

SALLY BUSHELL

TEXT AS PROCESS: CREATIVE COMPOSITION IN WORDSWORTH, TENNYSON, AND DICKINSON. (Virginia, 2009) xi + 302 pp. 18 illustrations.

Reviewed by Richard Brantley

Reading, like seeing, is selective: this review offers the broad perspective of a reader chiefly experienced in placing poets like Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Dickinson in their historical contexts. Uninitiated in the discipline of manuscript studies, I fought it for a chapter or two but then went along for a bracing, though not uncritical, ride. By the end, I too saw that the letter *S* in Dickinson's manuscript of "The Sea said 'Come' to the Brook" (Amherst College Library, Special Collections, Set 11, A432/431; qtd. Bushell 234) corresponds to a breaking wave, though I still sometimes wonder whether this text-as-process is just plain text. Even for skeptical browsers in "creative composition" theory, this book's somewhat counterintuitive stress on manuscripts as always already literary wears well, and does not finally represent too much of an un-tempered, or intemperate, stretch. Its willingness to acknowledge manuscripts as also preliminary, and perhaps even as in some sense subordinate, after all, to published or completed forms, constitutes a welcome, commonsense component of its methodology.

Bushell plainly states what is at stake for her and for any other "compositional critic" (160). "On the one hand," she declares, "I want to validate [the] process [of poetic composition] as an object of analysis in its own right and . . . for its difference from the published or completed text" (32). Thus she aims to change our thinking about poets' first thoughts or rough drafts, which in her view can prove to be as good as, and perhaps even (if I may take the next step, that she at times seems ready to take) better than their second thoughts or published work. In light of this point, we might well ask why we

would ever again need to teach revising to students (some of whom are, or could one day be, poets). But whether or not a poet's rough draft surpasses what follows it, Bushell demands that we take in both. "I am arguing," she writes, "for critical integration and movement across and between *avant-texte* and text, seeking an enlargement of the definition of literary studies to include this material" (32). Thus, like French *critique génétique* (which she recapitulates with the aid of Michael Groden), Bushell's work scrutinizes not so much the "teleological movement from early stages to finished product" as "a textual field that extends backwards and forwards between *avant-texte* and text" (qtd. Bushell 35).

In quest of other precedents for her method of reading (besides that of *critique génétique*), Bushell surveys such schools of thought as biblical scholarship on recension or emendation and Elizabethan copy-text theory (she skips medieval manuscript culture despite its primal role in the instability and variability of all texts). While noting the rivalry between claims for the final manuscript version (Fredson Bowers) and the first published text (Philip Gaskell), she is drawn to Jerome McGann's editorial watchword that—in her words—"social forces and communal activity . . . bring the text into being" (12). Like McGann, she moves away from what she calls "the previously dominant view of the author's fixed intention as the ultimate model of authority" (12). Thus her brand of reading seems best suited to the nineteenth or even eighteenth century and after (though her survey skips the eighteenth century, too), when many manuscripts survive to provoke debates over "grounds of intentionality and questions of authority" (11). Citing Siegfried Scheibe, Hans Zeller, and Gunter Martens, Bushell argues that each transmitted version of a text is in theory equally valid and hence that "text as process" may be integrated

“into the edition” (27). But she prefers *critique génétique* because it weighs “the critical status, or use, of such material” (27). She takes cues from Peter L. Shillingsburg’s concept of editing as “a form of literary criticism” (qtd. Bushell 14) and also makes good use of his distinction between “the intention to do,” which is “conclusively recoverable from the signs written,” and “the intention to mean,” which is “inconclusively recoverable through critical interpretation” (qtd. Bushell 54). To parry German and French denials of “individual creative origins” (6), she paraphrases John Searle and J. L. Austin, who argue—again in her words—that “language is a kind of act” and that “all action is intentional (though not necessarily involving conscious intention)” (53).

