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Wordsworth's Habits of Mind: Knowledge through Experience

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Brad Sullivan. *Wordsworth and the Composition of Knowledge: Re-figuring Relationships Among Minds, Worlds, and Words*. New York: Peter Lang, 2000. ISBN 0-8204-4857-5. xvi + 202 pp. \$50.95.

Many are the scholars who have sought to explicate Wordsworth's philosophy, teasing out from the poetry definitions of terms such as "Nature," "Imagination," and "Reason" and gleaning the underlying system of thought that connects them. Such accounts are often supported by detailed arguments about the influence of Coleridge and the philosophers, both German and English, whom that poet read so avidly and discussed with his friend and Lake District neighbor in the late 1790s. Given Wordsworth's reluctance to address such subjects directly, this persistent attention to his philosophy might seem nothing short of extraordinary—except that, especially in poems like *The Prelude*, Wordsworth clearly is placing his poetical meditations within the context of philosophers as diverse as Kant and Hartley. Nevertheless, attempts to find a logical and coherent system of philosophy within his poetry often seem remarkably sterile in contrast with the actual experience of reading the poetry. Within the past several decades, however, Wordsworthians have begun to look at the contradictions and inconsistencies in Wordsworth's writing and have started to ponder the possibility that these apparent weaknesses may indeed be part of a way of seeing, more elusive than a systematic philosophy but no less logical once its terms are understood.

Brad Sullivan's *Wordsworth and the Composition of Knowledge* is a contribution to this revisionary approach to the subject. Sullivan's reconstructive enterprise, as he calls it, focuses specifically on Wordsworth's concept of knowledge, which has been misunderstood heretofore because of the Cartesian-Newtonian epistemology that we have inherited from the Enlightenment and that still distorts and limits our intellectual constructions. In Sullivan's view, Wordsworthians intent on rescuing the poet from the charge that his poetry is essentially subjective and expressionist have been hampered by the habit of binary conceptualization that structures so much thinking in a scientifically oriented culture. Newtonian science introduces a split between the observer and the observed, between perceiving, valuing subjects on the one hand and a world of motion and matter on the other; this first and foremost creates a devastating rift between questions of value and those of knowledge. In Sullivan's assessment,

Wordsworth perceived this rift and developed an opposed, experience-based epistemology to remedy the ill effects of instrumental reasoning.

Intriguingly, Sullivan suggests that an important key to understanding Wordsworth's epistemology rests in the tradition of context-centered knowing that stems from the Sophists who, in contrast to Plato, emphasize *praxis* rather than *theoria*. Within this tradition, Sullivan singles out the philosopher Isocrates and the rhetorician Quintilian as central influences on the tradition of an alternative epistemology and, ultimately, on Wordsworth himself. The Sophist tradition stresses the evolution of knowledge within the context of human actions—indeed, stresses that situations and contexts are inextricable from processes of knowing and acting—and this tradition continues into the present in the theories of Kenneth Burke and Gregory Bateson. Wordsworth's model of knowledge, Sullivan maintains, is based on Quintilian rhetoric, which envisions “a continuum connecting perception, feeling, thinking, and acting” (10).

Chapter 7 of Sullivan's book focuses specifically on the tradition of rhetoric stemming from Quintilian and on the likelihood that Wordsworth was directly influenced by the classical rhetorician's view of knowledge. Unlike the dominant tradition of philosophy, represented by Plato and characterized by the view that meaning and truth are prior to language, the tradition of rhetoric claims that meaning and truth are bound up with language. Quintilian's rhetorical theory especially holds that experience and reflection as well as the development of feeling are central to rhetorical power, for these cultivate “habits of mind” which enable the individual to move others emotionally. Quintilian's notion that well-cultivated “habits of mind” form the core of powerful rhetoric parallels Wordsworth's belief that such habits (rather than human reason) constitute the individual's center of knowing. Instead of suggesting that “habits” be replaced by reason, Wordsworth suggests that they be understood, in Sullivan's words, as “The baseline for all decision-making and acting . . . *that tuning and broadening should become a habit of mind in and of itself*” (129)—in other words (and not unparadoxically), that cognitive flexibility should be cultivated as a valuable, central habit. Sullivan further surmises that the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* may be based on Quintilian's discussion of extemporaneous speaking. In this discussion, Sullivan looks sensitively at Wordsworth's use of the word “feeling” which, in the author's account, is more likely synonymous with sensation and perception rather than emotion. Wordsworth should be judged as a *rhetorical* rather than a *philosophical* poet, one who places perception at the center of meaning and who develops a theory of *composition* rather than a poetics or theory of writing.

In his basic contention that Wordsworth's “philosophy” has been fundamentally misunderstood as well as his more specific claims that align Wordsworth's epistemology with the Sophists generally and with Quintilian's theory of rhetoric in particular, Sullivan makes an important contribution to our under-

standing of the poet's thought. Whereas a number of scholars have become gradually more aware that, for instance, the complex structure of *The Prelude* has serious implications for how Wordsworth envisions the relationship between experience, thought, and meaning, none has framed this argument as an essentially epistemological one, and none that I'm aware of cite and discuss Quintilian as a likely influence. Ironically—since Sullivan's thesis is about the primacy of *experience*, and this part of the book demonstrates *intellectual influence*—his argument is given much credence by this chapter on Quintilian, which is, in my view, the highpoint of the book. Another unusual and valuable feature of Sullivan's book is the discussion throughout of Wordsworth's letters and discursive writings, including the "Essay on Morals" and the famously misunderstood Preface. One wonders if Northrop Frye, who said that no one would give the Preface more than a B+ as a piece of Wordsworth criticism, would change his grade after reading Sullivan's remarks.

