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reads

Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology

(Blackwell, 2007)

edited by Michael O'Neill and Charles Mahoney

WHICH ANTHOLOGY? THE FORCE OF THIS QUESTION will be readily apparent to the students that we teach, and that we ourselves once were. But in recent years the dilemma of how readers choose primers has also extended beyond this practical element, to become one of the research academy's most sustaining critical preoccupations. Even in those institutions that generally choose not to employ anthologies as part of their syllabi (the one for which I presently work being one such entity), the forms of selection, dissemination and exclusion that such collections make manifest are at once representative of broader questions, and worthy of study in their own right. That we might now think twice before setting Robert Southey's *Annual Anthology* or *Palgrave's Golden Treasury* as representative guides only makes such texts more useful in another guise, as an indication of the implicit valuations and prohibitions of a particular era.

It is logical, then, that scholarship of the past half century has expended much energy in demonstrating the extent to which the anthology offers one pervasive means of canon-formation, with all the attendant forms of exclusion according to gender, ethnic origin or social class that we would expect. This justified suspicion has not, however, prevented a steadily increasing number of anthologies from hitting the market—a phenomenon that continues into the present time of writing. How much this state of affairs represents a paradox depends on your point of view, and on the collection in question. Many of the most significant anthologies of the last three decades—Roger Lonsdale's *New Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Poetry* (1990), Andrew Ashfield's *Women Poets of the Romantic Period* (1995)—have been intended, at least in part, as counter-anthologies, to supplement or countermand prior selections.

Elsewhere, however, the accumulation of anthologies smacks of rather more pragmatic motives (for a frank and sobering perspective on the economic imperatives behind anthology commission and publication, see Duncan Wu's 'Editing Student Anthologies: The Burning Question').¹ We know that undergraduates increasingly rely upon online versions of short poems for their assignments; and while the Internet has made possible the open dissemination of a greater number of texts than we would previously have dreamed possible, web traffic streams overwhelmingly toward the more canonical works.² With such forces at play, what price ideology critique? Indeed, we might view the

¹ Duncan Wu, 'Editing Student Anthologies: The Burning Question', *Romanticism on the Net* (Oct. 1997), <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/005757ar>. Wu's candour is all the more refreshing, given that he is of course the editor of the market-leading *Romanticism: An Anthology*, now in its fourth edition (2012).

² For a good survey of these trends, see Laura Mandell, 'Canons Die Hard: A Review of the New Romantic Anthologies', *Romanticism on the Net* (Oct. 1997), <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/005755ar>.

anthology as a good index of the several phases of historicist critique, where a sustained attack on canonicity gave rise to a necessarily more flexible engagement with tradition. If exclusion is the cost of any cultural selection, the question becomes not how to achieve a perfectly representative sample (an impossible task), but rather how to make a combination provisional yet illuminating, rather than totalising and entrenched. So Jerome McGann's *New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse* (1993) organises its material according not to author but to date; while a still more radical recent anthology, Jerome Rothenberg and Jeffrey C. Robinson's controversial *Poems for the Millennium, Volume Three: The University of California Book of Romantic & Postromantic Poetry* (2009), mobilises a wide cultural and historical range of 'romantic' authors, stretching from Nietzsche to the Polish poet Cyprian Norwid.

Such collections powerfully contest the model of the anthology that 'seeks to *deceive* me/us by a false sense of closure and authority', as Rothenberg puts it in 'The Anthology as a Manifesto'.³ Yet so too do they beg a series of troubling questions: if the polemical counter-anthology prefers a historical and cultural openness, precisely what work is the gathering term 'romantic' (or 'postromantic') doing? This famously baggy concept must still to some extent be an exclusive one, in order to mean anything at all (we presumably wouldn't want to call Lewis Carroll a romantic. Or would we?). Surely it means more than a mere series of dates, a 'romantic period', to borrow from McGann's title, that we happen to designate as such? Given the comparative shift away from romantic poetry in general surveys (Stephen Greenblatt's most recent edition of the *Norton Anthology* significantly reduces the proportion of romantic-era verse, in comparison to M. H. Abrams's previous version), such questions are far from academic.

Blackwell's *Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* therefore enters a cultural terrain that is both crowded and contentious. Perhaps most immediately striking is its lack of programmatic assertion: in a time of anthology-as-manifesto, Michael O'Neill and Charles Mahoney advance no great claims for the principles through which its individual authors and texts are selected and arranged. This lack of polemic is no bad thing. Indeed, it may well signal that the anthology represents something of an undeclared truce between traditional and contestatory versions of the canon, between Jerome McGann and Jonathan Wordsworth's editorial practice.⁴ The male Big Six are all present and correct, but supplemented by a further four women poets (Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Felicia Hemans and Laetitia Elizabeth Landon); the ten authors in total are organised according to no perceived hierarchy of value, but in simple order of birth.

Insofar as the co-editors' brief introduction does imply a shift in focus toward romantic verse, it emerges through a critical optic that remains somewhat controversial, albeit not as directly contentious as the headline issues

³ Jerome Rothenberg, 'The Anthology as a Manifesto', in *Poetics and Polemics: 1980–2005* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), p. 14.

