

**Eliza Borkowska, *The Presence of God in the Works of William Wordsworth*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021. Pp. xviii + 191. £120. ISBN 9780367608125.**

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On first encountering ‘Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’, ‘Elegiac Stanzas’, or the Immortality Ode, bright students sometimes ask, ‘what was Wordsworth’s religion?’ My necessarily piecemeal response is usually prefaced with a disclaimer along the lines of ‘that is a huge and complicated question’. One reason why it is difficult to offer an answer is that Wordsworth’s personal affinities, affiliations, and opinions changed over his lifetime; another is the manner in which he deals with religion; another is the caution needed to separate the man from the poet. All of these obstacles are addressed at length in *The Presence of God in the Works of William Wordsworth* (subsequently referred to as I). Eliza Borkowska’s complementary volume, *The Absent God in the Works of William Wordsworth* (subsequently referred to as II), then explores the nature of the poet’s struggle to balance his chequered personal experiences with a solid poetic legacy.

The works are unique in their scope, approach, and organisation. *The Presence of God* tackles ‘the theme of religious faith’ (I.3), which covers references to God, the Church, church buildings, and worship throughout the whole of Wordsworth’s career (in poetry, prefaces, letters, and notes) from start to finish, before and after revision, and ‘including the work that was never written’ (I.7). A study of such scope has not been attempted before. (Critics have tended to focus on one stage in the poet’s life or writing – William A. Ulmer’s *The Christian Wordsworth*, for instance – or one strand of ideas, such as Richard E. Brantley’s *Wordsworth’s ‘Natural Methodism’*.) Borkowska’s ‘statistical’ approach is also highly unusual. It involves calculating, for example, the occasions on which Wordsworth mentions prayer or the proportion of his verse that references Christ. The types of comments Borkowska offers throughout *The Presence of God* – for instance, that ‘Catholic figures appear more commonly and persistently in Wordsworth’s poetry (and certainly in his prose) than the figure of Christ’ (I.37) – would not be possible through close reading of any part of Wordsworth’s oeuvre. In this sense, the first volume in particular functions as a survey or concordance as much as a piece of critical interpretation; indeed, the ratio of quotation, documentation, and description (on the one hand) to literary critical analysis (on the other) is pretty high.

While the work contains more mathematics than most Romanticists would care to muddle through, the shape of the volumes is artfully conceived. The first monograph consists of eight chapters; the second includes six: together these sections equate to the octave and sestet of a sonnet such that the entire work becomes ‘a tribute to Wordsworth as one of the most prolific sonneteers in history’ (II, n.p.). Each chapter takes a view of the whole body of work and each ‘statistical’ observation is made within a holistic context. As a consequence, there are few occasions on which Borkowska gives any single poem or prose work sustained attention. In *The Presence of God* this happens only in Chapter 6 (*The Excursion*) and Chapter 7 (*The Prelude*). The same poem might be discussed briefly in two or three separate chapters, each time from a different ‘angle’. The thematic treatment also means that readers coming to the volume without a fairly comprehensive sense of the chronology of Wordsworth’s life and work will struggle not to feel disorientated. Nonetheless, the trends that Borkowska identifies will help sharpen scholarly understanding of the patterns and nuances of Wordsworth’s manner of expressing religious ideas.

The ambitious design leads Borkowska to work almost entirely from Ernest de Sélincourt’s (digitised) one-volume edition of *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*

(1904). For the prose, she takes Alexander Grosart's three-volume edition of 1876, a decision based on the 'accessibility of this edition in a number of handy electronic formats' and its thematic rather than chronological arrangement (I.xvii). The Cornell Wordsworth volumes are given short shrift for not representing final authorial revisions and the Oxford *Prose Works* (prepared by Owen and Smyser in 1974) are discounted. Borkowska's first volume is steeped in Christopher Wordsworth's *Memoirs* (1851), the 'Reminiscences' recorded by Grosart, and Isabella Fenwick's 'Notes'. But with the exception of Stephen Gill there is little close engagement with recent criticism. Again, the design of the project precludes the enormous discussion this would require.

