

Ross Wilson, *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. 241. £60. ISBN 9781107041226.

Peter Larkin, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Promising Losses*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. xx. £58. ISBN 9780230337367.

Two new books from Ross Wilson and Peter Larkin show the life Michel Henry's thought has breathed into the parts of Romantic Studies it has reached. They are also, perhaps, enveloped in the ambient, inspirational hum of J.H. Prynne's 1988 essay, 'English Poetry and Emphatical Language'. Wilson quotes Henry's remark that 'Descartes's brilliant intuition, [is] that the sensations which result in the world giving itself to us under the appearance of a sensible world are not in the things but only in us, in our spirit' (7). We are conscious of ourselves feeling – and 'That which feels itself immediately, internally we call subjectivity or life'. For Shelley, in 'On Life', however, 'we live on, and in living lose the apprehension of life.' Protesting Yeats's judgement that Shelley 'hated life', Wilson proposes that 'Shelley's hatred, such as it is, is not for life but for life that does not live' (8). Living on is not life 'but aimlessly enduring vegetation . . . just eating and excreting like plants similarly rooted to the ground' (9-10). For those living on, Wilson glosses Shelley, 'life becomes its own tomb, a tomb which does not merely contain what has gone dead but perpetuates it, horrifyingly, as a perverse form of living . . . [and] "man becomes a sepulchre of himself"'.

This is not, however, because Shelley agreed with those British empiricists for whom 'life turns out not so much to be grasped in, but rather eroded by, its living' (19). On the contrary, according to Wilson, Shelley believed social and political conditions were responsible for travestying life into 'survival alone' (10). This diagnosis is difficult to act upon, though, because along with the brutalisation that is a consequence of exploitation and tyranny those of us who live on are also presented with a disabling 'cognitive deficit: we lose knowledge about life' (13). Formulae secretly replace thought; anhedonia squeezes out feeling.

Although both mind and body are in a state of arrest, Shelley claims that poetry can revive apprehension. Wilson writes:

poetry knows life in a way not routinely available to us; poetry bears . . . this knowledge not in theses or world views extractable from it, but in its 'physical qualities', in, in particular, the sounds of its words and letters; and, since this knowledge is concerned with us 'as living beings among other living beings', it is in no way separable from ethical and political concerns. (15)

Poetry's 'musical or . . . poetic thinking' (16) is the 'apprehension of life' Shelley wants, and – drawing imaginatively on Adorno and Simon Jarvis' reading of the same – Wilson brilliantly traces its movement in his wonderful book. With the emphatic life of poetry, Shelley enchants us out of the bad enchantment of damaged life.

Shelley and the Apprehension of Life is compelling, beautifully executed and, to use one of Wilson's key terms, profoundly animating. There are some excellent pages on how, for Shelley, 'Human life is . . . not self-animating . . . but interanimated by liberty and by communion with others. Parasitic exploitation of the kind condemned from *Queen Mab* to *The Triumph of Life* is a grotesque travesty of this interanimation' (85). While his writing on promises, wishes and anticipation is criticism at its rarest, it is Wilson's close readings, always guided by a simultaneously urgent and subtle thinking hovering nearby, that will press silvery

images on the reader's memory. For fear of ruining the surprises, this on the Fourth Spirit's 'On a Poet's lips I slept' (*Prometheus Unbound*, I. ii. 737-51) will have to do:

the Poet does not exactly watch the bees themselves: 'He will watch from dawn to gloom / The lake-reflected sun illumine / The yellow bees in i' the ivy-bloom' . . . The bees, even if they are not seen, are there, it would seem, in the poem after all, persistently making themselves heard in the sonic modulations of the following three lines: 'The yellow *bees* in i' the ivy-bloom, / Nor heed not see, what things they be; / But from *these* create he can'. (99)

Wilson is careful to say that he does not simply prize Shelley here for his artistry with onomatopoeia: 'song is no song . . . without the music of the bees'. Poet and bees interanimate one another – the latter's humming awakening the former to the ivy-bloom that catches the sunlight off the bees' yellow stripes, which in turn harmonise with the sun and its image in the water.

If Wilson would push through, and even past, philosophy to reach the musical thinking contained at the level of letter, syllable and sound in Shelley, Peter Larkin's *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Promising Losses* steps itself in the post-Heideggerian tradition in order to explore arguments that touch often on ecological questions. Henry and Jean-Luc Marion are important intellectual sponsors, but there are also fine discussions of Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, Derrida, Jean Luc Chrétien, and others, in Larkin's book. His writing on Wordsworth and scarcity – which freely develops ideas from, for instance, Timothy Morton and Paul H. Fry – is probably his best known. Yet, perhaps his most provocative essay is on Wordsworth's late work.

The problem late Wordsworth faces, according to Larkin, is that he is wholly dependent upon a youthful creativity that must remain intact and unrivalled while, at the same time, he has to demonstrate that he is its 'capable inheritor' (29-30). Wordsworth discovers – or must persuade himself that he discovers – that 'The pleasure of recalling only the nostalgia of recall is sufficient to seal the present of the poem without representing its prior source of security' (21). What Wordsworth inherits from his youth, though, is of ambiguous value, to say the least. 'Composed by the Sea-Shore', for example, 'conveys less a bitterness against the insecurity of human experience as the necessity of rest from a course of personal history' (24-5). The poem also reflects upon 'what an inheritance leaves for it to be inherited by'. Increasingly interested in the posthumous life of his *oeuvre*, Wordsworth finds that losing touch with the source of his meaning brings with it some blessed relief from the labour of meaning. Larkin's considerations of Wordsworth's poetry of the 'counter-sublime, sufficient mutuality, and provenience' – the poet's response to his delicate and thankless task – is sometimes as moving as it is astonishing (29).

Even a poem as early as 'Anecdote for Fathers' has to deal with the 'mature' difficulty of trying to think of home as more than 'mere preference' but less than paralysing loss (74). Larkin elaborates a fascinating theory of how to 'live beside' power's sources (such as youth and nature) rather than in submission or opposition to them. Like Wilson who reads Shelley as a poet of animation, Larkin sees in *The Ruined Cottage* the revelation of 'a bond [with nature] that renews and refreshes itself' (90-1) through poetry. Unlike Wilson, however, Larkin directly addresses the theological implications of the lines of thought made possible by Henry and Marion.

Launching off from the Prynian notion that in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* 'the self's relation to nature essentially involves a continuity under tension in which the asymmetry of

domains is reimagined as in harmony when held under positive stress' (140), Larkin homes in on the Mariner's praise of churchgoing at the end of the poem:

To walk together to the kirk,
And all together pray,
While each to his great Father bends,
Old men, and babes, and loving friends,
And youths and maidens gay!

Praying with others temporarily liberates the Mariner from the agonising repetition of his story and the self to which his story is tied, effectively allowing him thereby to re-enter time. This freedom, in fact, exceeds the poem's bounds – as Henry and Marion say life always will – and gives Larkin the opportunity break the spell of the Mariner's 'glittering eye' for a moment and turn his attention elsewhere. He expands on his idea of liturgy: 'evening, the vesper time, is the liturgical moment, a time when diurnal human action is made redundant in diminishing light, giving place to a vulnerable time of maximal exchange between heaven and earth' (202). It opens us up, argues Larkin, to a 'perpetual fulfilling of the very possibility of character in and through a transfiguring of the world as such' (202-3). The interanimation between poem and reader so vital to Wilson's argument is not exhausted, for Larkin, in philosophical reflections on musical thinking. Only theology has the right spirit: liturgy – that is, poetry in society – awakens the human through the divine overflow of imagination.

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