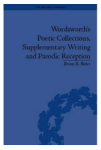
WORDSWORTH'S POETIC COLLECTIONS, SUPPLEMENTARY WRITING AND PARODIC RECEPTION



By BRIAN R. Bates
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Reviewed by Leslie Brisman on 2012-09-11.

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Brian Bates is a force to be reckoned with in the current war on literature--the conflict between, on the one hand, scholars and critics who believe in a class of privileged writing that for sheer magnificence deserves to be singled out *as literature*, and, on the other hand, scholars and critics who feel duty-bound and even appointed to deprivilege the "great," to level texts of every kind, and thus to treat a Chaucer manuscript (say) as no more awesome than a fourteenth-century laundry list. Though Bates's book includes no laundry lists, its attention to the advertisements at the back of Wordsworth's *The River Duddon* volume (1820) makes just such a challenge to the idea of literature, which is likewise challenged by the notions that Wordsworth's comments on his poems stand on a par with the poems themselves, and that parodies of Wordsworth deserve to be read just as closely as his poems have been. If nothing else, what makes Bates a force to be reckoned with is that he attacks the idea of privileged literature with the heavy, diverse artillery of these various para-literary forms. Others, such as Nicola Trott, have studied the contemporaneous parodies of Wordsworth, and "cultural critics" of Wordsworth and his age are legion; but Bates's work is unique in treating poetry, parody, footnotes, headnotes, incidental remarks, nasty reviews and the like as grist for the same mill. When he studies verbal repetitions or the language of the ordinary man in the parodies, for example, he carries over these curiosities into remarks about Wordsworth's poems as though all verbal repetitions or instances of ordinary language were of a kind. He does not separate bran from chaff.

Wordsworth himself believed that "every great and original writer in proportion as he is great and original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished" (Letter of May 21, 1807, paraphrased in "Essay Supplementary to the Preface" [1815]). Though this study deeply challenges the idea of a separate category of "great and original writing," even dissolving the distinction between "original" and parody, Bates earns the right to have his own work judged by the taste he would create. To read this book is to suspend one's annoyance at the triviality, unfairness, or anti-intellectualism of the parodies and to treat them (as Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and subsequent studies of poetic tradition refused to do) as a seventh, serious, worthy "revisionary ratio." To read Bates's analysis of Richard Mant's *Simpliciad* (1808) with the same generosity, the same "taste," that Bates accords Mant is to discover something fascinating about Mant, about Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence," or about the literariness of repetition-- whether it occurs in the Wordsworth poem, the Mant parody, or wherever. " 'Resolution and Independence,'" Bates declares, "shows how vacillating degrees of attention to repetition--even deformations like Mant's--can lead to self-discovery, sympathy, strength and independent reading" (76). Note that Wordsworth's poem is the subject of this sentence, and is being used to illustrate a feature of literariness (repetition) as characteristic of Mant as it is of Wordsworth. Later on the same page the agent changes: "Mant," writes Bates, "reveals that poetry and parody, verse and prose, writers and reviewers, redefine one another through continual acts of transformative reading." I should think, or I used to think, that Mant is no more the proper subject of the second sentence, and of all that is attributed to him, than is Wordsworth of the first. But Bates pushes me, or Wordsworth pushes me, or Mant pushes me, or some amalgam of poet, parodist, critic, and "the reader" pushes me towards the belief that the creative, critical, hypercritical, and impressionistically critical are all one.

One should note in particular the amalgam of cultural criticism and reader response theory. Bates often writes that Wordsworth and his parodists invite "the reader" to share in the creative process democratically. The chapter on Mant concludes: "Through his revisionary reading of Wordsworth's poetry, Mant's parody reveals how Wordworth's repetitious language and lined poems open up spaces throughout his 1807 volumes for readers to exercise and evaluate their roles as active and creative agents, who --by engaging with his poetic collection--are also asserting their capacity to uphold Wordsworth's ideals of British liberty." A reader hostile to Bates's efforts might wonder if doodling in the blank creative spaces between poems is participating in the grand tradition of British liberty. But to take seriously the injunction to let Bates, no less than Wordsworth, create the taste by which he is to be judged, one may begin to wonder if the parody cannot, despite itself, teach us something about what Wordsworth achieves in his (pardon me, Mr. Bates!) great poem.

