

Romantic Poetic Identity and the English Lake District

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While it is widely accepted that the English Lake District played a key role in the development of British Romanticism, our understanding of cultural attitudes to the Lakes in the early nineteenth century is dominated by Wordsworthian perspectives. The complex and often uneasy response of other Romantic poets to the Lakes has tended to be sidelined. This article reconsiders the attitudes of several Romantic-era poets to both the Lakes and to the Lake Poets, and argues that public and poetic responses to this place played a key role in the formation of individual Romantic identity. This article begins with the original Lake Poets and considers the misleading construction of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey as a regionally based 'school' of poets in contemporary reviews. It considers the effects of this identification on Coleridge and Southey and explores why both struggle with the notion of a poetic identity shaped by this region. Having begun with the original 'Lake School', the essay moves on to second-generation Romantic writers, Shelley, Keats and Byron, and considers the ways in which they negotiate their identity as poets in relation to the Lakes. The article argues that, with the exception of Wordsworth, the canonical Romantic poets have a deeply problematic relationship with the Lake District. It goes on to propose, however, that it is possible to find other more positive Romantic poetic responses if we move from the canonical centre to the margins. The article concludes by looking briefly at how an alternative model of regional poetic identity is shaped in the work of two relatively obscure Romantic-era poets, John Wilson and Isabella Lickbarrow.

The Lake Poets

THE term 'Lake Poets' has passed into our language and into our accounts of the cultural life of Cumbria during the Romantic period. The picture it suggests, however, of a group of poets working together in this region during the Romantic period and sharing a regionally-inspired identity, is largely an inaccurate and misleading one.¹ The poets who came to constitute this group were brought together initially through a political connection and subsequently because of a perceived poetic connection, rather than as a result of any regional affiliations; Southey and Coleridge were first linked together in 1797 – several years before they took up residence in the Lakes – as belonging to a 'NEW SCHOOL' of poetry on the basis of shared radical principles, and following Wordsworth's and Coleridge's collaboration in 1798 on the *Lyrical Ballads* the 'new school' idea was taken up to refer to the perceived poetic innovations of these poets.² It is not until 1807 that any specifically regional link came to be overlaid on the original construction of the 'school' of poets. The first mention of a geographical connection appears in a review of Wordsworth in which Jeffries refers to 'a certain brotherhood of poets, who have haunted for some years about the Lakes of Cumberland'.³ Ironically, Coleridge had by this date already abandoned permanent residence in the Lakes and the notion of a poetic brotherhood which he might have once cherished had been irrevocably lost. It is nonetheless through this review and the subsequent repeated use of such terminology in the reviews of the period (the 'Bards of the Lake', the 'Lakers', the 'Lake Poets', the 'Lake School')

that the idea of a regionally-based group of Romantic poets took hold. The terms are used in an almost exclusively derogatory way during this period and the predominant characteristic of the 'school' is defined by Cook as 'adherence to false poetic principles and affectations of diction'.⁴ While the term 'Lake Poet' originates as a convenient but artificial label created by contemporary reviewers, it does go on to become an important branding concept in relation to which several key Romantic poets attempt to negotiate their own poetic identity.

For Wordsworth of course the 'Lake Poet' label took on a retrospective significance. In his case it came to have a valuable and altered meaning as a poet whose identity is fundamentally shaped by and bound up with the landscape of the Lakes and who became, in Bate's terms, 'the founding father for thinking of poetry in relation to place, to our dwelling upon the earth'.⁵ For Wordsworth, this identification with the Lakes was certainly central to the development of his poetic identity. Following his arrival in Grasmere in December 1799, he clearly sets out to establish a geographically-inspired identity, and to stake an imaginative claim on this territory in poems such as 'Home at Grasmere' and the 'Poems on the Naming of Places'. In the early years of the nineteenth century he repeatedly depicts his life as one of poetic 'retirement' within his 'native mountains' and produces a poetry which is intimately and overtly bound up with this place.⁶ Wordsworth's poetic identification with the region has been a regular focus of critical attention from the Romantic period to the present. It has been subject to detailed critical analysis and is not the concern of this essay.⁷ Rather, the focus here is on those other responses which have been silenced by the dominance of the Wordsworthian perspective. Returning to those Romantic poets who follow in Wordsworth's wake try to find inspiration in the environs of the Lake District allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complex role played by the Lake District in the development of poetry in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Coleridge is the first poet to come to the Lake District as a direct result of Wordsworth's presence here. He comes just six months after the Wordsworths settled in Grasmere with the intention of continuing the collaborative poetic work begun in Somerset and with a view to developing shared poetic interests further. While Coleridge continued to be defined by his contemporaries as a Lake Poet throughout the Regency period, his main period of residence in the Lakes is from the summer of 1800 to early 1804, and the transience of his stay in the region is itself revealing. Coleridge arrives during the monumental year in which Wordsworth begins to establish his own identity as a poet of place, and his own arrival is celebrated auspiciously with a picnic with the Wordsworths on the island in Grasmere lake, during which the party danced around a bonfire. His immediate reactions to his new home, Greta Hall, are deeply enthusiastic and he writes that living here 'I shall have a tendency to become a God – so sublime and beautiful will be the series of my visual existence'.⁸

One of Coleridge's chief aims on arrival is to find inspiration within the Lakes landscape to complete his partially written 'Christabel', and the large section of book two of this poem which was completed at Keswick reveals a fascinatingly different imaginative response to the landscape from that of Wordsworth and a nascent alternative model of Lake Poet. Here the 'legendary north', as Holmes terms it, offers a landscape of

‘daylight witchery’⁹ as a fitting backdrop to the increasingly strange narrative of the poem:

In Langdale Pike and Witch’s Lair,
 And Dungeon-ghyll so foully rent,
 With ropes of rock and bells of air
 Three sinful sextons’ ghosts are pent,
 Who all give back, one after t’other,
 The death-note to their living brother;
 And oft too, by the knell offended,
 Just as their one ! two ! three ! is ended,
 The devil mocks the doleful tale
 With a merry peal from Borodale.¹⁰

Coleridge had already begun to shape a distinctive poetic identity through his initial collaborative work on *Lyrical Ballads* in which his primary contribution was to be a poetry influenced by ideas of the ‘supernatural’, and his response to the Lakes landscape shows that he intended to develop that style of poetry further here.¹¹ Coleridge identifies Gothic elements in the landscape from the outset and in so doing seems to recognise a potential for psychological horror rather than solace. Coleridge’s first poetic treatment of the landscape offers clues as to those elements of his imagination which would be a factor in his subsequent rejection of the Lakes, since it suggests the more disturbing meanings which could be elicited by this wild northern climate and landscape.