⁴ Jonathan Wordsworth and Jessica Wordsworth, eds, *The New Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry* (London: Penguin, 2001).

of valuation and canonicity: the optic of poetic form. '[T]he present edition', specify O'Neill and Mahoney, 'sets itself to illustrate and explore anew the nature and workings of what might be called Romantic form'; the accompanying notes thus 'give pride of place to features such as form, theme, genre, structure, rhyme, line-endings, imagery, and allusions' (xxviii–xxix). This clarification might seem modest to the point of truism: after all, what sort of critic would seek to ignore the significance of line-endings and genre? Plenty, is the sad truth: and the editors' sustained attention to the texts at hand does a fine job of correcting the still-pervasive critical belief that neo-classical formal rigour simply gives way to opposed Romantic values (interiority, expression, 'plain' speech). What in the editors' introduction appears as a rather tentative phrasing ('what might be called Romantic form') emerges much more confidently through the accompanying notes—not through direct statement, but as a pattern of sustained attention. It is hard to think of a more sensitive manipulation of the major feature that distinguishes these Blackwell anthologies from their direct rivals: the detailed annotations that accompany each author and text.

This is no mean feat, for annotation is as treacherous an art as anthologisation. An editor has to walk the tightrope between giving the first-time reader enough supplementary material to consider the poem in question, but not so much that he can avoid encountering the poem at all. (The balancing-act is only more delicate given the presence of websites such as SparkNotes, ever ready to regurgitate whole works as bite-sized gobbets.) In O'Neill and Mahoney's hands, the gloss is as much a prompt or a challenge, as it is a summary or exegesis. The hermeneutic impulse is checked, in favour of a form of attention that occurs more frequently in disciplines such as art history than in literary studies: the patient exposition of technical detail, generic make-up and social context, through which the expressive and the historical are taken to be inseparable. It matters, for instance, that Blake's 'The Chimney Sweeper' refers implicitly to Porter's failed petition of 1788, which attempted to improve the conditions of sweeps, that a strange distance separates the speaker of the poem from 'Tom', and that a tone of ambiguous condemnation arises 'in the half-stressed use of "your" in "your chimneys"' (27); no Internet gloss provides (or perhaps ever could provide) such notational range and concision.

The form of attention that O'Neill and Mahoney manifest is not only consistent, but also complementary. The former is particularly alert (as the example of Blake suggests) to metrical nuance and to strong ambiguity in a more general sense; the latter, meanwhile, shows a remarkable ear to the many echoes and allusions across and within texts. In this respect, Keats is the obvious foil for Mahoney's annotations: a remarkably full (yet never overly leading) series of annotations accompany not only the famously compressed Odes, but also the longer narrative works. The handling of *The Eve of St Agnes* is a particular case in point (421–435): Mahoney interweaves unobtrusive observations of Keats's many intertextual and intratextual echoes with detailed

reference to Leigh Hunt's reception (and mutilation) of the finished text. The result is a critical foregrounding not only of the brilliant verbal texture with which we continue to associate Keats, but also of the shockingly abrupt closing transition, which Hunt and other readers found difficult to the point of grotesquery, from the fleeing immediacy of the two lovers to the decay and fatality that visits all the actors in the longer term.

It is of the nature of such anthologies that they raise inevitable frustrations in the sort of reader for whom they are not principally intended. This reader would have liked to see more of Keats's very early or very late work, to supplement (or challenge) the more familiar mature sequence. The *Hyperion* fragment is one of the necessary sad casualties of the editors' knife, while *Endymion* or *Lamia* would, even in extracted form, force a consideration not only of Keats's lyrical voice, but also his idiosyncratic engagement with the couplet tradition (and thereby put further pressure on the distinctiveness or otherwise of 'romantic form'). This absence is clearer in Mahoney's treatment of Byron, which relies rather more upon biographical material, and less upon a close consideration of form. This feels like a trick missed: not least given Jerome McGann's suggestion (a suggestion that Mahoney's notes take up (240)) that Byron's avowed formal classicism represents a revolutionary alternative to romanticism 'proper'. But perhaps any primer can only take so much contestation.

Michael O'Neill's own annotational practice demonstrates the attention to poetic nuance that has characterised his career more fully: that is to say, it allows ambiguity to emerge as a series of productively competing impulses within a text, rather than insisting doctrinally upon the irreducibility of paradox, aporia, or so on and so forth. Whole generations of critical debate—which it may well be not only unnecessary but even actively disabling for a first-time student to know—are incorporated within the undemonstrative presentation of texts as rich as Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal':

If the poem is an elegy or 'sublime Epitaph' (Coleridge's description in a letter of April 1799), it refuses to grieve in any evident way, and offers an inscrutable consolation. It may be a pantheist celebration, or it may be a far more disturbing poem about misunderstanding in life and loss of spiritual dignity in death. (123)

Such observations conceal their acuity beneath a surface of apparently casual, 'mere' description; their lucidity and concision, rare in contemporary scholarship, remind this reader of the thrust of Empson's early criticism. As with Empson, the demonstration of significant ambiguity cannot simply be reproduced, but stands as a challenge: so which is it for you? How do you take Wordsworth's riddling poem? The observation of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* that 'the reader has to decide how much weight to attach to shadows that chase across the sunny surfaces of the poetry' (21) is a fine summary also of the merits of this annotational practice.

