

10-1991

## Wordsworth: The Sense of History [Review]

Michael Fischer

Trinity University, [mfischer@trinity.edu](mailto:mfischer@trinity.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/eng\\_faculty](https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/eng_faculty)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Fischer, M. (1991). Wordsworth: The sense of history [Review of the book *Wordsworth: The sense of history*, by A. Liu]. *Philosophy and Literature*, 15(2), 354-355. doi: 10.1353/phl.1991.0001

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

9. Religion deserves a privileged immunity from psychoanalysts' scrutiny because it refers to a reality transcendent to the analyst's domain.

10. Religion is true; it identifies something ontologically real. Psychoanalysis has failed to disprove this, cannot, and shouldn't try.

The very multiplicity of arguments is evidence of the personal energy at work and makes one wonder what unstated restlessness is transposed into, but left dissatisfied by, this pursuit of simple true-false claims. Perhaps psychoanalysts should stick to their own craft.

YALE UNIVERSITY

JAMES E. DITTES

*Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, by Alan Liu; xvi & 726 pp. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989, \$39.50.

Alan Liu's *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* is a large book containing a multitude of materials on a wide range of subjects: Napoleon's military tactics, the indebtedness of Lake District weavers, the social history of criminal punishment, the class structure of Lakeland agricultural society, and the floor plans of late eighteenth-century rural cottages (to name only a few). As if all this were not enough, Liu often apologizes for not providing more, as when he admits that "full proof" of one of his hypotheses "opens to view . . . a research field not as fully investigated as others and too vast to fit within my present project . . ." (p. 266). He laments what he still does not know—"It would be useful," for example, "if architectural historians of the Lakes could provide guidance on how structures characteristically decay under climate and social forces" (p. 589, n. 33)—and he encourages others to amass the data he reluctantly has had to do without.

Liu argues that such massive historical research is necessary to a complete understanding of Wordsworth's poetry. Building on New Critical and deconstructive readings of Wordsworth, Liu discusses Wordsworth's major works in chronological order, highlighting each work's formal instability—the tension between violent narrative and placid picturesque description in *An Evening Walk*, for instance, and the struggle to elide tragedy in *Descriptive Sketches* and *Salisbury Plain*. The tug-of-war between genres in Wordsworth's early poetry gives way to the triumph of autobiography and lyric in *The Prelude*, but even here a seemingly finished, coherent text shows traces of strain.

In Liu's view, this conflict results from Wordsworth's futile longing to deny history. Like a detective looking for evidence, Liu ingeniously reconstructs the

scene of the struggle against history that scars Wordsworth's poems. In *The Prelude*, for example, Wordsworth turns to autobiography to fend off "the invasiveness of history" (p. 361). But the "poem's closing torsions" (p. 400) reflect "the interior contest, transgression, or cross-channel invasion of genres" (p. 361) that have beset autobiography throughout the poem, prompting Liu to ask, "What seized imagination in 1804?" (p. 396). "Seized" suggests something grabbing Wordsworth's imagination and refusing its plea to be released. That something turns out to be history, as pieced together by Liu from journalistic and other materials from the period, especially *The Morning Post*. Wordsworthian autobiography thus turns out to be "history's strongest communication" (p. 361), not because autobiography reflects history but because history is such a formidable opponent. History fractures the generic weapon (here, autobiography) designed by Wordsworth to ward it off.

Liu's frequent appeals to "actual history" (p. 362) pose difficult epistemological problems, as he himself realizes. He concedes that we cannot know the past with full positivistic certainty, partly because "the actual stuff of the past" (p. 501) is itself textual and thus on a par with the complex literary texts that he wants history to help him decipher. Nevertheless, although we cannot be certain about the past, we can arrive at what Liu calls a "credible" picture of the historical realities prompting Wordsworth's denials.

Liu's analysis of Wordsworth's poetry is much more than credible. By rigorously reading historical and literary texts, he has written the most important book on Wordsworth since Geoffrey Hartman's *Wordsworth's Poetry 1797–1814*. Still, I appreciate his reluctance to claim too much for what he has done. Despite the prodigious research that went into this book, it remains "under-theorized"—to borrow Liu's own word for much New Historicist criticism (p. 523, n. 71). In particular, he needs to consider when enough is enough—when historical research ceases to be relevant and degenerates into self-indulgent antiquarianism. In a remarkably candid Epilogue, Liu fears that there may be "a certain driven quality about [his] amassing of material," his adding "the *extra* fact to the already sufficient fact" (p. 501). But when does historical research suffice? Liu dodges this question, feeding the suspicion that his project is merely compulsive. To reinforce his claim that historical research is necessary, he needs to show when it is sufficient.