Linda L. Reesman[1]

reads

Wordsworth Before Coleridge:
The Growth of the Poet's Philosophical Mind, 1785–1797

(New York: Routledge, 2018)

by Mark J. Bruhn

In a letter dated Tuesday, July 13, 1802 Coleridge comments to William Sotheby on Wordsworth's "poetic Creed": "It is most certain, that that P[reface arose from] the heads of our mutual Conversations &c—& the f[irst pass]ages were indeed partly taken from notes of mine / for it was at first intended, that the Preface should be written by me—and it is likewise true, that I warmly accord with W. in his abhorrence of these poetic Licences [i.e. metaphor, personification, etc.], as they are called, which are indeed mere tricks of Convenience & Laziness" (CL II 811). More intriguing perhaps than Coleridge's assertion of his influence on Wordsworth is the manner in which Coleridge defends his poetic principle before finally admitting "there is, somewhere or other, a *radical* Difference [in our] opinions—" (CL II 812). Given such tantalizing claims of influence and difference, Mark J. Bruhn's *Wordsworth Before Coleridge: The Growth of the Poet's Philosophical Mind, 1785–1797* investigates the origins of Wordsworth's poetic philosophy.

Bruhn's *Wordsworth Before Coleridge* systematically details the origins of Wordsworth's inquisitive mind and imagination, particularly as revealed in the evolution of *The Prelude*. Bruhn examines critical contexts and sources that span from biblical prophecy through ancient philosophy, eighteenth-century political and historical influences, up to the literary criticism of the twenty-first century. To gain such a comprehensive understanding, Bruhn poses three main questions that circulate throughout the book—Wordsworth's mind−matter dualism, political alliances, and transcendental thinking—tracing his poetic development from 1785 through 1797. Bruhn delves into Wordsworth's poetic language to demonstrate the origins of Wordsworth's philosophical development, unraveling the commonplace belief in Coleridge's position of principal influence.

What constitutes an independent mind? How does one determine the influences of individual thinking and academic tutoring? Wordsworth himself questioned his own autonomy as a poetic thinker, and these are the issues that Bruhn tackles in his first chapter. Between 1787 and 1791, Wordsworth spent four years at Cambridge University as a student of history, literature, philosophy, and politics. Bruhn teases out the subtle differences (and some not so subtle) in his comparison of Wordsworth to Charles Lamb, who did not attend university and was self-taught through his own efforts to stand as an

---

[1] Linda L. Reesman is professor of English at Queensborough Community College, City University of New York. A longtime member of the Friends of Coleridge, she has published several articles in *The Coleridge Bulletin* and book reviews in a variety of eighteenth-century journals.

equal to Wordsworth. Bruhn raises a deeper question that lies beyond the education of these two poets: Does the nature and origin of ideas arise from the physical or the metaphysical world of the human imagination? Lamb argued that his ideas were transcendental gifts unlike Wordsworth's genius, which was accredited to his academic studies. Against Lamb, Bruhn asserts, "Wordsworth thus claims to have introspectively 'felt' and for the first time 'directly recognized' endowments that were apparently always already there" (16). Bruhn thoughtfully acknowledges Wordsworth's early academic education in relationship to his poetic imagination, providing the reader with an effective starting point for his argument.

Wordsworth's efforts to distinguish himself as an introspective thinker apart from academic learning can be seen in Wordsworth's use of a singular word: "incumbencies." Bruhn uncovers its meaning as a rare form of diction, a type of "spiritual brooding" found in early discourses of religious meditation and homiletics. Bruhn recognizes in Wordsworth's reliance on this source an "overshadowing presence of some powerful social and religious institution that, despite all protestations to the contrary, still impinges deeply upon the substance and style of the passage at hand" (17). Despite Wordsworth's own protestations to the contrary, Bruhn clearly demonstrates that even Wordsworth cannot claim independence of mind without the influence of other literary and historical origins. As evidence of Wordsworth's own poetic formation, he cites *The Prelude*:

> Of Genius, Power,
> Creation, and Divinity itself,
> I have been speaking, for my theme has been
> What pass'd within me. Not of outward things
> Done visibly for other minds, words, signs,
> Symbols, or action; but of my own heart
> Have I been speaking, and my youthful mind. (3.172–78)

Bruhn develops this passage to show that education has significantly impacted the poet's autonomy. He leads the reader through Wordsworth's studies at Cambridge, where time spent reading, particularly the Greek philosophers, provided the fundamental sources of his literary transitions.