Despite the progress made with ‘Christabel’, Coleridge rapidly begins to experience a resurgence of the doubts about his own poetic capabilities which had beset him at Somerset. He struggles to finish the poem and a more fundamental crisis of poetic identity is precipitated by Wordsworth’s decision not to include the poem in the new edition of *Lyrical Ballads*.¹² In rejecting ‘Christabel’ Wordsworth was also effectively rejecting Coleridge’s role as a collaborator and the vision of a shared poetic identity which Coleridge had cherished in coming to the Lakes starts to disintegrate. Coleridge begins a well-documented descent into depression which seems to have been exacerbated by the Cumbrian climate itself; his rheumatic condition was aggravated by the damp weather and as a result he became increasingly dependent on the notorious Kendal Black Drop. Ill-health, rejection, doubts as to his poetic powers and a growing dependence on opium combine to make the final months in Keswick one of the worst periods of Coleridge’s life.

Coleridge’s struggles in the Lakes culminate poetically in ‘Dejection: An Ode’, a poem in which those darker emotions suggested by the landscape in ‘Christabel’ are realised more fully in personal psychological terms. The poem is also a riposte to the Wordsworthian response to the Lakes and argues that the physical outward beauty of nature cannot provide healing for those who are inwardly broken or unhappy: ‘I may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within’.¹³ Feeling that his own internal sources of light are missing, Coleridge is left with ‘viper thoughts’ and ‘Reality’s dark dream’.¹⁴ For Coleridge, depressed and unhappy, the sound of the wind howling round the house becomes a powerful metaphor for the effects of this place on his own poetry:

. . . What a scream
 Of agony by torture lengthened out
 That lute sent forth! Thou Wind, that ravest without,
 Bare craig, or mountain-tairn, or blasted tree,
 Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb,
 Or lonely house, long held the witches' home,
 Methinks were fitter instruments for thee,
 Mad Lutanist!¹⁵

The 'scream' which is 'sent forth' from the lute seems to express the internal torment experienced by Coleridge, which found echoes rather than comfort in this landscape. Although this poem was not written until 1802, Coleridge's disillusionment with the Lakes seems to have set in only months after his arrival at Keswick. In March 1801, he wrote that 'The Poet is dead in me – my imagination ... lies, like a Cold Snuff on the circular Rim of a Brass Candle-stick, without even a stink of Tallow to remind you that it was once cloathed & mitred with Flame'.¹⁶ During the remaining years of his residence here he had largely abandoned hopes of a poetic community in the Lakes and while he experienced occasional bursts of energy and periods of renewed personal creativity, he also spent a great deal of time considering different possibilities for his future life, most of which involved escaping from the north of England. In a way, the experience of living in the Lakes at the turn of the nineteenth century is as pivotal for Coleridge as it is for Wordsworth, but in a much more negative sense. Many of the psychological problems aggravated by the stay here remain a source of conflict in his work for the remainder of his life. The 'Lake Poet' label with which he had become associated functioned as a significant source of irritation, and a painful reminder of his earlier dream for a Lake District poetic community – a dream which he was well aware had never been realised.

Coleridge's brother-in-law, Robert Southey, had come initially to the Lakes at Coleridge's invitation and with little inclination to settle in the north, but ironically he becomes the poetic figure most closely associated with the Lakes after Wordsworth, remaining at Greta Hall from 1803 until his death in 1843. Although canonical within the original construction of the Lake Poets, Southey has subsequently shifted to the margins of both our understanding of Romanticism and our construction of literature and the Lake District in the Romantic period. Ironically, Southey's identification as a Lake Poet in part contributed to the decline in his reputation. Nicholson describes him disparagingly as 'Lord High Admiral of the Water Poets' and notes that:

on none of [the Lake Poets] does the name ring more falsely than on Robert Southey. You might say that his only claim to the title was a residential qualification. For he was never a poet, and very little of his long and honourable labours had anything to do with the Lakes. Yet, of that group of literary settlers, he was – oddly enough – the central figure.¹⁷

More recently, Chandler has argued that:

Robert Southey's personal and geographical association with the other 'Lake Poets,' Wordsworth and Coleridge, has affected his reputation since the mid-1790s. ... A strong case could be made that nothing actually damaged Southey's reputation more than the assumption that he was primarily a poet, and a 'Lake Poet' to boot, for he devoted much of his writing life to prose, while the 'Lake' tag carried Wordsworthian implications of local attachment and response to nature that Southey's works were ill-equipped to support.¹⁸

Both Chandler and Nicholson are right to question Southey's identity as a Lake Poet and to argue for the impact this has had on his subsequent reputation, yet he does offer us a glimpse of an alternative Romantic response to the Lakes, especially in the years following his appointment as Poet Laureate. In one of his most significant Laureate poems, *The Poet's Pilgrimage to Waterloo* (1816), Southey describes himself as a 'Cumbrian mountaineer' and makes his first attempt to identify himself as a poet in terms of this landscape, as he travels forth from and returns to Keswick on his great Laureate journey to survey the battle fields of England's recent triumph over Napoleon.¹⁹ Skiddaw rears symbolically over his home, a 'monarch of the scene' and life at Greta is depicted as a scene of national and domestic harmony, which has been protected by the defeat of the 'Man of Blood'.²⁰ Within the poem the Lakes takes on a wider symbolic significance in the sections describing the celebrations mounted on Skiddaw to mark the nation's final victory against Napoleon:

