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Aims and Scope: Formerly Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text (1997–2005), Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780–1840 is an online journal that is committed to foregrounding innovative Romantic-studies research into bibliography, book history, intertextuality, and textual studies. To this end, we publish material in a number of formats: among them, peer-reviewed articles, reports on individual/group research projects, bibliographical checklists, and biographical profiles of overlooked Romantic writers. As of Issue 15 (Winter 2005), Romantic Textualities also carries reviews of books that reflect the growing academic interest in the fields of book history, print culture, intertextuality, and cultural materialism, as they relate to Romantic studies.
The argument of this book is that Wordsworth’s later poetry focuses less upon nature and the poet’s inner self, more upon the visible external world, the visual arts and the visual appearance of his own poetry in print. He became less ‘a man speaking to men’ and more a man writing for posterity. Or rather he became, in collaboration with printers and engravers and publishers, a man printing for posterity. A late manifestation of this tendency was the engraving of Frances Chantrey’s very Roman stone bust of Wordsworth which he used as the frontispiece for his 1845 Poems and which is reproduced on the front cover of Peter Simonsen’s book. Permanence, Simonsen suggests, remained a fundamental value for Wordsworth throughout his writing life but in his later work it was to be found rather less in nature and rather more in art.

The common view that Wordsworth’s poetry declined in quality after the Poems, in Two Volumes of 1807 is a result, Simonsen believes, of our failure to understand what he was really trying to achieve in his later work. In making this argument he fully acknowledges the many recent studies of Wordsworth’s ekphrastic and inscriptive poetry and the increasing critical recognition of that there was a ‘turn to the visual’ in British culture. Jerome McGann for instance has claimed that after 1820 ‘artists and writers gradually developed a new and extraordinarily sophisticated understanding of the expressive character of physical text.’ By putting Wordsworth’s poetry in this wider context, and by supporting his argument with some rigorous close reading, Peter Simonsen succeeds in making Wordsworth’s later poetry much more interesting than many of us had realised.

Typographic inscription and ekphrasis are related aspects of the turn to the visual and while the chapter titles of Simonsen’s book suggest a separation of the two the actual argument moves constantly, and deftly, from the one topic to the other. Thus Yarrow Revisited, and Other Poems (1835) has a chapter to itself as ‘The Book of Ekphrasis’ but a poem from that volume, ‘Inscription’ (a poem without a title in later editions), is also at the centre of the chapter on ‘Typographic Inscription’.

The analysis of ‘Inscription’ and of another Yarrow Revisited poem, ‘Lines Suggested by a Portrait from the pencil of F. Stone’, demonstrate just how close the themes of ekphrasis and inscription can be. The ‘grey line’ mentioned in ‘Inscription’ refers both to the path or line left on the hillside by the composing poet as he walks and to the line of verse which is left, more permanently, on the printed page. In ‘Lines Suggested by a Portrait’, the word ‘Lines’ in the title is repeated as ‘line’ within the poem, as it had been thirty-seven years earlier in ‘Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey.’ But while the pun in ‘Tintern
Abbey’ had linked poetry to nature (‘these hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines | Of sportive wood run wild’), the pun in the later poem links poetry to the line of paint in a portrait (‘A silver line that runs from brow to crown | And in the middle parts the braided hair’). The permanence which the poem hopes to assimilate belongs in the later poem not to nature but to art, the pun signifying ‘the plastic fixity conferred upon song by its representation in the materiality shared by printing and painting’.

It is in fact not always quite clear, either in Wordsworth or in Simonsen, to what extent the distinction between handwriting and print is important. Nevertheless, some of Simonsen’s suggestions about the meaning of specific typefaces in the later poetry are persuasive. He has interesting things to say about the use of blackletter or ‘gothic’ type in *The White Doe of Rylstone* (1815) and about the resetting of the final poem of the *River Duddon* sonnets (1820) in italic for the five-volume collected edition of 1827 (where the poem’s title is also changed, from ‘Conclusion’ to ‘After-Thought’).

My only regret here is that so little attention is paid to the quite heavy use of capital letters in the later poems, for instance in ‘After-Thought’. The distinction between upper and lower case is a feature of ‘the visual language of typography’ quite as important as the distinction between roman and italic. If, as Simonsen argues, what has been called ‘the general typographic revolution at the close of the eighteenth century’ enabled Wordsworth to use italic as a precision instrument, perhaps it did the same for his use of capitals. And if so, it would make Hazlitt’s description, in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825) of early Wordsworth as a ‘levelling’ poet particularly intriguing since the levelling which Hazlitt had in mind was, among other things, typographic: ‘capital letters were no more allowed in print than letters-patent of nobility were permitted in real life.’

Hazlitt does play important role in Simonsen’s book, making his first appearance in a chapter on Wordsworth’s collaboration with his patron, the landscape painter Sir George Beaumont at Colleorton. We are reminded of Hazlitt’s formulation of the change from early to late Wordsworth as a change from the levelling to the ‘classical and courtly’, to poems which ‘seem to have been composed not in a cottage at Grasmere, but among the half-inspired groves and stately recollections of Cole-Orton’.

The entry of Hazlitt’s political aesthetics into the book has a bracing but slightly destabilising effect on its argument. There is a shift from seeing the early Wordsworth as a poet of nature and the self to seeing him as a poet of nature, the self and society; a shift of allegiance, we could say, from Hartman to Hazlitt. But then it may not be possibly to track the changes from early to late Wordsworth without, to some degree, changing your own vantage-point as you do so.

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