

Jessica Fay, *Wordsworth's Monastic Inheritance: Poetry, Place, and the Sense of Community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 238. £60. ISBN 9780198816201.

In her accomplished and useful study, Jessica Fay conveys the depth and extent of Wordsworth's thinking about and qualified attraction to monasticism or, more specifically, 'the coenobium or "conventual establishment", which contrasts with eremitical forms of monasticism in which an eremite (recluse or hermit) lives alone' (6). Wordsworth, Fay contends, distrusted eremitism or reclusion (despite his dream of writing *The Recluse*), valuing instead coenobium as the most important community in the north of England during the Middle Ages, the ancient heart of the 'national ecclesiastical unity' recounted by the Venerable Bede (AD 672-735) and that Wordsworth saw threatened, in the 1820s, by Roman Catholic Emancipation. Fay is fully aware of the tensions in Wordsworth's position; his admiration for a defunct Catholic institution, as well as Bede's 'Northumbrian Renaissance' (174, 197), are at odds with his opposition to Catholic Relief, or the building of new monasteries. Which is why, for Wordsworth, English monasteries are now best when suitably moldered and thus naturalized, indices of historical continuity amidst mutability, better to remember than relive.

Fay's Introduction announces her chronological focus on Wordsworth's life of writing from 1806-7, during the poet's residence at Sir George Beaumont's Coleorton estate, to the publication of *Ecclesiastical Sketches* in 1822, 'the culmination of a sustained period of interest in the monastic history of his local region' (3). (By Fay's count in Appendix I [201-04], Wordsworth visited 40 monastic sites over the course of his life, 18 of them between 1806 and 1822.) At Coleorton Wordsworth consorted with Quakers who, surprisingly to me, appear in Thomas Clarkson's and others' writings as quasi-monastic in their quietism, shared silence, and rural retirement amidst sacral space (75-77). By 1822, Wordsworth's was completely devoted to the Church of England, although it was for him a church somehow continuous with a medieval and Catholic past, a continuity the Tractarians and Oxford Movement would later explore. Fay's Wordsworth appears an orthodox, Trinitarian Christian, almost without interruption, from cradle to grave; she sidelines his short if well-known divagation into potentially unorthodox speculation, 1798-1805 – metaphysical speculation that contributes significantly to what we still sometimes identify as Romanticism.

Wordsworth's Monastic Inheritance contains passages of astute, historically-informed close reading, all of it attentive to Christianity but not all of it directly related to monasticism. Thus, for example, a detailed comparison of Spenser's Una and her lion with, from *The White Doe of Rylstone*, Emily and her doe concludes that Emily, unlike Una, properly construes her animal's spiritual significance; her interpretive ability 'is precisely the skill Wordsworth expects his reader to develop' (41). Imagination, meanwhile – that power endlessly discussed in Wordsworth criticism in relation to the Crossing of the Alps episode in *The Prelude* Book 6 – appears here, in a verse epigraph to *The White Doe*, as instrumental to faith in a future, beatified state (50-51). Fay's discussion of *The Excursion* hews more closely to monasticism proper, as the Solitary is presented as too eremitical, while the Solitary and Pastor understand, each in his own way, the necessity of coenobium or, more generally, mutual intercourse (154-58). Yet the Solitary nonetheless has a crucial insight into 'the monastic Brotherhood', in Wordsworth's phrase, and its superiority to the false pastoral ideal that initially beguiles the Poet (158).

Fay's Epilogue summarizes the ways in which Wordsworth shared an interest with his contemporaries in three matters – antiquarianism, the romance revival, and the gothic revival –

and yet differed from them, too. He made ‘topographical and antiquarian studies’ subservient to his own emotional and poetic motives. He ‘adopted the framework of romance [chiefly in *The White Doe*] but overturned narrative conventions, aiming to subdue rather than excite the reader’. Finally, ‘his knowledge of ecclesiastical gothic architecture was extensive but he valued monastic remains because they had been subsumed and consecrated by nature’ (198). One relevant context Fay does not address, but might in future work, is the extensive eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century poetry of retirement and seclusion in which Wordsworth seems to participate. Michael Edson has given us a 9-page ‘Checklist of Printed British Retirement Poetry, 1690-1830’ (“‘A Closet or a Secret Field’: Horace, Protestant Devotion and British Retirement Poetry’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35.1 (2012), 17-40). This literary tradition is, arguably, more Protestant than Horatian, but I would like to know, after reading Fay’s thought-provoking book, to what degree, if any, it too shares a monastic inheritance.

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