Chapter 1 of *The Presence of God* tackles the issue of separating the man from the poet. Borkowska concludes that while 'the poet' has often been read as an exponent of various Christian positions, Wordsworth did not strike his friends and Rydal neighbours as a religious man. Chapter 2 considers 'religious signposting' within Wordsworth's poetry which, Borkowska notes, is indeterminate. She asks whether poems count as 'evidence' of religious belief (I.33) and concludes that they do not. Chapter 3 takes 'Allusiveness' as its topic, a term Borkowska uses to capture Wordsworth's habit of making religious exclamations parenthetically (rather than to denote Wordsworth's use of literary or biblical allusion). That Wordsworth often makes 'bracketed allusion[s] to religion' (I.44) is an original observation; it is used by Borkowska to explain the poet's preference for the sonnet, a form that does not lend itself to extended exposition. While Chapter 4 offers a staid treatment of Wordsworth's prose, Chapter 5 is an interesting survey of references to prayer and church buildings, in which Borkowska demonstrates the lyric speaker's reluctance to enter into such. The main argument of Chapter 6 is that the Poet of *The Excursion* represents Wordsworth himself and that this 'blank character' epitomises Wordsworth's systematic practice of depersonalising all expressions about (or addressed to) God. Yet *The Excursion*'s dramatic framework, Borkowska concludes, gives Wordsworth the space to 'elaborate on the subject of religious belief' precisely because *all* of its characters are reflective of him (I.140). The seventh chapter contains a clear, careful account of the nature and extent of *Prelude* revisions and will perhaps become the most enduringly useful section of these works. Borkowska's interest in Wordsworth as a sonneteer pervades Chapter 8, which argues that Wordsworth 'attempted to build his compositions, regardless of their length or genre, upon the structural principles of the sonnet' (I.160). That is to say, he sets the groundwork in the opening lines before introducing a 'turn', after which he lets 'religion' briefly enter. Such comments on sonneteering are important to the cohesion of the two volumes, and will be of interest to scholars of Romantic sonnets.

One of the frustrations of reading *The Presence of God* is that it offers little sense of the relationship Wordsworth perceived between religion and the imagination. Wordsworth's energy and aspiration, his striving after 'something evermore about to be' makes the imagination itself a divine phenomenon. The frustration is remedied in *The Absent God*. The volume attempts to explain why Wordsworth was cautious, allusive, and personally disengaged when addressing or discussing God, why 'all his religious discourse turns out to be a record of his encounters with absence' (II. 8). The first chapter marks out what Borkowska defines as Wordsworth's poetry of past and future encounter: God is always either a memory or an anticipation. The following three chapters work cumulatively to build a picture of Wordsworth's understanding of the imagination. Chapter 2 explores the significance of Hartley's Associationism and Chapter 3 recounts the importance of Coleridge's influence before Chapter 4 contends that, without Coleridge and his notes for *The Recluse*, Wordsworth's poetry begins to lack imagination. Here Borkowska makes an insightful comparison with George Crabbe and frames Wordsworth as a poet with Popean tendencies. Chapter 5 expands these ideas by examining the place of 'imagination' in Wordsworth's 1815 categorisation of his poems.

The sixth and final chapter states that Wordsworth is ‘statistically’ the poet of God but he is reticent, allusive, and hesitant; he turns to God only when it is too late to say anything thorough, conclusive, or decided. The reason for this, Borkowska suggests, is that Wordsworth’s method of locating God in the past or the future (his method of ‘absence’) is connected with an anachronistic, eighteenth-century disposition towards the imagination: Wordsworth tried and failed to encounter a version of God that had become outdated. Borkowska’s most important contribution, then, is her appraisal of Wordsworth as a poet crossed (or cursed) by his position in time, at a turning point in history when the imagination began to replace God. But, Borkowska concludes, Wordsworth struggled to give religion up; he wanted to believe or, at the very least, he wanted his readers to believe that he believed. This is the source of the paradox of the present absence (or absent presence) of God in his works.

With hindsight and the benefit of electronic editions it *is* possible to extract a poet’s ‘method’ (and perhaps Wordsworth’s awareness, or otherwise, of the habits and processes Borkowska attributes to him is unimportant). The general impression of these volumes, however, is of Wordsworth as a methodist (so to speak); as a man who calculated and weighed, who followed certain structuring patterns, who did not allow himself the space or time to say what he really thought and felt. This mechanical study seems to take away the life of the poet, his felt experiences and sympathies, his humanity. But perhaps that is the valuable lesson of Borkowska’s tireless work: that when it came to God, Wordsworth was not himself.

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