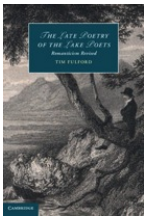
# THE LATE POETRY OF THE LAKE POETS: ROMANTICISM REVISED



**By Tim Fulford**
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***Reviewed by Peter Larkin on 2014-02-28.***

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The "Lakeness" of Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth amounted to a revisionary belatedness. This richly researched study shows us how an initially hostile label came to signify something positive about these poets: how they transformed their youthful practice by absorbing and revising the more commercially successful technique of their successors, whom they themselves had influenced. By extending their careers beyond those of the younger male Romantics, the elder poets made dependence, influence, and rivalry thoroughly reversible. Tim Fulford operates with something of a "late" historicism himself. Though broadly supporting the 1980s charge that "Romantic ideology" betrayed history, he reproaches historicists for having done little more than react to a received canon. While criticizing the youthful experiments of the Lakers, he contends that historicists neglected the complex self-mutations in their later work. This later output, Fulford argues, delimits and displaces the very idea of a Romantic imagination that emerged only from the subsequent trials of a founding generation.

By the middle of the nineteenth century it was the later poetry of Southey and Wordsworth that was widely read; only in the twentieth century was the early work of Coleridge and Wordsworth thought to surpass it in terms of imagination, genius and power. But according to Fulford, the Lake poets had always to reckon with the pressures of the literary marketplace, even though they remained comparatively aloof and under-remunerated. Wordsworth in particular, he says, devolved from his "egotistical sublime" stance (another label) in "the direction of a more communal and traditional voice" (7). His post-1815 work, Fulford shows, was neither an escape from history nor an ecological project but "a topographic writing allied with guidebooks and local histories...a historicised nationalism" (7). Southey made a comparable move. Repenting of his youthful Jacobinical ballads (though not of the Oriental romances that made his name and paved the way for Byron), he opted for a moral poetry expressing wholesome domesticity and propriety. Starting in 1816, Coleridge constructed a self-conscious aesthetic of fragmentation and oral chant, while trying to reoccupy the medievalist poetic that Scott had appropriated as a prime commercial asset. In different ways, each poet revamped the "Lake poets" branding that had been foisted on them by dismissive reviewers but that persisted as a distinctive marker in the literary market-place.

As an editor of Southey's *Collected Letters* and *Later Poetical Works*, Fulford has already contributed much to the re-evaluation of Southey, and his chapters on Southey here are deftly intricate. Though better known for his Orientalist tales like *Thalaba* (1801) and *Madoc* (1805), Southey moved to the Lakes in 1803, and after 1814 he assumed his geography as a badge of honor. Lending itself well to the new techniques of visual reproduction, his topographic poetry presented the Lakes as an authentic locality, not just a picturesque scene. His collaboration with the illustrators Edward Nash and William Westall was not only a commercial success but also a means of redirecting popular tourist genres from within that market. According to Fulford, he aimed to precipitate a richer subjective involvement -- mental and physical -- with place, so that a moral and metaphysical reorientation could transport the view beyond a commodified landscape. Southey also defied critics who thought his Lake poetry puerile because he wrote for children. In "The Cataract of Lodore" for instance, Fulford finds comedy flooding over into sheer intensification "as if the attempt to capture the endlessly fluid and changing water in the repeated participles, rushing metre and heavy onomatopoeia and alliteration induces mimetic desperation" (54). In a striking reading, Fulford demonstrates that in spite of its sonic eruptions, this poem dazzles on the page, transcending the oral for the more rewardable transmissions of print-culture.

Southey's Oriental romances continued until 1820, by which time Byron's Eastern tales and Keats's *Hyperion* (1819) had already taken them a step further. Reinforced by ponderous footnotes, Southey's Orientalist verse deployed a confusing array of perspectives but gave a radically free rein to exotic narrative. Byron became more adept at dramatic containment of such material, though with a racier eroticism and a Satanic *frisson* that the later Southey would fiercely oppose. In response, Southey adapted to the colonial context a paternalism derived from the nature lyricism of the Lake poets, a lyricism they had pioneered as apparently barbarously provincial outsiders themselves.

While Fulford's reading of Southey shows some respect for the local particularities of the poet's later conservatism, his chapters on Coleridge deploy a more unflinching historicism. After his failed attempt to supervise writer-reader relations in *The Friend*, Fulford explains, Coleridge had to reinvent himself by resubmitting to the uncertainties of commercial publishing. When at Byron's behest he published the unfinished "Christabel," "Kubla Khan," and "The Pains of Sleep" in 1816, he was cautiously repackaging notions about creative genius and the Romantic fragment dating from the 1790s. In 1816, Coleridge was trying to carve out a role for himself in a hostile literary market that already adulated the younger