And we did well, when on our Mountain's height
For Waterloo we raised the festal flame,
And in our triumph taught the startled night
To ring with Wellington's victorious name,
Making the far-off mariner admire
To see the crest of Skiddaw plumed with fire.²¹

Southey, Wordsworth and other neighbours not only built a bonfire on the summit and danced around the fire singing 'God Save the King' but also celebrated the event with roast beef and plum pudding, thus symbolically consuming England in a eucharistic ceremony of thanksgiving; paganism, nationalism and Christianity blur in this event and the role of the landscape is crucial in conveying the symbolic meaning of the celebrations. Skiddaw figures as the first point of land to have risen up above the biblical waters: 'above the abating Flood / Emerging, first that pinnacle arose'.²² As a result, the impressive summit offers a physical reminder of God's original covenant with man and is thus a 'Fit Theatre for this great joy'; from here Southey is granted a nationalist vision of England as a site where 'From bodily and mental bondage . . . / Hath man his full emancipation gain'd'.²³ England's victory is shown to be a result of her own moral superiority and Skiddaw comes to function as a reminder of God's later covenant with England in bringing the nation securely and victoriously through the conflict with the French. In the poem Southey's symbolic reading of the landscape and his close identification with the region functions to reinforce his status as England's national poet. Ironically, while the Lake Poets remained linked in the public imagination to the republican ties which had first connected them in the contemporary reviews, it is during the period of Southey's residence in the Lakes that the full movement from young republican poet to the mature poetic voice of nation and patriotism is realised. While Chandler describes Wordsworth's attempts to fix Southey as a poet of place in the commemorative verses written on Southey's death as a 'distorting Wordsworthian biography', Southey does come to explore and construct key aspects of his poetic identity in relation to this place.²⁴ In his case, though, this is an identity bound up in Tory notions of nationhood, with the Lakes functioning as a pastoral jewel in England's crown and the symbol of the nation's covenant with God. Southey was not merely a Lake Poet, but the Laureate of the Lakes, and it is in this capacity that he formulates his mature poetic identity and stakes a claim to imaginative ownership of this territory.

Second-generation Romantic poets and the Lakes

For the second-generation Romantic poets a negotiation with the Lake Poet group was a crucial element in the development of their own poetic identity since, to some extent, all were directly or indirectly influenced by the work of the first-generation poets. Byron, Shelley and Keats all display some form of engagement with the 'Lake School' of poetry in their own youthful attempts at identity definition and all three ultimately reject the Lakes and what it came to stand for in the process of defining themselves as poets, turning instead to what was offered geographically, culturally and politically by the cosmopolitan contexts of southern Europe or London.

Both Shelley and Keats make brief forays into the Lake District and for the former the primary interest is Southey, whom at this stage Shelley still perceived as an exponent of republican values. The young and recently married Shelley moved to Keswick for three months from November 1811 to the beginning of February of the following year. The visit was unplanned and impulsive, and was precipitated by the sexual overtures of Shelley's friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg towards Harriet Shelley rather than triggered by poetic motives. Shelley describes himself as 'indifferent' to their destination but having arrived does begin to document an initially passionate response to the landscape:

I have taken a long *solitary* ramble today. These gigantic mountains piled on each other, these waterfalls, these million shaped clouds tinted by varying colours of innumerable rainbows hanging between yourself and a lake as smooth and dark as a plain of polished jet – oh! these are sights admirable to the contemplative! I have been much struck by the grandeur of its imagery. Nature here sports in the awful waywardness of her solitude; the summit[s] of the loftiest of these immense piles of rock seem but to elevate Skiddaw and Helvellyn; Imagination is resistlessly compelled to look back upon the myriad ages whose silent change place them here, to look back when, perhaps this retirement of peace and mountain simplicity, was the Pandemonium of druidical imposture[.]²⁵

Shelley's reading of the place as a 'retirement of peace and mountain simplicity' seems absorbed from a reading of Wordsworth rather than of Southey, since at this point Southey's poetry bears virtually no traces of the influence of this landscape. Nonetheless, from the outset, what Shelley finds so promising and appealing are the potentially radical implications of a life lived in the Lakes: 'Oh! give me a little cottage in that scene, let all live in peaceful little houses, let temples and palaces rot with their perishing masters'.²⁶

Although the 19-year-old Shelley clearly contemplates the landscape and the possibilities it offers both politically and imaginatively, he does not commit these reflections to poetry and produces very little verse at all during the months spent in the Lakes. His letters make clear that his primary interest in the region is not so much the landscape but the Lake Poets themselves and, although he refers to Wordsworth on a couple of occasions, for Shelley the central figure is Southey.²⁷ Less than a week after his arrival he notes Southey's proximity and admits 'contemplating the outside of his house', later commenting that 'The scenery here is awfully beautiful ... but the object most interesting to my feelings is Southey's habitation'.²⁸ Southey was absent from Keswick during the first few weeks of Shelley's arrival but Shelley notes that he plans to 'pay homage to' this '*really* great man' on his return.²⁹ By late December Shelley

and Southey finally meet and ironically it is this much anticipated meeting which triggers Shelley's rejection of the Lakes and what it represents. While Shelley imagines Southey to be still 'an advocate of liberty and equality' he is rapidly disillusioned with the older poet's political views which had by this date shifted from their early youthful radicalism. Shelley's response to the Lakes itself sours almost simultaneously with his rejection of Southey as mentor.³⁰ In early January he attacks both Southey and the region in the same letter, describing Southey's mind as 'terribly narrow' and 'corrupted by the world, contaminated by Custom', and going on to write of Keswick:

tho the face of the country is lovely the *people* are detestable. The manufacturers with their contamination have crept into the peaceful vale and deformed the loveliness of Nature with human taint. The debauched servants of the great families who resort contribute to the total extinction of morality. Keswick seems more like a suburb of London than a village of Cumberland.³¹

