The Charles Lamb Bulletin

The Journal of the Charles Lamb Society

January 2010 New Series No. 149

Contents: Wordsworth Winter School Issue –

Articles in this issue were presented as lectures at the school held in Grasmere, between 16 and 21 February 2009.

Barren Rocks and Fertile Fields: The Lake District in *The Excursion* and *The Recluse*

By David Chandler

Much of Wordsworth's poetry is, in the suggestive phrase of William Michael Rossetti, 'powerfully localized'.[1] Wordsworth consistently turned to the Lake District and its inhabitants for inspiration, and both landscape and people were to feature prominently in *The Recluse*, his *magnum opus*. The current essay is about the way Wordsworth's view of the Lakes changed and developed over time, and how his poetry opens up various, sometimes contradictory, perspectives on this part of England. It pays particular attention to *The Excursion*, as this was Wordsworth's most ambitious and monumental attempt to make poetic capital out of the Lake District, and the most developed statement of his feelings concerning the place where he spent the greater part of his life. Before turning to Wordsworth's writing, however, it seems appropriate to pay some attention to the ways in which the Lake District was imagined before he began imagining it.

In any discussion of Wordsworth's 'Lake' writing it is important to keep in mind that the Lake District was only 'discovered'– discovered, at least, to be worth visiting – about twenty years before he was born. When George Smith's account of the black lead mines appeared in the popular *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1751 it effectively prompted the cult of the Lakes that became such a powerful cultural phenomenon in the following decades.[2] Before this date the central Lake District was little known, seldom visited (and not at all by sightseers), and such writing as it inspired was almost wholly negative in its appraisal. The often quoted account of Daniel Defoe, a visitor in the 1720s, gives some idea of how the Lakes appeared to a pre-Romantic eye:

> … we entred [sic] *Westmoreland*, a Country eminent only for being the wildest, most barren and frightful of any that I have passed over in *England*, or even in *Wales* it self; the West Side, which borders on Cumberland, is indeed bounded by a Chain of almost unpassable Mountains, which, in the Language of the Country, are called *Fells* … frightful Appearances to the right and left …[3]

Smith, by contrast, found in the vicinity of Keswick 'such variety of beauty as can scarce be believed upon report, or imagined by the most luxuriant fancy'.[4] His enthusiastic language heralded a remarkable shift in taste.

---

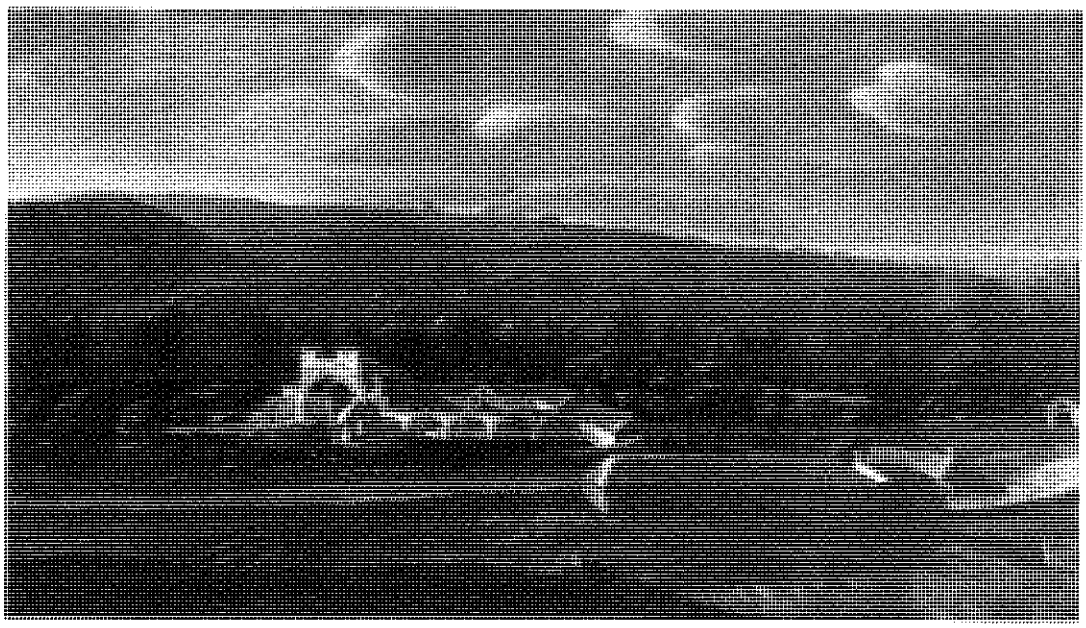
[1] *Lives of Famous Poets* (London, 1878), 211.

[2] For the discovery of the Lake District in the mid-eighteenth century, see: W. G. Collingwood, *Lake District History* (Kendal, 1925); Norman Nicholson, *The Lakers: The Adventures of the First Tourists* (London, 1955), hereafter referred to as *The Lakers*; John Murdoch's Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition catalogue, *The Discovery of the Lake District* (London, 1984); Peter Bicknell, *The Picturesque Scenery of the Lake District 1752-1855: A Bibliographical Study* (Winchester, 1990).

[3] Daniel Defoe, *Writings on Travel, Discovery and History*, ed. W. R. Owens, P. N. Furbank, *et al*, 8 vols. (London, 2001-02), iii. 136-37.

[4] *Gentleman's Magazine* 21 (1751), 52.

Even before Smith, a Cumbrian, sent his letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, however, one man had glimpsed a stern beauty in the fells. Mathias Read (1669-1747) is an important predecessor of Wordsworth's, though he has not been recognized as such. Born in London, by about 1690 Read was settled in Whitehaven, and for the rest of his long life carved out a career as a provincial landscape painter: an extraordinary thing to do, for no English-born painter had managed it before.[5] His paintings tend to represent scenes around the Lake District, rather than in it, but the fells often provide a mysterious, evocative, sometimes sublime backdrop. The magnificent painting of Calder Abbey reproduced below has strong claims to be the greatest British landscape of the first third of the eighteenth century, and shows what Read would have been capable of if there had been a demand for pure landscape painting. Though his pictures were absorbed into local collections, and attained no wider fame, the fact that Read both lived by the Lake District and made artistic capital out of its natural beauties makes him the founder of a tradition which leads to Wordsworth, born almost exactly a century later. It was a tradition which would lead through Smith to John Dalton (1709-1763) and John Brown (1715-66), two Cumbrians who wrote the most influential descriptions of Lakeland scenery in the 1750s and 60s, respectively.[6] Collectively the paintings and writings of these four men give powerful support to John Murdoch's claim that '[t]he Lake District as a cultural object was not the invention of outsiders, but was to a great extent a projection from within of its own resources and aesthetic self-consciousness'.[7]



Mathias Read, *Calder Abbey* (*c.* 1715-20). Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, Cumbria. Reproduced by permission.

[5] For a fascinating account of Read and his work, see Mary E. Burkett and David Sloss, *Read's Point of View: Paintings of the Cumbrian Countryside* (Windermere, 1995).
[6] Dalton was the author of *A Descriptive Poem, Addressed to Two Ladies, at their Return from Viewing the Mines near Whitehaven* (1755), Brown of the posthumous *A Description of the Lake at Keswick* (1767).
[7] Murdoch, *The Discovery of the Lake District*, 13.

The easiest way to grasp how the Lake District was imagined in the two decades between Smith's landmark article and Wordsworth's birth is to look at the paintings and engravings the region inspired. They depict the wilder, more mountainous parts, exaggerated (sometimes almost comically) for effect, only in the far distance, typically with a lake in the middle-distance. Grazing animals frequently appear in the foreground to evoke a comfortable, timeless, classical-pastoral atmosphere, and the human presence consists of stock rustics, leisurely fishermen, or fashionable tourists, the latter enhancing a general air of genteel, rococo elegance. Clouds are used to create visual interest, but the landscapes are generally flooded with light. Altogether these pictures are less honest, less impressive and less 'Wordsworthian' than the bleak grandeur Read had sometimes been able to evoke. Most of them were produced by visiting artists, but much the same can be said of the one surviving landscape by George Romney (1734-1802), the most important Cumbrian artist of the eighteenth-century. His *Memories of Windermere* of around 1761 nicely captures the spirit in which the Lakes were approached in the mid-century, but the scenery has the air of a park, and demonstrates that Romney had no Wordsworthian leanings.[8]

In the 1770s and 80s, as Wordsworth started to discover the Lake District, the established clichés of representation began to be challenged as adventurous tourists, and writers and artists, sought out more direct and immediate approaches to the landscape. Norman Nicholson judges William Hutchinson's 1774 *Excursion to the Lakes* to have brought a 'new complexity of response' to the Lakeland scene.[9] Hutchinson was not content to stroll by the major lakes, like most previous tourists, but energetically climbed the fells. His description of ascending Skiddaw, looking down on 'an angry and impetuous *sea*' of cloud (my emphasis), and finding himself above a thunder storm touches new sensations, effectively collapsing the 'safe' middle-distance that had been so much a feature of earlier representations; it may well have influenced Wordsworth's famous description of climbing Snowdon at the end of *The Prelude*.[10] Thomas Gainsborough made a tour of the Lake District in 1783, and was the first unquestionably major artist to paint the region. Though some of his depictions have an idealized, Italianate quality, at their best they seem closer to a Wordsworthian view of the Lakes than any earlier work by artist or writer. His drawings possess a truthful freshness that makes earlier representations seem fanciful and stale. And the larger oils Gainsborough produced as he reflected in tranquility on his experiences not only capture the character of the fells in close-up in a way no one had managed before, but substitute for the stock rustics and elegant tourists something that approaches real working Cumbrians (a sympathetic interest in the interrelationship between humans and landscape had, after all, informed Gainsborough's art since the 1740s). The picture reproduced here, with its 'deep romantic chasm' and contemplative shepherd is surely an imaginative reconstruction of the Lake District that Wordsworth would have responded to powerfully;

---

[8] The painting is reproduced in David A. Cross, *A Striking Likeness: The Life of George Romney* (Aldershot, 2000), 15. Its present whereabouts is unknown.

