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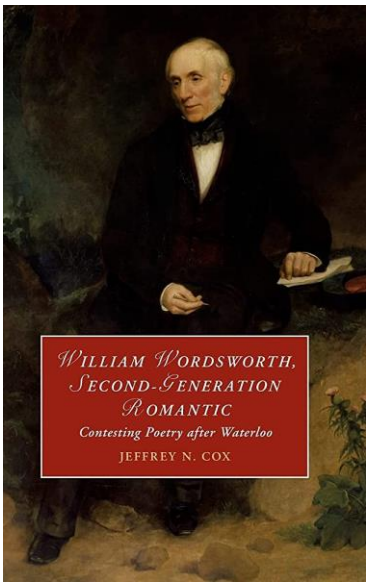
William Wordsworth, Second-Generation Romantic: Contesting Poetry after Waterloo

by Jeffrey N. Cox[1]

JEFFREY COX'S COYLY TITLED *William Wordsworth, Second-Generation Romantic: Contesting Poetry after Waterloo* gives us a Wordsworth who was never late. Cox makes the case that dividing Wordsworth's career into 'early' and 'late'—or marking him a 'first-generation' rather than a 'second-generation' poet—are misleading, retroactive impositions. Many critics, he argues, have justified such partitions by claiming that Wordsworth's post-1807 poetry lacks the same quality as his earlier work. But these readings ignore how, to younger writers ranging from Lord Byron to Leigh Hunt, he was an active poetical and political force. For Cox, the 'contest' between Wordsworth and his younger contemporaries was nothing less than a contest, as William Hazlitt said in his essay on *Coriolanus* (1816), over whether poetry would be allied with the institutionalist 'language of power'[2] or the populist hope for social change. More broadly, Cox shows how relegating Wordsworth's post-1807 poetry to the margins evinces a 'narrative tendency' (3) in our practice and understanding of literary history. Despite the wealth of historicist criticism that has reformed how we approach sociability, canonicity, and literary influence in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, Cox argues that Romantic scholarship still relies upon the notion that 'first-generation' writers set and then abdicated the radical groundwork upon which 'second-generation' writers built. As such, Wordsworth becomes for Cox a case study in how conflating a poet's politics and poetics blinds us to the poetry's aesthetic and historical value.



Engaging longstanding accounts of Wordsworth's revisionary habits (e.g. Galperin, Manning, Gill, Mahoney), Cox tracks Wordsworth's attempts to construct himself as a socially engaged national poet; he debated younger contemporaries in person, in periodicals, and revised and reassessed others' work. Among other underacknowledged Wordsworthian interlocutors, Leigh Hunt serves as Cox's primary facilitator. Drawing on his earlier *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Shelley, Keats, Hunt, and Their Circle* (1998), Cox

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[1] Jeffrey N. Cox, *William Wordsworth, Second-Generation Romantic: Contesting Poetry after Waterloo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[2] *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, vol. 5 (London: Dent and Sons, 1930–34), 347.

redeploys 'the Hunt circle' as a primary formulation for understanding the radical response to Wordsworth.

While attending to well-trod accounts of actual social interactions between Wordsworth and his younger contemporaries, Cox's introduction makes clear that periodical culture—within which Hunt was an indispensable force—was the medium through which a vital aesthetic and political competition was conducted. That periodicals stood as the poets' meeting ground keeps Hunt at the center of Cox's argument and many of his finest close readings, even though, as the book progresses, we discover that Byron most influenced Wordsworth, if only because 'it was Byron who had always bothered him the most' (187). However, when Cox links poets like Byron and Shelley to the 'Hunt circle', we detect some conceptual looseness. Cox himself acknowledges this potential problem, and he attempts to justify the circle's capaciousness again with periodicals: they created the 'Cockney' versus the 'Lake' schools, he contends, and Shelley and Byron collaborated with Hunt on *The Liberal* (19). This is all very well for most of the monograph, but when it comes to accounting for mutual influence detached from Byron and Hunt, as in chapter four's engagement with Shelley and by extension Coleridge, the circle feels less useful and more like a methodological problem.

