

***Re-reading The Excursion: Narrative, Response and the Wordsworthian Dramatic Voice*, by Sally Bushnell. Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 2002.**

This exciting study by the Co-Director of the Wordsworth Centre at Lancaster University is the product of the writer's Cambridge doctoral thesis and of her preparation as co-editor of the unpublished manuscript transcriptions from the forthcoming Cornell edition of *The Excursion*. This makes the book richly insightful of the various published and manuscript versions of this too neglected Wordsworthian text.

Foretastes of this research have already appeared in the writer's "Exempla in *The Excursion: The Purpose of the Pastor's Epitaphic Tales*" (1999) and in her "Retold Tales and Structured Silences" in *The Excursion*, in *Romanticism and Silence*, edited by F.L.Price and S.J.Masson (2001). Her larger thesis now is that the 1814 poem which was given brief, even dismissive, treatment by critics in the twentieth century, has been judged from a (disappointed) Coleridgean standpoint, even as its difference of method from the ever popular *The Prelude* may be held to have its origins in Wordsworth's loss from 1807 of the creative stimulus of his friend and the growing distance between them from 1809 to 1812.

As the present critic's "Introduction" stresses continually, *The Excursion* must not continue to be read as a didactic text so much as one concerned to teach readers to think for themselves and to provide them with moral habits and mental constructs by which to learn – a dynamic personal reading habit that has been largely lost. Thus Bushnell, the revisiting interpreter, acknowledges the help of reader-response criticism, as of Iser and of Todorov, in assisting the perception of the later Wordsworthian text as strongly self-conscious, loosening self-determinancy and demanding active reader participation. Thus she reverses the standard treatment of the poem as a failed monologic utterance: it is, rather, "dramatic," with many voices and with a dynamic of exchange and debate, to be placed alongside *The Prelude*, so that each of the two major poems illuminates the other.

Much attention is given to Coleridge's early praise for the first book of *The Excursion* in its 1797 form, "The Ruined Cottage," rather than focussing on the later reworkings of the text. Bushnell is also particularly helpful on her close analysis of the similarly slewed emphases of De Quincy (1845), Pater (1874), or M. Arnold (1879), each preferring shorter poems or selections of the longer works. This stance was opposite to that of Leslie Stephen (1876), who, in his 'Wordsworth's Ethics' had set out to establish *The Excursion* as the poet's core text, not just because of its length but because of its moral worth.

The earlier critical argument was concerned with "philosophy," but Bushnell wishes to stress rather a focus on the receptive reader responding to a "multiplicity of voices" (10), as the many Cornell-assembled variants are making clearer, and as Judson Stanley Lyon had stressed in 1950 in his emphasis on the discussions

embedded in the illustrative tales. Thus the emphasis makes it “a dramatic poem consisting of speakers and listeners” (13), much as in *The Borderers* (1797-1799), copying many of that work’s own specific dramatic conventions of recalling, of retelling and of responding to past tales. Bushnell argues that it works well, as in: “the Solitary’s autobiography of Book III where the telling of his life completes a reassessment of the first narrative told by the Wanderer in Book II.” (58)

This leads to discussion of the named recurring characters – and voices – across the published texts, for example, Rivers of *The Borderers*, through Wordsworth’s self-depiction in *The Prelude* Book X, to the misanthropic Solitary in *The Excursion*. Much more close identification is also given to Margaret, the Pastor, the Poet and the Wanderer for their various differences of tone and ways of approaching the central problems of human life, the poetic text being created from this cross-textual dialogue and response in the shared narrative.

The last matter is, in Chapter Three, deemed to be a dramatic text projecting a “performative philosophy,” in a “conversational poem” (Lamb’s term) with interactive characters. This Johnsonian form of philosophy, “reasoning,” and redefining autobiography through travel and dialogue, is likened to that of John Thelwell’s poem, *The Peripatetic* (1793), with location and character changing to enable the reader to travel through the text, re-evaluating the authority of the characters as guides/authorities, responding to events as they are (re-)told. These demands on the reader are likened to those made by Samuel Richardson’s novels. And other contemporary reference suggests that the long poem was often then both read in isolation and to others – a point linked to Wordsworth’s own 1800 “Preface,” where he had stressed that poetry should be based upon, and elicit, sincere emotion. This last task accords with Wolfgang Iser’s notion that readers have to take up a critical attitude, this necessitated in this poem by the placing of the narrators in ongoing relationship with each other, and forcing reader evaluation of often limited/conflicting stances. And, as Bushnell stresses (155), the relationship between life, death and narrative is constantly confused/undercut.

The use of a prose “Argument” for each book of *The Excursion* enabled Wordsworth to offer self-conscious comments on the poetic act, much as Cowper had done for *The Task*. Yet other voices or judgements must come from the differing ages of the characters and their abilities to respond to the poem’s embedded moral teaching, often presented by the Wanderer and even more, as the poem progresses, by the Pastor with his practical Christian wisdom.

Perceptions of the different ways of approaching the central problems of human life – failure of hope, loss of loved ones, and the doubtful consolations of religion – are shown to be explored in the later “epitaph” books (V-VII), even as they had been prepared for in the poet’s “Essays on Epitaphs” (1810), which clarified a possible model of poetic communication from poet to reader, “that does not form itself until the social feelings have been developed” (*Prose* 2:50). All this,

Bushnell stresses, is dramatic, privileging the oral over the written, urging acts of human rather than divine faith – much as the Pastor's narratives do in Book V.

The last chapter, VII, "Narrative Memory," refers to both the memorising and the positioning of stories, "spots of time," and then sharing/renewing them over time. In the end, the community is to be seen as one of poets, the Poet one among them, speaking out and yet listening, recording the "oral" world in writing, to "celebrate the good man's deeds and purposes" (*Excursion* VII, 375-76) – to write what A. Hickey has called "a social or collective entity – community, culture, England." For Wordsworth is peculiarly the poet of his country for an age when so much was in flux.

Clearly *The Excursion*, in the last analysis, is a representative yet personal experience narrative, following certain traditional norms for performance, providing in depth a revelation of the social life and values of its community, drawing on the experience of a particular person, the poet, telling of the functional/moral norms of a small community, in a remembered period. Yet this narrative memory is not for a specific audience, since the Poet has here transformed the spoken records for a timeless audience, and, in Books VIII and IX, for a national one.

This cogent and dynamic interpretation by Sally Bushnell, one both cogently argued, and irresistibly persuasive, shows the poem to be powerfully aware of natural life and to project an essential optimism, to counter the very real suffering of so many. In short, both the critic and the poet have succeeded brilliantly in their task of reading poetry back into real life, and in illuminating the soul of man in a time of so much martial and social tumult.

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***Manliness and the Male Novelist in Victorian Literature*, by Andrew Dowling. The Nineteenth Century Series. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001.**

Identifying male deviancy in a patriarchal society intent on displaying a united front of proper masculinity might seem like a difficult task. However, Andrew Dowling sets himself this assignment in his exploration of how ideals of manliness related to literary portrayals of men in Victorian culture. The book's opening chapters set out the central argument, which reacts against the "monolithic view" of male domination found in early feminist theories, but also responds to Queer Theory's equally limited notion of heterosexuality (4). Dowling situates his theoretical approach within Gender Studies, but acknowledges his indebtedness to feminism and gay studies, and suggests that Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) marks the beginning of an erosion of limited constructions of masculinity, by dividing homosociality from the homosexual "other." Ruskin's ideology of separate spheres (19), in "Of Queen's Gardens"