Bushell revives intention, then, as a motivating force capable of being inferentially reconstructed from “acts on the page” (50). Thus her methodological mix highlights a practicality that might be called Anglo-American in character. To be sure, whether or not *Text as Process* really counts as “the first study of this kind” (2), it pioneers “a new subdiscipline . . . (in Anglo-American studies at least)” (2) because Bushell’s sophisticated cross-Channel importations add explanatory breadth to the savvy of her homegrown pragmatism. Nevertheless, her oscillations between the axioms of “creative composition” theory (each version is equally valid; *avant-texte* is at least as important as text) and the nuts-and-bolts of “creative composition” behavior (“acts on the page”) tilt finally toward the latter. Against German and French insistences that a work does not represent an author’s intention, yet perhaps with something of New Criticism’s focus on a work as an author’s *fulfilled* intention (vs. misguided preoccupation with an author’s “reasons for writing” [15]), she retains what she calls “a distinctive Anglo-American model” whereby “the core intentional structures of the creative mind (the

‘author’), even if a kind of delusion, are a necessary delusion for creative process and one worthy of study” (6). She wittily observes that “even those who write *against* intention” (e.g., Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes) have “the intention of doing so” (49). Bushell’s greatest strength, in any case, is arguably Anglo-American in tendency. Together with her flair for generalization, her ability to break down a general proposition into specific instances makes her close reading of draft materials qualify as a viable, none too abstract or theoretical, kind of literary criticism.

Sometimes her close readings turn into hair splitting. In her chapter on Wordsworth, Bushell announces: “Reading the text in a state of process becomes a kind of puzzle in which words on the page signify a sequence of actions, of rapidly changing small-scale acts that can be reconstructed” (93). With regard to Wordsworth’s line “While on the perilous edge I hung” (the original version of 1850 *Prelude* 1.336), she painstakingly tracks the steps of revision as the poet adds *alone*, crosses out *edge*, and writes in two alternatives: *ridge* and *cliff*. His process, she observes, goes as follows: “prior intention (I intend to cross the word out); intention-in-action (I am about to cross the word out); bodily movement (pick up pen/place on paper); action (physically make a line through the word)” (92). I find the distinction between “prior intention” and “intention-in-action” virtually invisible. The whole reconstruction of Wordsworth’s act of crossing out, for me anyway, verges on self-parody, as Bushell almost admits. “It would be tedious,” she confesses, “to undertake this level of microanalysis of intentional acts at any great length” (92). She underscores, however, that it is “helpful . . . to see that the narrative process for written composition is capable of being broken down to this extent” (92). Not every reader will grasp how or why it is helpful.

Manuscript microanalysis, at times, can squint at motes and miss the light they float in. Bushell concedes that “we cannot access the all-important initial point of composition, which in this case produced the line ‘While on the perilous ridge I hung alone’” (92). We *can*, however, see something of how composition grows from the passage that precedes it (it does not come from nothing). Also, there is considerable difference between noting the significance of added or changed words and reconstructing the micro-steps of making a particular deletion. Bushell is at her best, I think, in the former kind of critical activity (as in her chapter on Dickinson).

What does Bushell really tell us about Wordsworth? First of all, her analysis of his MS JJ notebook links its early *Prelude* passages to its fragmentary “Essay on Morals.” “While the prose piece,” she writes, “argues for the need to act upon habit to good effect, the poetic draft describes and exemplifies the desired process. Whichever text was entered first, each bears upon the other” (80). This connection, though scarcely surprising, is successfully made.

Bushell maintains, moreover, that in MS JJ “the physical layout of words on the page enhances the meaning of the words” (90), as in

. . . how my bosom
beat

With expectation[.] (qtd. Bushell 90)

In Bushell’s view, the fact that “a certain kind of meaning” exists “on *this* page as a unique object” (90), whether or not Wordsworth intended it, makes for literary-critical

hay. One might ask in what sense meaning exists on a page apart from any reader's interpretation of it (a crucial question simply begged here), and Bushell hardly persuades me that physical layout makes this "bosom / *beat* / With expectation."

More convincingly Bushell argues that Wordsworth's "programmatically intention" to compose an epic both helped and hindered his creativity "as a writing poet" (80). Much of his verse, she shows, was "stimulated by his evasion" of his *magnum opus* ambition (80). Since the *Prelude* drafts in MS JJ (DC MS 19) "run forward from the back of the [MS JJ] notebook," she concludes that he thus tried to overcome "the psychologically difficult stage of first composition" (86). Maybe, on the other hand, he was just "hiding" what he had not finished, or was just saving the notebook's first part for something else.