Chapter one, 'Cockney Excursions', is not troubled by such issues. The chapter covers a wide array of responses to Wordsworth's *Excursion* (1814) to demonstrate the Hunt circle's simultaneous admiration of and 'collective turn' against the poem. Recovering the text's 'cultural power . . . to inspire and to infuriate' (37) his younger counterparts, Cox ventures that poets from Keats to Shelley share a common objection to the Solitary's 'despondency' (39) and 'loss of confidence in social Man' (*Excursion* 4.262) after the Revolution. In response to this shift, Wordsworth's younger rivals sought to 'resocialize' the older poet's evocation of despair and 'recreate poetry's experimental ability to disrupt the status quo and to reimagine the future' (43). Cox here attends astutely to how responses to *The Excursion* accord to the younger writers' aesthetic and ideological priorities: the sociable eroticism of Keats's *Endymion*; Byron's sophisticated recognition of Napoleon's toggling between despotism and Enlightenment intellectual principles in *Childe Harold III*. But Cox's account of Hunt's response to *The Excursion* is one of the chapter's highlights. Hunt draws his inspiration from the Solitary's account of myth and mythmaking in Book IV of *The Excursion*. Whereas Wordsworth understood myth to veil but still lead us toward a Christianized God, Hunt writes 'The Nymphs' to make 'a myth that refuses both religious allegory and mystical escape from life to embody sensuous experience' (65). A myth apart, Hunt's response supersedes Wordsworth's rubrics of understanding to 'identify the imagination utterly with freedom' (66).

Notably, and as we see throughout the monograph, for Cox the conversation is not one-sided. In reply, Wordsworth uses the classics to chasten the Hunt circle's political and stylistic 'extravagance and voluptuousness' (66). '[U]rging his readers to turn from sexual desire to a

restrained, rational, and chaste love' (68), Wordsworth punishes 'Laodamia's' (1815 but revised) passionate heroine with desertion and death. Wordsworth's 'Dion' (1816), by contrast, takes up the use of myth and history to elucidate contemporary political points by having the Syracusan, democratic society over whom Dion, a Napoleonic philosopher-king, seeks to impose himself assassinate him. In both cases, Cox convincingly frames Wordsworth's engagement with classical themes as a complex response to Hunt's *Descent of Liberty* (1814), 'The Panther' (1819), and other texts, all of which were themselves influenced by Shelley, Keats, and Byron's *Don Juan*.

Each of the following chapters examines this contest for ideological dominance as well as Wordsworth's personal ambitions to become a national poet. Chapter two focuses on his much-maligned 'Thanksgiving Ode' volume. Cox reads the text as not only an attempt to enter public discourse surrounding the event, nor just a struggle to characterize mass violence in verse, but as a 'stern rebuke to Hunt's paean to peace, liberty, and the arts' in *The Descent of Liberty*, Hunt's reviews, and his odic response to Robert Southey's militaristic *Carmen Triumphale* (1815). And the conversation Cox stages is not merely between Hunt and Wordsworth, but Wordsworth and Byron. Byron and Wordsworth came to what Hunt called this 'thing itself' (qtd. in Cox 107) from different angles: Byron wished to confront historical violence in precise terms; Wordsworth's approach was more self-conscious and interspersed with 'tropes of humility' (102), putting his attempt to write about Waterloo's cultural significance in direct competition with Byron. Still, Cox claims that they 'agreed on the necessity of poetry speaking to the public and to contemporary events, and they both recognized the difficulty of versifying the violence of history' (109).

Chapter three comes at the Wordsworth-Byron rivalry from a different angle: publication date and, by extension, the literary market's importance to instantiating both textual meaning and poetic authority. By publishing *Peter Bell* (1798) in 1819, Cox contends, Wordsworth transforms his title character into a Byron analogue in 'an attempt to redefine the villain-hero as simply a villain' (113). Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third* only serves to confirm Wordsworth's contemporaries' hostility toward the poem, not least due to Peter Bell's conversion to Methodism upon the poem's conclusion. To the Hunt circle among others, Methodism was shorthand for social control, especially of the poor. As was the case in chapter two, then, Cox's version of the *Peter Bell* controversy shows both Wordsworth and his young contemporaries at war and in agreement: to each faction, 'words matter', and the 'battle of the books was nothing less than a battle for the soul of the nation' (127).

