

Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth's Revisitings*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 265. £26. ISBN: 9780199268771.

Stephen Gill's lifetime of work on Wordsworth spans three major academic forms as editor of the Cornell *Salisbury Plain Poems* and co-editor of the Norton *Prelude*; author of the standard biography *William Wordsworth: A Life*; and critic of *Wordsworth and the Victorians*. There can be no-one better placed, then, to look over the entirety of Wordsworth's writing and develop a critical approach that enacts the poet's own 'habitual return as a poet "into the years which he himself had lived"' (2).

Gill defines the terms of his engagement clearly in his introduction with a subtle but important distinction between 'revisiting' and 'retrospect'. As he points out, there is a sense in which 'all Wordsworth's best poems [are] revisitings' (9) but this study is centred upon 'the poet's continual return not to his past but to his past in past writing' (10). This aligns the study with recent studies on Wordsworth – such as Andrew Bennett's *Wordsworth Writing* – that focus on the processes of the poet as writer, as well as with studies of the later works of major poets, such as Tim Fulford's *The Late Poetry of the Lake Poets: Romanticism Revised*. Gill's interest lies in the way that 'new creation is generated from earlier' (10) and he seeks to make the relationship visible. This also allows him to dwell upon the later Wordsworth and adopt a Mid-Victorian position from which to look back on the poet's acts of self-return – a perspective that he uses very effectively.

The first chapter is concerned with 'creative revisiting' and 'how revision worked in practice' (12). It focuses on the labour of revision for Wordsworth and the extraordinary (hidden) efforts involved. Revision is part of a refusal to let go, to allow separation between the poet and his work, which exists as an 'evolving whole': a 'being in the continuous present' (36). It is this odd, open relationship to his own work that allows for the kind of revisiting that Gill goes on to explore. In Chapter 2 Gill applies the totalising retrospective viewpoint to *The Ruined Cottage* to look at revisions made to the poem across its entire span, rather than dwelling only on early complexities. Gill's clean direct style gets right to the heart of a poem's meaning and its centrality to the Wordsworthian message. His succinct account of the questions posed by *The Ruined Cottage* is an excellent example of this: 'What is the proper response to a fate such as Margaret's? . . . Can it be made productive? Troubling thought, but can Margaret's death be made to work for our good?' (56). However interested Wordsworth is in suffering or in small human tragedies, his ultimate focus is always upon literature itself; the power of transformative communication that poetry offers.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on *The Prelude* through four significant acts of revision occurring in 1804, 1819, 1831-2 and 1839. These chapters are of great interest in terms of the kind of critical response they enable. They draw upon and effectively unite Gill's tri-partite strengths – editorial, biographical, critical – almost to articulate (although it is not explicitly articulated) a new kind of form. So, the chapters work as a kind of text-critical-biography enabled in the case of this *particular* writer by the textual self-extension that determines his relationship to all his work, especially this one: 'because it was an autobiographical poem it continued bone of his bone' (89). Gill is particularly good at posing core questions and steadily filtering through the possible answers. So, for example, in answer to the question 'Why not publish?' (in 1839) there are the poet's own literary and financial justifications but also the possibility of deeper undercurrents of 'aggressive self-defensiveness' (Millgate in Gill, 147) concerning the poet's relationship to critics, or the refusal to accept that 'the poem's creative evolution was over' (148). As Gill succinctly puts it: 'Wordsworth liked stillness but hated fixity' (148).

Chapter 5 develops the textual-biography model further in a slightly different way by exploring acts of poetic and physical revisiting by Wordsworth that are also bound up with

his relationship with Sir Walter Scott, before the book ends with ‘Salisbury Plain’ which is, of course, a double return, for poet and critic. As Wordsworth re-enacts in 1841 a journey first made in 1793 so Gill returns in 2011 to a text that initiated his career in 1975 to consider why the poem was left unpublished and the various stages of Wordsworthian ‘dismembering’ that it was made to go through. In this chapter too, the true nature of this book (in the terms outlined above) is directly stated as ‘Wordsworth’s particular way of conceiving the life of his poems’ (204). As always with Stephen Gill this is a very *useful* book. It covers ground so scrupulously and authoritatively that it invokes trust, and the scope and range of knowledge of texts in multiple states is deeply impressive. Gill’s place in the line of Great Wordsworthians is already assured and this late addition to his life’s work, centred on the poet’s late additions to *his* life’s work, can only confirm it.

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