

# William Wordsworth and the Theology of Poverty. By Heidi J. Snow

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*William Wordsworth and the Theology of Poverty*. By Heidi J. Snow. Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. viii + 152pp. Hardback, £60.00.

This short study makes an important contribution to the on-going reassessment of the religious contexts of British Romanticism. Arguing for a reconsideration of the theological foundations of William Wordsworth's poetry, Snow challenges the common conception of the poet's progress from irreligious radical to orthodox Anglican. Instead, reading Wordsworth in the context of contemporary Christian attitudes towards poverty, the five chapters of her book offer a more nuanced account of the development of his religious sensibilities by pointing out the range of Anglican and dissenting viewpoints at work in his early verse. In the process, Snow succeeds in shedding new light on the plurality of theological perspectives that, in shaping Wordsworth's ethical regard for the poor, had a lasting influence on his literary imagination.

This plurality, Snow contends, is a direct consequence of the diverse religious identity of the Lake District in which Wordsworth lived. A remote, semi-peninsular region set apart from the nation's main routes and thoroughfares, the Lake District was, as Snow reminds us, a marginal 'theological landscape' (p. 8) populated not only by the established Church, but also by a plethora of marginalised, non-established congregations. Combining insights from religious history, literary biography, and original archival research, Snow's study offers a sketch of this landscape, outlining the various Christian communities who inhabited it and examining their doctrines and principles in relation to a selection of Wordsworth's early poems.

Mainly, this work is accomplished in Snow's three central chapters, where she uses the twin issues of poverty and charity not only to distinguish between the Anglican, Methodist, and Quaker congregations Wordsworth encountered as a boy in Cockermouth and Hawkshead, and later as a man in Grasmere and Rydal, but also to suggest how they may have influenced the ethics espoused in his works. In Chapter 2, for example, Snow uses the sermons of Thomas Secker (Archbishop of Canterbury, 1758-1768) and Richard Watson (Bishop of Llandaff, 1782-1816) to speculate about the theological perspectives on poverty that the young Wordsworth would have heard pronounced from the pulpit at All Saints Church, in

Cockermouth. She then proceeds to contrast the established ‘charitable environment of Cockermouth’, with its poorhouse and its provision for ‘outdoor relief’ (pp. 35, 36), with the inchoate one Wordsworth would have encountered in Hawkshead, which did not have a poorhouse until circa 1782. Arguing that the attitude towards poverty expressed in several of Wordsworth’s early poems (including ‘Alice Fell’, ‘Beggars’, and ‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’) stands at variance with the principals expounded by Secker and Watson, and with the system of charity provided by the parish system, Snow concludes that we must ‘look elsewhere for [the] theological sources for his views’ (p. 44).

This ‘elsewhere’ is mapped out in Chapters 3 and 4, which explore in turn how – more than Enlightenment humanism – Evangelical Anglicanism, Methodism, and Quakerism may have informed Wordsworth’s regard for the poor. Here, as in Chapter 2, Snow’s method is to proceed from an extended consideration of historical context to a set of close readings. Accordingly, in Chapter 3, we progress from a concise summary of the origins of the Evangelical movement, and its spread across North West England, to an analysis of ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’ and ‘I know an aged Man constrained to dwell’ that suggests how both poems reject ‘the Anglican theory of minimal care’ in favour of an essentially ‘Methodist perspective that honors the poor’ (p. 76). Similarly, Chapter 4 advances from an overview of the burgeoning of the Society of Friends in the greater Lakeland region to a consideration of Wordsworth’s relationship with the Quaker poet Thomas Wilkinson (famously honoured in ‘To the Spade of a Friend’) and, finally, to an interpretation of ‘Simon Lee’, ‘Michael’, ‘The Brothers’, and ‘Repentance’, in which Snow stresses ‘the Quaker sensibility’ towards poverty that ‘rings out’ in each poem (p. 105).

Snow’s introductory and concluding chapters frame these analyses of individual lyric poems with broader considerations of Wordsworth’s self-identification with the poor and the presence of dissenting Christian perspectives on poverty in *The Excursion*. Compellingly, Snow treats this latter poem – often considered to be one of Wordsworth’s more orthodox Anglican works – as a master expression of his theological pluralism. Unpacking the poem’s debts to Rousseau’s *Emile* – which, Snow contends, provided Wordsworth with a model for

reconciling ‘private religious convictions’ with the dictates of ‘the established Church’ (p. 108) – she convincingly demonstrates how, in its effort to ‘explore the problems of life’, *The Excursion* mobilises ‘the multiple religious perspectives Wordsworth was exposed to during his early life’ (p. 109).

In sum, the portrait of Wordsworth that emerges from Snow’s study is neither that of the young radical championed by many modern critics, nor that of the stolid Anglican championed by their Victorian forebears. Instead she presents us with a poet whose religious sensibilities, though based on a reverence for the established Church, led him to reject ‘Anglican opinions regarding poverty’ and to embrace a more ecumenical view that shared much in common with Methodist and Quaker notions of ‘the individual’s role within a compassionate community’ (pp. 134, 135). Crucially, Snow limits herself to the early years of Wordsworth’s career, which, as she explains, is a period that has often been mistakenly characterised by over-simplified accounts of the poet’s turn from atheism to Anglicanism. Still, in ending with *The Excursion*, her study leaves off just at the point when Wordsworth’s engagement with Christianity becomes overt. It would have helped enhance the critical significance of this book were Snow to have included some commentary on, for instance, Wordsworth’s hagiographic ‘Memoir’ of the life of the Rev. Robert (‘Wonderful’) Walker or his three-part lyrical history of the Church of England, the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. Although Snow’s decision not to engage with such works is regrettable, her monograph is nonetheless of manifest importance for its criticism of the imprecise understanding of Christianity that has long stymied serious historicist study of Wordsworth. One, moreover, comes away from this book sensing that it may point the way for a broader reconsideration of the theological underpinnings of the whole of Wordsworth’s oeuvre.

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