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Donald H. Reiman
University of Delaware

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Reiman, Donald H., "Wordsworth *Senex*: Review of *The Cornell Wordsworth: Last Poems, 1821-1850*, ed. Jared Curtis, with associate eds. April Lea Denny-Ferris and Jillian Heydt-Stevenson." (2001). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 428.

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Wordsworth.Senex

DONALD H. REIMAN

The Cornell Wordsworth: Last Poems, 1821–1850, ed. Jared Curtis, with associate eds. April Lea Denny-Ferris and Jillian Heydt-Stevenson. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999. lxxxvi + 852 pp. \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-8014-3625-7.

The *Cornell Wordsworth* is one of the most ambitious and, on the whole, one of the most successful multivolume literary editions of our time. Nearly forty years ago, General Editor Stephen M. Parrish and other senior Wordsworthians conceived the project as a way to rescue the reputation of William Wordsworth (WW) from what they regarded as his mistaken tendency to age his poems as though they were fine wine by repeatedly revising them (some for nineteen years or more) before he finally released them for publication. An original aim of the *Cornell Wordsworth* was, therefore, to make available from Wordsworth's MSS what Parrish in his foreword now terms "the original, often thought the best, versions of his work." After gaining access to the major collections of the poet's MSS and securing support for the years of research and complicated publication, the editors brought out the first two volumes—*The Salisbury Plain Poems* (1975) edited by Stephen Gill and the two-part *ur*-version of *The Prelude, 1798–1799*, edited by Parrish (1977)—with two further documentary volumes still in preparation and an index volume slated to conclude the edition. Since then seventeen more volumes have appeared, including the subject of the present review. I previously vetted the first two volumes of the series in 1977 and the third title at the proof-stage for the MLA's Center for Scholarly Editions (CSE) and reviewed another volume in 1982 for *Studies in Romanticism*.¹ Thus, when I was asked to review *Last*

Poems, I was happy to renew my acquaintance with the series in its later stages and am now delighted to bring the *Cornell Wordsworth* to the attention of those readers of *Documentary Editing* who are not familiar with it.

To achieve the general editor's goal of unearthing the early Wordsworth, each volume provides selected photo-facsimiles of various holograph drafts and copies made by members of his household, accompanied by diplomatic transcriptions. Many of the series' most notable successes have been achieved with poems that Wordsworth wrote early, set aside either because he was unable to find a publisher or because he was spooked (as a student might say) by reviewers' attacks on *Lyrical Ballads* (1798, 1800) and even on the masterly *Poems; in Two Volumes* of 1807. These reviews caused him to revise some of the initial inspiration out of his poems when he tried—as he put it in his 1819 dedication of *Peter Bell: A Tale in Verse* to Robert Southey—"to make the production less unworthy of a favourable reception; or, rather, to fit it for filling *permanently* a station, however humble, in the Literature of my Country" (1819, p.liii).

At the beginning, the Cornell editors and some enthusiastic allies in the publishing world went a little overboard with the idea that Wordsworth usually spoiled his initial inspiration through what Shelley in his dedication to *The Witch of Atlas* (and alluding to his parody *Peter Bell the Third*) termed "Watering his laurels with the killing tears | Of slow, dull care" (lines 26–27). Some standard literary anthologies began to publish the incomplete drafts of the two-part *Prelude* (late 1790s) in preference to selections from the final, fourteen-book version of *The Prelude* that WW had cut, shaped, and polished with mature artistic judgment in the 1830s. As a result, they featured a fragment containing many of WW's famous "spots of time," but shorn of most of the philosophical reflections that elevated them to more than personal anecdotes. (The effect was similar to publishing Chapter I of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and touting it as a work

Donald H. Reiman, Adjunct Professor of English at the University of Delaware, has been general editor, co-editor, or compiler of major editions and compilations on English Romanticism, including six volumes of *Shelley and his Circle*; *The Romantics Reviewed* (9 vols.); *The Romantic Context: Poetry* (128 vols.); *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts* and *Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics* (52 vols.); and volume I of *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, co-edited with Neil Fraistat (to be completed in seven volumes). His books treating editorial theory and practice include *Romantic Texts and Contexts* and *The Study of Modern Manuscripts*.

superior to the whole.) But every serious student of literature applauded the editors for making available all versions so that we might decide where their values lay—whether in providing better understanding of WW's feelings and purposes when he first wrote, his methods and intentions while revising, or the modified messages and sharpened craftsmanship visible in a number of his long-delayed publications, including preeminently *The Prelude* itself.

