Journal of Markets & Morality
Volume 17, Number 2 (Fall 2014): 547–568

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

William Wordsworth and the Theology of Poverty
Heidi J. Snow
Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2013 (152 pages)

It is to Heidi J. Snow's great credit that in *William Wordsworth and the Theology of Poverty* she manages to maintain a steady academic examination of her subject while at the same time avoiding an error commonly found in discussions of both poverty and poetry: the elimination of the personal. This book is not quite successful in accomplishing its central goal—establishing how Wordsworth was influenced by religious thinking on poverty—but it is successful in making a much more fundamental point.

That Wordsworth was directly influenced by the theological climate of his day is an argument this book never completely establishes, although it comes closest when discussing the possibility of Quaker influence. The number of careful *perhapses* and *might haves* in this work regularly reminds the reader that the matter of influence is one of speculation. However, this book does clearly identify strong similarities between certain religious attitudes toward the poor—in particular those from Wesleyan and Quaker perspectives—and the attitudes found in Wordsworth's poetic portrayals of poverty, thus strongly suggesting that if one cannot establish in this work a direct influence from these traditions, then one can certainly observe a distinct kinship with them.

This is not to say there are no strong suggestions of direct theological influence on Wordsworth's poetry. His sister Dorothy was involved in the Anglican-Methodist Sunday school movement, and his younger brother, Christopher, was an Anglican clergyman whose sermons contained a nuanced view of the poor—one that combined (according to Snow) a typically Anglican contentment with poverty as part of the social hierarchy

with an evangelical sense of kinship with the poor. Wordsworth's admiration for the Quakers is also adequately established. There is a particularly convincing point of history that does seem to make direct influence more plausible—that of the close friendship between the Wordsworths and William Wilberforce. However, the book offers nothing from Wordsworth's own writings that definitively shows that his "unique blending of multiple religious sensibilities towards the poor" was, in fact, derived from or directly influenced by any particular religious tradition's perspective on poverty. Again, it is clear that his work shares emphases and sympathies with certain theologies, but the contention that the theologies and Wordsworth's thinking are directly linked simply does not move beyond informed speculation.

In the end, however, whether or not the book's argument is immaculate is immaterial. Even if it were incontrovertible that Wordsworth derived his thought on poverty from these theologies, the complicated relationship between proposition and art, between theology and poetry, remains such that any critical claim that one translates directly and cleanly to the other is usually specious. Wordsworth was a highly original thinker and a poetic innovator—meaning one would be extraordinarily hard pressed to argue that his work was, in the main, a product of external doctrines and not of his confidence in the formative power of imagination. (I do not here suggest that Snow argues that his work was a *product* of certain theologies, only that she argues for the existence of a religious influence.) Whether or not theologies of poverty directly informed his work, it is clear that Wordsworth's poetry covered much of the same ground and that is a point valuable enough. The implicit rather than the explicit point of the book is the striking one: Wordsworth's "poverty poetry" is notable in that it did not deal with poverty so much as it dealt with *the poor*. In other words, in considering the poor, his poetry does not preach so much as it portrays.

Here Snow's book does a special service. By directing our attention toward Wordsworth's imaginative portrayals of poverty, she not only shows how those renderings can harmonize with a theological perspective, but also reminds the reader of the power of art to do what all thinking on poverty and all treatments of poverty should do: recover the humanity in the humane. Or, to quote Wordsworth himself, "to shew that men who do not wear fine cloaths [*sic*] can feel deeply." The truly interesting point is that Wordsworth's view of the poor was decidedly nontheoretical but, instead, was thoughtful, compassionate, nuanced, and human.

An example is Snow's explication of "The Old Cumberland Beggar" in her chapter regarding the evangelical view of poverty. The vagrant in this poem is not portrayed as a societal leech or a swindler or a victim of Providence but as a manifestation of opportunity: the opportunity of a community either to hold the poor at arm's length or to embrace the poor and thereby increase in charity. Snow argues that Wordsworth's portrayal of this beggar is a challenge to the view that the poor ought to be dealt with more programmatically by way of state-endorsed poorhouses—those rather paternalistic institutions that tended to dehumanize and thereby maintain the social stratification between rich and poor. This stratification, Snow argues, is one supported by the Anglican theology of the time. The

rich were rich and the poor were poor through the will of Providence, and while charity was certainly still a requirement, it could and did take on more rigid, institutional forms that hurt as often as helped. These forms, Snow contends, were what Wordsworth (taking cues from evangelical and Quaker thinking) objected to. In opposition to the institutional view of poverty stands Wordsworth's beggar, a man who not only deserves not to be managed by a poorhouse bureaucrat but also deserves to be allowed to determine "*where* and *when* he will sit down / Beneath the trees, or by the grassy bank." It is the freedom and dignity of the poor that this poem demands by poetically portraying the free, dignified poor.

In dealing with poverty, the more evangelical goal, and one Wordsworth seems to endorse, is not simply the treatment of an ill but a restoration of kinship where "that first mild touch of sympathy and thought" reveals to the charitable that they have "found their kindred with a world / Where want and sorrow were." Indeed, even "the poorest poor / Long for some moments in a weary life / When they can know and feel that they have been / Themselves the fathers and dealers out / Of some small blessings, have been kind to such / As needed kindness, for this single cause, / That we have all of us one human heart."

The point is similar to one made by a pope two hundred years later, that in loving my neighbor, I must go "beyond exterior appearances, [and] perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern.… Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave."

As an overview of attitudes toward the poor in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Lake District, Snow's book serves its readers well. As a glimpse into how the poor can be illuminated by art, the book also serves well. If nothing else, *William Wordsworth and the Theology of Poverty* provides a helpful, introductory, theological, and poetic lexicon by which to better understand how poverty can be defined and engaged. Above all, it shows how Wordsworth's poetry instructs us that, when "the poor are allowed to be part of the community, both the poor and the community are richer."

—David Michael Phelps
Baker College, Michigan

Distant Markets, Distant Harms: Economic Complicity and Christian Ethics

Daniel K. Finn (Editor)

New York: Oxford University Press, 2014 (288 pages)

This is a volume of essays from an interdisciplinary conference aimed at demonstrating how Catholic social thought can provide a foundation for contemporary economic ethics. The editor is Professor of Theology and Clemens Professor of Economics at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. Both the conference and the volume sprang from the work of the True Wealth of Nations Project of the Institute of Advanced Catholic Studies. There are ten contributors to this volume from an assortment of academic fields, but all are interested in the topic of economic ethics.