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by Joel Scott and Matthew Pace

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Book Review of *Wordsworth in American Literary Culture*, Joel Pace & Matthew Scott (eds), New York and London, Palgrave, 2005. xix +248 pp.

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This collection of essays seeks to “explore the influence of Wordsworth’s writing upon American writers of the nineteenth century, suggesting in turn the importance of his legacy for the American reading public” (2). Exploration is the key concept here: while the book does not provide a systematic or balanced account of Wordsworth’s impact on the American scene, it does chart new territory, examining Wordsworth’s influence on writers from James Fenimore Cooper to Owen Wister. The essays can be divided into two categories. There are those, such as Adam Potkay’s “Wordsworth, Henry Reed, and Bishop Doane: High-Church Romanticism on the Delaware,” that make specific, research-based contributions to the study of Wordsworth in America; and then there are those, such as Joel Pace’s “Transatlantic Gothic and Race:

Wordsworth, Hawthorne, Poe, Chopin, Cable and Chesnutt,” that construct more tenuous literary genealogies. The book’s topical eclecticism is framed as a strength in its introduction, which argues that Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” should be replaced by the notion of “complicity of confluence.” The concept of “complicity” confers agency on American writers, implying that they were not simply reacting against Wordsworth’s legacy but rather appropriating and transforming it; while the idea of “confluence” suggests that Wordsworth’s impact was not unidirectional but rather part of a system of transatlantic exchanges. To consider “complicity of confluence,” then, is to imagine Wordsworth not as a fixed father-figure but rather as an unstable, diffuse, and yet renewable source of energy for American writers.

The most historically grounded (and uniformly successful) chapters in the book tend to focus on Americans who were Wordsworth’s near-contemporaries and who were actively engaged in fashioning—or reacting against—antebellum romanticism. Bruce Graver’s “Discord at Pennacook: Whittier and the Problem of the American Picturesque,” reminds readers that, although Whittier was often dubbed “the American Burns,” his affinities with Wordsworth are evident both in casual references in his letters and in the tenor of his early work. Graver examines two pastoral poems, “The Merrimack” and “The Funeral Tree of the Sokokis,” to show how Whittier reworks pastoral conventions learned, in part, from Wordsworth. In Whittier’s American vision, a cultivated landscape is always haunted by the indigenous people that its beauty renders invisible. Of course, the trope of a “vanishing race” was often invoked to support the racist ideology of Manifest Destiny. But by juxtaposing two other pastoral poems, Whittier’s “Bride of the Pennacook” and Wordsworth’s “Michael,” Graver illuminates Whittier’s “profoundly moral” objective: he wants to unsettle conventional tourists by investing the landscape with a history—a history that implicates the tourists themselves. Graver’s focus on Whittier is refreshing because this poet has received scant critical attention in recent years; it is also apt because the lines of influence (or confluence) between Whittier and Wordsworth are abundantly clear.

Even clearer lines can be drawn from Wordsworth to the Transcendentalist movement. Scholarly work on Wordsworth and Emerson is already plentiful, and this past attention may explain Emerson’s absence from the present volume. The editors include just one essay on Transcendentalism, Lance Newman’s “Henry David Thoreau as Wordsworthian Poet,” which, despite its prosaic title, emerges as one of most compelling essays in the book. Newman lays the groundwork for Thoreau’s early poems by offering close readings of passages from *Yarrow Revisited and Other Poems*, which was the first of Wordsworth’s collections to be issued in an American edition. Although Shelley famously claimed that Wordsworth was no longer a Prophet of Democracy when he became the Poet of Nature, Newman argues that for American readers the distinction was not so stark. American Transcendentalists believed that natural vistas and rustic people were the lifeblood of democracy, and that by contemplating nature these Transcendentalists could perfect themselves—not just as spiritual beings but also as citizens. Newman suggests that, in reacting to Andrew Jackson’s populist demagoguery, New England Brahmins were inspired by Wordsworth’s critique of the French Revolution and his

subsequent retreat into the Lake Country. Carefully following Thoreau's own references to Wordsworth in essays and diaries, Newman shows how Thoreau emulated Wordsworth, "mounting extravagant sallies of speculative thought in response to common events or conventional scenes" (134) in poems such as "The Bluebirds" and "The Old Marlborough Road." At the same time, American political pressures inspired Thoreau to follow the logic of Wordsworthian emotional engagement to distinctly different ends. Thoreau's "extravagant sallies" into the natural world fueled his lifelong commitment to radical democratic politics. His interest in Wordsworth continued, however, even as their politics diverged, and when *The Prelude* became available in 1850 he procured it immediately. As Newman points out, Thoreau's journals suggest that he had read it by August of 1851, during the same period that he was making important revisions to *Walden*. Newman does not push this link beyond the breaking point—after all, Thoreau read many books in the 1850s—but this restraint makes his brief comments on the confluence between *The Prelude* and *Walden* all the more tantalizing.

