

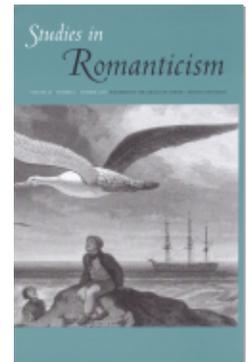


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Wordsworth and the Art of Philosophical Travel by Mark
Offord (review)

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(Review)



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that it was Thelwall's great ability as a political orator to reach a broad audience that terrified the defenders of the status quo and provoked robust repressive measures (181).

In terms of radical history Mee's book adds a lot of new material for the early 1790s period. Influenced by Clifford Siskin's and William Warner's emphasis on Enlightenment as mediation, Mee attends to the specific publishers and what the political associations actually did in terms of publicity; he does not spend a lot of effort trying to formulate what was the LCS or emergent working-class "ideology." It is important to recognize that a popular radicalism contained different, not necessarily completely coherent tendencies, some religious, some secular, some rationalistic in a Godwinian (Habermasian?) way, some raucously anti-authoritarian and carnivalesque. His book provides a good vehicle for thinking through what exactly is at stake with the word "literature." The book's last sentence, although on Thelwall, applies to Romanticist reflections in general: "Not the least among the issues facing the beleaguered and diverse experiments with democracy undertaken by Thelwall and his colleagues in the radical societies was how to define 'literature' in relation to their aspiration for a culture of reading and debate that would play an active part in defining who the 'people' were" (187).

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Mark Offord. *Wordsworth and the Art of Philosophical Travel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xi+271. \$99.99.

Wordsworth and the Art of Philosophical Travel is, in my opinion, one of the best books on Wordsworth of the past ten years. Developed from a Cambridge University Ph.D. thesis supervised by Simon Jarvis, Offord's monograph is a worthy successor to Jarvis's dazzling *Wordsworth's Philosophical Song* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and may even surpass its model in its rigorously dialectical and interpretively subtle presentation of Wordsworth's moral-political verse-thinking. With more tidiness than Jarvis, Offord places Wordsworth in dialogue with the political and to a lesser degree the moral philosophy that precedes him, Hobbes to Godwin, and also, looking forward, with twentieth-century social theory, chiefly Benjamin, Brecht, and Adorno.

Offord derives his themes of anthropological encounter and Enlightenment travel-writing from the works of Alan Bewell, Jonathan Lamb, and David Simpson, but he doesn't have a clear or over-arching argument to

make about travel, or ethnography, or for that matter Wordsworth. Rather, he traces the dialectic in Wordsworth's 1793–1805 writings between philosophy, as generalizing and systematic, and experiential encounters that are particularizing and mimetic. Wordsworth offers both verbal pictures from the field and also engagements with moral philosophy, even if these latter are largely negative, as in the 1798–99 "Essay on Morals" (9–11). "Across the distance of social class, and an estranged nature itself, Wordsworth's explorations of a Lakeland landscape of the working and vagrant poor was also a mode of foreign travel. But this project, centered on the 'picture' more than systematic exposition . . . was in a state of critical tension with moral philosophy" (1–2). Thus Offord's title phrase "Philosophical Travel" is, like "lyrical ballads," an oxymoron and dialectical provocation.

Offord provides no road map to *Wordsworth and the Art of Philosophical Travel*, no summary of chapters at the outset. His Introduction and first chapter serve rather to establish, poetically, a constellation of key terms or motifs that will reappear, with variations, throughout his study: *habitus*, human right, *terra incognita*, homelessness, stranger, savage, litotes, sacrifice. I would call this Offord's symphonic method. His chapters, unfolding through theme, variation, development, with gentle shocks of mild surprise, tend not to tell clear tales even in retrospect—"but should you think, / perhaps a tale you'll make it." Towards the end of the Introduction, Offord adumbrates a dialectic (embedded in his larger dialectic) that, as it turns out, will animate Chapters 1–3: "What is uncovered [in Wordsworth] is not a single and definitive state of nature, but a plurality of conflicting and changing *states*—prefigured in the contrast between the violently hostile and blank nature of *Salisbury Plain* [Chapter 1] and the Arcadian pastoral of *Descriptive Sketches* [Chapter 2]." Philosophical travel concerns states of nature, illustrating or negating what's in the pages of the philosophers, and the 1793–94 draft poem *Salisbury Plain* is "the young Wordsworth's most extensive attempt to image the state of nature" (20). The poem opens on a Hobbesian "savage" state of nature as universal violence and insecurity and traces this state's transformation, in modernity, into political society built on sacrifice (of the poor, of soldiers) and self-sacrifice (of the poem's protagonist, the traveler). In counterpoint to this dark vision there is the Arcadian state of nature of *Descriptive Sketches* and *The Prelude*, Book 6 description of Lake District shepherds: here Wordsworth affirms natural independence. The critical tension of Chapters 1 and 2 resolves, in Chapter 3, in "The Discharged Soldier": "The independence affirmed in *Descriptive Sketches*, and the isolate misery of *Salisbury Plain*, have here been superimposed: the man seems both to need, and not to need, a human context" (76)—or, I would add, human contact. Such is my

attempt to lay out the main points of each of the first three chapters baldly, but in doing so almost all is lost: Offord's talent is for flow and texture, particular observations and observations of particulars that, in combination, elude totality. For Offord, opposition to totalities appears to be a point of connection between Wordsworth and twentieth-century anti-fascist social theory.