[9] Nicholson, *The Lakers*, 61.

[10] *An Excursion to the Lakes, in Westmoreland and Cumberland, August 1773* (London, 1774), 157-62; the quoted passage is at p. 159. Wordsworth read this book around 1796: see Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799* (Cambridge, 1993), 77.

it is, in fact, close to the mood and spirit of Book VIII of *The Prelude*, where he describes his early fascination with shepherds.

Thomas Gainsborough, *Rocky Landscape* (*c.* 1783). National Galleries of Scotland. Reproduced by permission.

Not only does Gainsborough's painting anticipate Wordsworth's later portrayals of the Lake District, but it was painted at just such a time as is evoked in *Prelude* VIII. Wordsworth's personal discovery of the Lake District in the 1770s and 80s thus coincides importantly with a broader cultural discovery of the region in these years – the first guidebook was published in 1778 – and with attempts by writers and artists to represent it in more truthful, less formula-bound ways. In so far as there is a tendency toward realism in Wordsworth's successive descriptions of the Lakes, then, that tendency had been set in motion before he wrote his first poem; indeed in some ways it is remarkable how long it took Wordsworth to gain an imaginative vantage point akin to Gainsborough's. He began writing about the Lakes very early, in the fragmentary poem *The Vale of Esthwaite*, composed 1787-88. His enthusiasm for the landscape is already clear, but his excited feelings – what he would later call his Imagination – could only be expressed through Gothic fantasies of ghosts and spectres. Wordsworth abandoned the poem, perhaps realizing he had taken a wrong direction, and moved on to the more mature, but also more conventional, *An Evening Walk*, mainly written in 1789. This poem reads like a visual and aural catalogue of details of the Lakeland scene, described in the standard poetic rhetoric of the day:

—The whistling swain that plods his ringing way
Where the slow waggon winds along the bay;
The sugh of swallow flocks that twittering sweep,
The solemn curfew swinging long and deep;
The talking boat that moves with pensive sound,
Or drops his anchor down with plunge profound;
Of boys that bathe remote the faint uproar,
And restless piper wearying out the shore;
These all to swell the village murmurs blend,
That soften'd from the water-head descend.[11]

An Evening Walk is all surface and no depth. Local people go about their business, but they are simply there to add visual interest to the landscape: there is no concern with their experiences. The viewpoint is consistently low, sticking to the rivers, lakes and villages. And the superabundance of details do not coalesce into a larger landscape view: only someone who already knows the Lakes – the poem is addressed to Dorothy – could imagine the scenery on the basis of the information provided. Wordsworth later rejected this approach to landscape entirely, telling Aubrey de Vere in the 1840s that 'Nature does not permit an inventory to be made of her charms! ... In every scene many of the most brilliant details are but accidental. A true eye for Nature does not note them, or at least does not dwell on them'.[12] With these limitations, when *An Evening Walk* was published in 1793 it was in no sense in the vanguard of artistic responses to the Lake District, whatever its other claims to attention.

After *An Evening Walk* Wordsworth largely stopped writing about the Lakes for several years as he went on to produce *Descriptive Sketches, The Borderers*, and the first volume of *Lyrical Ballads*. But he returned to the subject in the great Goslar winter of 1798 when he composed those accounts of boyhood experience which went into the first book of *The Prelude*. Those descriptions, particularly that of the boat stealing on Ullswater, now stand at the centre of the canon of Wordsworth's 'Lake poetry', but it is worth remembering that they were not published until 1850, long after the idea of Wordsworth as a 'Lake poet' had gained common currency, mainly on the strength of *The Excursion*. For the most part they describe intense imaginative moments, often experienced in solitude, and though landscape features are evoked, the focus is more on Wordsworth than on the Lake District. The landscapes here are generally empty, unlike the later descriptions in Book VIII where shepherds feature prominently. They are, of course, landscapes of memory, and it is worth again recalling Wordsworth's comments to de Vere, where he spoke of memory preserving 'the ideal and essential truth of the scene ... by discarding much which, though in itself striking, was not characteristic'.[13] Though not described in detail, Wordsworth says enough to evoke landscapes of a shadowy grandeur far removed from the detailed atmospherics of *An Evening Walk*.

The following year, as he went on to write the 'spots of time' passage, Wordsworth found a way to evoke bleaker, drearier, less obviously exciting landscapes. In the Penrith

[11] *An Evening Walk*, ed. James Averill (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1984), ll. 315-24. The 1793 text.
[12] Aubrey de Vere, *Essays Chiefly on Poetry*, 2 vols. (London, 1887), ii. 277.
[13] Ibid.

Beacon episode, for example, he writes of a 'rough and stony moor', and goes on to picture a landscape that is not only revolutionary in its departure from earlier beautiful, picturesque, or sublime representations of the Lakes, but also extraordinarily memorable:

> ... reascending the bare slope, I saw
> A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
> The beacon on the summit, and more near
> A girl who bore a pitcher on her head
> And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
> Against the blowing wind. It was in truth
> An ordinary sight but I should need
> Colours and words that are unknown to man
> To paint the visionary dreariness ...[14]

Anyone who has spent much time in the Lake District will recognize the value of that wonderful, oxymoronic phrase 'visionary dreariness'. These 'spots of time' landscapes anticipate the discoveries of nineteenth-century realist landscape painting, where pictures of the bleakest, most unprepossessing scenes will often attain a visionary quality precisely because of the intensity with which they are contemplated. Certainly Wordsworth's 'spots of time' landscapes have such imaginative power that, as Karl Kroeber recognized, 'we have the illusion that nothing has been omitted'.[15] They are even further removed from those of *An Evening Walk* where, as suggested earlier, the very excess of details prevents the reader getting any clear view of the landscape as a whole. They show that by 1799 Wordsworth was coming to realize that much of the Lake District was not beautiful according to strict eighteenth century standards of what constituted a beautiful scene. In many ways Defoe was hardly wrong to judge much of Westmoreland 'barren and frightful', but even when not beautiful the landscape was sternly impressive, and at its most 'ordinary' capable of powerfully echoing states of mind. These were insights Wordsworth would develop in a much more programmatic way in *The Excursion.*

At the end of 1799 Wordsworth moved back to the Lake District. From this time on his descriptions of the Lake District no longer rely on memory, as they had largely done before – most of *An Evening Walk* was written at Cambridge – but are written on the spot, as it were. The most important development at this time is the new human interest Wordsworth finds in the Lakes. The inhabitants of the Lake District, no longer simply staffage in a picturesque scene as they had been a decade earlier in *An Evening Walk,* emerge from the landscape as subjects of compelling imaginative interest. The Lake District is no longer just a place of memories, or a 'wild field', to use Wordsworth's own term, in which a poet's soul could grow,[16] but a place where deeply real people live and work and die, a place with community traditions and its own folklore.

The first few months at Dove Cottage produced an extraordinary burst of poetry, including a number of compositions Wordsworth described as pastorals. Outstanding in this group are 'The Brothers' and 'Michael', of course, ethnological poems which

---

[14] The Prelude, *1798-1799,* ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1977), I, 314-22.
[15] *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth* (Madison, WI, 1975), 17.
[16] *The Thirteen-Book* Prelude, ed. Mark L. Reed (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1991), III, 181.

brought a new depth and sympathetic realism to the poetry of rural life. It is no small tribute to these poems that they have been taken as seriously by social historians as by literary scholars.[17] Nevertheless, it is remarkable how quickly Wordsworth stopped writing this sort of poetry, or at least stopped envisaging such 'powerfully localized' character studies as independent poems. He seems ultimately to have understood them as finger exercises for the great project of *The Recluse*, a poem that was to be firmly connected to the Lakeland scene.

Indeed around the same time he was writing 'The Brothers' and 'Michael', Wordsworth began *Home at Grasmere*, a poem at first designated simply 'Book first'– that is, 'Book first' of the first part of *The Recluse*. In the scheme Wordsworth eventually worked out, this would have followed the introductory *Prelude* and been succeeded by *The Excursion*. Wordsworth found *Home at Grasmere* a much harder poem to write than anything he had attempted before. He wrote several hundred lines in 1800, but then broke off, having run into difficulties. He returned to it in 1806, and brought it to a sort of conclusion. He tinkered with it in later years, and extracted some passages for inclusion in *The Excursion*. But *Home at Grasmere* was not published until 1888, when it made pitifully clear how far short of a completed *Recluse* Wordsworth had fallen.

