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reads

Romantic Marks and Measures: Wordsworth's Poetry in Fields of Print

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016)

by Julia S. Carlson

IN THIS LEARNED, COMPLEX, AND REWARDING BOOK, Julia S. Carlson shows deftly some of the many ways in which Wordsworth's efforts to ground his poetry in "nature" and "speech" are implicated within a "matrix of inscriptional projects not traditionally considered part of the Romantic canon" (8). These "inscriptional projects" involve two major categories: 1) the charting of terrain by cartographers and writers of guidebooks, and, 2) the marking and measuring of poetic language by printers, prosodists, grammarians, and elocutionists. In Carlson's argument, these projects often share with Wordsworth's poetry a deep cultural interest in strengthening social and patriotic bonds, the first by attempting to represent the variegated beauty and affective power of British landscape, the second through efforts to communicate on paper the expressive range and force of the English language.

Carlson describes her approach as "historically informed formal analysis" coupled with "formally informed historical analysis" (19). Her focus throughout is the "vexed relationship" these two widespread cultural projects have with their media and with each other. Two-dimensional mapping reduces the varied contours of the British landscape to "flatland"; print publication mutes the living voice of poetry. In example after well-chosen example, we are led to see the many and often surprising ways in which these limitations in media are materialized as "visible symptoms of authorial anxiety and material self-consciousness" (256) and how such self-consciousness complicates understanding of key aspects of Wordsworth's own poetic project.

The book traces in impressive detail the work of a range of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century guidebook writers, mapmakers, and elocutionists as they strove to convey topographic features and prosodic information and effects—most importantly, variety of elevation and volume in landscape and "emphasis" in speech—through "new practices of measuring and marking, and of rendering measures and marks in print." These practices, Carlson argues, "reconfigured topographic and typographic fields and brought verse into heightened visibility and meter into national importance" (9). And it is in the context of such contested "marking" and "heightened visibility" of printed material that Wordsworth's poetry was written, revised, published, read, and voiced.

Carlson divides the book into two major sections with an "Interchapter" connecting the discussion of guidebooks and maps in part one (chapters 1–3) with the work of elocutionists and prosodists in part two (chapters 4–7). The

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first three chapters provide a wealth of insight into the reciprocal relationship between poetry and the representation of place: in the creation of the "Lake District" as a national treasure (chapter 1); in the role played by maps (and their representational insufficiencies) in Wordsworth's 1790 tour of the Alps and in the textual record of his attempts to understand the implications of that tour, especially with respect to the confusion he and Jones experienced at the Simplon Pass (chapter 2); and in the effect of controversies sparked in the early years of the nineteenth century by the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain on the development of Wordsworth's autobiographical blank verse (chapter 3). These chapters contain bold and startling insights into the ways in which problems of conveying the affective power of British landscape parallel and implicate poetic efforts to embody the "living voice" in verse.

One particularly illuminating line of argument in these chapters focuses on the practice of printing poetic excerpts, especially passages of blank verse, in the context of prose description of landscape. For Carlson, the appearance of blank verse in the context of prose "elevates" the language of verse, making it visibly distinctive in ways that challenge dismissive eighteenth-century descriptions of blank verse as mere "printer's measure" or "verse for the eye," and contribute to its adoption as the preferred verse form for the "nature lyric" for Wordsworth and others. An excellent brief example of this is Wordsworth's insertion of five lines from "There Was a Boy" into his prose introduction to Joseph Wilkinson's *Select Views in Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Lancashire* (1810):

> The visible scene
> Would enter unawares into his mind
> With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
> Its woods, and that uncertain heaven received
> Into the bosom of the *steady* lake!

The verse is quoted to illustrate a principal that Wordsworth lays out in prose, that "the form of the lake is most perfect when . . . it least resembles that of a river." At issue for Wordsworth is the ability of a body of water with the right proportions to reflect "the clouds, the light, and all the imagery of the sky and the surrounding hills," allowing contemplation with the "placid and quiet feeling which belongs particularly to the lake—as a body of still water under the influence of no current" (Prose, II:179). The illustrative effect of the verse on the surrounding prose is obvious—"translat[ing] the aesthetic claim into individual experience." Less obvious is the effect of the prose context on the verse, as the "valorization of smallness, wholeness, and proportionality" tempts us to view the five lines as a "typographical instantiation of a formal proportion: five lines long by five feet wide." The verse, Carlson continues, "floats on the page like 'a body of still water under the influence of no current,' a medium portraying the 'all' of a 'visible scene'" (34).

