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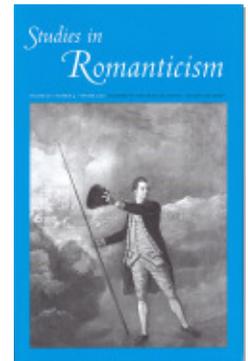
Romantic Marks and Measures: Wordsworth's Poetry in Fields of Print by Julia Carlson (review)

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Studies in Romanticism, Volume 56, Number 4, Winter 2017, pp. 551-554
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/srm.2017.0005>



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Book Reviews

Julia Carlson. *Romantic Marks and Measures: Wordsworth's Poetry in Fields of Print*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. 368 + xiv. \$59.95.

This is a wonderful book. It seems odd to start a review with such unmitigated praise, but I am confident that readers will find much to admire here, including but not limited to its unexpected conjunctions between the development of blank verse and the mapping of England in tourist guides and the Ordnance Survey, fine close readings of poetry keenly attuned to effects of metre and marking, a challenging connection between geographical notation and elocution, and new insights on the voicing of print in Romantic culture. And when I say readers, I do not mean just scholars of Wordsworth's poetry. Indeed, one of the distinctive features of this book is the extension of its appeal beyond Romanticists and literary scholars generally to those more focused on cartography, information sciences, visual graphics, and print culture generally. More, Carlson doesn't just draw broad, metaphorical connections between these seemingly diverse fields but through her patient and minute attention to the cultural practices and epistemological affinities that unite them in fields of print, she helps to reveal the cognate intellectual roots of these various modes of knowledge production, all of which were changing in dramatic ways during the period of her study.

The book covers in formidable detail material ranging from John Mason's 1748 writings on elocution, which introduced a new spatio-temporal grammar for marking the printed page in relation to speech, to Matthew Arnold's call for the restoration of shade lines to Ordnance maps in 1862. But, as its subtitle indicates, its main focus is on Wordsworth's writing, from the *Lyrical Ballads* and the "Discharged Soldier" fragment of 1798 to *The Excursion* (1814) and the *Guide to the Lakes* (1810; 1835) through the repeated manuscript revisions of *The Prelude* (1798–1850). The broader context is important, though, because Carlson notes that while Wordsworth's poetics emphasize speech and nature, his poetry is fundamentally a product of print, with its correspondent insistence on measuring and marking landscape and language on paper. Hence her focus on the entangled relationship between the guidebook genre's enlistment of verse as an illustrative technology and the elocution movement's attempt to attune

pupils to the peculiarly English cadences and patterns of stress hidden within print. Both seek to navigate the challenges of blank verse—its seemingly unregulated placement of pause and stress and its frequent use of difficult enjambment—as they traced the rambles of Wordsworth’s long sentences across lines of verse and maps. Carlson argues that cartography and elocution function as overlooked domains of print whose conjunction both reveals and recalibrates what Celeste Langan and Maureen McLane call the “media situation of Romantic poetry” (qtd., 8).

This will perhaps strike some readers as too wide-ranging of a claim. This reader, at least, confesses an initial sense that perhaps this was two books: one on poetry and the measurement of landscape and a second on poetry and the measure of voice. But, as the claims developed, I became convinced by the book’s insistence that the subjecting of Wordsworth’s poetry to systems of marking and measuring joins both aspects in examples ranging from Thelwall’s elocutionary marks on *The Excursion* to the excerpting of Wordsworth’s poetry in *Black’s Picturesque Guide to the English Lakes*. Ultimately, what links these wide-ranging motifs is the way that blank verse, the mapping of landscape, and the elocution movement share an underlying project of democratic access to newly central aspects of the national imaginary, made possible by the emergent importance of a range of marks and measures applied to poetry, landscape, and elocution.

As the breadth of its argument would suggest, this is a long book. The argument develops over seven chapters and an interchapter. Each chapter situates Wordsworth’s poetry as an inscriptional interaction in a contentious and developing print culture. Chapters 1–3 consider how the cartographic imagination uses the enlistment of excerpted blank verse to create the “Lake District,” while also showing the relevance of mapping in Wordsworth’s *Prelude* revisions and the subsequent role of Wordsworth’s poetry in Victorian debates about mapping Britain. The final four chapters focus on the elocution movement’s reception of Wordsworth’s blank verse, while also scrutinizing later twentieth-century editing of his poetry. They underscore the use of blank verse to demonstrate qualities of voicing and the establishment of “emphasis” in speech as an animating force and distinct quality of the English language, one that could unite its diverse users across vast geographical distances. An interchapter links the visual rendering of language and landscape and clarifies the book’s central claim: that topographical guides and the marking of verse for elocution “implicated iambic pentameter, as a visual and vocal medium, in the national and imperial print project” (15).

