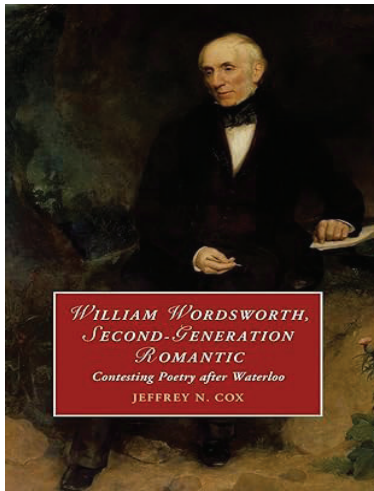


William Wordsworth, Second-Generation Romantic: Contesting Poetry after Waterloo

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*William Wordsworth, Second-Generation Romantic:
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In his Introductory chapter, Cox begins by questioning Harold Bloom's methodology in *The Anxiety of Influence*, which patents its own, psychoanalytic brand in Romantic literary studies by utilizing "poetic oedipal anxiety" (2) for studying strong poets across canons. Cox argues that this theoretical approach both "distorts" and "forgets" (ibid.) the contemporaneity between the two generations of Romantic poets, and the function of "noncanonical figures" (ibid.) in empowering the interrelationship between them. Citing earlier research conducted by Tim Fulford, Jeffrey C. Robinson, and others in recent years, one could assert that Wordsworth and his poetic contemporaries were dynamically associated through eventful episodes, such as the "immortal dinner," (7), where Haydon was gradually assigned the task of the mediator, a go-between the "Lakers and the Cockneys" (11). To dismiss the dynamic entanglement between contemporaries, young and old, would lead to an unjust, gendered discrimination between the strong and the weak poets, or the masculine and the "effeminate" (21), as Bloom would like us to believe. Instead, Hunt, Hazlitt, Byron, Shelley and Keats were re-arranging poetical strengths on both aesthetic and political grounds by attacking the (creative) conservatism of Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth in important texts, renegading by travestyng them, by generating a democratic "vision" (30) against their autocratic, poetic tyranny. This creates the foundation for Cox's counter-psychoanalytic framework in his book.

In 'Cockney Excursions', Cox elaborates on his earlier argument by drawing a discriminatory line between the egotism of the Lakers, especially Wordsworth, and the careful deconstruction of such egotism amongst the Cockneys, vis-à-vis Hazlitt's criticism of *The Excursion*, in Shelley's "Alastor", Byron's *Manfred*

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and Keats's "Ode to Melancholy". Wordsworth's egotistical universe is construed as "the great flaw in Wordsworth's poem," (Cox 44), a universe without other egos (and subsequently, other men) – reminiscent of an anti-social apocalypse.¹ The "eroticizing turn" (Cox 48) in Keats's *Endymion* is read as an anti-egotistic resistance against Wordsworthian celibacy, the reinforcement of a deliberate paganization/humanization upon poetic self-complacency. Similarly, the third canto of Byron's *Childe Harold* resists the excesses of Revolutionary utopianism and the "cynical despair" (Cox 56) of the Pietists, restoring earthly virtues over either political, or graphological totalitarianism. Wordsworthian experiments in Christianizing Romantic thought are substituted by "Eastern exoticism" (Cox 64), Oriental religiosity and incestuous undercurrents by Shelley in *Laon and Cythna*, where the false consciousness surrounding imaginative domesticity is revealed and undone. Wordsworth's "Laodamia" overturns Cockney rhetoric by instituting culture above nature, re-organizing and de-eroticizing poetry of its sensualities, with its preference for a "restrained, rational, and chaste love" (Cox 68). Martial masculinity, witnessed in Protesilaus's character in "Laodamia", contrasts and overturns the promiscuous masculinity of Keats's Lorenzo in "The Pot of Basil". Wordsworth's role, as a "religious poet," (Cox 73), becomes even more pronounced in his later poetry in order to counteract the influence of his so-called poetic successors. The "secret springs" in Shelley's "Mont Blanc" is reconstituted under the "secret springs" in Wordsworth's "Dion", subjugating his imaginative abyss under the Christian faith, out of a fear for another "licentious" (Cox 75) outbreak of the second-generation Romantics.