Finding Southey's political principles fundamentally altered and the place itself on further scrutiny not conforming to the ideals of Romantic poetic seclusion and peaceful liberty, Shelley abandons the Lakes never to return. On 3 February he writes from Whitehaven (a 'miserable manufacturing seaport Town') that 'I passed Southey's house without *one* sting. – He is a man who *may* be amiable in his *private* character stained and false as is his public one'.³²

Shelley's rejection of the Lakes and Southey at this juncture is crucial since he was still trying to define and understand his own sense of himself as a poet. The Lakes visit had far-reaching repercussions for Shelley since it is during his time here that he struck up an epistolary acquaintance with another older mentor-figure, who would henceforth become the defining influence on his development as a poet. His first letter to William Godwin was written at Keswick on 3 January 1812, less than two weeks into his acquaintance with Southey, and it seems likely that it was Southey who gave Shelley Godwin's address.³³ During the next month he writes and receives replies to four lengthy letters to Godwin and when reading these letters alongside those in which he comes to reject Southey it is apparent that he is shifting his allegiances. By November of this year he had finally met Godwin and by 1813 *Queen Mab*, his first really significant political poem, had been published. Within the Shelley narrative the overall significance of his encounter with the Lakes has tended to be overlooked, but though his residence in the region covers only a very brief period, his negotiation with – and eventual turning away from – the Lakes and from Southey is crucial in terms of the making of the poet he would become, and represents a most significant turning point in his early poetic career.

Six years after Shelley's visit, during the summer of 1818, John Keats set out on a Northern tour which was much more explicitly and self-consciously planned as a route to poetic development and which was largely inspired by Keats's reading of Wordsworth. *The Excursion* was published in 1814 and in January 1818 Keats had described the poem as one of the 'three things to rejoice at in this Age'.³⁴ Immediately prior to the trip Keats's *Endymion* had been published and received notoriously bad reviews. Keats himself seems to have felt at this point that something was lacking and he draws on Wordsworth's own trajectory as a model for his own improvement, noting in a letter written to his brother on arrival in the Lakes: 'I shall learn poetry here

and shall henceforth write more than ever, for the abstract endeavour of being able to add a mite to that mass of beauty which is harvested from these grand materials, by the finest spirits'.³⁵ The whole tour was to play a vital role in the development of Keats's poetry and poetic identity. Watson refers to it as a 'very significant episode in Keats's life, and ... a necessary step forward in his poetical apprenticeship', noting that the 'whole experience had important repercussions for his poetry'.³⁶ It was indeed a vital turning point for Keats but ironically what Keats discovers in the Lakes is an understanding of what he needed to define himself *against*.

The letter written to his brother on arrival in the Lakes tells of Keats's initial enthusiastic response to the spectacles of Windermere and Stockgylhll Force but also contains hints of disillusionment from this very early stage. Keats, like Shelley before him, had to face up to both the reality of what the fashionable Lakes was in these years and the altered political opinions of the older poet-mentor figures identified with the region. He had expected to find Wordsworth living in seclusion with nature; what he found instead was the Lakes in full tourist season with 'Lord Wordsworth' and 'his house full in the thick of fashionable visitors'.³⁷ The Wordsworthian landscape is itself 'disfigured' by the 'miasma of London'; it is 'contaminated with bucks and soldiers, and women of fashion'.³⁸ He discovers on arrival that Wordsworth, far from 'living in retirement' amongst his 'native mountains', is away from home canvassing for the local Tory candidate in what Keats describes as a 'sad' abandonment of his political principles. While Keats goes on to admire aspects of the scenery, the impact of this disillusionment stays with him and there is a perfunctory quality to Keats's Lakes tour which suggests that he did not find what he sought here. He makes the staple visits and moves on, registering very little disappointment when the prerequisite visit to Rydal Mount is made and he finds the Wordsworths away. Far from 'learning poetry here' the visit to the Lakes stimulates virtually no poetry in Keats at all. He produces only a couple of insignificant verses until he crosses the border into Scotland and enters Burns's country. Once outside Wordsworth's demesne there is a marked and sudden return of poetic inspiration and Keats produces more than a dozen very various poems which are a direct result of the Scottish part of the expedition, including reflections on visiting the literary shrines associated with Burns, poems in the Scottish dialect and an interesting reflection on the experience of his tour, 'Lines Written in the Highlands after a Visit to Burns's Country'. The relative poetic silence during the Lakes part of the expedition is significant and reflects on Keats's ongoing negotiation with Wordsworth as a poetic-role model.

While Keats's early ambitions for the northern tour were not realised, the visit to the Lakes has a direct impact on the development of Keats's most significant and life-changing perceptions about poetry. He returned to Hampstead on 19 August and by October he had finally theorised in a letter to Richard Woodhouse his famous declaration of his own poetic distinction from Wordsworth, a distinction which emerged forcefully for Keats only as a result of his visit:

As to the poetical character itself (I mean that sort, of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian or egotistical Sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone), it is not itself – it has no self – It is every thing and nothing – It has no character.³⁹

Keats's formulation of the Wordsworthian 'egotistical sublime' is crucial to his development as a poet and some of the ideas behind this defining statement can be traced in the poem on which Keats also began to work that autumn and which was finally published as *Hyperion. A Fragment*. He had begun to plan the poem prior to his tour of the Lakes and had clearly intended this experience to feed into and inspire the poem. The trip did not provide what Keats had expected it to provide but *Hyperion* nonetheless remains his most important literary response to the Lakes. Here he draws on the Lakes landscape for his setting and presents an allegory of the poetic revelation he had experienced on the tour in his portrayal of the overthrow of the older Titans, Saturn and Hyperion, by the youthful God of poetry, Apollo. The northern landscape becomes a fitting, dark backdrop to the battle of the gods and the groans of the 'bruised Titans' are drowned out by 'the solid roar / Of thunderous waterfalls and torrents hoarse'.⁴⁰ Although a number of possible meanings cluster round the figure of Saturn, at one level he seems to symbolise Wordsworth and here the landscape frames Keats's conceptualisation of an imaginative rebellion between himself and the older poet. The opening lines suggest Keats's youthful vision of the Lake Poet as a fallen god within his 'lair':

