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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. 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.

There’s an infinitive verb that scholars have been using with increasing relish over the last decade or so: ‘to problematise’. I am a fan neither of the term nor of the practice, believing that for most readers, poetry is opaque enough as it is, the critic’s job being to offer what clarity she can. But it is something we do in any case, casting and recasting arguments from an increasing number of unique, sometimes obscure, angles, refracting the light, turning what might have been telescopes—a way of bringing something far off and lovely across the boundaries of time, place, genre or identity, into our newly resplendent ken—into kaleidoscopes: pretty, interesting but useless as navigational aids.

Percy Bysshe Shelley’s was already a problematic corpus, fraught with fragments, co-authorings, deletions, contradictory manuscript copies and titular revisions, almost to the same rank degree that his was a problematic corpse: decayed, dismembered, sainted, quarantined; all of it dubious and difficult and intensely intriguing. Surprisingly, one subject on which the poet was more or less consistent throughout his brief career, was his conception of ‘life’ as that which quenches the original fire, fades the inspirational coals and stains ‘the white radiance of eternity’. Over and again in poems, essays and letters, he tries new ways of saying the same thing about the dulling effects of the passage of time on one’s ability to perceive. For him, poetry was the one antidote, the tool capable of restoring that lost vision, that freshness and vitality. And one can see why he returned to the topic: it’s an *ars poetica*. Writing poetry, for Shelley, matters to the practical health—political, spiritual, relational—of the whole world, else why write it?

In *Shelley and Apprehension of Life*, Ross Wilson surveys this territory, asking, what is unique in Shelley’s mode of apprehension, what is consistent in it? Along the way, he problematises what had been clear for most Shelleyans. Wilson begins a paragraph in the book’s Introduction with a dropped quote—odd for a topic sentence, but a stylistic choice I suppose—from Shelley’s essay ‘On Life’. It reads: ‘We live on, and in living, we lose the apprehension of Life’ (p. 2). Wilson then offers his own *ars poetica*, giving us as near a thing to a thesis as we find here, in, ‘this book is an extended reading of this statement’. He then qualifies—in particular, I argue—that Shelley does not merely acquiesce in the obliteration of ‘the apprehension of life’ by ‘living’. On the contrary, his work is at once a profoundly informed, incisive critique of what might be called mere life and an attempt to bring the resources of poetic imagination to bear on the restoration of what he calls ‘the apprehension of life’.

To such a claim, it seems to me that the only possible response is: ‘well, yes’. It isn’t that he’s wrong: Wilson has as thorough a command not only of Shelley’s work, but of the drafts, minutiae, scholarly tradition and philosophical allusions that make it up as I’ve seen anywhere. He’s right. Such a restoration is (one of) Shelley’s intellectual projects. But isn’t the point so correct as to be obvious? Had any of us thought Shelley on the side of acquiescence? Had we imagined that
he thought poetry impotent against such forces? Shelley’s energetic optimism, despite everything, his belief in the possibility of cultural renewal is more or less the one thing people know about Shelley apart from that he was rebellious all the way down to his blackened, lofty soul.

Wilson’s prose is full of verbal tics that one is welcome to find endearing—it takes all types to make a world, does it not? Here, we’ll encounter ‘to be sure’ and ‘certainly’ as double qualifiers in the same sentence (p. 3). There (and there, and there), the term ‘however’ used, yea though the sentence contains no contrary (p. 2). Over yonder ridge, a large handful of sentences with missing articles (‘life is [...] nor [a] more broadly thematic concern’) and there some misplaced modifiers (‘Life in this book is [...] performance itself’). The book has the most fun with problematising English idioms. We find such exotica as ‘acquiesce in’ where ‘acquiesce to’ is meant, or poems that ‘tail off into infinity,’ rather than ‘trail off’ (p. 43). We are rapt in the fun redundancy of ‘also, moreover’ (p. 26), and a recurrent ‘then’ (as on p. 35) not at the conclusion of an argument, as would be expected, but at the start of a new point. So Wilson knows how to keep things lively. We’re often strained, thinking, what do you mean by ‘x’? and then, having reworked the sentence into proper syntactic form, concluding, ‘oh, that old thing? Of course’, as we piece together that the point is something we’ve assumed since our first readings of Shelley as undergraduates.

But this isn’t such a bad thing. It shows, to my mind, how thoroughly Wilson is a Shelleyan. If, as the poet has it in Defence of Poetry (1821), ‘Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world’, it also ‘makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar’. This is what Wilson’s book does so well. Who isn’t familiar with the old dictum that ‘life turns out never to confirm mere thoughts about it’ (p. 38)? Or who hasn’t in their pockets an old penny, inscribed with ‘language’s ability to articulate regret is close to being overwhelmed’ (p. 36)? Or again, who doesn’t wish they had one for every time they’d heard some version of ‘thinking happens differently in poetry and in prose’ (pp. 16–17)? And what object could be more familiar than ‘tyranny [...] is [...] exploitation’ (p. 20)? But Wilson burnishes those dull pennies, casting away the veil of familiarity—every thought herein has been thought a thousand times—and making them appear strange, even revelatory. Shelley and the Apprehension of Life is a problematic book, despite its truly wonderful-to-behold textual and philosophical work, but only because it is so dedicated to problematising the familiar, which is to say, only because it is so much like poetry.

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Peter Garside taught English Literature for more than thirty years at Cardiff University, where he became founding Director of the Centre for Editorial and Intertextual Research. Subsequently, he was appointed Professor of Bibliography and Textual Studies at the University of Edinburgh. He served on the Boards of the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels and the Stirling/South Carolina Collected Edition of the Works of James Hogg, and has produced three volumes apiece for each of these scholarly editions. He was one of the general editors of the bibliographical survey *The English Novel, 1770–1829*, 2 vols (OUP, 2000), and directed the AHRC-funded *British Fiction, 1800–1829* database (2004). More recently, he has co-edited *English and British Fiction 1750–1820* (2015), Volume 2 of the Oxford History of the Novel in English; and forthcoming publications include an edition of Scott’s *Shorter Poems*, along with Gillian Hughes, for the Edinburgh Edition of Walter Scott’s Poetry.

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