Chapter Two commences with the reception of Wordsworth's "Thanksgiving Ode", published after the Battle of Waterloo had permanently deferred the anxiety behind a Napoleonic invasion. Cox refers to pantomimes performed in honour of the British generals at Covent Garden, including *Harlequin and Fancy*, or *The Poet's Last Shilling* by Thomas John Dibdin who incorporated within it a parody of *Hamlet*. More interesting is the familiarity between Wordsworth's "Ode" and Hunt's *Descent of Liberty, A Mask* (1815), which, as he acknowledged, was a family favourite during that time. Hunt is right in critiquing his "Ode" upon publication, for its "affectation" (Cox 90) and verbiages. Cox testifies to further similarities with Hunt's *Descent* in Wordsworth's "Ode, Composed in January, 1816." In both his odes, Wordsworth maintains his martial code of masculinity, in constant opposition against Hunt's pacifying (read effeminate) instincts. This, however, is carefully underscored with the typical anxiety of

¹ Wordsworth is certainly culpable for compartmentalizing weaker egos as non-egos, arranging them at the periphery of his own poetic egocentrism, by presenting himself as the perpetual, poetic/political state. See Shouvik Narayan Hore, "The 'Moral Flaw' and Wordsworthian Imagination in "The Old Cumberland Beggar"" *The Atlantic Critical Review* 20.1-20.4 (2021): 116-26.

a canonical strong poet; Wordsworth is systematically concerned with the “horrifying sublimity” (Cox 97) of war, and attempts its substitution with “God’s sublimity” (ibid.) as an acceptable form of martial masculinity. Through a close reading of the “Ode”, one gathers how Byron, in his *Childe Harold*, fights to keep the revolutionary spirit alive, despite Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo, in his bid to desist Conservative complacency by shifting the agency of victory to a perennialized moral victory for the radicals, instead of a battleground victory for the English war criminals.¹ Nevertheless, both poets, if not both schools, despite their disagreements, cooperated in assigning poetry its public responsibilities – in assigning its rightful opinion to “contemporary events,” (Cox 109).

Chapter Three suggests that we, the readers, approach Wordsworth’s *Peter Bell* through Hunt’s *Hero and Leander*, Shelley’s *Rosalind and Helen*, Byron’s *Don Juan* and Hans Busk’s *The Vestriad*, amongst other poems by the above-mentioned authors. Cox’s central argument rests on the proposition that Wordsworth’s protagonist, Peter Bell, is an “anti-Byronic hero” (Cox 113), divested of the Byronic villain’s charms. Wordsworth contends that religious intervention often redirects the sinner into repentance, which does not *need* to be the extravagant Byronic hell, but *can* be the “supernatural interpretation” (Cox 118) of an earthly event, such as a controlled mine blast, or a surfacing corpse in his poem – a fact emphasized by Wordsworth in his letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon in April, 1820. Hunt’s insistence on the unnecessary excesses of Methodism, and Wordsworth’s eulogization of it leads him to dismiss it as “not the Christian religion” (Cox 120) and as an “institutionalized despondency” (Cox 122), allowing us to reflect, once again, upon the Cockneys’ consistent deconstruction of the Lakers’ ideological flaws. This theme is carried forward into “Thinking Rivers: The Flow of Influence, Wordsworth-Coleridge-Shelley” where Wordsworth’s ambition of inheriting the Miltonic epic form is manifested within the sonnet form, as gleaned in his sonnet sequence on Liberty and on the river Duddon. The fluvial, riverine movements may be witnessed in the Duddon sonnet-sequence as resembling, at once, “individual pools,” (Cox 134) and as fluvial literary movement in its entirety. Shelley, in his “Mont Blanc”, expresses disgust at Coleridge’s “explicit religiosity” (Cox 140) in “Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouny”, forming another line of subsidiary criticism besides Wordsworth’s dismissal of it as an instance of the “Mock Sublime,” (Cox 149).² Cox also assesses the probability of Wordsworth’s encounter with excerpts from Shelley’s aforementioned poem in Mary Shelley’s *History*, which could have

1 “It [Wordsworth’s land] is an anti-Keatsian, anti-Byronic land, avowedly English rather than Orientalist, but one governed by a naturalized paternalism” (Fulford 191).