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
 Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
 Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,
 Sat gray-haired Saturn, quiet as a stone,
 Still as the silence round about his lair;
 . . .
 A stream went voiceless by, still deadened more
 By reason of his fallen divinity
 . . .
 Upon the sodden ground
 His old right hand lay nerveless, listless, dead,
 Unsceptred; and his realmless eyes were closed;
 While his bowed head seemed listening to the Earth,
 His ancient mother, for some comfort yet.⁴¹

In depicting the older poet as 'quiet as stone', passively listening for some 'comfort' from his 'ancient mother' earth, Keats reaches an acceptance that Wordsworth is symbolically dead and no longer a vital source of poetic inspiration. While *Hyperion* never became the full epic project envisaged prior to his northern tour and remained unfinished, Keats does seem to have achieved what he needed to in the fragment; crucially what he represents in the poem is his rejection of the older poet as mentor and his need to establish a clear sense of his own individual poetic identity as distinct from the Wordsworthian model.

While Byron makes no youthful pilgrimage to the Lakes, his responses to the Lake Poets in his poetry indicate that this group of poets was crucial in terms of what he establishes his own poetry against. In the 1818 Dedication to *Don Juan* he publically and infamously rejects the model of poetic identity associated with the Lake District. Like Shelley before him, Byron places Southey centre stage within the Lakes coterie and groups as satellites around him, Coleridge – who 'too, has lately taken wing' and is busy 'Explaining metaphysics to the nation' – and Wordsworth, who:

in a rather long 'Excursion'

...
 Has given a sample from the hasty version
 Of his new system to perplex the sages;
 'Tis poetry – at least by his assertion.⁴²

The poem goes on to ridicule the negative consequences of the group's isolation in their remote northern region:

You – Gentlemen! by dint of long seclusion
 From better company, have kept your own
 At Keswick, and, through still continued fusion
 Of one another's minds, at last have grown
 To deem as a most logical conclusion,
 That Poesy has wreaths for you alone:
 There is a narrowness in such a notion,
 Which makes me wish you'd change your lakes for ocean.⁴³

Byron draws on the wider public ridicule levied at the Lake Poets in contemporary reviews and constructs his own poetry and poetic identity in opposition to the Lakes model. He challenges these poets whose inspiration he perceives to be limited by remote geographical landscapes and narrowed by a self-reflexivity that is the by-product of their isolation. The counterpoint to this is a poet who is cosmopolitan, a traveller, one whose work is inspired by other cultures and experiences, potentially exotic ones. Byron's public attacks on the Lake Poets reveal that even towards the end of the Regency period, other poets continued to negotiate with the Lakes 'brand' in their own acts of self-definition. Ironically – given the initial political identification of the poets who would make up the central Lakes coterie – as the nineteenth century progressed, their identification with the remote northern rural Lakes came to be associated with a perceived abandonment of their earlier radical political principles, whilst their geographical affiliations become symbolic of their removal from the wider social and political networks of the nineteenth century.

Alternative Lake Poets: Wilson and Lickbarrow

So far my attention has been given to those poets who have long been identified as central to our understanding of Romanticism and with the exception of Wordsworth these poets offer relatively unsatisfactory alternative Romantic engagements with the Lakes. To conclude, I want to turn to two lesser-known poets of the period who lived and worked within the region and who offer a very different model of Lake Poet identity from Wordsworth, but one which is nonetheless successfully negotiated in relation to this place. The first is John Wilson, a vigorous and energetic young Scot who purchased an estate near the shores of Windermere in 1808. He lived there until 1815 and continued to return at intervals throughout his life following his appointment as professor at Edinburgh University. Wilson has become most famous in Romantic contexts for his work as a reviewer and for his long-running series of comic dialogues for *Blackwood's* written under the pseudonym of Christopher North. His identity as a Lake Poet has tended to be sidelined. Nonetheless, he moved within the main literary Lakes circle during the Romantic period and while living here produced his most

important poetic collection, *The Isle of Palms and other Poems* (1812). On the basis of this publication he was described in early reviews as:

a new recruit to the company of lake poets;- and one who, from his present bearing, promises, we think not only to do them good service, and to rise to high honours in the corps; but to raise its name, and advance its interests even among the tribe of the unbelievers.⁴⁴

Wilson was a regular companion of the Wordsworths and their circle during the time of his residence in Windermere and a description of him by another fellow Laker, Harriet Martineau, suggests that he was a deeply charismatic figure:

More than one person has said that Wilson reminded them of the first man, Adam; so full was his large frame of vitality, force, and sentience. His tread seemed to shake the ground, and his glance pierce through stone walls; and, as for his voice, there was no heart that could stand before it...[.] Every old boatman and young angler, every hoary shepherd and primitive dame among the hills of the district, knew him and enjoyed his presence.⁴⁵

Nicholson is rather more critical in his account of Wilson in *The Lakers* but he does suggest that he was ‘the first man to respond, with the whole of his bodily being to the challenge of the Lakes. To him what the Lakes offered above all else was the physical stimulus of air, sunlight, space, and water’; he ‘anticipated the freedom of the present-day hiker’.⁴⁶ Nicholson largely dismisses Wilson’s poetry, but *The Isle of Palms* is shaped by Wilson’s very physical response to the region and presents an interesting alternative model of Lakes-inspired poetry. Wilson is primarily drawn to wilder, more remote locations such as Wastwater and to the Lakes landscape in the hours of darkness or during stormy turbulent conditions. These locations and elements find an answering response in Wilson as a poet and a man which would not be found in solitary daylight excursions around the undulating vale of Grasmere. He seems to find in these more terrifying landscapes a reflection of his own energy and physical power. In a particularly evocative sonnet, ‘Written at Midnight, on Helm-Crag’, he ventures into Wordsworth’s own geographical territory but the temporal setting transforms the experience:

Go up among the mountains, when the storm
Of midnight howls, but go in that wild mood,
When the soul loves tumultuous solitude,
And through the haunted air, each giant form
Of swinging pine, black rock, or ghostly cloud,
That veils some fearful cataract tumbling loud,
Seems to thy breathless heart with life imbued.
‘Mid those gaunt, shapeless things thou art alone!
The mind exists, thinks, trembles through the ear[.]⁴⁷

Wilson’s poetic response to the landscape here is very different from that of Wordsworth. It is triggered by the intensely physical experience of the night-time climb in which the violence of the midnight storm on the mountain’s summit seems to literally pulse through Wilson’s mind and body.