Chapters 1–3 work very well in their symphonic unfolding; Chapters 4 (“The Commonwealth of Song”) and 5 (“Mimesis”) are less fluid compositions. Chapter 4 meditates on the power of sound (form/measure) to signify, apart from semantics, and to establish a common joy shared by individuals apart from “commodified and stereotyped experience” (107); predictably, this chapter centers on a close reading of “The Solitary Reaper.” Chapter 5 appears to be two different chapters or essays, the first and stronger of which (109–27) concerns Wordsworth's redemption of primitive mimesis from Enlightenment detractors who preferred concepts and general laws—that is, philosophy. As Wordsworth shows in the Infant Babe passage of *The Prelude*, Book 2, mimesis, correlate with love, makes possible the experience of faces and objects. Wordsworth then turns in Book 2 to the mimesis of sound: “whate'er there is of power in sound / To breathe an elevated mood, by form / Or image unprofaned” (lines 324–26, quoted 123). Wordsworth's ontogenetic account of the poetic mind is, however, suddenly dropped as Offord veers to consider in the disjointed second part of his chapter “similitude in dissimilitude” as a principle of verse (127–30) and anthropological encounter as it appears in “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman” (130–39).

Chapter 6, “Man Working for Himself” (140–80), is superb. The theme of work is wholly unanticipated, and I did not at first recognize the quotation that serves as the chapter's title, identified 29 pages from its outset: it concerns the shepherd of *The Prelude*, Book 8, lines 152 and following: “Man free, man working for himself” (169). Along the way we are reminded that “the state of nature is a state of work” (141) in the Scottish Enlightenment's four stage or “stadial” theory of universal economic development (the four stages are hunter-gatherer, pastoral, agricultural, and finally commercial). Offord argues that Wordsworth reproduces these stages in his poetry, from the childhood “hunting” scenes of *The Prelude*, Book 1, to “The Leech-Gatherer,” and then on to a shepherding stage that incorporates, in small plot farming, the only agriculture Wordsworth admits into his poetry, and that appears, in *Michael*, in tension with the commercial-urban world that will take Luke away from father and sheepfold. Of *Michael*, Offord concludes: the poem “ends with the vanity of all labour in the face of bereavement and extinction. . . . In the poem's grief remains a longing for the possibility half-glimpsed in its opening: a life of gain with-

out sacrifice" (179). Offord's is the best account of *Michael* that I have ever read.

Offord's seventh and final chapter is not so felicitous. Concerned with the indeterminate utopianism of Wordsworth's verse, it opens with a claim at which I was taken aback: "It is astonishing how few critics have read this [Wordsworth's] poetry on its own terms as an avowedly utopian project" (181). My counterpoint is: it's astonishing how few critics Offord appears to have read. Offord's selective engagement with the scholarly literature on Wordsworth is a stain on an otherwise exemplary study. In America, Wordsworth's utopianism has been standard fare since the nineteenth-century: Edwin Percy Whipple maintained in 1844 that Wordsworth's "England of a thousand years past is the Utopia of a thousand years to come." I elaborate on this quotation and on Wordsworth's utopian project in my 2012 Johns Hopkins University Press book, *Wordsworth's Ethics* (Whipple quoted, 48), which Offord apparently did not consult—a pity, as we approach so many poems in convergent ways, most notably "The Discharged Soldier" (Potkay, 49–62; Offord, 61–84). Other American scholars whose work on Wordsworth, encounter, and utopianism that ought to have been engaged include Lynn Festa, William Galperin, Vivasvan Soni, and Nancy Yousef. American scholars often err, conversely, in inadequately recognizing British contributions to the relevant scholarship, though the situation has improved markedly, in both directions, during my time in the profession. Let us not flag in our pursuit of trans-Atlantic encounters and enrichment. At the very least, if much of the critical terrain is *terra incognita* to you, don't make imperious claims about it.

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Colin Jager. *Unquiet Things: Secularism in the Romantic Age*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 332. \$75.

Colin Jager's *Unquiet Things* is a substantial, sweeping, ambitious book. The subject under discussion is nothing less than the condition of modernity itself: Jager's exploration of the privatization of religion, the power of the state, and the effects of capitalism requires him to tackle historiography, hermeneutics, epistemology, and ontology; the strength and significance of this book, however, comes from the deep subtlety with which these weighty subjects are treated.

Jager challenges the assumption that as modernity advances the presence (or "noise") of religion is banished. The title, *Unquiet Things*, originates