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Paul H. Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*

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Source: *Modern Philology*, Vol. 108, No. 3 (February 2011), pp. E191-E194

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.uchicago.edu)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/659005>

Accessed: 19/10/2011 00:02

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## BOOK REVIEW

Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are. *Paul H. Fry*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. xvi+240.

Paul Fry's new book displays the scrupulous textualism and psychological acuity that have long characterized Yale-based or -trained Romanticists, several of them also mentioned by Fry as intellectual points of reference (Geoffrey Hartman, David Bromwich, Leslie Brisman, Laura Quinney, Ian Balfour, and others). Notably retreating from the more reflexive and programmatic criticism of Wordsworth that distinguished the work of Paul de Man, Fry's explorations of Wordsworth ultimately eschew strong methodological or theoretical commitments of any particular kind. Although he describes his own method as "broadly phenomenological" (xi), Fry clearly does not mean to involve himself in the rather technical strand of phenomenology defined decades ago by Edmund Husserl, Roman Ingarden, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty or in even their literary-critical permutations (e.g., the Constance school of reception-aesthetics and reader-response criticism of the 1970s and '80s). Instead, this study adheres to a canonical and textual approach that has (for better or worse) been on the decline in most English departments for the last two decades or so. Implicitly relying on a tightly circumscribed and canonical model of literary studies, Fry remains unapologetically and closely focused on the poetic and, to a lesser extent, the critical oeuvre of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and just a small handful of their contemporaries. There seems to be an element of self-denial at work here, since allusions and passing references throughout the book attest to Fry's wide-ranging awareness of critical methodologies and their underlying theoretical frameworks (e.g., Marxism, Heideggerian existentialism, post-Freudian psychoanalysis, historicism, ecocriticism, and so forth). While he will occasionally hint at his misgivings about contempo-

rary criticism's tendency to get bogged down by an extrinsic conceptual machinery to which it must resort for legitimation, Fry has clearly decided not to involve himself in any metacritical and theoretical debates. Emulating instead the understated rhetoric of his principal writer, he clearly prefers to work within a model of close reading with which he is evidently comfortable and at which he often excels. Throughout this book, Fry comes across as someone who, having looked long and steadily at his object (the canonical Wordsworth) has found the latter's oeuvre turn into an extension of his own intellectual and even affective economy.

The book's central claim is that Wordsworth's poetry concerns itself above all with "the ontic, unsemantic self-identity of things" (7). Thus, prior to all custom, politics, and particular social meaning, his "poetry discloses the unity constituted by and as the being, apart from meaning and apart even from difference, of all human and nonhuman things" (9). As the book's introduction and the first three chapters demonstrate, such a claim has plenty of evidence to support it. Moreover, Fry's focus on "the nonhuman in the human" to show how "Wordsworthian solitude is sought for being alone, not just to be alone" (22) also helps us put in perspective Wordsworth's occasional dalliance with pantheist formulations, many of which he was to excise from later versions of his lyrics and the *Prelude*. Instead, the source of Wordsworth's muted expressiveness stems from his deep attunement—which Fry adopts more or less in the spirit of Heidegger's *Stimmung*—to the sheer connectedness of being. As he tells us, "What unifies and levels being in Wordsworth, its 'ground,' . . . is the minerality of 'inanimate creation' from which 'sentient beings,' all of whom are linked ontically to the world by their own inanimate (i.e., somatic) nature alone, are estranged by enlightenment anthropocentrism" (47). Whereas Plato had understood philosophy to originate in the sense of *thaumazein* (wonder) with which this ontology reverberates in the human, modernity—having redefined philosophy as a far more technical of epistemological curiosity and instrumental reason—revives the lyric (particularly beginning in early Romanticism) as the one medium still capable of thinking about "being" prior to its post-Cartesian dispersal into the merely notional and representational: "For Wordsworth, the lyric moment does not reshape existence, it names being. It tries to do, in short, what language cannot do" (12).