Wilson’s developing poetic identity emerges more clearly in one of the longer poems from the collection, ‘The Angler’s Tent’, a poem which records a fishing and camping trip at Wastwater made in the summer of 1809 by Wordsworth, De Quincey and Wilson.

From the outset the poem is attuned to ideas of poetic identity and Wilson carefully establishes his own identity as separate from that of Wordsworth 'whose inspired song / Comes forth in pomp from Nature's inner shrine' and to whom 'by birth-right such high themes belong, / The unseen grandeur of the earth is thine'; to himself he takes only 'One lowlier simple strain of human love'.⁴⁸ While Wilson is ostensibly giving due deference to Wordsworth's status, there is also surely a slightly Wilsonish dig (this is after all the man who would become notorious for his scathing reviews in *Blackwood's*) in the idea of Wordsworth's poems 'coming forth in pomp'. While exploring a number of Romantic concerns, the poem is as much a rejection of Wordsworthian practices as anything else since this is a poem which celebrates human companionship rather than solitude, activity and noise rather than silence, and energy rather than quiet contemplation. In doing so it presents a very different Romantic poetic response to the experience of living among this landscape.

While Wordsworth might have lingered over the solitary tranquillity of an angling expedition Wilson's impulses are primarily towards the social. Word of the 'stranger tent / Seen by the lake-side gleaming like a sail' is 'quickly spread' among the 'lonely dwellers' of this wild and remote place, and soon shepherds and scattered dwellers of the nearby hamlets gather 'to view our wondrous cell'.⁴⁹ Over half of the poem is focussed on the scenes of sociability which follow this disruption of their solitude as a 'gladsome crowd' appears and is miraculously crammed into the tent, 'Like some wild dwelling built in fairy land'.⁵⁰ The 'airy pyramid' becomes a 'joyous scene' where 'loving hearts from distant vales did meet / As at some rural festival'.⁵¹ As a poet Wilson revels in the rich communal discourse which ensues; they indulge in tales of travel and discussion of politics as well conversing of local sports and pastimes. The party drink wine and the village girls sing ballads. There is a dream-like Shakespearian feel to the whole episode and especially in the sudden arrival of 'a virgin band' of local girls who appear in a boat from across the water and all 'gay-moving hand in hand / Into our tent they go, a beauteous sister band!'⁵² Wilson finds the whole experience strangely exhilarating. He describes being 'moved to happiness in our inmost blood' and 'the unexpected cheer, / Breaking like sunshine on a pensive mood'.⁵³ For Wilson the experience functions to reaffirm 'common brotherhood' and this is confirmed at the end of the poem when he notes that as the party breaks up, 'deep in every breast / Peace, virtue, friendship, and affect, After the girls finally depart there is a moment when the men stand stranded and desolate: 'Like mariners some ship hath left behind, / . . . speechless and alone' but suddenly the echoes of the departing visitors singing and shouting their farewells are heard; a 'mystic noise' a 'fairy rout' and a 'din of mirth' sound around the hills from the summit of Great Gable and the 'remotest depths of Ennerdale'.⁵⁵ The deep silence of the Lake and valley which returns after the echoes themselves begin to fade is undermined by the memory of the 'lively images of mirth and glee' and Wilson describes his determination to challenge nature's quiet forces with man's sociability; to 'kindle on the earth, this night ... a joyous fire' which will 'drown' the 'feeble rays' of both the 'haughty' moon and the stars.⁵⁶ 'One' of their group – possibly De Quincey – like a 'lone maniac' snatches up from the fire a 'blazing bough' and 'as he waved it, mutter deep a vow, / His head circled with a wreath of fire'.⁵⁷ The lines echo images from 'Kubla Khan' and elsewhere in the poem Wilson seems to draw on the imaginative exotic geography of that poem in his construction of

the remote wildness of Wastwater as a fitting spot for these ‘mystic orgies’.

Wilson dedicates the poem to Dorothy Wordsworth and suggests that William’s presence at the events described will allow Mary Wordsworth, who is ‘used to loftier minstrelsy’, to accept and enjoy the poem. Wilson is very conscious throughout that this is a very different kind of poetry from that produced by Wordsworth. He couches this in terms of subservience but in fact Wilson constructs here an interesting alternative identity for himself as a Lake Poet, one which is shaped not only by a focus on wild and untamed landscapes, but also by shared communal experiences and by an interest in the older more pagan traditions which still seem relevant to lives lived among these lost valleys.

