ALEXANDER REGIER AND STEFAN H. UHLIG, EDs.,

WORDSWORTH’S POETIC THEORY: KNOWLEDGE, LANGUAGE, EXPERIENCE
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Reviewed by Leslie Brisman

In years to come, a special place in the history of literary criticism may be reserved for this collection in tribute to its various permutations of “thing theory.” Both the editors and several other contributors speculate on the relationship of things, especially Wordsworth’s own use of the word thing, to Wordsworth’s poetic theory. As Geoffrey Harman puts it in the book’s culminating essay, “The impact of matter on the imagination begins to matter” (195). More probably, the collection will be remembered for the way two of its most distinguished contributors transcend the theoretical frameworks in which they operate to leave us with graceful and insightful work on specific Wordsworth poems. Claudia Brodsky, writing about regularity and sublimity, comes to this startling observation: “what dies for Wordsworth in [“Strange Fits”] is his theory of poetry, the theory of the continuous ‘co-presence of something regular’ able to ‘throw a sort of half-consciousness of unsubstantial existence over the whole composition,’ the very sort of absence of thought to which the horse’s metred or measured hoofbeats calamitously bring the traveler” (97). And Mary Jacobus, setting out to situate “the auditory effects that murmur ‘not idly’ in Wordsworth’s poetry, situating them within late eighteenth-century debates about the education of the deaf” (176), wholly transcends the cultural history which she ostensibly embraces. But one topic of debate in this collection is so crucial to the way we read Wordsworth, and the writers on either side of the debate are so persuasive in their very different readings, that the remainder of this review must be dedicated to them.

What Geoffrey Hartman and Frances Ferguson invite us to reconsider is perhaps the greatest single challenge in reading Wordsworth generally: how does the focus on interiority relate to what lies outside the poet’s own mind—other minds and (as it were) the mind of nature? The problem is perhaps

Hartman’s work here is related to, but significantly different from, the monumental corpus he has previously given us of reading and rereading Wordsworth. If he has previously explored the theme of “anti-self-consciousness,” he develops anew in this volume the idea of “remedial anti-self-consciousness, even anti-traumatic effect” (196). In place of the blind faith that went along with phenomenological explorations of the relation of mind and nature (both the poet’s faith in nature and the critic’s full investment in that faith), we have now a sage and subtle critical acknowledgment that the “myth” of nature is that Nature has a mind and consciously communicates with us. What substitutes for the old faith is the new tolerance for the crutch of childhood: Nature does not really respond, educate, welcome or threaten, but the adult mind really does have a need to take strength in remembering how nature was once perceived. Here is the substance of the new perspective, couched as tenderly as honesty permits:

The poetic mind shelters a memory of mute nature’s communicativeness. It cultivates a refusal to leave behind something deeply relational, something fundamental to the imaginative life rather than its negation—even when the muteness in question is associated with suffering rather than tranquility or happiness. (198)

The crucial critical insight lies in formulating poetic work not in terms of delusion (the delusion that “nature communicates”) but in terms of a habit of mind that needs to be respected (the need to hold on to the child’s delusion that nature communicates). The hospitality of the adult mind to such childhood needs and beliefs is gently indicated by Hartman’s choice of the verb *shelters*. Similarly, the “refusal to
leave behind something deeply relational” is couched without a hint of patronizing the weak, all-too-human mind; this is a heroic, not a stubborn refusal. Most revelatory is the way the second half of Hartman’s sentence accommodates the combination of beauty and fear that Wordsworth in *The Prelude* claims nurtured him: If relation is the crucial need, then the memory of fearsome encounters may be more important than the memory of gentle ones because their haunting power is more “real.” Such is the power of “a huge Cliff” remembered like “unknown modes of being” (1805 *Prelude* I.420)—ostensibly threatening, but deeply, lastingly reassuring.