Home at Grasmere begins with a description of how Wordsworth, as a schoolboy, had seen Grasmere from Loughrigg Terrace, and been amazed by its peacefulness and beauty. Now, years later, he finds himself a resident of this 'calmest, fairest spot of earth',[18] and can hardly control his excitement. The poem is much more about Wordsworth than about Grasmere, but when Wordsworth does describe the scene around him it emerges as a smiling, gentle landscape, beautiful rather than sublime, an easy place to live:

> ... I would call thee beautiful, for mild
> And soft and gay and beautiful thou art,
> Dear Valley, having in thy face a smile
> Though peaceful, full of gladness. Thou art pleased,
> Pleased with thy crags and woody steeps, thy Lake,
> Its one green Island and its winding shores,
> The multitude of little rocky hills,
> Thy Church and Cottages of mountain stone–
> Clustered like stars ...
> What want we? Have we not perpetual streams,
> Warm woods and sunny hills, and fresh green fields,
> And mountains not less green, and flocks and herds,
> And thickets full of songsters ... ?[19]

It is an attractive description, no doubt, but there is a soft, voluptuous complacency about it that bespeaks something false. Such a landscape in *Pilgrim's Progress* would be charged with danger, and even in *Home at Grasmere* we have misgivings. The bleaker,

---

[17] See for example Mark Keay, *William Wordsworth's Golden Age Theories during the Industrial Revolution in England, 1750-1850* (Houndmills, 2001).
[18] *Home at Grasmere*, ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1977), 43. MS. D, l. 73.
[19] Ibid. 44-46. MS. B, ll. 133-48.

grander aspects of the Lake District, the 'visionary dreariness', the education by 'Fear' that Wordsworth had written of in the recently completed *Two-Part Prelude*, do not intrude into the poem. The Lakeland scene is, quite literally, transformed into Eden, and this leads Wordsworth into what Kenneth R. Johnston calls 'insuperable' contradiction.[20] Wordsworth would like to believe that the inhabitants of paradise are blessed spirits:

> Ah! if I wished to follow where the sight
> Of all that is before my eyes, the voice
> Which is as a presiding Spirit here
> Would lead me, I should say unto myself,
> They who are dwellers in this holy place
> Must needs themselves be hallowed.[21]

The reality of course is very different, and Wordsworth is perhaps at his least likeable when he goes on to agonize over how far the shepherds of Grasmere fall short of his ideal, and concedes that they actually differ little 'from the man elsewhere / For selfishness and envy and revenge'.[22] At times it is very hard to believe that Wordsworth was writing *Home at Grasmere* at the same time as 'The Brothers' and 'Michael', so different is the self-obsessed narrative voice from the calm sympathy expressed in those poems. Ultimately *Home at Grasmere* is an 'us and them' poem and shows, as 'The Brothers' and 'Michael' do not, how difficult Wordsworth found it to feel part of the Grasmere community: he was, after all, the highly-educated son of the powerful law-agent of the greatest local landowner. And connected with this 'us and them' feeling are vocational anxieties explored more explicitly in the extended *Prelude*. What was Wordsworth actually to do? Why was he here? The poem shows Wordsworth struggling with such questions, which would eventually be used to kick-start the full-length *Prelude*.

By 1806, then, Wordsworth had written about the Lake District in several different stylistic and thematic registers, from the Gothic fantasies of *The Vale of Esthwaite*, to the picturesque cataloguing of *An Evening Walk*, the shadowy grandeur of the earliest *Prelude* landscapes, the 'visionary dreariness' of the 'spots of time', the ethnological explorations of 'The Brothers' and 'Michael', and the soft, paradisal imaginings of *Home at Grasmere*. To this list can be added the *Prelude* Book VIII descriptions, which partake of some of the idealizing tendencies seen in *Home at Grasmere*, but associate that idealization with childhood. Of all this poetry, what really impresses as original, powerful and genuine are the early *Prelude* landscapes (including the 'spots of time') and the descriptions of local people in 'The Brothers' and 'Michael'. Wordsworth himself seems to have recognized something of this, and as he developed his plans for *The Excursion*, which he began to do around this time, he clearly decided to draw together evocative but unsentimental descriptions of Lakeland scenes with a series of unvarnished stories of local people.

The Excursion is Lake poetry on a monumental scale, and in a profound sense. The Lakeland landscape is not just decorative, or incidental, but deeply connected with the philosophy of human life that the poem expounds. Given this, however, one of the most

---

[20] *Wordsworth and* The Recluse (New Haven, CT, and London, 1984), 92.
[21] *Home at Grasmere* 60. MS B, ll. 362-67.
[22] Ibid. 66. MS B, 435-36.

remarkable features of *The Excursion* is the way Wordsworth writes himself out of the poem, and out of the Lake District. The narrator of the poem, the 'I', is essentially Wordsworth, but he is the most silent of the four principal protagonists and the one about whom the least is known. Indeed, apart from his friendship with The Wanderer, and his broad agreement with The Wanderer on a range of philosophical topics, it is not until Book V, halfway through the poem, that we find out more about him, in a short passage that reprises some of the themes of *Home at Grasmere* in a minor key. The narrator here gives

> ... fervent thanks
> For my own peaceful lot and happy choice;
> A choice that from the passions of the world
> Withdrew, and fixed me in a still retreat,
> Sheltered, but not to social duties lost,
> Secluded, but not buried; and with song
> Cheering my days, and with industrious thought,
> With the ever-welcome company of books
> By virtuous friendship's soul-sustaining aid,
> And with the blessings of domestic love. (V, 48-57)[23]

The attentive reader would doubtless link this passage with Wordsworth's statement in the Preface that '[s]everal years ago ... the Author retired to his native Mountains, with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live'. Nevertheless, it is not until the final book of *The Excursion*, when the narrator spontaneously recalls rowing on Windermere as a boy, that the poem itself establishes a biographical connection with the Lake District.[24] This strikes the reader as a surprise, even a contradiction, for most of the poem seems to prohibit such a conclusion. The first Book does not take place in the Lake District at all, but in an unspecified location further south, where the narrator meets The Wanderer by a ruined cottage and hears the tragic story of its former inhabitant, Margaret. The two men then embark on a pedestrian 'excursion' together, and it is The Wanderer who decides, indeed decrees, that they should head for the Lake District:

> My Fellow Traveller said ...
> That I must yield myself without reserve
> To his disposal. Glad was I of this:
> We started – and he led towards the hills;
> Up through an ample vale, with higher hills
> Before us, mountains stern and desolate;
> But in the majesty of distance now
> Set off, and to our ken appearing fair
> Of aspect, with aerial softness clad,
> And beautified with morning's purple beams. (II, 90-100)

---

[23] *The Excursion*, eds. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca, NY, and London, 2007). All quotations from *The Excursion* are taken from this edition.
[24] *The Excursion* IX, 483-89.

The narrator does not admit to any familiarity with the region until the belated reference to rowing on Windermere. In so far as the narrator is Wordsworth, then, he is presented as a guided visitor to the Lake District – a surprising artistic decision in a poem that was to have followed *The Prelude* and *Home at Grasmere* in the *Recluse* plan. It was perhaps a drastic solution to the problems encountered in *Home at Grasmere*, where, as suggested above, Wordsworth's relationship to his Grasmere neighbours had proved singularly difficult to write about. A good deal of *The Excursion* takes place in an imaginative compound of Grasmere and Langdale, but The Wanderer and The Pastor now function as mediating figures between the narrator and local people.

The Excursion launches the narrator and The Wanderer prematurely into the heart of the Lake District, but having got them there, much of what follows is reasonably faithful to the topography of the region. In his later notes for Isabella Fenwick, Wordsworth stated: 'I suppose that the Pedlar [i.e. The Wanderer] & I ascended from a plain country up the vale of Langdale & struck off a good way above the Chapel to the Western side of the Vale. We ascended the hill & thence looked down upon the circular recess in which lies Blea Tarn, chosen by the Solitary for his retreat'.[25] The 'ample vale' that the narrator and The Wanderer walk through is, then, Langdale, and they look towards Bowfell and the high central peaks of the Lake District. Wordsworth's description of the view, in the passage just quoted, is suggestively ambiguous, and it is an ambiguity that will run through the remainder of the poem. The mountains are 'stern and desolate'– we are not so far from Defoe's 'barren and frightful'–'but' they appear 'fair' in the 'majesty of distance'. Thomas Campbell had famously written of how ''Tis distance lends enchantment to the view', and that seems to be the case here. In fact, many artistic representations of the Lake District had taken a low vantage point and relied on the 'majesty of distance' to make the fells attractive.

The Excursion, however, forces the reader to move on from such picturesque 'framed' scenes, popular with tourists, into the bleak hinterland of the Lake District. Before getting there temptation beckons, though. As the narrator and The Wanderer proceed up Langdale they become aware of a rustic merrymaking, or wake, taking place, an event described by Wordsworth in stilted, old-fashioned poetry that one would hardly guess to be by the author of 'Michael': 'Tabor and Pipe / In purpose join to hasten and reprove / The laggard Rustic' (II, 128-30). It could be one of the peasant festivals painted at this very time, and with great success, by David Wilkie. The narrator suggests that they might 'quit' their road to join '[t]hese festive matins' (ll. 146-47), but The Wanderer, though acknowledging the pleasure of such a diversion, speaks sternly of 'The appointed task and duties of the day' (l. 155), and points to the 'craggy summits' (l. 161) which they must reach. He then mentions, for the first time, The Solitary, the '[l]onesome and lost' (l. 167) soul who has taken up residence in those 'mountain fastnesses' (l. 163). The point of the wake episode seems to be that the Lake District can, on occasion, produce a sort of stereotypical image of 'merrie England', but that for those who will take the trouble it has a deeper, more painful wisdom to import.