An alternative ‘Lake Poet’ persona to either Wordsworth or Wilson is constructed by Isabella Lickbarrow, a little-known contemporaneous poet who was born in Kendal of a Quaker family in 1784, and who published the bulk of her poetry in the *Westmoreland Advertiser* between 1811 and 1815. Until recently, her work has been long out of print but she is currently experiencing a revival of interest and she has recently been described as having a voice which is ‘every bit as passionate and original’ as that of Wordsworth and as displaying ‘a poetic vision as subtle and intense as that of her better-known male contemporaries’.⁵⁸ Her most important collection, *Poetic Effusions* – to which Wordsworth subscribed – was published in 1814, the same year which saw the publication of Wordsworth’s major poem of identification with the Lake District, *The Excursion*. She is thus an interesting comparative Cumbrian poetic voice and Wu observes that Lickbarrow like Wordsworth was seeing the ‘Lake District landscape in verse as if for the first time’ and was ‘finding her own way of articulating its strangeness’.⁵⁹

Although Kendal was an important market town in the Romantic period there is little sense of its busy commercial identity in Lickbarrow’s poetry. Rather, Lickbarrow is drawn to the pastoral side of ‘Kendal’s lovely vale’ – Underbarrow Scar, the woods, the ‘rocky hillocks’, the ‘rock-imprison’d rivers’ and the lonely landscapes away from the town’s centre.⁶⁰ Lickbarrow’s landscape is clearly gendered in a way that recalls the gendering of places in Wordsworth’s ‘Poems on the Naming of Places’. In the ‘Naming’ poems Wordsworth identifies the significant women in his life with hidden glades and secret dells, while he himself is associated with Stone Arthur, a precipice towering over the vale, and the same transaction occurs in Lickbarrow where the fells are masculinised (‘blue Helvellyn lifts his lofty head /... The monarch of the hills’) and the woods, dells and glades feminised.⁶¹ It is to the latter that Lickbarrow is drawn and her own identity as a poet is closely wrapped up with such feminised landscapes. She repeatedly retreats to secret, lonely, womb-like spaces: ‘most conceal’d recesses’, ‘lovely vale, deep bosom’d’, ‘loneliest haunts’, the ‘sweet sequester’d vale’ and the ‘dell of wilderness’.⁶² The spirit of poetry and the spirit of place are both feminised and merged in her poetry; she figures the inspiration which comes to her in these places as a female ‘woodland Genius’ who is depicted as a kind of wood nymph.⁶³ Like Wilson, Lickbarrow is interested in the fantastic possibilities suggested by the landscape. Poetic imagination is depicted here as an ‘enchantress’ and she seems to draw on older literary models.⁶⁴ In her interest in the historic layering of ruined abbeys and

castles on the landscape she harks back to the fashion for Gothic writing but we can also glimpse the influence of an older Spenserian tradition of an English landscape-literature populated by fairies, wood nymphs and naiads.

Although Lickbarrow identifies certain natural spaces as feminised, she seems to find herself here released from certain gender mores because these spaces operate outside normal social structures. In the 'Introductory Address' which opens *Poetical Effusions* and in which she very self-consciously attempts to establish her poetic identity as a poet of 'solitude' and place, she depicts a less overtly gendered self which resembles Wordsworth's descriptions of his youthful relationship with nature in his still unpublished autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*:

There, far from observation's curious eye,
Lightly I bounded o'er the elastic turf,
Ascending ev'ry rock hillock's brow,
My heart expanding as I look'd around.⁶⁵

Despite the possibilities offered to Lickbarrow by her immersion in this natural landscape, her continual emphasis on the profound sense of 'liberty' which she experiences in these secluded spaces, functions as a reminder that her excursions offer only a temporary suspension of the 'continual cares' which mark her daily life.⁶⁶ Lickbarrow's financial and domestic situation was not such as to allow for the development of a vocational poetic identity of the kind constructed by Wordsworth and the restraints on her writing come across clearly in the 'Advertisement' to *Poetical Effusions*, in which she admits having 'secretly indulged in "wooing the muse"' in snatched moments 'after the domestic employments of the day'.⁶⁷ Lickbarrow therefore provides not only an alternative kind of Lakes-inspired poetry but also a very different model of the Lake Poet, that of a woman who has to balance her poetic impulses with her domestic responsibilities and that of a writer who is able to carve out her own imaginative responses to the landscape independent of the pressures of the main cultural heartland of the Lakes literary scene.

Conclusion

McKrackran comments that 'No other great poet has so decisively influenced our consciousness of an English place as much as Wordsworth has done of the Lake District', and Wordsworth must remain the touchstone against which we define the relationship between the Lake District and British Romanticism.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, to engage more fully with the meanings and significance of this place in relation to the development of British poetry in the early nineteenth century it is important that we do look beyond Wordsworth, for though his poetic legacy is vital, it is only one key element of the Romantic narrative. Consideration of other, long over-shadowed, Romantic responses to the Lakes reveals the extent to which this region emerges as a site of complex negotiations about poetic identity during the Romantic era. When we turn to other Romantic poets one of the most striking and surprising discoveries is how far from being a universal site of poetic inspiration the Lake District actually is during the Romantic era; we certainly cannot discuss a 'Romantic response to the Lakes' as if there were a single perspective shaped by historically specific aesthetic

and cultural factors. Rather, the Lake District generated a range of possible poetic meanings and experiences which offer interesting and illuminating counterpoints to the Wordsworthian model. For the most part other Romantic poets either struggle with a Lake Poet identity or come to define themselves against what the Lakes seemed to offer in poetic terms. What is particularly interesting about the final two, less well-known, poets discussed here is that for personal and practical reasons they do not experience a significant struggle with pre-established models of poetic identity and as a result they are able to offer new kinds of regionally-inspired poetry. Wilson and Lickbarrow offer alternative models of the Lake Poet and present refreshingly different poetic responses to a landscape which is still in the process of imaginative reclamation by the self-appointed Bard of the Lakes.

