 'Pastoral Reclusion and *The Excursion*', Fay takes on the challenge of associating *The Excursion*—an outdoor conversation poem—with monasticism. She succeeds by modulating from monasticism as such to 'pastoral reclusion' and showing how the four conversationalists (of whom only the Pastor exhibits a discrete, consistent position) dramatize varieties of poetic and religious reclusion. The claim that the aim of the poem is 'to help return wavering souls to the Church' (140) may well be right, though I am not sure how well that fits with its ambivalent close —Wordsworth's wry inquiry as to whether all this well-intentioned talk has done anything to rescue of the Solitary from his despondency—or with the evident fact that the Wanderer represents an experience of the divine unmediated by ecclesiastical authority (156), or indeed with Fay's emphasis on its Quakerism. Lamb saw in it 'a sort of liberal Quakerism', and William Howitt judged it to be 'a very Bible of Quakerism' (both quoted 156).

Fay's approach assumes a hierarchy of authority within the poem that some have queried. In her account the Wanderer 'teaches' the Solitary, and 'explains' this and that aspect of wise conduct (162–63), including how to 'apprehend and appreciate the silence of the landscape' (sceptics might protest that the Solitary's own perceptions of landscape provide the poem with some of its most imaginative passages and that silence is not the Wanderer's forte). In Book 5, Fay argues, the Pastor, with his 'solid example of community life and worship … displaces the Wanderer as the voice of authority' (165). An especially engaging point is Fay's discovery in Nicolson and Burn's *History and Antiquties of Westmorland and Cumberland* that there was a Cistercian cell at Blea Tarn—a tarn created by the monks—which cell may well be the site of the Solitary's 'hermitage'. Consistent with the idea of contrasting modes of 'reclusion' the chapter concludes with Wordsworth's wry observation to Isabella Fenwick that Southey would have been suited to the life of a Benedictine monk in a convent 'with an inexhaustible library' while he himself might have embraced the wandering life of a pedlar (167).

This anecdote leads neatly into the final chapter on 'Wordsworth's Ecclesiastical Heritage', which begins by considering Southey's naming of his sons Herbert and Cuthbert—good Anglo-Saxon names—as if to incorporate them into 'a Christian community that unites spatially and temporally disparate people through faith' (170) alongside Wordsworth's poem on the two saints,

his 'Inscription' on St Herbert's Island.[3] The textual focus of the chapter is on aspects of the *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, a series motivated in the first place by Wordsworth's opposition to the Catholic Relief Bill in 1821. In the *Sketches*, Fay observes, Wordsworth again 'uses monastic ruins, and their capacity to evoke stillness, as a means of glimpsing transcendence and of achieving a sense of trans-historical community'. Whatever the change from functioning monastery to picturesque ruin, Wordsworth writes, 'once ye were holy, ye are holy still' (3: xvii), which perhaps raises the issue of whether Wordsworth's valuation of religious sites is akin to Larkin's sense of churches as places 'proper to grow wise in, if only that so many dead lie round'. As Fay argues, the memorial function of ecclesiastical foundations is key: his relative valuation of Westminster Abbey and St Paul's reflects that the latter is not yet 'satiate with its part |Of grateful England's overflowing Dead' (3: xxvi).

Fay cites from Alan G. Hill the view that the sonnets 'deplore the destructiveness of the Reformation' (186) and she notes Wordsworth's surprising sympathy with the villain of Milton's *Lycidas* (Archbishop Laud), two points that further illustrate the conflictedness of late Wordsworth. There are three successive sonnets in Part 2 on the 'Corruptions', 'Abuses' and 'Voluptuousness' of the unreformed church, and three on the Dissolution of Monasteries. The first of the latter three notes the 'desperate shocks' of dissolution; the second rejoices in 'the lovely Nun' stepping forth into summer suns; the third imagines young novitiates welcoming their liberation 'with undissembled glee' (too long locked up in 'polar ice', they rejoice in their 'Unlook'd-for outlet to an open sea' 2: xvii). This startling sonnet is reflected in a passionate outburst in the letters. During debate on the Catholic Relief Bill, Wordsworth wrote to Robert Inglis MP: 'How far it is possible for legislation to interfere for the punishment of those who abuse the power of inflicting spiritual terrors I do not enquire.… If Nunneries are to be allowed at all, no one ought to be received under the age of 21…; nothing can be more cruel than to take advantage of the inexperience of a child, to entrap her into a course of life by which Nature is counteracted and religion distorted' (*LY*, 1: 363).

Nobody will read this book without gaining an enlarged sense of how to think about ruined monasteries. Perhaps what makes them treasured landmarks of cultural evolution is not merely that they *have decayed* but that they *were dissolved*. That proposition seems to me to dovetail neatly into Jessica Fay's rich and highly stimulating argument.

[3] The claim is made on page 172 that Wordsworth not only 'felt an affinity with Bede' but 'identified himself as a descendant of the kingdom of Northumbria' (172). No evidence is offered for the latter claim, and I can find none. Wordsworth certainly venerate Bede's devoted scholarship, but he also rebukes his religious and national bigotry against the Britons and Celtic Christianity. No 'English' poet uses the word 'British' with greater awareness of the constituent strands of that mongrel identity.