As the narrator and The Wanderer near Bleatarn House, where The Solitary has taken up residence, there are extraordinary shifts in the way the narrator experiences the landscape. First of all, deprived of the 'majesty of distance', the mountains seem as unattractive as they had to Defoe:

---

[25] *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis (London, 1993), 81.

> We clomb without a track to guide our steps;
> And, on the summit, reached a heathy plain,
> With a tumultuous waste of huge hill tops
> Before us; savage region! and I walked
> In weariness ... (II, 343-47)

Wordsworth later corrected 'heathy plain' to 'dreary plain' and '[i]n weariness' to '[d]ispirited', thus emphasizing even more strongly the unattractive wildness of the place and the negative effect this had on the narrator's spirits. When the walkers come to 'the circular recess in which lies Blea Tarn', however, we immediately move to a far more positive frame of reference:

> Ah! what a sweet Recess, thought I, is here!
> Instantly throwing down my limbs at ease
> Upon a bed of heath; – full many a spot
> Of hidden beauty have I chanced to espy
> Among the mountains; never one like this;
> So lonesome, and so perfectly secure:
> Not melancholy – no, for it is green,
> And bright, and fertile ... (II, 369-76)

This 'hidden beauty' again turns out to be an effect of distance, however, and before we actually get to The Solitary's house there is another startling shift in the narrator's perception of the place:

> –homely was the spot;
> And, to my feeling, ere we reached the door,
> Had almost a forbidding nakedness;
> Less fair, I grant, even painfully less fair,
> Than it appeared when from the Valley's brink
> We had looked down upon it. (II, 664-69)

The emotional oscillation does not end here, but continues as the visitors enter The Solitary's apartment: at first the rooms seems an appalling mess, but when a meal is served the poem swerves toward a rustic idyll.

Bleatarn House, where this entertainment takes place, is about as central a point in the Lake District as one could find, so by now the narrator and The Wanderer have walked from outside the Lake District into its geographical heart, leaving behind them, both physically and symbolically, the more accessible, picturesque areas popular with tourists. What do the emotional ascents and descents of their journey mean? Surely Wordsworth is not describing it in this way simply to demonstrate that, indeed, 'tis often distance that lends enchantment to the view. It seems equally clear that he is rejecting the high romanticism of, say, Coleridge's 'Dejection', where we experience the beauty of 'outward forms' in direct proportion to the 'passion and the life' we have within us. The narrator of *The Excursion* is as equable and predisposed to enjoy natural scenes as one

could be, so the reader is forced to the opposite conclusion: that some landscapes have an intrinsic beauty which uplifts the human spirit, while, conversely, others have a bleak or forbidding quality that can easily depress it. The Lake District is rich in both kinds of landscapes, a fact which in some ways explains both the negative reactions of early visitors like Defoe, and the aesthetic raptures of later tourists. Put another way, the sheer range of landscapes on offer means that the Lake District offers, analogously, a compelling slide show of the human mind – geographically it embraces everything from heavenly combinations of rock, water and vegetation to bare, heathy desolation; meteorologically it offers an equally wide spectrum of experiences.

The Excursion is a far more mature work than *Home at Grasmere*. Both are emotionally complex, but *The Excursion* is able to find an artistic form for its complexity in a way the earlier poem had not. *Home at Grasmere* tries, tries desperately, to connect entirely happy feelings to an entirely beautiful landscape. *The Excursion* recognizes a much wider range of experiences, and a much greater variety of landscapes. Nevertheless, its overall message is hopeful and redemptive, with the sterner aspects of the Lakeland scene ultimately understood as a challenge to the human spirit, one which, embraced, allows us to recognize the greatness of human life. The Solitary's problem, according to the poem, is not that he chose the wrong place to live, but that he is inactive there, squandering opportunities for physical and mental improvement that the surrounding landscape offers. The Wanderer's prescription for a happier life must count as one of the most extraordinary passages in the literature of self-help:

> Take courage, and withdraw yourself from ways
> That run not parallel to Nature's course.
> Rise with the Lark! your Matins shall obtain
> Grace, be their composition what it may,
> If but with her's performed; climb once again,
> Climb every day, those ramparts; meet the breeze
> Upon their tops, – adventurous as a Bee
> That from your garden thither soars, to feed
> On new-blown heath; let yon commanding rock
> Be your frequented Watch-tower; roll the stone
> In thunder down the mountains: with all your might
> Chase the wild Goat; and, if the bold red Deer
> Fly to these harbours, driven by hound and horn
> Loud echoing, add your speed to the pursuit:
> So, wearied to your Hut shall you return,
> And sink at evening into sound repose. (IV, 489-504)

Even allowing for some poetic exaggeration, this seems to steer close to silliness, and it is tempting to appeal to the dramatic nature of the poem to argue that these are not Wordsworth's own sentiments (just as the activities described were not his daily practice!). But complicating any such conclusion is the fact that the idea is taken up and extended by the narrator in a rhapsodic speech which may well be his most passionate utterance:

> How divine,
> The liberty, for frail, for mortal man
> To roam at large among unpeopled glens
> And mountainous retirements, only trod
> By devious footsteps; regions consecrate
> To oldest time! and, reckless of the storm
> That keeps the raven quiet in her nest,
> Be as a Presence or a Motion – one
> Among the many there; and, while the Mists
> Flying, and rainy Vapours, call out shapes
> And Phantoms from the crags and solid earth
> As fast as a Musician scatters sounds
> Out of an instrument; and while the Streams – ...
> Descending from the region of the clouds,
> And starting from the hollows of the earth
> More multitudinous every moment – rend
> Their way before them, what a joy to roam
> An Equal among mightiest Energies ... (IV, 513-32)

This truly remarkable passage seems to imaginatively look back through the descriptions of boyhood excitement in *The Prelude* to the Gothic fantasies that Wordsworth wrote of in his teenage *Vale of Esthwaite.* The practical point, extending what The Wanderer has said, seems to be that the wilder parts of the Lake District offer the thrill of proximity to nature at its most raw and turbulent. And this is not only good for the body, in the physical challenges necessarily encountered, but good for the mind and soul, elevating, ennobling, and bringing a sense of oneness with nature.

The problem, of course, is that the number of people who can experience the landscape in this way is limited: first, a good deal of leisure is required, and second the essential emptiness of the landscape is no small part of its appeal. The elderly Wordsworth campaigned energetically against railways being extended into the Lake District. The actions and feelings evoked seem as remote from conventional tourist experience as they are from the experiences of the blaspheming shepherds Wordsworth had shaken his head over in *Home at Grasmere.* Perhaps, though this is not entirely clear, *The Excursion* makes a distinction between the narrator and The Solitary, men of leisure and independent income in a position to luxuriate in the landscape in this way, and The Wanderer and The Pastor who experience the landscape in the course of other avocations. Certainly it is the latter two who introduce ordinary Cumbrian lives into the second half of the poem. The direct engagement with his neighbours' lives that Wordsworth had struggled with in *Home at Grasmere* is now replaced by a far more mediated experience. The narrator, a visitor to the Lake District, hears about local people from The Pastor, who is prompted to tell his stories by The Wanderer. Further erasing any sense of direct contact between the narrator and the people of Grasmere is the fact that all but one of the stories concern dead people.

These stories, told in Books V-VII, are remarkable in the way that, for the most part, they are not 'powerfully localized'. The Pastor sometimes includes little descriptions of the Lakeland landscape in his narratives, but it is generally clear that these are attempts to

add incidental details for the enjoyment of his listeners rather than essential background to understand the lives described. The strong connection between place and experience established in 'The Brothers' and 'Michael' is greatly weakened, and for that reason, in part, the stories are a good deal less memorable. They are, as The Pastor says, pictures of '[t]he universal Forms / Of human nature' (VIII, 14-15), and the point seems to be that the people of Grasmere are not in any profound way different from the people of Wiltshire or Kent. The stories expound a series of predictable though certainly not contemptible virtues: hard work, frugality, cheerfulness, fidelity, trust in Providence. There is occasionally a hint that living in Grasmere is harder than living elsewhere, and therefore a greater test of these virtues.

But though there is little suggestion that the landscape shapes the people, there is a good deal on the way the people shape the landscape. To a surprising extent, the stories echo Blake's famous 'Proverb of Hell': 'Where man is not nature is barren'. Cultivation, building, and especially tree-planting are praised, with the suggestion that as the hand of man extends itself over the landscape it becomes more beautiful. This note is struck immediately in the very first story, the only one of living people:

> You behold,
> High on the breast of yon dark mountain – dark
> With stony barrenness, a shining speck
> Bright as a sun-beam sleeping till a shower
> Brush it away, or cloud pass over it;
> And such it might be deemed – a sleeping sun-beam;
> But 'tis a plot of cultivated ground,
> Cut off, an island in the dusky waste;
> And that attractive brightness is its own. (V, 672-80).