2 Ian Balfour, “The Matter of Genre in the Romantic Sublime” in Charles Mahoney ed., *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*. Blackwell Publishing, 2010: 503-520. at 509 and 511.

inspired *The White Doe of Rylstone*. The author could be rightly speculating that Wordsworth was confabulating with Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" through his poem, by offering allusive references. But Wordsworth, unlike Keats, stubbornly holds on to the Englishness of his sonnet-sequence by de-glorifying the exotic "cosmopolitanism" (Cox 148) of Keats, rebuffing the Romantic, Cockney discourse which decentralizes (and attempts to re-situate) the Romantic movement from its English stronghold. The Duddon sonnet-sequence also isolates the evolved, Wordsworthian poetical discourse from hackneyed themes of poetry, allowing him to re-instate spiritual meaning in an alienated (from martial masculinities in war/physical combats, etc.), English countryside.

The final chapter in this book, "Late 'Late Wordsworth'" is the summation of the poetic prerogatives that Wordsworth had offered, and challenged his Cockney rivals with. *Ecclesiastical Sketches* echoes those themes explored earlier in the *Duddon* series, unconsciously incorporating the phrase "palm and amaranth" within his opening sonnet, entitled "Introduction," from Charlotte Smith's sonnet to "Mrs. ____." Wordsworth wants us to recognize and acknowledge the common poetic faith, shared for the fulfilment of a common poetic (read English) cause across compositions. He is alert to the compensation that must be paid for concrete perceptions, as in "Yarrow Visited" where he fears the loss of imaginative abstractions once reality comes into sight. This helps the mature Wordsworth come to terms with retrospective, imaginary experiences, which could be counted upon as "new strengths" (Cox 165), as he had wished for Scott. This transference modifies the original, aesthetic purpose of Wordsworthian poetry to become more "liturgical ... political or ideological" (Cox 170) – something that, according to Cox, would be classified by the Cockneys as "ideological apostasy" (Cox 174). Wordsworth had attempted its remedy by publishing *Borderers*, a play from his radical years alongside his *Sonnets Upon the Punishment of Death* (1839-1840). It is useful to note how Wordsworth resisted creative inspiration from "touristic Italy" (Cox 176), relying upon memories of the English countryside to rejuvenate his imaginative self. Therefore, he is critiqued as a flawed predecessor to the second-generation Romantics, and a bad successor of the great tradition of Classical European literature, for his tendencies in offering "more opposition than advice." (Cox 190), leading to the later Wordsworth suffering from, ironically, the anxiety of Walter Scott's influence on him. To conclude, the Second-generation Romantic, here Wordsworth, had transitioned from meditative truths to irreversible "governing" (Cox 194), forcing the Cockneys to engage with Wordsworthian recentralization in creative and contradicting ways.

There are a few, minor misprints that could be traced across the book (pp.

111, 112, 121, etc.). While Cox's book offers a coherent reading experience from cover to cover, there is an uncanny return of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* in its final stages, perhaps as a reminder that the psychoanalytic framework was never, and could not have been discarded in the first place. But, because of a conscious dismissal of the earlier method, and an adoption of another which relied on allusive contingencies, one finds, not unexpectedly, a handful of "seems" and "perhaps" in the book, probably leading the reader into his own methodological anxiety of reading a text which, at times, compensates with its lack of theoretical depth. Nonetheless, the book is an important addition to the scholarship of "Late Wordsworth", and shall continue to enrich readers worldwide.

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