Above all, Bushell helps to explain whether Wordsworth's poetry came direct from his mind (à la Mozart) or was generated on paper (after the manner of Beethoven). The answer—both—will astonish only those still under the exclusive sway of "Romantic poetry as unpremeditated outpouring." Discussing the *Prelude* drafts in MS WW (DC MS 43), Bushell shows that "the lack of change in the 'Arabian Tales' piece seems to support the Wordsworthian ideal of written words as mere 'transcription'" (107). In *The Excursion*, similarly, as indicated by Bushell's assessment of its avant-texte as "a large central mass of unsituated material," Wordsworth wanted, if not to elide the poet as writer, then "to envisage long poem composition as some kind of 'spontaneously' self-generating structure" (116). By contrast, a point that seems to me to be well worth reinforcing here is that Wordsworth's work toward *The Excursion* discloses what Bushell's scrutiny of DC MS 70 says it does. His *struggle* with a "prosaic moment of

introduction” and “the establishment of character” makes for *highly wrought* style (108). Thus, even in rough drafts, his poetry can become almost lapidary, almost more crafted than inspired.

Turning from Wordsworth to Tennyson, Bushell notes that a Tennyson first draft “looks remarkably ‘clean’ on the page” (133). With the aid, again, of the distinction between Mozart and Beethoven (in Klaus Hurlebusch’s theory of aesthetic production), she maintains that rather than following Beethoven-like “construction,” his poetry derives from Mozart-like “reproduction” (133). It could be, instead, that Tennyson’s chaotic jottings are simply gone, but Bushell contends, consistently and persistently if not convincingly, that his love of clean pages led him “to externalize process and work in a receptivity-dominated way” (123). In this vein, Bushell reminds us, Tennyson persuaded his publisher to print “trial books,” “choosing to read the words in print not merely to prepare the published text but as an active [if neat-freakish] part of the creative process” (125).

Bushell’s Tennyson chapter, moreover, takes tantalizing notice of his Trinity Notebook 17, which, like the notebooks of Paul Valéry, features drawings “between passages of written text” (128). Bushell’s linking of these drawings to the verbal imagery in the texts illustrates “the relationship between word and image for the creative process” (126). She does not fully spell out what she thinks the notebook reveals about Tennyson’s word/image connection, but I gather that even his necessarily outward-oriented visual images can appear as inward in their origin as his words can seem spontaneous in their effect.

Bushell revisits the much-mooted question of why Tennyson's Arthurian idylls "do not appear in the final published whole poem in the same order as that of first publication" (144). As she notes, the standard view of this re-arrangement is that the final order emphasizes "the linear progression toward the kingdom's downfall" and hence the pessimistic direction of the poet's thought (144). Bushell demurs. Drawing on the concept of idylls as vignettes and on Friedrich Schleiermacher's and Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic circle (understanding through the relation of parts to whole and vice versa), she reasons that the poem's "cyclical model of . . . repeated return" is "far more positive than the steady movement toward decline and collapse" (144). In particular, she concludes, Tennyson's relocation of "Guinevere" to a penultimate position in *Idylls of the King* demonstrates that the queen "has been 'false' throughout in order to be 'true' to her emotions" (151). Thus the poet's repositioning tempers any pessimistic reading of his idylls' final form, and this optimistic interpretation of "Guinevere" is buttressed by Bushell's upbeat reading of Enid's song (from "Geraint and Enid") as it appears in Trinity Notebook 30 and "within the final published version" (160-7, esp. 166).

Bushell also confronts the charge that Tennyson simply "translates" Sir Thomas Malory's prose into the poetry of the *Idylls*. To answer this charge, Bushell presents "The Holy Grail" as it appears in Harvard Notebook 38. Yes, she admits, Tennyson does his own prose version of Malory and then transforms that into verse. But in this case, she argues, the nature of the creative act is not necessarily a "lesser" phenomenon just because "the poet chooses to create a process-within-a-process in the form of 'self-translation' across forms" (141). She also contends that "all poetic creativity involves

such acts” (141). Whether or not poetry was once prose, and whatever the degree of Tennyson’s selfhood in his writings, Bushell’s study of this draft material (136-41) skillfully unfolds his *integration* of a prose plan into *consequent* poetry. His updating of legend, therefore, emerges from her discussion as all the more timeless and alive.

Emily Dickinson’s work is the ideal quarry for compositional criticism. During her lifetime, only ten of her 1,789 poems appeared in print, and they did so against her will. Except for fair copies in the first eight of her forty fascicles or manuscript books, all of her lyrics were poems in process, with changes entered on the manuscript page. Bushell resists the widespread tendency among Dickinson scholars “to distort the nature of the unpublished material” by assuming that it achieves the status of a published collection (174). She reminds us that the poet’s groupings are “held in multiple, loose, separate bifolium sheets or single leaves” and so “are always subject to potential regrouping” (175). Bushell’s insistence on valuing draft material for its own sake turns out to be just what Dickinson studies need at present.