There is, however, a troubled distinction made between human developments that, economically motivated, end up beautifying the landscape, and other changes, equally economically motivated, which make it less attractive. Having praised the work ethic of a 'Peasant of the lowest class', The Pastor expresses alarm at the way the man is enriching himself by felling timber:

> I feel at times a motion of despite
> Towards One, whose bold contrivances and skill,
> As you have seen, bear such conspicuous part
> In works of havoc; taking from these vales,
> One after one, their proudest ornaments.
> Full oft his doings leave me to deplore
> Tall ash-tree sown by winds, by vapours nursed,
> In the dry crannies of the pendant rocks;
> Light birch, aloft upon the horizon's edge,
> Transparent texture, framing in the east
> A veil of glory for the ascending moon;
> And oak whose roots by noontide dew were damped,
> And on whose forehead inaccessible

> The raven lodged in safety. – Many a ship
> Launched into Morecamb-bay, hath owed to him
> Her strong knee-timbers, and the mast that bears
> The loftiest of her pendants. (VII, 607-23)

There are, needless to say, contradictions in this that we still very much live with today, not the least being that The Pastor's poetic appreciation of the trees is unlikely to be shared by the peasant. Interestingly, this speech of The Pastor's prompts no immediate response from the others, but much later The Wanderer refers back to it when he condemns the general 'outrage done to Nature' in the name of Industry (VIII, 155). The Wanderer has deeply mixed feelings about the Industrial Revolution, though, and admires as much as he deplores it. Ultimately the poem can only gesture at the potential danger to the Lake District if the landscape comes to be seen simply as an exploitable material resource. The poem stops somewhere short of saying that the enterprising peasant is wrong to fell and sell timber, and Wordsworth certainly does not attempt to set out a principle of land regulation.

The final long speech in *The Excursion* is given to The Pastor, who, as the assembled party sits on Loughrigg Terrace and looks down on Grasmere, offers an impassioned prayer on behalf of 'the Children of [his] humble care':

> loudly do I utter thanks
> With earnest joy, that will not be suppressed.
> These barren rocks, your stern inheritance;
> These fertile fields, that recompence your pains;
> The shadowy vale, the sunny mountain-top;
> Woods waving in the wind their lofty heads,
> Or hushed; the roaring waters, or the still;
> They see the offering of my lifted hands– (IX, 739-46)

At this climactic moment in the poem one might expect an unqualified tribute to the beauty of Grasmere, perhaps something along the lines of the descriptions in *Home at Grasmere*. There is indeed some evidence that the narrator, a visitor to these scenes, would like to praise the landscape in rather more ecstatic terms.[26] But the almost studied neutrality of The Pastor's summary of landscape features suggests that Wordsworth had realized that touristic and poetic raptures depended too much on physical, cultural and economic situation to form a meaningful part of a communal prayer. Rather, The Pastor's series of contrasts both identify the sort of landscape elements that drew humans to Grasmere in the first place, and, in his remembrance of the 'stern inheritance', the barren rocks, the sort of physical challenges to the body and spirit that the region presents. It is, in other words, an insider's view, but tellingly expressed by a man who has shown himself fully sensitive to the beauty of the world around him. The Pastor's opposition between 'barren rocks' and 'fertile fields', in particular, seems to encapsulate the ambivalences in the description of the Lake District which have run through *The Excursion*. What looks beautiful from a distance, physical and cultural, to the outsider, may not look beautiful when seen close up, or to the insider – but then again, it may look

[26] See for example IX, 504-5: "'Turn where we may', said I, 'We cannot err / In this delicious Region'".

beautiful in different ways. *The Excursion* keeps the reader thinking about this, both stimulating admiration of the Lakeland landscape and prompting critical reflection on that admiration – much more critical reflection than many 'Wordsworthians' have been prepared to entertain. It is the poem which, more than any other, qualifies Wordsworth as a 'Lake poet'; at the same time it is the poem which, more than any other, makes us ponder what it might mean to be a 'Lake poet'.

Doshisha University

A Day in Heaven: Charles Lamb's reading of *The Excursion*

By Felicity James

It is appropriate to end this celebration of the 'Recluse' project, from the 'Two-Part Prelude' to *The Excursion*, with the perspective of a reader – an appreciative reader, a reader who had known the project from its earliest Alfoxden murmurs. A reader, moreover, who, as a city dweller, working in the East India House, living in Inner Temple Lane, brought quite a different set of preoccupations to bear upon the poem. Moreover, Lamb's readings of Wordsworth show *The Excursion* living on in different contexts, from the Lake District to the heart of London. Lamb persistently tries to prove the power of the city reader to Coleridge and Wordsworth; from the beginning of their friendships in the 1790s, he is always eager to demonstrate the power of sympathy to overcome the boundaries of rural and urban.

In reflecting on the experience of reading *The Excursion,* and the related issue of the importance of reading in *The Excursion*, Sally Bushell's *Re-Reading 'The Excursion'* deals with the topic brilliantly, when she argues 'acts of re-reading are [...] of great significance for the intended dynamics presented within the poem, and of the poem with the reader'. [1] No narrative within the poem – from the story of Margaret to the life of the Solitary – exists in isolation. Each, in Bushell's words, 'demands to be "re-read" – mentally if not actually – in the light of what comes before and after it, by the "active" reader'.[2] Lamb was such a reader. He was keenly aware of the wider significance of Wordsworth's project; he had been a sympathetic and engaged Wordsworthian reader since his first glimpse of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Yet he could also be sharply critical of Wordsworthian egotism, self-importance, and didacticism. He is one of the most acute early critics of Wordsworth, and his immediate sense of the enormous importance of *The Excursion* might help one to understand why and how it is important to keep re-reading the poem.

The making of Lamb's review

Lamb was one of the first to receive *The Excursion*, in early August 1814. 'I cannot tell you how pleased I was', he wrote to Wordsworth,

> at the receit [*sic*] of the great Armful of Poetry which you have sent me, and to get it before the rest of the world too! I have gone quite through with it, and was thinking to have accomplished that pleasure a second time before I wrote to thank you, but M. Burney came in the night (while we were out) and made holy theft of it, but we expect restitution in a day or two. It is the noblest conversational poem I ever read. A day in heaven.[3]

Pleased at this response, Wordsworth asked Lamb, via Robert Southey, to write a review of it for the *Quarterly*, which duly appeared in October 1814.

Unfortunately, the review proved unsatisfactory to Lamb. For a start, he had difficulty writing it. 'Who can cram into a strait coop of a review any serious idea of such a vast & magnifict. Poem as Excursn–?' (Marrs, III: 115) he complained to Southey. To Wordsworth

---

[1] Sally Bushell, *Re-Reading 'The Excursion': Narrative, Response and the Wordsworthian Dramatic Voice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 1.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marrs, 3 vols. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), III: 95. Hereafter cited in text as Marrs. The original spelling and punctuation of the Lambs' letters has been retained.

he later claimed that the review had been written in 'haste & peculiar bad spirits' (Marrs, III: 125). These 'bad spirits' were partly caused by anxiety about work. He writes to Wordsworth in September 1814 about being shorthanded at the East India House, and 'bad peace speculations in the Calico market' – both of which meant that he lost the valuable writing time usually afforded by his evenings (Marrs, III: 111). This trial might have been worsened by concern about Mary's health. Certainly in December 1814 she had to spend a week in an asylum. He also had difficulties of his own, complaining of being scarcely able to 'command my own resolution to sit at writing an hour together. I am a poor creature, but I am leaving off Gin' (Marrs, III: 125).

Furthermore, he was uncertain about the sort of tone and approach he should adopt in the review, and how best to juggle his literary and emotional loyalties. 'I have attempted to personate a mere **stranger** to you', he told Wordsworth, somewhat anxiously, 'perhaps with too much strangeness. But you must bear that in mind when you read it, & not think that I am in mind **distant from you or your Poem; but that both are close to me among the nearest of persons & things.** I do but act the stranger in the Review' (Marrs, III: 125). An added difficulty was the fact that the poem had already been reviewed by Hazlitt in the *Examiner*. In fact, it had sneakily been Lamb's own copy which Hazlitt had used, procured by Martin Burney, whom Lamb mentions as having come to take it away almost as soon as it had arrived. Hazlitt's review saw certain flaws and problems with the poem, and Lamb was eager to avoid using the same quotations Hazlitt had cited, since, as he said, 'Extracts repeated give an idea that there is a meagre allowce. of good things' (Marrs, III: 125). Unused to reviewing, Lamb was not sure how long to make the piece, and was also concerned that 'Giffard [William Gifford] & his crew do not put words in its mouth, which I expect' (Marrs, III: 125-6).

