

TIM FULFORD. **Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815-1845**. Pp. viii+334. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Cloth, £62.

As its title implies, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1815-1845* picks up where Geoffrey Hartman's *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* ends. At the close of his landmark study, Hartman proclaimed that Wordsworth ceased, for the most part, to produce work of any note in the wake of *The Excursion*, thereby restricting future critical attention to the poetry of the so-called 'Golden Decade'. With a handful of exceptions, including most notably the essays by the later Hartman on 'To the Torrent to the Devil's Bridge, North Wales, 1824' and 'A little onward lend thy guiding hand', collected *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (1987), this is a view that continues to hold sway. In the introduction to his book Tim Fulford acknowledges the later Hartman's willingness to revise his earlier assessment by showing how the 'emphasis on a Wordsworth engaged in a struggle to derive a vatic voice from a natural world as sounds and traces' was altered, rather than diminished, by 'the anxieties attendant upon age' (p.4). Though respectful of Hartman's legacy, Fulford is keen to avoid shackling his own investigation to a rigid conceptual framework. Freed from the necessity to search for instances of 'apocalypse' or '*akedha*' in the poetry or, indeed, any other kind of theoretical binary, he is at liberty to read the later work on its own terms, perceiving formal and thematic continuities as they occur while remaining sensitive to the occurrence of untidy specificities.

Having wisely rejected the writing of a 'comprehensive survey', claiming that 'thirty years' worth of writing cannot be explored in one book' (p.7), Fulford focusses his study on close readings of representative poems to trace the ways in which the later work responds to a range of changing personal, political and creative pressures. From the outset, Fulford works hard to defamiliarize the accepted view of late Wordsworth. Thus, in response to the widely held belief that the later poetry lacks the self-questioning intensity of the early work due to its unproblematic accession to religious and political conservatism, he proposes that 'the later poetry dramatizes the conflict between a recurrent concern to situate the self (writer or reader) in a larger whole within which it can find meaning (a historical institution or poetic tradition) and a restless need to reshape that whole or to preserve difference from it' (p.4). Arguing that 'Wordsworth's expressions of conformity [...] put

conformity into question', Fulford goes on to explore the corollary that expressions of 'individual freedom' cannot be abstracted from the historical contexts in which they are conceived (p.4). It is, therefore, by tracing the effects of socio-political externalities on literary forms, genres and styles, while acknowledging 'the literary as a historical actor in its own right', that the later Wordsworth responds to the 'preoccupations of critical readers today', establishing a new identity as a self-reflexive 'history poet' (p.8), undeceived by the eudaemonic worship of nature or by the transcendental aspirations of the individual imagination.

In chapter 1 Fulford directs his attention to a poem that established a template for Wordsworth's late style. In a reading of the 1815 'Yew Trees', he shows how the poet sought to 'live down his reputation for undisciplined sensibility and excessive egotism' (p.39) by forging himself as a poet of the 'Imagination', a category that was defined in the 1815 *Poems* as disinterested and objective, an indicator of the mind's ability to measure, judge and act upon the world. Far removed from the subjective, confessional pronouncements of the poet's earlier phase, 'Yew Trees' thus establishes its authority on the back of a 'sobering conservatism' (p.39). As Fulford demonstrates in chapter 2, the roots of Wordsworth's adoption of a poetics of impersonality can be traced to the beginnings of his relationships with Sir George Beaumont and Lord Lonsdale. Here, attention turns to the poetics and politics of landscape, with a particular emphasis on the 'Inscriptions' section from the 1815 *Poems*. In seeking to honour his patrons, while preserving a sense of independence, Fulford argues that Wordsworth was forced to confront his recurring uncertainty about the meanings of rural labour, land ownership and paternalism. The resulting poetry, threaded with jarring allusions and dissonant phrases, manifests an 'authorial unease' about the 'landowning classes [...] and the kind of landscape poetry that glamourizes them' (p.47). Chapter 3 sustains the emphasis on ambivalence and self-reflexivity via readings of the Scottish memorial poems that Wordsworth produced between 1814 and 1833. In his detailed and suggestive accounts of 'Yarrow Visited', 'The Brownie's Cell' and 'Written in a Blank leaf' as exposés of bardic originality and authenticity Fulford's skills as a close reader and as a literary and social historian are on impressive display.

As the study proceeds it becomes apparent that late Wordsworth's challenges to Romantic notions of truth, originality and individual genius are strikingly congruent with the radical scepticism

of late modernity. But while Fulford is keen to set the later poetry within frameworks of depersonalised and collective authority that chime with our contemporary mood of disenchantment—his arresting account in Chapter 4 of the material processes of ‘textual retrieval and reassemblage’ (p.148) that resulted in ‘Enough of Climbing Toil’ is a case in point—he is no less concerned to draw out the poetry’s playfulness and virtuosity, as shown in Chapter 5 where, via a reading of ‘the Haunted Tree’, he examines Wordsworth’s engagement with the sexualised poetics of Keats and Byron and his own, earlier and more recent interest in Ovidian eroticism. In Chapter 6, ‘Wordsworth and Ebenezer Elliott’, Fulford explores another, fruitful engagement with a poet who recalls earlier impulses, in this case the Jacobinism of the 1790s. Here again, the portrait is of a figure sympathetic towards the plight of the labouring poor while distrustful of expressions of working-class autonomy. As Fulford shows, Wordsworth is at his most surprising when defending the institutions that conspire to keep radical desires in check. Thus, in Chapter 7, through readings of *Ecclesiastical Sketches* and ‘Sonnets on the Punishment of Death’, he observes how the ‘need for and delight in poetic order’ (p.211) could be placed in the service of authoritarianism while manifesting, at the same time, a delight in the expressive freedoms of the sonnet form and a residual fascination with pagan spirituality.

The book closes with an extended discussion of the ‘Evening Voluntaries’, a form that, through its hybridization of ‘improvisation and tradition [...] establishes a late style of self-differentiation and self-argument’ (p.272). ‘Freer in their prosodic structure than the sonnet’, the Evening Voluntaries allowed Wordsworth ‘to explore—and to dramatize himself exploring—the conflict between allegiance to singular authority’ and expressive individuality (p.243). What also comes through in this discussion is how the exploration of a new genre afforded the aging poet a surprising degree of formal and intellectual elasticity, enabling him to detach from the burden of the egotistical sublime to acknowledge the ‘evanescence of passing experience’ (p.268). In this chapter, and in the book’s elegiac coda, Fulford’s close reading is unsurpassable.

Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1815-1845 should be read as an important corrective to our ingrained prejudice against the later poetry. Through its deft combination of historicist critique and laser-sharp formal analysis, the book displays the richness of Wordsworth’s oeuvre while highlighting the

meagreness of thought that, all too often, has prevented readers from experiencing the full range of the poet's accomplishments.

Philip Shaw

University of Leicester