Adam Potkay's "Wordsworth, Henry Reed and Bishop Doane: High-Church Romanticism on the Delaware," works as a counterweight to Newman's Thoreau piece, adding an element of cohesion to this otherwise eclectic mix of essays. Potkay explains that while critics habitually conflate "Wordsworth's reception in America" with "Wordsworth's reception among the Transcendentalists," there were in fact competing interpretations of Wordsworth circulating in antebellum America. Two of Wordsworth's most prominent supporters, Henry Reed and George Washington Doane, were ardent Episcopalians, doctrinally opposed to Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. And unlike the Transcendentalists, Reed and Doane valued Wordsworth above all other poets: Reed was Wordsworth's first (and ongoing) American editor, and Doane not only wrote and preached extensively on Wordsworth's poems but also visited him in England. Together Reed and Doane fashioned a "robustly Christian Wordsworth, a poet of social ethics, eleemosynary gospel injunctions, and the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity" (108). From this perspective, Wordsworth's later Toryism represents not a decline or an apostasy but rather the fulfillment of his "abiding Burkean commitments to custom and place, church and state" (113). Although Potkay's topic is highly specialized, his conclusion is broadly useful: Concord's Wordsworth was not necessarily America's Wordsworth—and indeed, Wordsworth himself disapproved of Emerson and aligned himself with the conservative Churchmen of the Delaware river. To read him as simply a precursor to the Transcendentalists is to misunderstand both Wordsworth and the cultural context of his reception in America.

Another conduit of Wordsworthian romanticism was the New York circle of writers led by James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, and Washington Irving. They are represented here by Richard Gravil's "The Wordsworthian Metamorphosis of Natty Bumppo." Gravil argues that Cooper moves, over the course of his *Leatherstocking Tales*, away from a Burkean concept of the sublime towards a more Wordsworthian vision. Gravil's argument is not speculative; he grounds the links between Cooper and Wordsworth in Cooper's letters, essays, and epigraphs. However, his essay does beg some questions about emphasis. Cooper's debt to Wordsworth is faint and indirect compared to his well-known lifelong connection to the avowedly

Wordsworthian poet William Cullen Bryant. Gravid implicitly if fleetingly acknowledges this several times, referring, for instance, to Leatherstocking's view of nature as "Wordsworthian or Bryantesque" (46). Why, then, trace an arc just from Burke to Wordsworth, instead from Burke to Wordsworth to Bryant—especially given Cooper's self-conscious literary nationalism? The strong emphasis on Wordsworth over Bryant reflects the book's mandate (these are, after all, commissioned essays) but is rather disproportionate in the context of what is known about Cooper's allegiances. Indeed, Gravid's own depth of knowledge and range of references make the essay's ultimate focus on Wordsworth seem more dutiful than inevitable.

Essays about Wordsworth's impact on Whittier, Thoreau, Doane and Cooper, as well as those on Whitman and Dickinson, make intuitive sense: all of these figures are in some sense "romantic," and all are consciously responding—if not always to Wordsworth in particular—then at least to the movement that he helped to create. However, *Wordsworth in American Literary Culture* pushes beyond the obvious, including essays that attempt to trace Wordsworth's lines of influence into the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. At their best, these essays describe specific moments in cultural history, putting pressure on American exceptionalism by demonstrating the nation's ongoing transatlantic debts. James A. Butler's "Wordsworth and Owen Wister's *The Virginian*," for example, argues that even cowboy clichés—the rugged individualist, the chivalric gun duel, the plucky schoolteacher, the regenerative wilderness—are not, strictly speaking, indigenously American. Rather, Wister's 1902 best-selling novel is steeped in the assumptions of British romanticism: it champions "the folk," celebrates nature over civilization, and promotes the dream of finding an Eden (in this case, Wyoming) on earth. Butler takes pains to chart Wordsworth's influence in particular, although Wordsworth is clearly just one among many romantic authors (Scott, Keats, Byron) that Wister admired. In meditating on the "gettin' or spendin'" of money, the novel's hero echoes Wordsworth, but apart from that one reference, the links are less direct. For instance, Wister married Mary Channing, an educational reformer descended from William Ellery Channing—and William Channing was profoundly impressed by Wordsworth's pedagogical theories as expressed in *The Excursion*. But this narrow genealogy has its limits; for instance, surely any account of romantic educational reform should take a detour through Wordsworth's American correspondent Elizabeth Peabody. Moreover, why call Wister's educational ideas (expressed through his novel's schoolteacher figure) "Wordsworthian" and not, say, "Rousseauian"? A similar issue emerges when Butler compares Wister's depictions of neurasthenia ("American nervousness") to Wordsworth's descriptions of the psychological ravages of industrial civilization. While Wordsworth and Wister surely agree that a robust tramp through the wilderness can mitigate urban neurosis, so do a multitude of other writers from Felicia Hemans to Jack London. Confluence is not causality—and it is to Butler's credit that he does not really make stronger claims than he can support. His links to Wordsworth rather serve as examples bolstering his larger and more important point: forms of Romanticism that were born in Britain had a long and prosperous life in the United States, assimilating so thoroughly that their origins were obscured.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, American culture as a whole developed a markedly therapeutic orientation that made it receptive to the psychological dimensions of Wordsworth's poetry. Butler touches on this trend in his analysis of Wister, and Matthew Scott carries it further in "An Ethics of Wonder and the Cure of Poetry: Wordsworth, William James and the American Reader." Scott's essay begins with a confessional meditation on a 1976 photograph of a dead Palestinian girl. Inspired by Susan Sontag and Elaine Scarry, he asks how viewers can respond to images of suffering over which they have no control, noting that beyond sympathy there lies a realm of "horrified incomprehension" (218). He moves directly from this documentary example to some literary ones, suggesting that Wordsworth, too, questions the adequacy of mere sympathy in poems such as "The Old Cumberland Beggar" and "We Are Seven." And from close readings of these poems, larger and less wieldy questions emerge, such as, "Does the verbal image always obscure its facticity so that it is sufficient for a humanizing concord of affect that nevertheless tactfully occludes mimeses? I am not yet sure" (220). Many readers will also be unsure, not least because the question is so awkwardly phrased. Nevertheless, Scott's central insight—that the American Wordsworth is (largely thanks to Emerson) therapeutic or curative—rings true. Moreover, for Wordsworth as for Emerson, the psychologically healthy individual has a sense of wonder that is not just pleasurable but moral. It is not our understanding of other peoples' suffering, but rather our incomprehension of it, that allows us to respond with true feeling (and not just with a false sense of empathy) to a Palestinian girl or a Cumberland beggar. The second half of the essay is an historicization of Wordsworth's therapeutic uses in America. Scott focuses largely on William James, who quotes extensively from Wordsworth in his 1899 essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in which he suggests that self-reflection can counter depression. Some infelicitous phrasing persists here; Scott writes, for instance, that "James, following the example of John Stuart Mill, had himself suffered from a form of depression in his late twenties" (227). While James was certainly inspired by utilitarianism, one suspects that his depression was caused by factors other than the example of John Stuart Mill. But this is a quibble. Overall, Scott's essay is a fascinating exposition of how Wordsworth in particular (and not just romanticism in general) continued to matter at the turn of the twentieth century, and why he still matters today.