In chapter four, Wordsworth finally seems to have figured out how to establish himself as a 'national poet': through the Miltonic *River Duddon* sonnet sequence (1820). Other than conveying Wordsworth's personal success, however, this chapter reads as a methodological outlier. Hunt and Byron are not central to the chapter's argument, nor does it feature Wordsworth's confrontational tactics. As a result, Cox's account of influence is not quite

convincing. Instead, he ventures that, in the absence of any evidence that Wordsworth read the 'river poem' 'Mont Blanc' (143), we nonetheless can 'hear' echoes the younger poets' phrasing in his verse. For Cox, a sonnet's 'lush[ness]' (145) links it to Keats's 1820 volume, and repeating 'idle' or 'idleness' resonates with Byron's use of the term in *Childe Harold* (146). Here Cox's commitment to younger poets and their influence reaches a limit point, for Coleridge is Wordsworth's true interlocutor. Wordsworth's postscript to the sequence links the *River Duddon* sonnets to Coleridge's projected but incomplete 'The Brook' (1797), inviting, in a cross-generational move, his former collaborator to finish what he began as a young man. Coleridge is also a more convincing hinge point for Shelley: his 'Hymn Before Sun-Rise' (1802) served as one of Shelley's primary points of reference for 'Mont Blanc'. Through these tenuous connections, Cox triangulates Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge to articulate 'a true sublime speaking into nature's silence' and find 'the proper subject for such a poet, the God praised by Coleridge and queried by Shelley' (151). Cox thus contends that we find yet another example of Wordsworth moving away from the past toward a present where he can 'shape his own moment' (156) in response to younger poets.

This chapter may be of most interest to Coleridgeans, but Cox's partial treatment of Coleridge alerts us to his comparative absence in the monograph. Given that Coleridge was also remaking his literary past and future (something Cox mentions only in passing [16–18]), it seems odd that Cox does not acknowledge Coleridge's ongoing contemporaneity with Wordsworth more carefully. Understandably, given the book's priorities, Cox is most committed to exploring Wordsworth among 'younger contemporaries' (156). But when Cox presents Wordsworth's relationship to Byron, Hunt, Keats, and Shelley as 'closer to sibling rivalry' (5) rather than a fatherly one at the book's outset, he misses an opportunity to examine Wordsworth's behavior toward an actual literary sibling—Coleridge. Of course, there is no shortage of outstanding criticism on the Wordsworth-Coleridge relationship, but Cox's new readings of cross-generational influence could yield compelling insights about their imbrication that this book suggests but does not pursue.

Cox's fifth chapter attends to Wordsworth's corpus as complete rather than 'dismember[ed]' according to our current scholarly approaches (170). The lengthy, two-part 'Late, "Late Wordsworth"' addresses Wordsworth's constant reworking of his previous poetry. After reviewing Wordsworth's various modes of 'revisiting' his prior work (Stephen Gill) through new editions (Michael Gamer) or poems that seek to undo earlier ones (Peter Manning), Cox focuses on Wordsworth's last volume, *Poetry, Chiefly of Early and Late Years* (1842). Cox queries whether publishing early work like *The Borderers* (1796) alongside works from 1841 was an effort to 'demonstrate a coherent poetic project' or 'a consistent, if solidifying, ideological position' (174). The answer is 'both', and Wordsworth's 'Memorials of a Tour in Italy, 1837' (1842) 'conform . . . Italy to English precedent' to 'avoid the counterexample of Revolutionary France' (182). In taming Italy, Wordsworth overwrote and revised his former radical

rivals'—and especially Byron's—Italianate poetry. Yet these revisions also may have led Wordsworth to greater appreciate his former contemporaries (185–86). Only once Wordsworth rendered Italy 'safe', it seems, was he able to acknowledge, for instance, Shelley's stylistic prowess or to favorably echo 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' in 'Praised be the Art' (185). When engaged with these posthumous interlocutors, Wordsworth is generous in his replies and most at ease with assuming his role as a national, Christian poet who wrote verse 'not simply [for] aesthetic pleasure but political insight' (195).

Cox's coda on *The Prelude* brings the best aspects of his argument into relief. By this point, there is no question that *The Prelude*'s posthumous publication obscured his narrative or political poetry as well as his interactions with Scott, Byron, and other young contemporaries. Instead, *The Prelude*'s publication led critics then and now to see Wordsworth as a lyric, 'first-generation' poet (203). Ironically, Wordsworth and his association with Romantic lyric made him part of the canon, but erasing his post-1807 poetry canceled out Wordsworth's and his radical contemporaries' greatest concern: 'that poetry could do real, tangible, political work in the world' (204).

In keeping with Cox's previous monographs, *William Wordsworth, Second-Generation Romantic* has a profound ethical valence. Presenting alternative models of sociability, displaying critical generosity, and evoking accounts of Romantic periodical culture and politics, this study is essential reading for scholars of Wordsworth, Leigh Hunt, and Romantic-period periodical culture. Most valuable, though, is Cox's unmisgiving recovery of biography's importance to historicist criticism. Here are two methodologies between which there need not be a contest.