He was right to worry. In the next letter he records his annoyance at Gifford's 'spurious' alterations 'palm'd upon' the review: 'I never felt more vexd in my life than when I read it'. He complains that the review had been cut by 'more than a third', the quotations stripped out, the language altered, and the tone changed: 'Every warm expression is changed for a nasty cold one' (Marrs, III: 128-9). It is a supreme example of the perennial frustration of an author with his editors. The whole review, says Lamb, is mangled, 'vulgarized & **frozen**', with the parts that have been left behind the worse for its cuts, 'the eyes are pulld out & the bleeding sockets are left' (Marrs, III: 130). If Lamb and his review are allied with Gloucester, Wordsworth himself is King Lear, reeling from the ingratitude of his treatment, 'How are *you* served! and the labors of years turn'd into contempt by scoundrels –' (Marrs, III: 130).

So how, given these difficulties, might Lamb's review of *The Excursion* be read? In part, it has to be an effort of reconstruction. Lamb says that since so many of the extracts and quotations have been cut from the review, 'without conjuration no man could tell what I was driving [at]' (Marrs, III: 129). That conjuration, using the letters and Lamb's long friendship with Wordsworth to re-imagine the 'day in heaven', and to re-read Lamb's attraction to the poem, is the task of the current discussion.

Lamb's approach to *The Excursion*

The immediately striking aspect of the review is that it acknowledges *The Excursion* as a complete poem, in spite of the larger aims of the 'Recluse' project. Lamb begins by quoting Wordsworth's own claim in his 'Preface' that *The Excursion* is 'a detached portion of an unfinished poem [...] to be called the Recluse'.[4] Nevertheless, he says, 'the "Excursion" is not

[4] Review of *The Excursion*, first printed *Quarterly Review* October 1814, repr. *Quarterly Review* Vol. 12 (London: Murray, 1815), 100-111. Reprinted in E. V. Lucas, ed. *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 8 vols.

a branch (as might have been suspected) prematurely plucked from the parent tree to gratify an overhasty appetite for applause; but is, in itself, a complete and legitimate production' (p. 100). This is a view not always shared even by modern critics. Certainly, other readers had difficulty setting aside Wordsworth's comments; Coleridge's response to *The Excursion* seems always to have been coloured by his grander designs for 'the first & finest philosophical Poem', and Hazlitt's three-part review of *The Excursion* in the *Examiner* begins with the prophetic comment that he cannot say whether or not the poem 'may not rather remain like one of those stupendous but half-finished structures which have been suffered to moulder into decay, because the cost and labour attending them exceeded their use or beauty'.[5] Lamb, on the other hand, offers a useful reminder that the poem should be assessed on its own merits.

This starting point gives a good idea of the tone of the review which is essentially, self-consciously, *sympathetic*, in several senses: Lamb is, from the start, displaying sympathy with Wordsworth's project, with the larger aim of the poem and its achievements. He is also interested by portrayals of sympathy and response within the poem, and the way in which he writes about them is a reminder that the review is part of a larger conversation of friendly sympathy which spans several decades. Lamb had heard poetry which would become part of Book I as early as summer 1797; he had been closely and carefully reading Wordsworth and corresponding with him throughout the intervening years. The piece is at once an appreciation of the poem and a testament of friendship, a public sign of affiliation and allegiance which should be read alongside Hazlitt's review. This similarly continues a conversation over many years – but functions instead as an expression of disappointment and regret.

Lamb begins his review with a long discussion of the character and occupation of the pedlar, and his discussions with the sceptic, the village priest, and the poet himself. While the summary of the poem is somewhat strained, there are flashes of an alert, Wordsworthian reader at work. For example, consider Lamb's perception that this is a poem 'not wanting in stories of the most interesting kind', echoing the Pedlar's suggestion that this is not a poem of action but of narrative, and, furthermore, that the reader must work to discern the stories within the poem. 'We might instance the Ruined Cottage', continues the review, 'and the Solitary's own story, in the first half of the work; and the second half, as being almost a continued cluster of narration' (p. 101).

The review also calls attention to the importance of the 'conversational' style of the poem, and argues that its setting is absolutely integral to the narrative. Lamb places this emphasis on landscape in a lineage stretching back to Cowper, Goldsmith, and – a typical Elian touch, this – Walton's *Compleat Angler*, a book always dear to Lamb's heart. 'We breathe in the fresh air', writes Lamb, of Wordsworth's description of his 'native hills', 'as we do while reading Walton's *Compleat Angler*; only the country about us is as much bolder than Walton's, as the thoughts and speculations, which form the matter of the poem, exceed the trifling pastime and low-pitched conversation of his humble fishermen' (p. 101). That 'breathe in the fresh air' is pure Lamb: it is pretty well certain that this escaped the manglings of Gifford.

Lamb is always attuned to the sensory experience of reading: nourished on the literature of sensibility, Henry Mackenzie and Rousseau, he often links sensual and textual discovery.

(London: Methuen, 1912), I: 187-200. I use the *Quarterly Review* text, and page numbers will be cited in the text.

[5] Coleridge to Richard Sharp, 15 January 1804, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1956-1971), II: 1034. Hazlitt's three review articles were published in *The Examiner* on 21st and 28th August and 3 October (repr. *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London, 1930-1934) XIX: 9-25; cited in text as Howe).

Indeed, *feeling* (of different sorts) is a structuring principle throughout Lamb's responses to his reading. Remember that burst of joy when he first received his copy of *The Excursion,* as he almost embraces that 'great Armful of Poetry' (Marrs, III: 95). Again, slightly later, 'faggd & disjointed [...] with damnd India house work' he tells Wordsworth that 'My left arm reposes on "Excursion". I feel what it would be in quiet. It is now a sealed Book' (Marrs, III: 113). That 'sealed Book' reflects how Lamb is investing Wordsworth's writing with almost prophetic force, a point further reinforced by his Old Testament reading of the heavenly scene featured in Book II, in which he sees echoes of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Revelations.[6] But it is the physical link to concentrate on here: even in extremis, at the India House, Lamb retains a physical link to the poem, 'feel[ing]' its healing power. The sensual pleasure of reading is always present in Lamb's writing. Thinking about the uncertain pleasures of immortal life in 'New Year's Eve', for instance, Elia feels a nostalgic regret, not only for 'sun, and sky, and breeze [...] the delicious juices of meats and fishes, and society, and the cheerful glass' but also for the sheer satisfaction of picking up a book. 'And you, my midnight darlings, my Folios!' Elia exclaims, 'must I part with the intense delight of having you (huge armfuls) in my embraces? Must knowledge come to me, if it come at all, by some awkward experiment of intuition, and no longer by this familiar process of reading?'.[7] 'Breath[ing] in the fresh air' of Wordsworth's poetry is another facet of this sense of the interpenetration between reading and living, the internal and external worlds.

The quotations he chooses to illustrate his review further this interest in the ways in which mental activity and physical setting, inner and outer worlds, might be sympathetically connected. One of the greatest annoyances for Lamb about the alterations to his piece was the destruction of an argument he had carefully built up about Wordsworth's representation of nature. Gifford, he says,

> has kept a few members only of the part I had done best which was to explain all I could of your 'Scheme of harmonies' as I had ventured to call it between the external universe & what within us answers to it. To do this I had accumulated a good many short passages, rising in length to the end, weaving in the Extracts as if they came in as a part of the text, naturally, not obtruding them as **specimens**. (Marrs, III: 129)

Wordsworth's 'Scheme of harmonies' – the 'external universe & what within us answers to it' – is at the centre of Lamb's reading of the poem: the reciprocity between the outer and the inner world, the ways in which a close focus on the external – the spring, the leaf, the flower, the tiny ordinary detail of the natural world – can afford an unexpected insight into the workings of the heart and mind.

This can be seen at work in the quotations in the review which *are* left, a sample of these – a 'cluster of narration' – demonstrates Lamb's approach to the poem. In the first five pages, for instance, there are several substantial extracts: firstly, several passages from Book II, including a long extract, ll. 722-752, where the Solitary describes the mountains as his 'prized Companions'. Then comes a passage from Book I, ll. 516-521 ('Beside yon Spring I stood') followed by two quotations from Book IV– a description of 'the whispering Air' sending inspiration from 'shadowy heights', 'blind recesses', 'little Rills, and Waters numberless' (ll. 1164-1168), and the child listening to the 'smooth-lipped Shell' (ll. 1125-1141) – and the now famous image of the ram reflected in the water (Book IX, ll. 440-454).

---

[6] ll. 864-912, Book II, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 102-3. Hereafter all line-numbers will be cited in text, with reference to the Cornell edition.

[7] Lucas, *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, II: 34.