Among the volumes of this series that opened up Wordsworth's early writings to illuminating new scrutiny and provided students of the poet with years of useful critical and biographical analysis—as well as much new imaginative poetry—one that exemplifies all the values of its original aims is Robert Osborn's edition of *The Borderers* (1982), which prints on facing pages the early and late texts of the tragedy that WW was unable to have produced in 1797–99 but that strongly reflects his contemporary feelings about the French Revolution; he later revised and published a reconsidered version in 1842 that lacks the freshness of his earlier composition. Since 1982, the earlier version of *The Borderers* has not only been produced as a play (at Yale, at least) but has also opened up many lines of biographical research and critical perspective on WW's time in France during the Girondin ascendancy, including both his own political development and the lives and views of his acquaintances there.

In a typical volume of the *Cornell Wordsworth*, significantly different stages in each poem's compositional history are presented by two or more critically edited reading texts of the poems—usually of the earliest complete version and (depending upon the history of the poem's composition and publication) either the latest authorially approved manuscript or a late authorially supervised printing. Thus the editors must strive to present both accurate transcriptions of sometimes chaotic MSS and critically edited texts of the much-revised poems, making the challenges for the editors perhaps as great as those for any multivolume literary edition. To recognize the scope of the research involved, one need only survey the contents of the *Last Poems* volume: its frontmatter includes a sixty-page “Manuscript Census,” giving locations and succinctly detailed descriptions (including the watermarks and measurements), of 189 literary holograph MSS, transcriptions, and photo-facsimiles or published records of lost MSS that relate to the approximately two hundred poems found in this volume, in addition to seventy-six letters by Wordsworth, members of his family, and friends that bear on the texts, dates, or circumstances of composition of these poems. (These counts are mine; Curtis's website states

that “More than 260 manuscripts were consulted, several of them large recensions containing many poems, often in more than one copy.”) These documents were located in over fifty libraries, museums, and private collections ranging from the major collections at Grasmere, London, New York, and Ithaca, to isolated examples in Australia and New Zealand.

Following a brief explanatory Introduction (3–10) and a précis of “Editorial Procedure” (11–18) is the edition itself in three main parts. Part I, “Reading Texts” (19–411), contains a text or texts of each poem (represented by as many as three or four versions), supplemented at the foot of each page by liberal collations that embody not only verbal variants from the multiple primary textual authorities (both printed and MS, including transcriptions, with cancellations, of heavily emended passages) but also, in theory, record all variants in words and pointing from every holograph, every transcription that was emended or otherwise bears the influence of WW's preferences, and every edition that he helped see through the press. To ascertain the thoroughness and accuracy of this record would obviously require years, but my spot-checking of several printed sources and the variants drawn from the MSS reproduced in photo-facsimile in Part III suggests that they are impressively accurate. Moreover, the edition provides, through its facsimiles and precise citations of the scattered textual sources, ways for scholars to find the relevant authority for any minute point that they may question.

“Part II” is split between (1) a section of narrative “Notes” (415–506) that discuss the evidence pertaining to the dating and history of each poem and sometimes cite the reactions of those for whom, or about whom, the personal poems were written; and (2) a section consisting of straightforward lists (in double columns) of “Nonverbal Variants” (507–614), recording all differences in orthography, punctuation, spacing, and typography between the reading texts and the primary authorities. Part III, “Selected Transcriptions and Photographic Reproductions” (615–830), provides the primary manuscript evidence on complex or disputable passages that are more satisfactorily displayed than described, accompanied by complete diplomatic transcriptions facing the pages reproduced in facsimile.

Because scholarly users of the volume must (as in most other comprehensive editions) frequently flip back and forth from one section to another, the readers' work would have been lightened if the editors and the Press had introduced each poem in the Text section with a note referencing the pages on which related notes are found

and prepared running heads for Parts II and III that cite the pages of the Text section to which each ancillary page or two-page opening pertains (instead of merely repeating “Notes” or “Nonverbal Variants” on each page). Such care in user-friendly book design would always be welcome, but it is crucial in an edition made up of no fewer than 187 different poetic units that often involve two or more versions of a relatively obscure poem and occasionally—as with “Evening Voluntaries”—encompass as many as nine poems. These miscellaneous units, some published by WW himself and others existing only in private letters to friends over three decades, relate to one another only through their absence from other, more rationalized volumes in the *Cornell Wordsworth* series that contain the major works composed during the same chronological period. This catch-all volume, containing a mass of disparate poetry, largely unfamiliar even to Wordsworth scholars, requires more than a table of contents and index to titles and first lines to facilitate its use.