Wordsworth's educational development at Hawkshead Grammar School and Cambridge formed a desire to reconcile passion with intellect and the moral life. In chapter two, "Growing out of Pope," Bruhn focuses on the particular influence of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*. Wordsworth's dependence on Pope's system of benevolence gradually faded as he singled out one particular idea, thereby distinguishing himself as an independent poetic thinker. Bruhn's carefully constructed argument pieces together threads of poetic language to demonstrate Wordsworth's transition into a philosophical poet in dialogue with the likes of John Locke, Joseph Priestley, Edmund Burke, and Thomas Warton. In his early poem, "Lines on the Bicentenary of Hawkshead School," Wordsworth personifies Education, elevating its

importance from a physical to a metaphysical influence: "'To lead the mind to those Elysian plains/Where Thron'd in Gold immortal Science reigns'" (43). Bruhn explains how the younger poet had learned to correlate the "intellect with virtue and passion with vice" (44), while the mature poet recognizes how the mathematical and the moral, at the same time, reconcile the development of intellectual growth as the passions yield to truth. Bruhn defends Wordsworth's independence by asserting that his heuristic approach separates Wordsworth's later poetry from the sacramental and the further assimilation of Pope's ideas.

What influenced the growth of the poet's mind? To fully answer this question and dissect Wordsworth's philosophical thinking, Bruhn challenges the traditional reliance on Coleridge as an unparalleled source in chapter three, "Beyond Godwin." With his scrutiny of Wordsworth's poetic revisions in place, he ties a careful analysis of poetic development to the political and economic inquiries of the period from 1792 to 1794, prior to Wordsworth's friendship with Coleridge. Bruhn argues that William Godwin's *Enquiry into Political Justice* both produces a transformation in Wordsworth's political philosophy towards that "freedom of inquiry" and challenges Godwinian principles of liberty with an endorsement of the moral sentiments and affections. Bruhn persuasively alleges that Wordsworth was, in fact, aligned with the Scottish mathematician and moral philosopher Dugald Stewart, whose *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* could have had a timely effect on his political thought after returning from France in 1792.

Then, in chapter four, "Toward *The Prelude*," Bruhn neatly connects Wordsworth's thoughts on "poetic genius" to Stewart's principles of the human mind. Bruhn observes Wordsworth's shift of attention from material objects and phenomena to moralistic and philosophical thinking in his revisions of *An Evening Walk*.[2] Bruhn emphasizes a psychological perspective to highlight a change in Wordsworth's poetic language, claiming that Wordsworth's additions to *An Evening Walk* in 1794 illustrate the impact of the associative nature of the imagination promoted in Stewart's writings. Nature absorbs feelings of passion: "And are there souls whose languid powers unite / No interest to each rural sound and sight; / To the lone chapel on the ocean coast, / The nameless brook below in ocean lost . . ." (EW 197–200). Bruhn details the changes in Wordsworth's philosophical ideas from *An Evening Walk* to *The Prelude*, accenting nature's moral purpose as reflective of Stewart's views on the passions and imagination through the associative habits of the mind. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth writes, "To every natural form, rock, fruit, or flower, / Even the loose stones that cover the high-way, / I gave a moral life, I saw them feel, / . . . " (P2 3.123–25).

In his final chapter, "The Finishing of Wordsworth's Philosophical Education, 1795–1797," Bruhn explores Wordsworth's transcendental thinking on the "One Life." Relying on Jonathan Wordsworth's interpretation of

[2] William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk*, ed. James Averill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

additions and revisions of the Pedlar, Bruhn determines that a significant change has occurred by 1798: Wordsworth challenged Pope's concentration on "one nature" in his use of the phrase "one mind." Both Stewart's *Elements* and Pope's *Essay on Man* had shaped Wordsworth's poetic language and perspective on mind, nature, and the passions, but, with the introduction of Coleridge, Wordsworth developed a more considered view of the relationship between the human and the divine. While this study distinguishes Wordsworth's philosophical development independent of Coleridge, the reader is reassured that Coleridge's influence remains as the dominant shaping influence of Wordsworth's poetic mind.

Bruhn concludes that many of his assertions regarding Wordsworth's poetic philosophy lack the material evidence to establish certainty for his claims. However, with an awareness of mathematical and philosophical theories that pervaded Wordsworth's culture, he contends that Wordsworth tells a clear story of the poetic growth of his own mind. With the detailed chronology of influences presented in this text, the reader may be convinced by Bruhn's position, yet, at the same time, be aware that a sufficient background in the knowledge of these theories is required to fully grasp his intertextual argument. What Bruhn, in fact, suggests as he clarifies Coleridge's impact on Wordsworth is how other historical, political, and poetic influences on Wordsworth measure in light of the distinctive relationship between Coleridge and Wordsworth. Does Coleridge rightfully deserve the attention he has garnered for Wordsworth's poetic development or has their unique relationship exaggerated Coleridge's role in shaping Wordsworth's poetic imagination? Bruhn's analytical study reveals the significance of understanding many perspectives on Coleridge's dominance of Wordsworth.