Each of these extracts revolves around the different ways in which Wordsworth's 'Scheme of harmonies' might be expressed. The Solitary's description of the mountains, for instance, centres on their capacity to take part in a larger concert, to 'echo back' and respond to the scenery around them. The Wanderer, eyeing the waters of Margaret's spring, believes the waters feel 'one sadness' with him because their bond with humanity has been broken; man and water become fellow-mourners:

> ... Beside yon Spring I stood,
> And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel
> One sadness, they and I. For them a bond
> Of brotherhood is broken: time has been
> When, every day, the touch of human hand
> Dislodged the natural sleep that binds them up
> In mortal stillness; ... (Book I, ll. 516-521)

Lamb's focus on the description of 'the touch of human hand' displays the interplay between the human and the external worlds, and the possibility of shared feelings. To Wordsworth's mind, 'visible and audible things' are not simply emblematic, or symbolic, but 'revelations and quick insights into the life within us' (p. 103). As Nicola Trott has pointed out, 'The Elia in Lamb cannot resist the word-play between "quick insights" and the "life" they symbolize'.[8]

This selection of quotations itself displays Lamb's own capacity for making connections, links and living metaphors. His extracts from the poem continually evoke the importance of echo and response across visible and audible elements, from the 'whispering Air' to the 'little Rills, and Waters numberless', from the sea to the shell, from the universe to individual faith. These two passages about the rills and the shell come, again, from the fourth book of *The Excursion*, which Lamb, slightly later in the review, admires as the 'most valuable portion of the poem' (p. 106). Of particular note is the image of the child with the shell, which comes as the Wanderer tries to rouse the Solitary from his struggles with doubt and grief. In Book III the Solitary has bemoaned his knowledge of man not as 'that pure Archetype of human greatness' but as 'A Creature, squalid, vengeful, and impure' (ll. 960-2) – a knowledge which has spurred his withdrawal and retreat from the world. '[H]ow languidly I look / Upon this visible fabric of the World', he complains at the end of Book III, 'I exist – Within myself' (ll. 969-70 and l. 974). The Wanderer urges him to regain the child's responsiveness as he hears the 'native sea' inside the 'smooth-lipped Shell':

> Even such a Shell the Universe itself
> Is to the ear of Faith; and [...] doth impart
> Authentic tidings of invisible things' (Book IV, ll. 1135-1138)[9]

Wordsworth, suggests Lamb, is teaching the reader, too, to listen in to the universe. The poem, in effect, is a shell, which in the very rhythms of its verse contains the 'ebb and flow, and ever-during power' (l. 1139) of the universe. This is what lies behind Lamb's comment that *The Excursion* has 'a *versification* which we feel we ought to notice, but feel it also so involved in the poetry, that we can hardly mention it as a distinct excellence' (p. 106). It is a part of the larger harmony of the poem, carrying its own message to the listening reader. And

---

[8] Nicola Trott, 'The Excursion: Types and Symbols of Eternity', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* 79, (Jul., 1992): 239-52 (247).

[9] The omission of several words here is Lamb's own.

it is up to the reader to draw the connections, to recognise the 'Scheme of harmonies', like the onlookers who see the 'two-fold image' of the ram – the 'breathing Creature' and its 'shadowy Counterpart' – and comment that it is 'blended in perfect stillness, to our sight!' (Book IX, l. 454). 'To our sight': the Wanderer is repeatedly trying to tell the Solitary that the process depends on the onlooker, or reader or listener, and their openness to response, their willingness to hear the sea inside the shell. Lamb, in his turn, is showing himself to be one of those attentive, sympathetic listeners.

Conversations of sympathy

The quotations he chooses – while bearing in mind the proviso that not all have remained intact – also continue a longer conversation with Wordsworth, and perhaps carry special significance for Lamb. Among the examples of this continuing pattern or response is one of the early long quotations in Book II, when the Wanderer and the poet have called upon the Solitary, and are eating their 'oaten bread, curds, cheese, and cream' before the window (l. 704). In vivid contrast to the dusty, disorderly domestic interior of the Solitary's 'hermitage', the little 'cabin' or 'cell' scattered with 'books, maps, fossils, withered plants and flowers', 'broken angling-rod' and 'shattered telescope' (ll. 689-695), the poem suddenly turns to look out of the window 'To glance an upward look on two huge Peaks' (l. 719), and there begins a description which Lamb quotes at length. Those twin mountains, says the Solitary,

> 'if here you dwelt, would be
> Your prized Companions. – Many are the notes
> Which in his tuneful course the wind draws forth
> From rocks, woods, caverns, heaths, and dashing shores;
> And well those lofty Brethren bear their part
> In the wild concert – chiefly when the storm
> Rides high; then all the upper air they fill
> With roaring sound, that ceases not to flow,
> Like smoke, along the level of the blast
> In mighty current; theirs, too, is the song
> Of stream and headlong flood that seldom fails;
> And in the grim and breathless hour of noon,
> Methinks that I have heard them echo back
> The thunder's greeting:... (Book II, ll. 722-735)

This evocation of the mountains' part in the whole 'wild concert' is an aspect of Wordsworth's 'Scheme of harmonies'. The description is characterised by an appreciation of the ways in which the different elements of the landscape – 'rocks, woods, caverns', wind and water, sound and smoke – 'echo' one another in a sequence of answer and response, 'touch, / And have an answer'. Framing this description of nature's diverse 'harmony' is the figure of the Solitary, to whom these mountains are 'Companions', and who sits and watches them. This response to the mountains is what redeems the Solitary. Despite the 'wreck' of civilisation which lies around him – the destroyed tools, the ways of interacting with the natural world such as the angling rod and telescope which lie broken and dusty – he retains an instinctive fellowship with the companionate mountains outside. His own 'instruments of music' lie silent, but he can yet appreciate the music of the wind and rocks.

In this way he differs from his predecessors in Wordsworth's poetry such as the frustrated subject of 'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree' from the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. This was a poem Lamb knew well. Despite its unpromising subject matter, the poem was written into the conversations of their friendship, because Lamb had heard it first in Nether Stowey on his

visit there in July 1797. An enthusiastic letter sent to Coleridge immediately on his return begs for a copy of the poem:

> You would make me very happy, if you think W. has no objection, by transcribing for me that inscription of his. I have some scattered sentences ever floating on my memory, teasing me that I cannot remember more of it. (Marrs, I: 117)

The poem seems to be embedded in the story of the Solitary in *The Excursion* – and really to be fundamental to the 'Recluse' concept, since it deals directly with the problems of solitude, of retreat prompted and directed by the wrong motives. Here, too, as in the story of the Solitary, is a man who has hidden away from the world, taking up an isolated dwelling 'commanding a beautiful prospect'. Similarly, this solitary man has 'no common soul', and the poet – like the Wanderer – takes it upon himself to tell his story as the reader enters his 'lonely yew-tree' bower:

> Stranger! These gloomy boughs
> Had charms for him; and here he loved to sit.[10]

This man has also been disappointed in his hopes, which are, it is implied, both personal and social, individual and revolutionary. He went out into the world 'big with lofty views' but found these rejected and his 'spirit damped':

> At once, with rash disdain he turned away,
> And with the food of pride sustained his soul
> In solitude. (ll. 19-21)

Like the Solitary, too, he endlessly gazes upon the view, looking first upon the ground, on 'these barren rocks' where he traces 'An emblem of his own unfruitful life', and then upon the 'more distant scene'. But there seems to be a difference in the way they look upon the world. For the man in the yew-tree of *Lyrical Ballads*, the beautiful prospect reminds him only of what he has lost, prompting him to 'mournful joy' that those who have succeeded in benevolent activity in the world feel

> What he must never feel: and so, lost man!
> On visionary views would fancy feed,
> Till his eye streamed with tears. In this deep vale
> He died, this seat his only monument. (ll. 40-43)

The Solitary's response to the mountains seems subtly different, since he is engaging with the mountains as 'prized Companions'. The man in the yew-tree looks beyond them to 'visionary views', longing for a brotherhood from which he feels excluded, unable to engage with his present surroundings, insulated in retreat within a carapace of worldly pride. The poet ends with a warning to the reader – a predecessor of that given by the Wanderer – to retain 'lowliness of heart' and humility towards the living world.

Lamb – like the Solitary – shows his capacity for sympathy in singling out this passage depicting a humble, watchful response to the living world. It also, perhaps, shows his awareness of the development of the character from the poem in *Lyrical Ballads* which he

[10]'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree', ll. 21-22, from *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 49.

had once admired so much. This excerpt is a way of continuing a conversation which had begun in 1797, with that plea to Coleridge to supply the poem: 'But above all, *that Inscription*! – it will recall to me the tones of all your voices'. He also notes to Wordsworth, with pleasure, the reappearance of 'the story of Margaret [...] a very old acquaintance even as long back as I saw you first at Stowey' (Marrs, III: 95). Like 'Lines left upon a Seat', the 'story of Margaret' must have sunk deeply into his consciousness; indeed, traces of Wordsworth's 'Ruined Cottage' can be seen in his own writing of the period, particularly his short novel *Rosamund Gray*, published in 1798. Again, then, when he places a lengthy quotation from Book I in the review, ending with the poignant lines:

> ...and here she died,
> Last human Tenant of these ruined Walls. (Book I, ll. 50-51)

he is looking back to the poetry he had heard in Somerset so many years before.

Why did these figures – the Solitary, abandoned Margaret – mean so much to Lamb? Did he, perhaps, find an echo of his own lonely self in their stories? Certainly, poems such as 'The Old Familiar Faces', written in January 1798, show a deep awareness of the position of the individual left alone, who feels himself lost, locked out of sympathy, looking back on a world from which he feels himself excluded. Like the Solitary, the poet of 'The Old Familiar Faces' has had all familial and friendly ties stripped away; he is consigned to a wandering existence, unable to feel or see properly:

> Ghost-like, I pac'd round the haunts of my childhood.
> Earth seem'd a desert I was bound to traverse,
> Seeking to find the old familiar faces.[11]

Unlike this figure, and unlike the subject of 'Lines left upon a Seat', the Solitary *does* have the capacity to find pleasure in society again, although, admittedly, this is not fully achieved within *The Excursion*. Between the 1790s and the 1810s, Wordsworth's figure of the Solitary has evolved, cautiously yet optimistically. So, too, had Lamb's voice changed, developing from the lonely, wandering, uncertain poet of the 1790s to a much more sociable, lively essayist persona. The particular style Lamb develops in his later work, and particularly in the *Essays of Elia* – with their deliberate allusiveness, their capacious way of sympathetically incorporating other voices, other genres, everyone from metaphysical poets to George Dyer – is in some ways a reaction to that early, painful knowledge of isolation and loss. 'Books are to me instead of friends', he tells Coleridge in February 1797 (Marrs, I: 89): an idea which might be usefully set alongside the Solitary's companionate relationship with the mountains, however different the two yearnings for sympathy might initially seem.