Unlike other specialists in Dickinson’s manuscript material, Bushell seeks not so much to survey “a number of alternatives to the word to be replaced” as to explore “a semantic field that generates meaning out of itself” (210). Dickinson’s manuscripts, she notes, suggest “an almost physical resistance to rejection” (184). For instance, she writes, “When [Dickinson] does cross out a word, she usually does so not by drawing a line through it horizontally but by a less harsh diagonal across the page to include the word, with the line often made in pencil and rarely in ink” (184). In decoding Dickinson’s religious-looking crosses (as distinct from her crossings-out), Bushell finds that they help to make the poet’s text “layered and palimpsestic, with one word

constantly disappearing below another. . . . This makes it possible for the poet to *return* to a text repeatedly but not to have advanced it teleologically” (195). Consequently, Bushell argues, “being anti-teleological” is “a fundamental part of the kind of poet [Dickinson] wants to be” (176-7).

In Dickinson’s texts Bushell finds “suspended deletion, allowing for the unresolved alternative” (187), and hence “not ‘revision’ so much as creative optionality” (197). Her options, Bushell states, are concerned not “merely with suspending meaning, or with ‘not choosing’ between variants” (203), but with the vitality of options. She writes that “the creation of options in one part” leads to their creation “in another, so that optionality becomes an active part of the creative process” (203). Although few readers of even the subtlest literature can always “choose not choosing” (life is too short), Bushell holds that no word of Dickinson’s is to be replaced. Each is to remain in play.

Yet at the same time, Bushell discovers stability among Dickinson’s variants for each poem, for while half of her text “contains multiple versions” of diction, the other half is a “fixed frame” of syntax (198). Thus Bushell’s Dickinson composes by means of “juxtaposed stability and instability” (198). Bushell’s acknowledgment of Dickinson’s steady word order, as distinct from her English major’s yen for the poet’s interchangeable words, guides us through the vertiginous world of Dickinson’s chosen un-choosing. Bushell’s method here, thankfully, is balanced. It does not exacerbate, too much, the postmodern migraine of relentlessly verbal hare-chasing.

As Bushell notes, it has long been recognized how uncannily and “directly” Dickinson “anticipates the complex twentieth-century redefining of the nature of understanding” (210). Bushell adds aesthetic nuance to this philosophical emphasis on

the poet's un-decidability. For her, it is "a poetic device," not "an ontological state" (210). Moreover, as a welcome sign of Bushell's attention to historical context, she acknowledges that Dickinson's openness "*also* emerges from a far more ancient, self-enclosed sense of spiritual identity, behind which lies the presence of God as supreme Author" (211). Thus it is not as though Dickinson foresaw Gadamer's concept that the "dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself" (qtd. 210). Rather, Dickinson's un-decidability functions as a mark of her religious humility.

As Bushell concludes from her reading of such a theoretically prescient, yet surprisingly traditional, poem as "No Other can reduce Our Mortal Consequence," "a deeply self-conscious awareness of the limits of self-conscious awareness" informs Dickinson's poetic works (214). Here is Bushell's transcription of Dickinson's four-stanza version of this lyric (Houghton Library, Harvard, MS 97a), which – Bushell argues – voices not so much "a Gadamerian understanding" of "a life lived . . . in relation to time" as "the Last Judgment" in "the world beyond" (211-12):

No Other can reduce Our
 Mortal Consequence
 Like the remembering it be Nought –
 A Period from hence –

 But Contemplation for
 Cotemporaneous Nought –

Our Mutual Fame – that

haply

Jehovah – recollect –

No Other can exalt Our

Mortal Consequence

Like the remembering it exist –

A period from hence –

Invited from Itself

To the Creator's House –

To tarry an Eternity –

His – shortest Consciousness – (qtd. Bushell 211)

I cannot help but note that Bushell's grounding of Dickinson's openness in a religious worldview nicely confirms my less manuscript-oriented, yet similarly religion-aware, findings in *Experience and Faith: The Late-Romantic Imagination of Emily Dickinson* (2004; paper 2008).

To help summarize her argument, Bushell invokes the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and his privileging of the made object. Anticipating, perhaps, Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar," Heidegger once wrote, "The making . . . lets the jug come into its own. But that which in the jug's nature is its own is never brought about by its making. Now released from the making process, the self-supporting jug has to gather

itself for the task of containing” (qtd. Bushell 217). Bushell, however, privileges “the making process” (219). She wants “the juxtaposition and cross-interpretation of two radically different kinds of literary meaning: the self-sufficient meaning of the text as a work of art, and the meaning of it in the flux of its coming-into-being” (219).