The poems are arranged in a very rough chronological order; usually by the putative date at which composition first began, although poems “for which we know only the latest possible date of composition are placed under that date” (p. 11). An alternative would have been to arrange all the poems by their dates of *completion* or “release”—that is, the date by which Wordsworth felt that the poem was either finished enough to transmit to its intended audience (whether a friend, a periodical, or a publisher), or so flawed that he put it in his drawer as a failed effort.

Jared Curtis, whose work as editor in this series of the masterful *Poems in Two Volumes* (1983) and co-editor of *Early Poems and Fragments, 1785–1797* (1997) makes him the world’s acknowledged expert in editing Wordsworth’s shorter poems, has assembled the present volume with the aid of two younger scholars. Given its valedictory title, *Last Poems, 1820–1850* may have been envisioned as the final volume in the (unnumbered) series, but given the nearly thirty-year period spanned within its covers (in his introduction Curtis dates the first entry January 1821 and the final one April 1847), we cannot think of it as containing simply such geriatric efforts as those found in *Last Fruit from an Old Tree* (1853) and *Dry Sticks Fagoted* (1858) by WW’s contemporary Walter Savage Landor (1775–1864). Within this span of years, Wordsworth (1770–1850)—like many other long-lived poets from Sophocles to Wallace Stevens—was still writing memorable original poems (most of them in sequences of sonnets and short travel poems that appear elsewhere in *The Cornell Wordsworth*), and he was still making major

improvements in *The Prelude*, his autobiographical masterpiece, which appeared soon after his death in 1850. *Last Poems*, a catch-all basket into which have been thrown mostly verses from the final three decades of WW’s life that did not merit space on the title page of one or another volume in the series, is therefore the collection most likely to vindicate the opinion of Parrish, Jonathan Wordsworth, and other twentieth-century Wordsworthians that poetry and revisions by the “later Wordsworth” (i.e., anything drafted after he was forty years old or so) are generally far inferior to the original versions he drafted during his “Great Decade” of 1797–1807.

Certainly there are a number of relatively unsuccessful poems here, but when the contents of the volume are analyzed, that falling off may be due largely to the occasional nature of the genres in which he wrote the poems collected here and the obligations to friends and family that frequently led him to write either at times when he was not personally inspired to do so, or on subjects that were not congenial to his perspective. An example of Wordsworth working casually in an uncongenial minor genre are the four “[Epigrams on Byron’s *Cain*]” (25–26) that he included in a letter sent to Robert Southey in late December 1821. None is contemptible—though all are contemptuous of Byron; the second one also takes aim at Scott (author of “The Death of Abel”), to whom Byron dedicated his skeptical verse drama:

On Cain a Mystery dedicated to Sir Walter Scott
A German Haggis—from Receipt
Of him who cook’d “The death of Abel”
And sent “warm-reeking rich” and sweet
From Venice to Sir Walter’s table.

(Much worse are another four political epigrams written during the election for the reformed parliament of 1832, directed at a man identified as “J. Lubbock,” the Whig candidate for the seat from Cambridge University; see pp. 230–31, 455). WW’s remark on the quality of his epigrams on *Cain* shows that, whatever his work as a poet may have lost in spontaneous inspiration, he had lost little in poetic taste and judgment, for his only claim for sending them to Southey (who was then exchanging published recriminations with Byron) was that “the Girls [Edith May Southey and Sara Coleridge] may be amused,” and he rightly made no effort to publish these trifles, realizing that allowing comparison between them and the products of Byron’s incisive wit might merely add luster to Byron’s reputation as the genius of the age. (Two of

these epigrams first reached the public in William Knight's collective edition of 1896, while the four together heretofore appeared only in twentieth-century editions of WW's letters.)