It is this experimental probing of the presemantic realm that consternated reviewers like Francis Jeffrey who simply could not fathom "any sort of non-sensory human interest . . . in the non-human world" (46). Making the case for what Jeffrey and his empiricist cohorts in Edinburgh and elsewhere found so elusive a proposition, Fry's book unfolds as a loose sequence of chapters that explore Wordsworth's role in Coleridge's *Rime*, Wordsworth's early lyrics, the *Prelude*, the *Excursion*, and questions of ecology in *Lyrical Ballads* and other poems. Throughout, Fry reads Wordsworth's unique

poetic idiom as seeking to capture an ineffable ontology even as, paradoxically, Wordsworth stakes this seemingly all-encompassing claim by adhering to a rigorously particularist model of (poetic) experience. In so doing, as Fry shows, Wordsworth was able to redraw and (in entirely unexpected ways) render semipermeable the very boundary separating the human from the nonhuman. That is, Wordsworth's lyrics seek to distill the implicit undertow of indifferent being from the secondary, nominalist sphere of "subjective" poetic meanings unfolding at (and seemingly enclosed within) a unique moment in space and time. What renders the Wordsworthian idiom so distinctive is, as Fry shows, a twofold objective realized in a single and singular pattern of utterance. In other words, Wordsworth not only captures the unique and often perplexing specificity of human experience but, at the same time, appears to mutate into an "anthropologist of (lyric) poetry" who seeks "to explain why poetry exists" (11). As such, Fry's Wordsworth may have found a more congenial reader in Walter Pater than in Matthew Arnold, since Pater was among the first to remark—not on the stolid Anglo-Protestant moral philosopher—but on the poet's "sense of a life in natural objects" (63). Pater's original insight was programmatically drawn out by William Empson, who had so vividly demonstrated the multiplicity and coincidence of semantic strands in a single word ("sense" in the *Prelude*, for example) and who provides Fry with an interpretive template for reading Wordsworth's poetry in the way that he feels it ought to be read.

For all its virtues—and without gainsaying the merits of its central argument—Fry's unflinchingly textual and canonical approach does at times betray its intrinsic limitations. Virtually all of the poetry and prose taken up in this book has, of course, been exhaustively appraised by a host of different readers and schools of interpretation for more than a century; and Fry's passing references and fulsome endnotes document this most literary genealogy of English criticism—extending from Arnold, Pater, John Ruskin, A. C. Bradley, Empson, and I. A. Richards all the way forward to the latest permutations of neo-Marxist, historicist, or ecocritical readings. Yet notwithstanding the admirable efficiency and completeness with which that history is handled (or perhaps because of it), it is hard not to feel a sense of exhaustion, a critical ethos in a state of advanced decline, permeating the entire book. Just how much can we hope to gain from delving, yet once more, into Wordsworth's collaboration with Coleridge and, more specifically, the former's dialectical presence in (and response to) the *Rime*? However elegant and informed in its execution, Fry's decision to "mainly consider the *Rime* as a reading of Wordsworth" (26)—and, at the end of it, to find the two poets parting ways on "the role of superstition itself in the poet's journey toward understanding" (28)—is to risk a rather limited return on one's critical investments. This is not to dispute the actual findings here; Fry's identification of Coleridge's hermit with Wordsworth rings intuitively true as both

a theological and biographical jab of sorts, as does Fry's overall reading of the *Rime* as telling us "that human engagement with the natural world needs to be a dialectical process if it is not finally to extinguish the spark of mind in the dank moss of organicity" (35).

Verging at times on the belletristic, Fry's readings occlude the broader intellectual relevance of Wordsworth's oeuvre to the complex and often agonistic political, cultural, and moral debates during a period in English history when notions of "literariness" and "canonicity" were in any event still very much in flux. To some extent, of course, this recusant outlook on "political" readings is itself an entailment of Fry's main thesis. Remarking on how some of Wordsworth's earliest poetry—such as his lines "Written in Very Early Youth" (1788)—anticipates the deceptively affectless world of the Lucy poems, Fry turns to the *Prelude*, "where 'this blank of things' is all the significance that the semantically underdetermined Spots of Time can finally convey. Nature is reduced to blankness, both in the slumber of consciousness and in the world" (82). While such a reading does indeed seem intuitive, it also flirts with its own irrelevance since it all but erases the distinction between an argument advanced about Wordsworth and the specific example introduced in support of that argument. In what is the weakest, often associative, and at times disjointed chapter of an otherwise carefully wrought argument, Fry thus remarks that in Wordsworth's "Poem to Coleridge" "the landscape seems to do its work, as usual, by dissolving difference rather than as a 'multēity in unity'" (140). Similarly vague references to the pervasive "immanence of death in every moment or 'spot' revelation" (138) or to the "mercifully imbecilic" quality of so many characters infusing the *Prelude* with a pervasive "animal tranquility" (141) render critical argument incontestable less on account of its novel and critical recasting of literary utterance than because the argument in question has all but merged with the affective and cognitive reach of the poetry to which it responds.

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