

**Vincent Quinn, *Pre-Romantic Poetry. Writers and their Work Series. Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers/British Council, 2012. Pp. 125. £12.99. ISBN 9780746311882.***

**Bill Roberts, *Thomas Gray's Journal of his Visit to the Lake District in October 1769 with his Letter on his Tour of the Highlands in 1765 and a Commentary on each Journey. Kirkoswald: Northern Academic Press, 2012. Pp. 160. £12.99. ISBN 9780952810322.***

'Pre-Romantic', admits the author of this short and stimulating study, is a label which 'creates as many problems as it solves' (3). William Cowper, gracing the cover in a 1792 portrait by Romney, looks – half-expectant, half-anxious – as if he probably agrees. Perhaps he can see them all lined up and waiting, the Posterity gang: 'Wordsworth, Arnold, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis' (103), co-creators of the canon that left the second half of the eighteenth century looking like a warm-up act for the real thing. Vincent Quinn's task in this volume is to challenge the whole notion of 'preromanticism' and the curiously teleological version of literary history it implies. He does so engagingly, and with verve, in an introductory chapter which unpicks the problems of a narrative about the development of English literature essentially formed during the nineteenth century, and from whose assumptions of literary value we are still not entirely free. Three thoughtful studies then tease out some of those ideas in readings of mostly Cowper and Thomas Gray, though others are drawn into the discussion: Yearsley, Leapor, Pointon, Pope and Keats amongst them.

Quinn has a knack for taking well-worn critical themes and reinvigorating them (what, after all, could there be left to say about 'Poetry and Patronage' in this period?). He does this partly by shifting focus, in the first two studies, to lesser-known poems, like Cowper's 'On Mrs Montagu's Feather-Hangings', which he locates in a subtle nexus of social aspiration and indebtedness involving the poet, his cousin Lady Hesketh, and Elizabeth Montagu (whose Portman Square mansion contained 'a room decorated entirely with feathers' (19)). In 'The Occasions of Poetry', Quinn spends time with Gray's 'Ode on the Death of Favourite Cat' and Mary Leapor's 'Upon her play being returned to her, stained with Claret', questioning (with Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' by way of demonstration) some assumptions about 'occasional verse' and its suitability as a vehicle for 'high' poetry – a discussion which opens out to consider how such writing has been edged out of later constructions of the sublime. The third chapter, 'Homoeroticism and the Pastoral' returns to Gray, exploring the various ways – in letters, jokes, allusions and poetry – in which the poet figured and expressed his feelings for Richard West through the ambiguous – and here, beautifully nuanced – tropes of pastoral. A fine reading of Gray's 'Elegy' follows, which hinges in part on an idea developed by Pierre Macherey that 'gaps and absences reveal the ideological tensions that inhabit every text' (95). Drawing attention to the sheer awkwardness of the final stanza ('Even interior readings struggle to make this verse coherent; it falls completely apart when spoken aloud'), Quinn argues that this 'stutter' reveals a moment of cultural pressure, where the conventions of literary pastoral come up against the rules of eighteenth-century Christian morality.

Quinn shows how all three categories of writing discussed here failed to conform to post-Wordsworthian notions of the function and nature of poetry ('real' poets are not supposed to do it for money, for fun, or in ways that might be construed as unmanly). Close attention to historical context can help us to bear in mind the changing nature of perceived literary value, and understand why certain genres or types of poetry find favour at certain times. Which is not to embalm them or to hedge them in impenetrable scholarship; it is more

a case of learning a language well enough to get the jokes. Nor, as Quinn demonstrates, need Historicism preclude dialogue across the centuries: Plath, Woolf, Lyotard and others have some interesting things to contribute here.

The ability of eighteenth-century texts to speak out across time is a preoccupation in the second book under review, a new edition of Thomas Gray's accounts of two tours made in the Scottish Highlands and the Lake District in 1765 and 1769. These journeys, undertaken more than twenty-five years after his European Grand Tour with Horace Walpole in 1739-41, situate Gray interestingly near the beginnings of the fashion for tourism within Britain that would so characterise the second half of the eighteenth century. He is, indeed, just ahead of Thomas Pennant, who is often credited with 'opening up' Scotland with his published *Tours* of 1769 and 1772. Gray's account of the Lakes was not written for publication, but appeared after his death, annotated and considerably revised, in 1775. Bill Roberts, in what is effectively a diplomatic edition, returns us to the raw, jolting, episodic texts of the note-book journals, which Gray copied out more or less verbatim and sent in letters to his friend Thomas Wharton.

The account of his five-day Scottish tour is also a letter to Wharton, setting out his itinerary from Edinburgh to the Highlands, and describing at length the grounds and castle at Glamis, where the ninth earl was busy with a vast programme of land improvement: 'all the Highlanders, that can be got, are employ'd in it' notes Gray, adding that 'many of them speak no English & I hear them singing Erse songs all day long' (22). That interest in local lives and stories is also revealed in his comment on one of the Pictish carved stones at Meigle, explained to him by local women as 'the tomb of *Queen Wanders* [i.e. Guinevere], *that was riven to dethe by staned-horses for nae gude, that she did*' (23).

It is in the journal of the Lakes tour, however, that Gray's gift for capturing visual effects in words becomes most evident. There are phrases of lovely precision – from October grass 'cover'd with a hoar frost, w<sup>ch</sup> soon melted, & exhaled in a thin blewish smoke' (58) to 'the shining purity of the Lake, just ruffled by the breeze enough to shew it is alive' (59). The quality of the attention Gray paid to his surroundings arose, perhaps, from the need to share this lived experience of a new landscape with what William Ruddick calls 'an absent but imaginatively present companion' (cited 152): Thomas Wharton should have accompanied him on this trip, but turned back at Brough after a bad attack of asthma. Gray was a conscious connoisseur of landscape, using his Claude glass assiduously and referring to scenes published in prints by Thomas Smith of Derby. But, just as in Scotland, he is not only interested in effects of light and shade amongst these awe-inspiring mountains: he talks to local people, picks up stories, accents – 'Ilkeley (pronounce Eecla)' – and learns how they make a living. We meet the farmer 'let down from the cliff in ropes' to raid a predatory eagle's nest (62); we hear 'the thumping of huge hammers' near the forges at Sizergh ('pronounce Siser') (71) and are moved by the story of an experienced family of cockle-pickers caught in the treacherous tide at Poulton sands.

Preserving the immediacy of such writing in a published text is always difficult, but it must be said that this hyper-faithful edition (which mimics every feature of the manuscript down to the long S's) can be quite hard to read. The illustrations are illuminating, but it would have been good, too, to have a couple of maps; I would recommend reading this book in conjunction with Lancaster University's 'Mapping The Lakes' website, which devotes several pages to the itinerary of Gray's tour. Roberts's commitment to Gray the poet and the man, though at times bordering on the downright defensive, is admirable, and his commentaries (both treble the length of the originals) are fascinating. They effectively give us a new narrative, that of a traveller trying to walk in eighteenth-century footsteps through a modern landscape. It is an excellent way to grasp the both the lost-ness and the immediacy of history; for if the inns today are less dark and damp, and the roads are that much smoother

(and noisier), you can still catch that interplay of light and cloud on the hills, or reach out across centuries and touch the bark of a tree that Gray once measured and described. And people still drown on those dangerous sands.

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