At the other extreme are some poems that Wordsworth produced because of a willing sense of obligation to family members and friends, such as "The Triad" (105–12), which he wrote in 1828 as a compliment to his daughter Dora (born August 1804), Edith May Southey (b. May 1804), and Sara Coleridge (b. December 1802). WW himself claimed that the poem contained "some of the happiest verses I ever wrote[,]" although he noted that he wrote it suddenly several years after he had promised such a poem to "two of the Party." Sara Coleridge, however, recognized the poem's failure to achieve its object, writing to a friend in 1851 (soon after WW's death) that "The Triad" "is, to my mind, *artificial* and *unreal*. There is no truth in it as a whole, although bits of truth, glazed and magnified, are embodied in it" (see the notes on 438–39). Indeed, this *labor* of love is spoiled by idealizing its subjects into antique marble goddesses instead of breathing intelligent young women. Subliminally WW himself must have recognized something of that quality, for he sent the poem, via Southey, as one of his four contributions to the 1829 number of *The Keepsake*, one of the gift annuals that he and most major writers of the period soon came to look down on as merely easy-money sources that featured fashionable, formulaic verse and prose used to illustrate artificial engravings.²

Finally, Wordsworth's controversial epitaph for Charles Lamb, which in its earliest versions read, "To the dear memory of a frail good Man" (297–304), failed to satisfy Lamb's sister, his other living friends, and posterity alike. Ironically, Mary Lamb and Charles's other friends objected to the poem for much the same fault for which WW in his *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* (1816) had attacked Dr. James Currie's biography of Burns: WW's epitaph for Lamb, which eventually grew too long to serve as the epitaph actually carved on Lamb's tombstone, alluded to Lamb's problems with alcohol, although WW had criticized Currie's references to similar mentions of Burns's frailty as immaterial to the poet's achievements and likely either to discredit genius or mislead admirers of the poet into accepting drink as an adjunct of poetic talent. (Henry Crabb Robinson, who in July 1816 had reviewed critically WW's pamphlet on Burns for the *Critical Review*,³ was one of Lamb's friends who in 1832 attempted to work out a compromise between Mary Lamb and WW over the epitaph.)

In any quantity of works by this truly great poet,

however, one finds amid such failures a number of brightly shining gems. Some of Wordsworth's better poems here are well known to readers because they appear frequently in selections of his poetry and in period anthologies. Among these are his "Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg" (305–7), which contains concise but memorable memorial tributes not only to the Ettrick Shepherd but also to Walter Scott, Coleridge, Lamb, George Crabbe, and Felicia Hemans, all of whom had died between September 1832 and November 1835; here, unencumbered by any theory of composition such as governed some of his other late poems, WW's sense of his own mortality spurred him to give vent to the feelings of his heart: "How fast has brother followed brother, | From sunshine to the sunless land!" There he finely commemorated Lamb along with Coleridge, the dearest friend of both of them:

The 'rapt one of the godlike forehead,
The heaven-eyed creature sleeps in earth:
And Lamb, the frolic and the gentle,
Has vanished from his lonely hearth.

Another immortal poem is that beginning "Scorn not the Sonnet" (82, 433; in fourteen rhymed lines, of course), which betrays its occasional nature only by the mention of a "Critic" who seems to have taken WW to task for his love of the form, here well represented by other exemplars, including one beginning "*A Poet!*—He hath put his heart to school" (366–67, 496), which shows that WW's motivation was not to teach people to feel or write "by rule."

Above all, however, this volume contains the wonderful but neglected group of nine "Evening Voluntaries" (235–51), which, as Curtis notes, follow a tradition of "evening reverie in verse" that stretches from Milton's *Il Penseroso* through Gray and Thomson, and (he might have added) extends to such larger-scale works as Young's *Night Thoughts* and Blair's *The Grave*. A few years ago I wrote how they demonstrate that to the end of Wordsworth's poetic career he maintained his interest in the dichotomy between what the poet learns in youth through the tyrannous "bodily eye" and the more spiritual messages absorbed through the ear at twilight and, ultimately, through the total darkness and silence of mortality's midnight. The "Evening Voluntaries" begin with a review of the sounds of evening that elude the irresponsible, unreflective years of childhood, when a noisy crew fills the air with their own sounds and miss the "Village Church-clock's iron tone" with its "Nine beats

distinctly to each other bound | In drowsy sequence” or the “Far-heard the Dor-hawk” that “chases the white Moth | With burring tone” (“Evening Voluntaries,” I. 10–13, 21–22). By the third poem, the sound of “The Linnets warble, sinking towards a close, | Hints to the Thrush ‘tis time for their repose” (1–2), and after a flock of noisy rooks settle down, the poet addresses the Nightingale, prophetic bird of late evening, which brings its own intimations of immortality:

