Wordsworth and the Druids

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in Proceedings of the British Academy, Volume 162, 2008 Lectures

This lecture presents the text of the speech about English poet William Wordsworth and the druids delivered by the author at the 2008 Warton Lecture on English Poetry held at the British Academy. It provides an analysis of the beginning of Book III of The Excursion and explains the concepts of the Poet, the Wanderer, and the Solitary. The lecture suggests that Wordsworth's characters inhabit a common land until modernity takes it away from them, and that this dissolves the natural regenerative seasonal cycle in which humans now find it so difficult to live and work.

Perfection Absolute: The Aspiration of The Recluse

Thomas McFarland

in William Wordsworth: Intensity and Achievement

This chapter discusses a number of Wordsworth's finest poems, including 'The Ruined Cottage' and The Excursion, which is a volume of poems by Wordsworth. The Recluse is also examined and discussed in this chapter. It can be noted that Wordsworth had a little trouble finishing some of the poems included in those volumes.
‘The Words He Uttered...’: Wordsworth
Michael O'Neill

in Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem

Published in print: 1997 Published Online: October 2011
Published Online: October 2011
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198122852.003.0002
Item type: chapter

This chapter begins with a discussion of The Excursion, a poem whose fear of the autonomous imagination results in writing that is fascinatingly, at times tragically, both repressed and expressive. Wordsworth is concerned in much of the poem with time and transience, forces implicitly and explicitly at odds with affirmations about the value of poetry. The Excursion's awareness of itself as a poem is a means of bringing death and temporality within 'the reach of reflection'. By examining the poem's self-conscious preoccupation with the uses of language embodied in its own procedures, an attempt is made to rescue it from the comparatively low esteem which it has suffered. The second section of the chapter explores the workings of self-consciousness in two poems from Lyrical Ballads, suggesting that the poet's designs on the reader are especially impressive when the poems relinquish didactic ambitions and allow themselves to be surprised by the direction they have taken. The third and fourth sections are devoted to detailed readings of ‘Resolution and Independence’ and ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, respectively.

The Pastor's Wife and the Wanderer: Spousal Verse or the Mind's Excursive Power
Paul H. Fry

in Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are

Published in print: 2008 Published Online: October 2013
Published Online: October 2013
DOI: 10.12987/yale/9780300126488.003.0008
Item type: chapter

This chapter explores the diminishments of William Wordsworth's verse. Here, it is argued as it has been argued elsewhere that the weakening of Wordsworth's verse in The Excursion is in accordance with his theme of the function of poetry in human self-understanding. The chapter thus goes through the process of trying to bring this view out into the open through a reading of Wordsworth's work. In The Excursion then, the function of poetry remains the same. However, compared to The Prelude, The Excursion mentions a skepticism about the claims and benefits of reflection, promoting religion as long as it fulfills its former claims of
visionary power. The chapter then examines the role and the significance of the Wanderer and the Pastor's wife throughout these two poems of Wordsworth.

Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem
Michael O'Neill

In this wide-ranging study the author examines the phenomenon of the 'self-conscious poem' — that is, a poem concerned with poetry or, more centrally if often connectedly, a poem that displays awareness of itself as a poem — in the work of the major Romantic poets: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. The book freshly illuminates many famous lyrics and longer poems and re-values less regarded works such as The Excursion. For the author, self-consciousness is allied to the new status granted to poetry by the Romantics. His closely attentive readings suggest that self-consciousness in Romantic poetry often accompanies exploration of, even anxiety about, poetry's significance. Yet his emphasis falls on the imaginatively productive ends to which such exploration and anxiety are put. An extended coda looks at the bequest of Romantic self-consciousness to post-Romantic writers. It offers chapters comparing Yeats and Stevens, discussing later Auden's scepticism about poetry, and exploring the affecting intricacies of Amy Clampitt's Voyages: A Homage to John Keats. Throughout, the author challenges recent accounts of Romanticism by placing at the centre of his study poetry's imaginative and aesthetic value.

Individual Sovereignty and Community: Wordsworth's Prelude
Zoe Beenstock

Wordworth understood poetry as a development of political economy. The 1805 Prelude describes his personal growth as a transition from a state of nature to society. Echoing Rousseau’s Second Discourse and Social Contract, Wordsworth presents nature as a socializing force and initially assumes that the French Revolution realizes the general will. When the revolution degenerates into violence, Wordsworth also blames
its failure on Rousseau’s theory for its weak account of community. In the final books of the 1805 Prelude Wordsworth qualifies his withdrawal to the private will and to poetic vocation by comparing himself to Adam Smith, David Hume, and Godwin, all of whom he regards as excessively individualistic. In his revisions to the 1850 Prelude and in The Excursion Wordsworth eclipses individual sovereignty and turns to utopian communitarianism. This resolution of the tension between private and general wills explains the lesser popularity of these poems for modern readers. Nonetheless, the 1805 and 1850 Preludes and The Excursion map out an epic concern with the struggle between individual and community as central to Wordsworth’s poetry.