Some quibbles nevertheless inevitably arise. O'Neill is simply so brilliant at uncovering nuances beneath a text's deceptively smooth surface, that on occasion the slightly mischievous (or less brilliant) reader wonders whether there would be any text that *wouldn't* indicate murkier regions. The question comes into particular focus in the handling of Felicia Hemans's patriotic hymn, 'The Homes of England' (1827). Here again O'Neill wants to read 'a subliminal disquiet', however equivocal, into a poem whose explicit pronouncement and formal nature are exemplarily traditional. But if even an apparently confident statement on the stately homes ('How beautiful they stand!') conveys Hemans's surreptitious fear 'that the houses might not stand forever' (405), what would genuine confidence look like? The point is not that Hemans's poem could not contain a self-critical or unconscious doubt despite its formal and patriotic propriety; it is rather that the notes at this point do not show clearly enough why *this* formal and ethical tension (Hemans's tension) is particularly worthy of study. The anthology's general attention to precisely this aspect of verse form is what makes such a lapse uncharacteristic. Indeed, this reader would be eager to see such attention extended to other texts that demonstrate, more clearly than 'The Homes of England', a dynamic tension between form and sentiment: Mary Robinson's 'The Negro Girl' (1800) stands as a prospective case in point, being a richly puzzling poem whose eponymous subject bewails the injustice of colonialism—in irregular Spenserian stanzas.

The omission of such voices raises further questions over the overall structure of the anthology, and in particular the rather delimited division of the romantic period into ten poets. Francis O'Gorman's *Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* forms part of the same series, yet incorporates a far greater number of poets, as does David Fairer's equivalent for the eighteenth-century; a wider selection would have permitted a richer sample not only of women authors such as Robinson, but also those still-marginal (if increasingly less so) male poets—Crabbe, Clare, Southey—who may well have contested some of the formal and political underpinnings of the chosen few. The stubborn issue of gender remains, in some ways because of and not despite the provision for women on the curtailed short-list. The discrepancy is both quantitative and qualitative: with such a reduced canon, we are far more likely to notice the difference in page allocation; and the difference between the space given Wordsworth (ninety-seven pages) and Barbauld (six pages) is immediately apparent.

This is hardly to suggest that a quota system should be put in place. But the quantitative disparity looms larger still when we consider that, of the three Barbauld poems that are featured, two justify their inclusion through being in dialogue with other, more prominent figures from the period ('The Rights of Women', which takes aim at Mary Wollstonecraft, and 'To Mr. S. T. Coleridge'). Rather than a poem that prepares a grounding context for the male romantic poet who figures later in the anthology, I would prefer to see a less orthodox selection: some of Barbauld's translations of the psalms, for instance, whose directness of diction may well have influenced Coleridge's own

experiments in the conversational register in a more indirect manner.⁵ Or *1811*, which Mahoney correctly terms ‘her greatest poem’ (1), but whose subsequent omission is for that very reason surprising.

The inclusion of *1811* would also have helped redress the other major structural flaw in this enterprise: the difficulty of arranging the selected poems under a set number of ‘themes’. Put simply, this other distinguishing feature of the Blackwell *Annotated Anthology* does not work, although the failure is itself suggestive. Where other volumes in the series fare reasonably well in grouping works into general subheadings (e.g. ‘Society’, ‘Self’, ‘Gardens’), O’Neill and Mahoney struggle, for entirely understandable reasons, to achieve a balanced grouping. The difficulty is clearest in sub-headings that treat of politics, such as ‘Politics and Society’ (fifteen entries), ‘Slavery and Feminism’ (seven entries) and ‘Orientalism’ (three entries, of which one—Wordsworth’s ‘The Solitary Reaper’—is justified presumably by a single line’s reference to ‘Arabian Sands’!). By comparison, more conventional ‘romantic themes’ such as ‘Self and Solitude’ and ‘Nature’ muster thirty-seven and twenty-five entries, respectively.

Such a disparity conjures several disquieting thoughts. Are we still in thrall to the very hierarchy of value that the critique of romantic ideology attempted to dismantle? Or (a far more unsettling prompt), might that romantic ideology have been true all along? But I prefer another solution. This anthology presents verse that powerfully resists thematisation; it does so not only through the intrinsic nature of that verse, but also through its annotational practice, which refuses to paraphrase the materials under consideration into a take-home message. In this respect, Mahoney and O’Neill’s sustained close attention ironically works to unsettle from within the structural framework under which the editors are obliged to operate. Such unsettling casts a certain doubt upon the Blackwell *Annotated Anthology*’s general editorial protocol. But so too does it work more productively to suggest another kind of anthology: an anthology still to come, which would continually and consciously disrupt its own presuppositions, through the only apparently simple act of attention.

⁵ Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *Devotional pieces, compiled from the Psalms and the Book of Job: to which are prefixed, thoughts on the devotional taste, on sects, and on establishments* (London: printed for J. Johnson, 1775).