We should pause to note also Hartman’s poetic re-presentation of “mute nature’s communicativeness” as “the muteness in question.” For the child, it is not the muteness that is associated with suffering or disturbing thoughts; it is what nature seems to communicate despite its muteness. But the sage critic remembers it as though it were the muteness itself that is associated with suffering, as in an adult’s memory of being reproved by a parent who just bit her lip and would not verbally reprove. Hartman’s insight here is poignantly late Hartman, perhaps comparable to Shakespeare’s in having Lear, moments before his death, bend over the dead Cordelia:

> What is ‘t thou say’st? Her voice was ever soft,

> Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman. (5.3.273-74)

For Wordsworth in after-meditation, the voice of Nature “was ever soft, / Gentle and low,” whether remembered in the act of comfort or reproof. One can easily adapt Hartman’s insight back to Lear:

> The [king’s] poetic mind shelters a memory of mute [Cordelia’s] communicativeness. What may be harder, but well worth the effort, is to find and celebrate the tragic joy of Lear in the rediscovering of the meanest flower that Wordsworth blows. Lear mourning over Cordelia is not that far from
Wordsworth mourning over Lucy: “No motion has she now, no force; / She neither hears nor sees.” Cordelia mute because dead merges with Cordelia mute because she can articulate nothing in the meretricious public spaces of Act I; Lucy mute because dead merges with Lucy “made one with nature,” to borrow Shelley’s phrase, because Wordsworth is our supreme poet of what Hartman calls “consolatory myth” (200).

Because Hartman is so sensitive to the nuances of Wordsworth’s various formulations of the myth of nature, he never seems to be tooting the same horn, even if he is forever reexamining the relation of what “Nature remembers” to what Wordsworth seemingly forgets. About “Home at Grasmere,” Hartman himself sounds grandiloquent: “He summons us, in his most bardic mode, to recognize a soul in non-human nature. Without that recognition, the earth would seem dead. . . .” (201), where the seem is appropriately underplayed. About the Boy of Winander, on the other hand, Hartman more ruefully displays the myth in the myth: “His premature death is then portrayed as a return to nature, as if that were a comfort” (206). Seems and as if say the same thing, from the perspective of strict facticity; but that boy is in his grave, and oh the difference to me!

For Frances Ferguson, “the myth of nature” that needs to be deconstructed is not the myth that Nature has a voice but the myth that Wordsworth has no concern for the voices and ears of other human beings. Her antagonist is not Hartman but a tradition of Wordsworth criticism she traces back to John Stuart Mill, who famously distinguished eloquence from poetry by proclaiming, as if in Wordsworth’s own voice, “the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener” (131). Thus for Ferguson, for example, the wonder of Tintern Abbey is not that the poem goes on so long oblivious of the presence of Dorothy; the wonder is that the poem comes round to its gentle and crucial recognition of Dorothy. Ferguson distinguishes her emphasis from that of Margaret Homans, whose seminal study Woman Writers and Poetic Identity (1980) took Wordsworth to task for excluding Dorothy from the symbolic discourse of the poem. In Ferguson’s emphasis, “the sudden turn to Dorothy [marks] a genuine shift into
acknowledgment rather than a sign of her exclusion”(138).

In “Simon Lee,” Wordsworth appears to excoriate his reader for expecting more of a tale than the poet can supply: “O Reader! Had you in your mind / Such stores as silent thought can bring, / O gentle Reader! You would find/ A tale in every thing.” In Ferguson’s reading, there are stores of silent auditors to be brought to our consciousness, and the wonder of poem after poem is the “dawning or sudden consciousness of his auditors as individuals, persons with lives, feelings, sensitivities”(135). A poem like “Nutting” reenacts for us the obliviousness to and rediscovery of Dorothy, just as “The Thorn” rediscover the audience to which the poem’s narrator seems to have been so obtuse. Ferguson dares us to consider that the Martha Ray of the poem may have been based on the Martha Ray who was the grandmother of the child, Basil Caroline Montagu, living in the Wordsworths’ household and —young as he was-- forming part of its reading circle. But where others, like Karen Swann and Josephine McDonagh, see Wordsworth trafficking in the lurid sensation associated with the murder of the historical Martha Ray, Ferguson sees Wordsworth, acutely conscious of the effect his ballad might have on seven year old Basil, erecting “a screen against the story of his actual grandmother by the time he would come to hear it”(136).

Ferguson splendidly sums up her perspective on a poet talking to men (and women, and children): “What I have been attending to here is the way in which individuals—and not just mountains and silent footsteps—suddenly loom up in Wordsworthian consciousness”(136). These “real” individuals, or the hosts of real readers for which they stand, beautifully balance the myths of responsive nature to which Hartman’s Wordsworth is so passionately and poignantly addicted.

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