Heidi J. Snow[1]

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Wordsworth and the Art of Philosophical Travel

(Cambridge University Press, 2016)

by Mark Offord

IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE TO THINK that Mark Offord's book is merely a new historicist review of travel literature and Wordsworth's place in that literature. It would equally be a mistake to believe the book uses the word travel as a mere metaphor for Wordsworth's transitioning through philosophical views. The book is something more ambitious; it is an attempt to trace the mental and poetic work of Wordsworth in his "search for an individual autonomy in the 'essence of things'" (8) and to tie it (sometimes loosely) to the Romantic era's fascination for travel writing. In his introduction, Offord describes Wordsworth as one dissatisfied with the abstract philosophizing of his day, the inability of such works to capture the minutia and immediacy of the world around one. "What moral-political theories lacked were precisely 'pictures of Nature, Man, and Society' capable of mimetically laying hold of the reader" (9). This dichotomy between the abstract and the concrete is echoed in the tension within travel literature of the day, between the universal and the particular, accompanied by its problematic colonialism and othering. To lead the reader through this delicate landscape of Wordsworth's search for balance and answers, Offord equalizes both historical perspective on travel literature and modern literary criticism on travel literature and on Wordsworth. As Offord argues, "Wordsworth's poetry of vanguard travel was ambiguously suspended between its own moment in history and an unknown future. A truly historical reading must look towards that afterlife" (17). Offord's seamless integration of the historical and the current justifies his claim here, creating a text that is engaging and persuasive.

Good literary criticism is at its best when it opens up a text instead of closing it down to a narrow interpretation. Offord's work excels at this quality. It is not that he is himself ambivalent about Wordsworth's intents or purposes; it is that he does not shy away from showing us the ways in which Wordsworth both succeeds and fails in his attempts to find answers of the role of the universal and the specific. For Offord, the importance is in the attempt, the journey itself of working through the issues of meaning. This results in some beautiful, sensitive readings of the poetry. In particular, Offord's interpretation of "The Discharged Soldier" opens up the poem to a reading of misjudgment corrected, a theme often repeated in Wordsworth's works (think "Point Rash Judgment") but not often identified as present in this particular poem. Wordsworth's encounter with the soldier shows that "Each successive interpretation is overturned by what follows, only for that to be revoked in

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[1] Heidi J. Snow is Professor of English Literature at Principia College. She is the author of *William Wordsworth and the Theology of Poverty* (Routledge, 2013).

turn." Writes Offord, "The reader cannot know, and the man cannot be known. This, the poem seems to tell us, and not the project of a sympathetic identity, is the true basis of care." As Offord highlights here, it is the actual act of misjudgment and correction that carries the important message—our often misreading of those we encounter, our inability to *know* the other and the recognition of that fact becomes an honoring of the other.

But it is perhaps Offord's chapter "The Commonwealth of Song" that best combines travel theory—in this case translation theory—and poetic analysis. The chapter is a thought-provoking examination of the way in which translation works as well as its limits. The limit, the inability to put into words or to translate word for word the newly encountered, is not a detriment to our understanding but a humane acknowledgement of the other. Offord quotes Said's claim that there is a "human tendency to fall back on a text when the uncertainties of travel in strange parts seem to threaten one's equanimity" (85). Offord leaps, in a brilliant and believable way, from this desire to pin the unfamiliar down to the eighteenth-century comfort with metrical regularity. Wordsworth's resistance to these poetic forms, as announced in his Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, becomes a sensitive acknowledgment of the way in which the unknown and the uncertainties that accompany it can only be honored as they are, not to be made to be twisted into the familiar. And then Offord uses "The Solitary Reaper" as the example of this sensitivity. A poem often interpreted as exemplifying a colonializing tendency to flatten a new culture into the undecipherable becomes an acknowledgement that to attempt to interpret the song of the Reaper, to fix it in meaning, would be to fall into the danger of making it something it is not. Offord writes of Wordsworth's surprise at the song, "The oxymoron of a 'gentle shock' offered perhaps the nearest possible approach to a non-interpretive intuition that could receive with sympathy, far into the heart—and not simply bury or absorb—a quality of difference" (99). Offord's reading of "The Solitary Reaper" does not completely ignore the problematic objectification of the woman, but he indicates it as part of a larger recognition on Wordsworth's part of his encounter with the unknowable: "As if to acknowledge that the sub-altern may be able to sing like a bird, but certainly cannot speak, the following stanza by contrast exhibits a pained recognition of historical and cultural distance. Wordsworth becomes exasperated, almost desperate" by his inability to understand her (101), yet he resists the temptation to interpret.

As beautiful and sensitive as the reading is of the poem, at the same time it underscores one of the weaknesses of Offord's book. He addresses post-colonial theory, as in his nod to Spivak above, and eco-criticism in his chapter "Man working for himself." But he ignores feminist theory and concerns in some obvious places, such as the "Reaper" and "Michael." His ability to look at theory and see its relevance in the poetry is lost when the topic is women in Wordsworth's poetry. He simply does not take up the problem, so that the omission stands out as a very large missed opportunity. His handling of translation is strong enough in the discussion of the "Reaper" to make one

overlook it, but when he reaches "Michael" and fails to address the obvious concerns of a silent wife in the text, the reading of the criticism feels unfinished. He certainly has the ability to address such concerns; one hopes he will in the future.

Offord's wide-ranging approach to the topic can make the reader feel as if on a journey that does not have clear signposts or direction. That feeling drops away in the final, invigorating chapter, "Progress." What he says of Wordsworth's approach could be applied to his own work: "And it seems that it is an aimless travel, a drift or flow forwards, which gives us that feeling. *The Prelude's* progress has been aimed not towards a point or goal, but at the 'endless' itself" (212). Here, all the parts of Offord's book that have seemed disparate come together in a crescendo of interpretation in this last chapter. Offord picks up Wordsworth's own metaphor of a river and pushes it beyond the usual interpretation of "nature as a bending or turning river; … [I]t is a form of prosodic comportment, even a mode of travel" (196). The windings are not just the windings of nature educating the poet; they are the windings of poetry and philosophy, of the poet's constant negotiation between the concrete or particular and the abstract or universal. They show Wordsworth's willingness to face estrangement: "It is to stare deep into estrangement itself—until something opens up or leaps out at us" (197). Offord closes with an argument that this ability to accept the estrangement is a kind of resistance to colonize or consume: "A hunger for what is near identical to an imperial exploitation has been turned into its very contrary" (211). Such an approach to the world, Offord suggests, could be an example to our own age.