Elizabeth Fay also situates Wordsworth at the fin de siècle, albeit in a radically different context. "Wordsworth, Boston Chivalry and the Uses of Art," Fay's interdisciplinary analysis of Edwin Austin Abbey's 1901 mural cycle, painted for the Boston Public Library, traces turn-of-the-century medievalism to the *Lyrical Ballads* by way of Morris, Ruskin, Tennyson, and Mill. This is an unexpected narrative line that re-interprets Wordsworth's "chivalric ethos" in terms of the effects it ultimately had on a public space, but it works because Fay historicizes her argument so meticulously. Other essays in the collection make similarly startling leaps; these can be applauded for boldness, but not every reader will find them convincing. Joel Pace's "Transatlantic Gothic and Race: Wordsworth, Hawthorne, Poe, Chopin, Cable and Chesnut," for instance, rushes through assorted American gothic narratives in which traces of Wordsworth can allegedly be glimpsed. Pace's writing is energetic and his topic is exciting, but his hurried pace does not allow for proper historical grounding. For instance, he asserts that, in

“Desiree’s Baby,” Kate Chopin draws on the “Lucy” poems—but how does he know this? He half-admits the problem at the end of his Chesnut section, when he concludes that it is “necessary to push the too-neat narrative of Wordsworth’s seemingly omnipresent influence on American literature and culture to the point where the presence is no longer Wordsworthian and/or no longer able to be categorized as ‘influence’” (93). But why, in a book supposedly dedicated to Wordsworth, is this necessary? Pace is an established expert on Wordsworth’s American reception, but in this particular essay he relies too much on resonances and parallels in lieu of solid literary-historical evidence—evidence that he surely has at his disposal.

Susan Manning’s essay, “The Place of Style in Transatlantic Romanticism,” is also quite speculative; she initially sets up some fruitful juxtapositions between Wordsworth and Margaret Fuller, but as the essay progresses she makes less convincing linkages between disparate English and American authors from Wallace Stevens to John Burnside. These connections stem from her assertion that to impose hierarchies and chronologies onto literary materials recapitulates the logic of colonialism, and that such methodologies should thus be cast out in favor of nonhierarchical intertextuality. Manning’s intertextual approach will be most appealing to readers who already concur with the premises of French feminists such as Julia Kristeva; others may find it a bit ahistorical. However, her basic critique of Harold Bloom is useful and integral to the book as a whole. And indeed, Pace and Scott’s collection exemplifies the many ways that influence studies can be pushed beyond restrictive or retrograde paradigms. In most of the essays, tracing the “complicity of confluence” between Wordsworth and his American readers involves complicating (not simply discarding) the idea of influence. Ultimately, for the majority of scholars represented here, “influence” no longer implies a transmission from father to son or from center to periphery, but rather suggests more complex interactions. A single-author study, akin to John Henry Raleigh’s classic *Matthew Arnold and American Culture*, is still needed to construct a systematic narrative of Wordsworth’s impact on the American literary scene. But Pace and Scott’s lively collection makes an indispensable contribution to the field as it charts the ways that Wordsworth crossed and re-crossed the Atlantic ocean, creating a web of complicity that blurs the border between British and American romanticism.