Throughout the book, Sullivan makes connections between Wordsworth's epistemology as he is elucidating it and the thought in our century of Kenneth Burke, David Bohm and, most particularly, Gregory Bateson. This aspect of the book is less successful than that which ties Wordsworth's thinking to classical rhetoric. In claiming, for instance, that Bateson's ecology of mind continues a tradition that begins with the Sophists and stems through Wordsworth, Sullivan is certainly correct; the trouble is that he has been very selective in the post-Wordsworth thinkers he has chosen to discuss. With the waning of the Enlightenment, the failure of rationalism combined with the accumulated knowledge of our universe began a shift away from static conceptualizations toward an understanding that dynamic process shapes organisms, environments, experience, knowledge—that, well, dynamic process shapes *everything*. Intellectual culture, it would seem, begins to catch up to the Sophists by the turn of the nineteenth century, and numerous figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not least among them Charles Darwin and the pragmatic philosopher William James, importantly prepare the way for Bateson's ideas. Bateson's ecology of mind is, in Sullivan's words, "a view in which human minds are connected within, and constituted by, larger mind-like processes of family, social structure, and the natural world" (81-82). In his recognition that human mental representation does not mechanically mirror reality but is the product of an ongoing, active process whereby human perceivers correct and adjust mental constructs through continuous perceptual feedback, Bateson is influenced by the dynamic models of systems science, which emerged in the 1950s and have enjoyed a broad, cross-disciplinary influence since that time. If systems science itself, then, grows out of a new tradition of thought that reaches back to Darwin, James, and Charles Lyell, among others, so, too, it reaches forward to contemporary fields like evolutionary epistemology and behavioral and environmental ecology.

Sullivan's treatment of the poetry is, in my view, too cursory—although at the same time I feel it's somewhat unfair to make this criticism, since he has treated the discursive prose so sensitively and clearly. Yet it is with the poetry that Sullivan could best demonstrate his argument, since it is here that Wordsworth means to involve the reader in the experience of knowing, in overriding our "preestablished codes of decision." In Chapter 8, "Poetry and Composing," Sullivan claims that there are four models for reader participation in Wordsworth's poetry—unfamiliar identification, mixed identification, shared re-evaluation, and reflection on re-evaluation (153-54)—and then provides a reading of the well-known lyric "We Are Seven," asserting that this is an example of "mixed identification," in which readers are not supposed to side with one point of view or the other. Yet surely by the poem's conclusion readers are meant to lean toward the little girl's point of view, even while they must recognize that her childish naïveté cannot be incorporated into an adult understanding of death. The adult male speaker who demands that she enumerate her siblings cannot understand that, unlike himself, the little girl doesn't equate *death* with *nonexistence*, and his frustration and insensitivity in the final stanza of the poem come across as simultaneously funny, pathetic, and profoundly sad, as his outlook presages his own terrible struggles with loss:

"But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!"
'Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, "Nay, we are seven!"

This speaker is, in fact, deeply invested in the tradition of binary thought against which Sullivan pits Wordsworth's interactive, experientially based epistemology; indeed, both this reading and that of the paired lyrics "The Tables Turned" and "Expostulation and Reply" earlier in the book could make strong claims that Wordsworth is intentionally dramatizing the limitations of binary thought.

Sullivan is forthright in his moral claims in this book: the ongoing interaction of the human mind and the entities outside it that results in knowledge that is, itself, continually being revised shapes a healthy, sustainable relation between humans and their several worlds, not least the natural one. On the other hand, the exaggerated tendency to dichotomize self and other, the inheritance of a scientific culture, is harmful in its artificial separation of the individual from all else. I find it refreshing that Sullivan is willing to claim that Wordsworth can teach us a better way of looking at ourselves and world, and I also think he is right. That said, Sullivan himself succumbs to some unnecessary binary conceptualizing in his implication that logically ordered argument, as the rhetorical mode of rationalist culture, repeats the damaging elements of this tradition. Sullivan takes pains to explain in both the introduction and the conclusion to his book that his strategy of organization is recursive because he wishes to involve

the reader in the epistemology that he is in the process of explicating. But Sullivan's organizational strategy does not fundamentally alter the kind of book he is writing or the style he adopts—he is not attempting Paterian aesthetic criticism, nor is he writing a poem—and at times, in fact, he offers extremely logical taxonomies of types of poems or central points of key texts. The recursive technique is at times rather repetitive, and is apt especially to be so for romanticists who are generally well aware of the limitations of Enlightenment rationalism. In sum, to assume that the rational organization of an argument necessarily partakes of the worst aspects of Enlightenment thought is to oversimplify; separating the self from the object in rational contemplation need not necessarily oppose an experiential epistemology but can be, instead, *part of the experience*, part of the process of interactive engagement.

Sullivan's book implies that, for individuals, knowledge is an ongoing process, and the same can be said about humankind as well: over considerable periods of time, ideas come to be considered more or less valid not because of the charm of a particular contributor to the stream of ideas, but because other thinkers have suggested like ideas that, furthermore, seem to account well for relevant outside facts. This is why Sullivan's book is especially valuable. It joins the work of other Wordsworthians who have articulated the extent to which the poet's work is rooted in dynamic cognitive processes, and in so doing lends added force to a renewed—perhaps a better—understanding of the poet.