Surely, from fairest spots of favoured lands,
 Were not some gifts withheld by jealous hands,
 This hour of deepening darkness here would be,
 As a fresh morning for new harmony:
 And Lays as prompt would hail the dawn of night;
 A *dawn* she has both beautiful and bright,
 When the East kindles with the full moon’s light.
 (III, 17–23)

For those too young in heart to listen silently to the sounds of other creatures, human or merely natural, these poems will, like the “Etudes” of Chopin, have less appeal than, let’s say, a good shoot-’em-up or a car chase. But for students of great poetry (rather than political science, sociology, philosophy, or pop culture), “Evening Voluntaries” deserve space with anything else Wordsworth wrote. Written in the “middle style” of meditative and philosophic poetry (which Wordsworth preferred to the high style of Shelley’s verse dramas and Keats’s odes, or the colloquial low style of Byron’s *Beppo* and *Don Juan*), these poems seem a distillation of his spiritual maturity, as in his sixties he contemplated the significance of his life in relation to the Life surrounding him. They rank with Stevens’s *The Auroras of Autumn* among the finest poems in the language about coming to terms with age and mortality. And those looking for “larger social issues” will find, by comparing the sensory figuration of “Evening Voluntaries” (1835) with that of such early masterpieces as “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” and “There was a boy” (1798) and “The Idle Shepherd-Boys” (1800), that a great deal of the imagery of Wordsworth’s poetry was meant to disprove a maxim of his enemies the Utilitarians, who emphasized that “Seeing is believing.”

Notes

1. A paper combining the two early reports to CSE and the review in *SiR* appears as “The *Cornell Wordsworth* and the Norton *Prelude*,” in my *Romantic Texts and Contexts* (University of Missouri Press, 1987), 130–155. Current information on the series, for which Stephen Parrish remains the general editor, supported by Associate

Editors Mark L. Reed and James A. Butler and by Coordinating Editor Jared Curtis, can be found on Curtis’s website at Simon Fraser University (<http://www.sfu.ca/~curtis/CorWor.html>).

2. See Peter J. Manning, “Wordsworth in the *Keepsake*, 1829,” in *Literature in the Marketplace*, ed. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 44–73.

3. In *The Romantics Reviewed*, I (New York: Garland, 1972), 320–24, I was unable to identify this reviewer, but in 1981 Oscar Wellens published in *Bulletin for Research in the Humanities* (David V. Erdman’s continuation of the *New York Public Library Bulletin*) a record of Henry Crabb Robinson’s anonymous reviews, drawn from Robinson’s voluminous papers.

Nominations Sought for 2001 Butterfield Award

The Lyman H. Butterfield Award is presented annually to an individual, project, or institution for contributions in the areas of documentary publication, teaching, and service. The 2000 recipient was Elaine Forman Crane

Please send letters of nomination by August 1, 2001, to Cullom Davis, Chair, Butterfield Award Committee, 2624 East Lake Drive, Springfield, IL 62707. The other members of the committee are Helen R. Deese, Dorothy Twohig, and Conrad E. Wright.

Notes continued from page 17

19. See Peter Gordon, *Journal of Peter Gordon, 1732–1735*, ed. E. Merton Coulter, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1963); William Stephens, *The Journal of William Stephens*, ed. E. Merton Coulter, 2 vols. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958–1959); E. Merton Coulter, comp., *A List of the Early Settlers of Georgia* (Athens, Ga., 1949); John Percival, *The Journal of the Earl of Egmont, 1732–1738*, ed. Robert G. McPherson, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1962). The Egmont Papers of the Philips Collection are today in the Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

20. These publications include Frances Beckemeyer, *Abstracts of Georgia Colonial Conveyance Book C-1, 1750–1761* (Atlanta: R. J. Taylor, Jr. Foundation, 1975); R. J. Taylor, Jr. Foundation, *Index to Probate Records of Colonial Georgia, 1733–1778* (Atlanta: The Author, 1983); and idem., *An Index to Georgia Colonial Conveyances and Confiscated Estates Land Records, 1750–1804* (Atlanta: The Author, 1981).