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Notes and References

- ¹ Coleridge himself describes the claim that he, Wordsworth and Southey belonged to a particular 'school' as 'utterly unfounded' (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, George Watson (ed.), [New York: Dent, 1975], 29, n. 1)
- ² For a detailed account of the development of the 'Lake School' identification see Peter A. Cook, 'Chronology of the "Lake School" Argument: Some Revisions', *The Review of English Studies*, 28: 110 (May 1977), 175-81
- ³ Cited in Cook, 178
- ⁴ Cook, 179
- ⁵ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), 205
- ⁶ William Wordsworth, 'Preface', *The Excursion* (London: Moxon, 1851), vi
- ⁷ There are numerous critical discussions of Wordsworth as a poet of place; see for example: David McCracken, *Wordsworth and the Lake District* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995); Jonathan *Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environment Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991); James. A. Butler, 'Tourist or Native Son: Wordsworth's Homecomings of 1799-1800', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 51:1 (June 1996), 1-15; Ian Thompson, *The English Lakes: A History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010); Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments: The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010)
- ⁸ Cited in Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Penguin, 1989), 273
- ⁹ Holmes, 287
- ¹⁰ *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Complete Poems*, William Keach (ed.), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 2: ll, 350-59
- ¹¹ Coleridge, Watson (ed.), 168
- ¹² Dorothy Wordsworth records her brother's determination not to 'print Christabel with the LB' in October 1800 (*Dorothy Wordsworth: The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, Pamela Woof (ed.), [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002], 24)
- ¹³ Coleridge, Keach (ed.), ll. 44-5
- ¹⁴ Coleridge, Keach (ed.), ll. 94-95
- ¹⁵ Coleridge, Keach (ed.), ll. 97-104
- ¹⁶ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (vol. 2) Earl Leslie Griggs (ed.), (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 714
- ¹⁷ Norman Nicholson, *The Lakers* (Bristol: Western Printing, 1955), 113
- ¹⁸ David Chandler, 'Wordsworthian Southey: The Fashioning of a Reputation', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 34:1 (2003), 14
- ¹⁹ *Poems of Robert Southey*, Maurice H. Fitzgerald (ed.), (London: Oxford UP, 1909), Proem: l. 1 & 4; 2: l. 19
- ²⁰ Southey, Fitzgerald (ed.), Proem: ll. 1, 4 & 19
- ²¹ Southey, Fitzgerald (ed.), 2: ll. 139-44
- ²² Southey, Fitzgerald (ed.), 2: l. 144 & ll. 152-3
- ²³ Southey, Fitzgerald (ed.), 2: l. 151 & ll. 163-4

- ²⁴ Chandler, 18
- ²⁵ *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (vol. 1), Frederick Jones (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 189
- ²⁶ Shelley (ed.), Jones, 200
- ²⁷ Shelley seems to have formed a picture of Wordsworth based on odd London anecdotes. He describes him as a one-time 'associate of Southey' who 'yet retains the integrity of his independence, but his poverty is such that he is frequently obliged to beg for a shirt to his back' (Shelley, Jones (ed.), 208-9)
- ²⁸ Shelley, Jones (ed.), 174 & 183
- ²⁹ Shelley, Jones (ed.), 191
- ³⁰ Shelley, Jones (ed.), 211
- ³¹ Shelley, Jones (ed.), Jones, 223
- ³² Shelley, Jones (ed.), Jones, 248 & 249 (*sic*)
- ³³ Jones notes that 'It can hardly be doubted' that Southey not only communicated the news that Godwin, whom Shelley had thought dead, was alive but also gave Shelley Godwin's address (Jones, 220, n. 2)
- ³⁴ *The Letters of John Keats*, Maurice Buxton Forman (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 64
- ³⁵ Keats, Forman (ed.), 157
- ³⁶ J. R. Watson, *English Poetry of the Romantic Period, 1789-1830* (New York: Longman, 1985), 269
- ³⁷ Keats, Forman (ed.), 155
- ³⁸ Keats, Forman (ed.), 155
- ³⁹ Keats, Forman (ed.), 210
- ⁴⁰ *John Keats: the Complete Poems*, John Barnard (ed.), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 2: ll. 7-8
- ⁴¹ Keats, Barnard (ed.), 1: ll. 1-21
- ⁴² *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), l. 13 & 15; l. 25 and ll. 27-9
- ⁴³ Byron, ll. 33-40
- ⁴⁴ 'The Isle of Palms, and other Poems. By John Wilson', *The Edinburgh Review*, 19 (1811-2), 373
- ⁴⁵ Cited in *The Lake District: An Anthology*, Norman Nicholson (ed.), (Norfolk: Lowe and Brydone, 1977), 171
- ⁴⁶ Nicholson 1955, 143.
- ⁴⁷ John Wilson, *The Isle of Palms, and other Poems* (Edinburgh: Longman, *et al.*, 1812), 390
- ⁴⁸ Wilson, 186-7
- ⁴⁹ Wilson, 196
- ⁵⁰ Wilson, 188
- ⁵¹ Wilson, 188 & 197
- ⁵² Wilson, 194
- ⁵³ Wilson, 195
- ⁵⁴ Wilson, 200 & 208
- ⁵⁵ Wilson, 209 (*sic*)
- ⁵⁶ Wilson, 211
- ⁵⁷ Wilson, 213
- ⁵⁸ Duncan Wu, 'Out of poverty, riches', *Guardian*, Saturday 7 August 2004. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/aug/07/featuresreviews.guardianreview14> (Accessed: 24/7/09). Interest in Lickbarrow was initially provoked by Duncan Wu in an article entitled 'Isabella Lickbarrow and the Westmorland Advertiser', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 27:2 (Spring 1996), 118-26. Subsequent essays were published by Constance Parrish during the late 1990s culminating in the publication of *Isabella Lickbarrow: Collected Poems*, Constance Parrish (ed.), (Grasmere: Wordsworth Trust, 2004). Parrish's detailed biographical introduction to the *Collected Poems* represents the fullest and most detailed information we currently have on this poet
- ⁵⁹ Wu, 2004
- ⁶⁰ Lickbarrow, Parrish (ed.), 99
- ⁶¹ Lickbarrow, Parrish (ed.), 83
- ⁶² Lickbarrow, Parrish (ed.), 101, 67, 101 & 93
- ⁶³ Lickbarrow, Parrish (ed.), 101
- ⁶⁴ Lickbarrow, Parrish (ed.), 179
- ⁶⁵ Lickbarrow, Parrish (ed.), 99
- ⁶⁶ Lickbarrow, Parrish (ed.), 180
- ⁶⁷ Lickbarrow, Parrish (ed.), 97
- ⁶⁸ McCracken, *Wordsworth – and the Lake District*, 2