Thus, though differing with Heidegger on the importance of made vs. making, Bushell finds in his philosophy a framework for rounding off her enterprise, as though the discipline of manuscript studies, when all is said and done, should enter into dialogue with phenomenology and ontology! Heidegger might indeed have been describing Bushell’s understanding of poetic composition when he wrote, “[T]he possible is drawn into the actual, arising out of the actual and returning to it” (qtd. Bushell 224). Just as Dickinson famously dwells in possibility, Bushell conceives of textual process as just such a realm to live in. Whether or not Heidegger’s stress on actualization fully explains manuscript production, as Bushell implies, she deploys his key term, *Dasein*, as her means of epitomizing her rationale for studying texts that precede a printed text:

“[C]reative process could be *both* apparently teleological, directed toward a clear goal . . . and, at the same time, part of a larger, always open-ended, process of *Dasein* for the person engaged in it” (227). Heidegger observes that “as long as any *Dasein* is [whether *Dasein* ready-to-hand, present-at-hand, or becoming], it too *is already its ‘not yet’*” (qtd. Bushell 224). In Bushell’s paraphrase, “*Dasein* directs itself toward part of itself to reconsider and reinterpret anew” (225), and Bushell suggests, in this spirit, that imagination directs itself toward ever-emerging draft materials. Heidegger cares not so much about self-renewal or self-reinterpretation through manuscript production as about the ephemerality of being (always shading into non-being), but Bushell’s appropriation of

Heideggerian authenticity works well enough for her conclusion, providing its provocative, not to say violent, juxtapositions of forms and ideas.

For all its merits, the flaws in this book are large enough to be sometimes distracting. A bewildering proliferation of the kinds and variations of intention—programmatic, contingent, final, unfulfilled, revised; accidental and unconscious intended meaning; consciously intended unintentionality—makes the head swim, and ache (62-8). Chapter 3, moreover, is overly schematic. Unwieldy sentences, scattered throughout, bounce off the frontal lobes, e.g., “In the case of textual self-extension the mediation of body with the world also appears to the writer to occur to prepare the way for the mediation of consciousness with the world through language” (231). Sometimes this book relies too heavily on other secondary sources; its discussion of Wordsworth’s preference for orality over writing (100-4), for instance, goes no further than has Andrew Bennett, who highlights Wordsworth’s “inevitable paradox of a writer writing about his poetry as speech” (qtd. Bushell 104). Repetitive at times, the book introduces theories (e.g., Searle’s on 52-3) only to reiterate them when applied to a poet (e.g., to Wordsworth on 90-1); in fairness, this arrangement ensures that readers interested only in Wordsworth, let us say, can learn all that the book has to tell us about him from chapter 4. In general, I would have liked to see a little less process-analysis of draft materials alone (this is where Bushell’s heart lies, though) and even more of what she *also* promises—namely, “critical integration and movement across and between *avant-texte* and text” (best illustrated, perhaps, in her *Idylls* discussion).

But the book is still worth reading. Even if Bushell’s style and procedure do not always please her readers, her content will certainly instruct them. While she admits that

she could not afford to reproduce as many manuscripts as she wanted to use (264n.65), and while the cost of doing so—even if some are available online—might well restrict the growth of “compositional criticism,” Bushell has laid out a reasonable compromise. She well describes some draft materials and judiciously selects eighteen illustrations that form the focus of her most sustained discussions; thus she advocates “an editorial tension between allowing material to speak for itself and presenting that material in a form that readers are able and willing to respond to” (169). She sensibly compromises, too, by striking a careful balance between *just* reproducing manuscripts vs. *interpreting* them. A courteous scholar, Bushell does not write for “compositional critics” alone.

Seldom taking her approach too seriously, and often entertaining opposed ideas, she brings her “multiple audiences” (8) with her, for the space of this book, at least, “backwards and forwards between *avant-texte* and text.” She asks, forthrightly, “Is genetic criticism a theory of criticism or just helpful advice, something like: keep in mind that manuscripts can also contribute to the understanding of literature?” (28). Just when her readers may well be formulating their own versions of Charles Lamb’s “Disenchantments of an Original MS,” she quotes Lamb’s conclusion, “I will never go into the workshop of any great artist again” (75). Bushell’s adaptation of Euro-Continental methodology to Anglo-American habitat beckons even skeptical old lay readers like me into that very laboratory, there to test text-as-process theory on fresh objects of practical literary analysis (“there is much more to be done” [237]).

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