Readers invested in Romantic media theory and ideas about communication broadly will recognize that the “diagrammatic and accentual turn” described by Carlson—which helped to connect English readers across

longer and more accurately quantified distances—offers a fresh take on a key moment in what John Guillory characterizes as “the history of communication theory” (see “Enlightening Mediation,” in *This is Enlightenment*, eds. Clifford Siskin and William Warner, University of Chicago Press, 2010). Though Carlson focuses more on space than time, the book’s emphasis on the ideological work done by blank verse to bridge distance also resonates with Mark Salber Phillips’s argument that history is a “mediatory practice” framed not only by temporal distance, but also by human agents who construct history through making, feeling, acting, and understanding. Making corresponds to formal concerns like aesthetic qualities and rhetorical address. Feeling relates to the emotions that render history accessible, while acting indicates the moral and ideological imperatives that summon readers to action. Finally, understanding addresses questions of cognition and coherence raised by historical explanation (see *On Historical Distance*, Yale University Press, 2013). Though she does not use these terms, Carlson also shows how the multidimensional layering of these four axes combine to shape the experience of distance in the spatiotemporal imagination of landscape and language.

Carlson doesn’t do much with Guillory or Phillips, but this shouldn’t be taken as an oversight. This book offers powerful new readings, especially those concerning Wordsworth’s process of sustained revision, of what are clearly resonant questions for literary scholars and historians alike. More even than its affiliations with the work of Phillips and Guillory, the book’s emphasis on the cultural work done by a particular literary form—blank verse—marks a distinctive contribution to what has come to be known as “historical poetics” or “formalist historicism.” This mode of inquiry joins formalist and contextual concerns in order to show the cultural power of form itself as a historical subject worthy of discrete attention. Indeed, *Marks and Measures* acknowledges its affinities with works by Adela Pinch, Yopie Prins, and Virginia Jackson that similarly offer historical accounts of meter and figures of address. The result is a sophisticated and meticulously situated account of the Romantic media context of blank verse itself, a form whose nationalization and naturalization depended on the new practices of interacting with texts that Carlson shows in such rigorous detail.

One of the central motifs uniting these concerns is the line, ranging from lines on a map to lines of verse. After reading *Romantic Marks and Measures*, one cannot help but notice the figural language of points and lines and traces and tracks and other languages of measure seemingly everywhere in Wordsworth’s verse. More, readers can now recognize the figural resonances of such language not only in the poetry but in the material culture that surrounded its composition and are thus newly aware of the combined force of both poetry and the cultural practices used to mark voice and to

measure and represent landscape. Christopher Ricks long ago pointed out the frequency with which Wordsworth uses variants of the word *line* throughout his verse, a lexicon that accustomed readers to visual boundaries and the phonic effect of the line itself within a blank verse paragraph (see “Wordsworth: ‘A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines,’” *Essays in Criticism* 21 [1971]: 1–23). For Ricks, lines were a natural hinge between aesthetic form and Wordsworth’s concerns with a balance between sight and hearing. Carlson, in contrast, argues that “*line* and *lines* are not a ‘natural’ self-reference in the blank verse of *The Prelude*. Inscribed from the earliest stages of the poem and incorporated in its latest phases of revision, they reflect the shifting autobiographical concerns and representational strategies as well as a formal consciousness sharpened by contemporary projects of marking and measuring the landscape that had unprecedented cultural visibility and authority” (100). She then joins this claim to a related argument about the marking and measuring of Wordsworth’s blank verse in the elocution movement.

Ultimately, this book insists on the distinctly political importance of blank verse as iambic pentameter becomes a visual and vocal medium through which both nation and empire are consolidated. After Joseph North’s trenchant critique of contextual politics, one might ask here about the degree to which we should take seriously a *politics* of form (see *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History*, Harvard University Press, 2017). Regardless of how this debate develops, *Romantic Marks and Measures* constitutes a powerful example of the kinds of knowledge that can be produced through close attention to the shaping power of literary form.

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Alan Bewell. *Natures in Translation: Romanticism and Colonial Natural History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. Pp. xvii + 393. \$60.

Alan Bewell’s important book urges us to think of nature as plural. He asks why, when we are comfortable with so many other plurals—such as the idea of many cultures rather than a single culture—we persist in thinking of nature as a monolithic entity. The natures that emerge from his book are in constant movement, translated from one place and peoples to another, circulating around the globe, adapting and changing to ever-new environments. The natures he describes in the book are “thoroughly modern” in this ability to be translated.