If read generously, Bates's book can teach us something about fundamental qualities of Wordsworth 's style--simplicity, repetition, confusion of poet and speaker--which can indeed illuminate the poems that the parodists and Bates himself would "level" with those of Wordsworth. But a second great thematic thread running throughout the chapters on Wordsworth's prose and parodists of Wordsworth teaches us, I believe, less about Wordsworth than about a particularly dreary school of twentieth-century literary criticism: reader response. According to Bates, Wordsworth's supplementary prose democratizes composition by inviting "the reader" to reflect on (and as it were, compose) the order of poems. I would perhaps be unfairly parodying Bates if I called this concern a variety of "choose your own adventure," but Bates really does wish us to see Wordsworth's constant tinkering with the groupings of his poems as creative activity in itself and "open" to the reader as the composition of the individual poem is not. Here is the "reader thing" in its simplest form: "Through his

prospectus Wordsworth attempts to include readers in the process of producing and collecting together his poetry"(81). To my mind, this would be sheer nonsense but for the fact that in the poems themselves Wordsworth sometimes implicitly and (in "Simon Lee" explicitly) turns to the reader:

> My gentle Reader, I perceive
> How patiently you've waited,
> And now I fear that you expect
> Some tale will be related.

Though these lines are not themselves an object of Bates's scrutiny, he aims to relate (he might write re-lating) how readers' expectations and choices enter the prose. But how does the Prospectus "include readers"? Is there something that readers "do," other than read? Are we invited to star poems that we like, to pencil in "see p. xx," to connect poems that the poet has not explicitly connected? To celebrate connections he has made? Here is Bates in one of his most fanciful formulations of this reader response theme: "Wordsworth's 'Preface' and 'Essay Supplementary to the Preface' announce the 1815 volumes as a living collection that can be activated only through his readers' participation in his textual design and anecdotal history of British culture" (92). Are the poems, then, like a touch screen computer that can be "activated" only by the reader's touch? Or is my parodic version of his true belief, like the belief itself, really about a touching compulsion in the affective sense of *touching*?

Since poetry and prose are said here to be no different in the kinds of engagement they invite, Bates's conception of Wordsworth's prose essays might be illuminated by what he writes of "Tintern Abbey." This poem, he says, "provides an experimental explanation of Wordsworth's poetic system, which enables readers to participate in constructing and exercising the poetic networks and historical contexts that compose his works" (998). Unlike Marjorie Levinson, who in her extraordinary essay on "Tintern Abbey" in *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (1986) tells us something about the historical context we might not have known from the poem, Bates invites us to "construct" historical contexts--as we see fit! Readers compose, recompose, exercise (play with? build up, like muscles?) contexts and connections that the poet may or may not suggest. In his most daring extension of readers' rights and privileges, Bates finds Wordsworth in "Essay Supplementary to the Preface" (1815) marveling at the variety of readers' responses to his work, marveling at "the love, the admiration, the indifference, the slight, the aversion, and even the contempt, with which these Poems have been received, knowing, as I do, the source within my own mind, from which they have proceeded." Though I do not see how the antecedent of *they* could be anything but *Poems*, Bates finds the antecedent ambiguous, so that *they* might refer to readers' responses. And so, he infers, the "'labour and pains . . . bestowed on them' could be both the poet's and readers'"(129). But if there is no privileged category of great poetry, then Wordsworth's prose and readers' notes are all "writings" of equal labor and potentially equal interest. It is no accident that Bates' most ambitious and far-reaching discussion should concern John Hamilton Reynolds' "Peter Bell," published two weeks before Wordsworth's poem appeared. Which is the "original"? What is "originality"? I think I hear Falstaff revising his speech on honor to transfer his contempt to *originality*, perhaps the Romantic equivalent, in terms of value, to *honor* in Shakespeare's Henry plays. Reading Bates, one may say of originality what Falstaff concludes about honor: "Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. [Originality] is a mere scutcheon" (*1 Henry IV* 5.1. 138-39).

And so ends my catechism.