Another highlight (of many) in these chapters is Carlson's discussion of

controversies involving the use of non-quantitative, "artistic" shading, or "hachuring," to indicate aesthetic features otherwise lost in the Ordnance Survey's geometrical representations—a practice that she sees as part of an attempt to humanizing the experience of map-reading. In the Interchapter, Carlson pivots to various kinds of equivalent attempts to overcome the muteness of print in representations of poetic speech, transitioning in the second half of the book to efforts to indicate subtleties of speech in print. These efforts, Carlson argues, visualize in various ways the anxiety of writers and readers constrained to express and receive representations of voice in a visual medium.

The extended discussion of the elocutionist movement throughout the book is of particular importance. Among those engaged in this fascinating effort to define and convey the true power, or "emphasis" of English speech through print, John Thelwall looms large. (The concluding chapter is an extended treatment of Thelwall's scansion of the entirety of *The Excursion*, according to his idiosyncratic system for revealing the true "rhythmus" of English verse.) For Carlson, Thelwall's work as an elocutionist keeps alive the spirit of revolutionary and democratic poetics that briefly united him, in the 1790s, with Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth. His efforts to develop and teach a system for scanning and marking poetic texts reflects a levelling and unifying impulse, building on earlier eighteenth-century efforts that aimed, as Thomas Sheridan puts it in his 1775 *Lectures*, to diffuse "the emphatic language" through "all ranks of people, in whatever part of the globe English shall be taught" (158). It is easy, guided by Carlson, to have sympathy and admiration for these efforts, even if one may reserve judgment about the coherence and communicability of Thelwall's approach or about the influence of that approach beyond a relatively small set of enthusiasts. It is also difficult to glean from Carlson's treatment of Thelwall's critique of Wordsworth's versification exactly how his elaborate scansions reveal the presence or absence of the true "English rhythmus" or help to recover from misguided notions of prosody what is, or should, or could be going on in the text that Thelwall marks and measures. Nevertheless, Carlson's repeated emphasis on Thelwall's and others' methods for marking texts gives important evidence of a cultural practice that is indeed important to our understanding the writing, printing, and reading of poetry in the late eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries.

The chapter likely to be of most immediate interest to Coleridgeans is, happily, also among the book's most effectively argued and best written. In chapter 6, "Measuring Distance, Pointing Address," Carlson explores the genesis of the *Prelude* in the letters and poetic manuscripts exchanged with Coleridge by William and Dorothy Wordsworth during their residence in Germany in 1798–99, arguing for the importance of the physical separation of the friends in the development of the poem. In these manuscripts, Wordsworth makes copious use of the exclamation point, especially as he turns towards Coleridge as the "Friend!" to whom the poem is addressed. Carlson shows how the editorial history of the *Prelude*, especially the influential Norton

text of the 1805 poem, has occluded the prominence and importance of the exclamation in the development of the "Poem to Coleridge," thereby skewing our understanding both of Wordsworth's development and of his relationship with Coleridge. The Wordsworth of the Norton *Prelude* is an emotionally cooler, toned down, and less "emphatic" poet than appears in the manuscripts—or, for that matter, in Coleridge's exclamation-heavy poems of the period, including "To William Wordsworth," which the Norton prints in all of its exclamatory splendor. Carlson's investigation shows convincingly how the prominence of the exclamation—a "distinct textual means of marking distance, and perhaps overcoming it"—enhances our ability to understand the importance of Wordsworth's attempts to bridge the physical gap between himself and Coleridge in his emerging conceptualization of poetic autobiography itself as "bridging, through acts of metrical composition, of temporal distance within the self" (231).

These few examples give just a taste of the abundance of insights, large and small, that this challenging and valuable book provides. Carlson's work is an important and original contribution to our understanding of a pervasive element of the culture within which Wordsworth's poetic development and reception took place and of how complex practices of "marking and measuring" helped shape significant aspects of his poetic achievement.