Conversations of difference

Lamb's review also bears the traces of a conversation with another friend which, similarly, extends back to the 1790s. William Hazlitt's approach to the poem, however, was not quite so sympathetic. His three articles on the 'Character of Mr. Wordsworth's New Poem, *The Excursion*' were published in *The Examiner* on 21st and 28th August and 3 October; Lamb read them and commented on the 'vigor' of Hazlitt's remarks, complaining to Wordsworth about the first two pieces that they 'wore a slovenly air of dispatch and disrespect' (Marrs, III: 112).

---

[11] Lucas, *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, IV: 25-26.

In many ways, however, there are parallels between the approaches of the two men. They were, after all, reading from the same copy. Both poets had attentively followed the whole course of Wordsworth's career, and had the 1790s firmly in view as they wrote about *The Excursion*. But Hazlitt's response had been filtered through disappointment and regret that the ideals of that time had not been realised. Although he begins by praising Wordsworth's setting, the simplicity and elemental power of the poem, this quickly hardens into a discussion of the 'intense intellectual egotism' of Wordsworthian verse (Howe, XIX: 11). While exclaiming at the poem's 'vastness and magnificence', reminiscent of 'the country in which the scene is laid', Hazlitt finds no room for response or sympathy, commenting, indeed, that Wordsworth 'only sympathises with those simple forms of feeling, which mingle at once with his own identity' (Howe, XIX: 11). In contrast to Lamb's delicate delineation of echo and harmony within the poem, Hazlitt hears only one voice – a booming Wordsworthian soliloquy. Lamb comments on the 'cluster of narration' in the poem, and its individual characters and stories, but for Hazlitt, there are no multiple narrators, only 'three persons in one poet'. For Hazlitt, Wordsworth's poem holds 'nothing but himself and the universe' (Howe: XIX: 11).

Hazlitt's liveliest and most vehement condemnations of the poem emerge in his final article, when he complains firstly about Wordsworth's choice of rural inhabitants for narrators: 'we take leave of him when he makes pedlars and ploughmen his heroes and the interpreters of his sentiments' (Howe, XIX: 20). The complaint then broadens into a general attack on the country, 'All country people hate each other. [...] There is nothing good to be had in the country, or, if there is, they will not let you have it' (Howe, XIX: 21). Crabbed, sour, 'stupid for want of thought – selfish for lack of society', country people have little imagination, and less capacity for sympathy. Indeed, Hazlitt goes on, 'The weight of matter which surrounds them crushes the finer sympathies. Their minds become hard and cold, like the rocks which they cultivate' (Howe, XIX: 23). A far cry from the Solitary's mountains, those 'prized Companions' which join in 'wild concert' – and a clue as to why Lamb, writing post-Hazlitt, might have chosen to highlight such a quotation, perhaps in the spirit of refutation.

The contrast between the two friends' approaches to *The Excursion* is highlighted by the knowledge of Lamb's own private exasperation from time to time with Wordsworth's mountains. Take, for instance, Hazlitt's description of the lively pleasures of city versus country life:

> There are no shops, no taverns, no theatres, no opera, no concerts, no pictures, no public-buildings, no crowded streets, no noise of coaches, or of courts of law... (Howe, XIX: 22)

This sounds curiously like Lamb's defence of the city in his famous 1801 letter to Wordsworth thanking him for his gift of *Lyrical Ballads*. 'I have passed all my days in London,' he writes, 'until I have formed as many and intense local attachments, as any of you **Mountaineers** can have done with dead nature'. He chooses, instead, to praise

> The Lighted shops of the Strand and Fleet Street, the innumerable trades, tradesmen and customers, coaches, waggons, play houses, all the bustle and wickedness round about Covent Garden.... (Marrs, I: 267)

But Lamb holds back from such criticism in his comments on *The Excursion* – partly because of his awareness of Wordsworth's sensitivity to criticism, and, perhaps, his protective impulse toward Wordsworth's work and his desire to defend and explain its intricacies.

Certainly Hazlitt's tirade against 'pedlars and ploughmen' must have prompted Lamb's defensive final paragraph, which begins: 'One objection it is impossible not to foresee. It will be asked, why put such eloquent discourse in the mouth of a pedlar?' Invoking Piers Plowman and Burns, Lamb supports Wordsworth's choice of a pedlar as narrator as 'in harmony with the system and scenery of his poem' (p. 111). Lamb realised the kinds of criticism to which Wordsworth was laying himself open – criticism such as Francis Jeffrey's subsequent infamous review: 'This will never do'.[12] Lamb's own occasional private concerns about Wordsworthian egotism are therefore left unspoken. By making the case for a sympathetic reading of *The Excursion*, Lamb's review functions as an important public statement of sympathy with its author.

But Lamb's review goes beyond an act of friendship. It springs from a deep and sincere response to the poem itself, which transcends particular settings, and which allows Lamb to find solace in *The Excursion* even when 'faggd & disjointed [...] with damnd India house work'. As George Soule in his excellent lecture on the poem has pointed out, there is a 'comparative classlessness' in the way in which the stories of Grasmere lives unfold from particular places, nooks, paths, springs, a ruined wall, a mountain view. 'We must read *The Excursion*', he writes, 'in the light of Wordsworth's insistence that the world's surface is alive with stories and messages'.[13] The world's surface – perhaps, then, not simply Loughrigg, Grasmere, Borrowdale. Perhaps also the Inner Temple, Fleet Street, the Strand. Where Lamb's reading goes beyond that of Hazlitt is in its insistence on the wider implications of *The Excursion* – that its 'stories and messages' may be read and understood beyond the bounds of Wordsworth's native hills, that Wordsworth's 'Scheme of harmonies' might involve the city reader as much as the rural solitary. His review, therefore, even in its mangled form, argues for a reading of *The Excursion* which reaches across boundaries of specific setting, or period – a reading which is, perhaps, particularly relevant for a contemporary audience, which struggles to find an easy sympathy with the poem.

University of Leicester

[12] Review of 'The Excursion', *Edinburgh Review* (November 1814).
[13] George Soule, '"Spots of Earth" in *The Excursion*', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* 85 (Jan., 1994): 19-24.

Society Notes and News from Members

CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

The Society is pleased to welcome further new members: Dr Greg Dart of University College, London, and Mme Eva Soreau of Barbizon, who is working on a comparative study of Charles Lamb and the German writer, Jean Paul (J.P.F.Richter). Both took part in a well-attended December meeting, which heard a fascinating account from James Grande of Linacre College, Oxford, of the work that is being carried on in editing William Godwin's Diary. More of this in a future issue of the *Bulletin*.

Keeping in mind, always, the Society's principal object, namely 'to advance knowledge and publish studies of the life, works and times of Charles Lamb and his circle', I would be interested to hear from any member who has views on how the Society should best go forward in the new decade (accepting the common view that we have now entered a new decade, even though it seems to me that this can only be true a year hence). The scope and nature of the Society's activities were reviewed at a recent meeting of the Council. It was decided to implement some changes over the next couple of years. Members will be interested to note that next autumn the usual October and December meetings will be amalgamated into a Lamb 'day conference' to be held at Swedenborg Hall on Saturday 27 November 2010, a date which you should all please put in your diaries now! Further details of the conference will appear later.

Following decisions by the Society at the AGM, donations are being made for 2010 to furnish bursaries for post-graduate students to attend academic conferences. £1,000 has been granted to the University of Manchester for 'Bill Ruddick Memorial Bursaries' and £500 to the Friends of Coleridge to provide bursaries in connection with the Coleridge Summer Conference 2010. Given the current straitened financial climate, the Society is pleased to be able to maintain its role of assisting educational activity in this fashion.

As has already been announced, the title of Stephen Burley's lecture on 10 April will be 'Trying to like Scotchmen: Lamb, Hazlitt and Cockney anti-Caledonianism'.

Finally, a new paperback version of the *Essays of Elia* has just been published in the Hesperus Classics series. This has a brief introduction by the journalist and broadcaster, Matthew Sweet. The details are: *Essays of Elia* by Charles Lamb, foreword by Matthew Sweet, Hesperus Classics, published by The Hesperus Press Limited, London, paperback, 184 pp, price £7.99.

Editor's Note: Beginning with the April issue of the *Bulletin*, Dr. Felicity James will become Review Editor. Please forward all reviews to her at fj21@le.ac.uk or, if in print form, to School of English, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH. As with other materials forwarded for inclusion in the *Bulletin*, submission in electronic form is preferred.