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Brian Bates responds (26 September 2012):

While I am flattered to be reviewed by Leslie Brisman, whose work I have long admired, I must disagree with his account of my book, and especially with his insistence that it seeks to deprivilege the "great" while reducing Wordsworth's poetry to the same level as his comments on it. In choosing to feature my discussion of Wordsworth's 1807 *Poems* and Richard Mant's parody *The Simpliciad*, Brisman overlooks important claims set out earlier in the book. In chapter one, "Reframing *Lyrical Ballads* (1800/1798)," and chapter two, "Textual Travelling in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*," I argue that by a combination of new poetry and paratextual features, Wordsworth revised the 1798 volume to forestall the threat of negative criticisms and parodic responses. Through these textual creations and maneuverings, Wordsworth also attempted to "provide a connective framework for his poetic collection, separate his edition from similar publications (like Southey's), and alert readers to the particular reading experience that [he] had created through revision and careful arrangement of his poems" (30). Because Brisman pays less attention to these early chapters, he neglects the book's primary focus on Wordsworth's use of supplementary prose and the repetition of specific words from poem to poem to interweave "the place and placement of his poems with how readers build up their emotional responses to those poems" (56).

Tempting as it might be to engage in a point-by-point rebuttal of Brisman's claims, I will instead keep this response brief. What I want to emphasize for potential readers, and what I think Brisman does not acknowledge about the book, is my argument that the parodic reception of Wordsworth's poetry and prose in the first two decades of the nineteenth century ironically led to his canonical status. By the publication of his *River Duddon* volume in 1820, Wordsworth largely managed to "frame, reframe, combat and absorb the myriad responses of reviewing critics and parodists into his poetic collections" (1). I provide close readings of these parodies because, in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Wordsworth's reputation and readership were largely shaped by the parodic framings and re-framings of his multi-voiced poems, shifting registers and supplementary prose. Moreover, these parodies demonstrate how intertwined Wordsworth's writings were with reader responses. Several chapters in the book reveal how many parodists and periodical reviewers of Wordworth's time sought to mock and undermine his uneven poetic power and to level his developing poetic system--poetry and supplementary prose--in the collections of his poetry published from 1800 to 1820.

Although many parodists and reviewers singled out Wordsworth's prose as a primary problem, I treat it as an instrument of self-canonization: "Wordsworth's poetic collections foreground a poet intent on developing the prefatory, concluding and marginal spaces in his books to foster paths of connective reading through his volumes, relate individual poems to the whole of his poetic project and life, publicize and defend his poetry and establish an enduring place in an emerging contemporary canon of British poets" (12).

Brisman's conception of my argument as a leveling one also prevents him from recognizing how the parodies I analyze often function as double-edged swords that, while attempting to denigrate and level Wordsworth's poetry, often

unwittingly highlight the affective power of his poetic language. As chapter three makes clear, Mant's *Simpliciad* is an especially important example of this parodic tendency.

I value Wordsworth's poetry as great literature, and I take seriously statements such as his often quoted epistolary remark that "every great and original writer in proportion as he is great and original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished." However, I also consider remarks such as the piece of advice he once gave Samuel Rogers: "Why don't you hire somebody out to abuse you? And the higher the place selected for the purpose the better. For myself, I begin to fear that I should soon be forgotten if it were not for my enemies" (Letter of 13 May 1817). My book investigates the uncertain, and at times messy, reception of Wordsworth in the early 19th century and examines the significance of the supplementary texts and cultural forces that shaped his reputation, influenced his composition of poetry, and enhanced his posthumous renown. Despite Brisman's critique, I continue to insist that tracking the history of his reception means recovering the cacophony of voices surrounding and infusing themselves into the composition, publication, and reception of Wordsworth's poems.

Leslie Brisman replies (27 September 2012):

Literary history is certainly on Brian Bates' side: If, in my review, I could not help brooding on the implications of treating the prose and the parodies as worthy of teaching us how to read the poetry (so that repetitions in the parodies, for example, show us something about how to read repetitions of phrase in Wordsworth's lyrics), the fact remains that Wordsworth himself elevated the critical response to his poems, and among them the parodies, to an importance and a generative influence that perhaps no other writer before or since has accorded his reviews. For showing us how that worked, we must be very grateful to Brian Bates.

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