imitators (Scott and Byron) of his unpublished manuscripts, which had been circulating privately for almost two decades. Consequently, the printed pages of the 1816 volume remain haunted by the previous life of the poems as orally embodied performances of melody or chant. This volume, writes Fulford, violates the poet himself to some degree, presenting songs that print can never wholly refresh, or "three fragments in search of a singer" (117). In its attempt to reframe bodily recital and enchantment through print transmission, the volume is what Fulford calls an "entransment" within the body of commodity form. Soon after publishing the volume, Coleridge produced his own would-be foundational prose statements on the origins of the "Lake" school so as to clarify his differences from Wordsworth and demonstrate a more literary street-wise self-consciousness. In "The Pains of Sleep" Coleridge explores the boundaries between sleep and waking, thereby questioning the very possibility of self-control and self-knowledge. Here, Fulford observes, lies not so much a chant as a grim entrancement projecting the stagnancy of mind rather than its growth. For Hazlitt, such orchestrated enchantment was in any case undemocratic, or as Fulford puts it, univocal. Coleridge was "bechant[ing] his retreat to a...traditionalist cultural politics in which meaning, the preserve of a few, was vouchsafed through the enthralment of an audience to speaker rather than by clear and equal debate" (151).

By the 1820s, Fulford goes on to explain, Coleridge's later poetics became fully tuned to the needs of a paying literary market. As an older, obliquely disillusioned male writer, he courted in print the youthfully receptive, refreshingly attentive female reader. In 1828, having seen the success of Letitia Elizabeth Landon with her poem "Improvisatrice," he contributed "The Improvisatore" to the *Amulet*. His contributions to the literary annuals, however, avoid any intensely Romantic self-exposure even while their frequent allusions to personal loss and failure raise expectations of confession. "After self-estrangement comes rest," Fulford writes, "albeit in a position of displacement from all deep emotion" (165).

Though "estrangement" seems partly to echo the ubiquitous "trans" of the involuntary marketplace, Fulford does not pursue this point. Instead he notes that in releasing to the annuals some "new old" (167) poems such as "A Day Dream," originally addressed to Sara Hutchinson in 1802, Coleridge presents himself as "the infantalised centre of nurturing female attention" (167). Though Fulford finds such poems more like aids "to masturbation than to reflexion" (167), he admits that Coleridge seems to risk his new role as a conservative moralist and educator of the young men of a future clerisy. But Fulford tends to slight the massive quantity of philosophical prose that Coleridge begot in this period. As a prolific philosophical writer, Coleridge could afford (however reluctantly) to compromise his reputation tentatively for the sake of income from the annuals. He is not just the male poet writing for the female reader but the off-duty male philosopher offering a little occasional poetry to his (purchasing) female admirers. While such poetry may constitute a self-slighting record of personal frustration insofar as it must remain unsublimated, such hopelessness is exactly what is challenged in his more bracing and risky life-and-death metaphysical prose.

Fulford's account of Coleridge actually ends on a metaphysical note. Noting that the prose opening of "The Blossoming of a Solitary Date-Tree" substitutes for two stanzas not lost (as the poet claimed), Fulford reads the published text as a fragment-construct. Syntactically and semantically, he argues, the verse reveals an excess of nature in the past in which nothing is lost other than its original binding unity. This prompts Fulford to move from historicism to a statement of (transcendental) belief: stories, he writes, can only be "allegories of absence" of an original unity that cannot be regained in public print by the subtlest textual strategies and revisions. So Fulford ends (however bleakly) on Coleridge's own chosen late ground, whereby an engaged critic becomes an equal metaphysical contender.

The chapters on Wordsworth with which this study concludes are also the most satisfying. From his early ballads and nature poems, Fulford observes, Wordsworth turned to topographic odes and sonnet sequences, a strategy whose commercial success was reinforced by his writing of popular illustrated guidebooks and the frequent re-collecting of his past and recent verse. According to Fulford, Wordsworth aimed to bring before a larger public work that both "honoured the ambiguous legacy of [the] spots of time and legislated a way of living after them" (202). In his later poetry, Fulford finds, the (deconstructive) abyss underlying Wordsworth's encounter with nature gives way to the talismanic power of local names, which lack semantic traction. In working the names of the fells into his verse, Wordsworth generates what amounts to a "priestly incantation" (209). In a quasi-magical procedure that Fulford calls "Glaramarous," names like "Helvellyn" or "Glaramara" offer ripples of sound and internal rhyme but with only a material reference. In "Yew Trees," a line like "Murmuring from Glaramara's inmost caves" depends on a uniquely deictic name denoting an "experience untransferable and therefore precious in its locality" (211). While "Glaramara" is thus seen to combine material place and sublime poetic language, though not as a unity, another "trans" surfaces but is not overtly signalled here. Words and world merge as sonic occasions: Fulford implies that the "trans" in each transitional moment makes Wordsworth a "poet of singularity" (212) rather than of metaphysical vision. He also faults the poet's Christianizing later work but in more familiar terms: its names, he says become "too easily translatable into empty generics such as 'Faith' and 'Joy' "(227).

Besides his poetry, the later Wordsworth's influential *Guide to the Lakes* established him as an authority on authentic Cumbrian names, names that both evoke and champion the folklore and work-culture of an in-depth topography. Bound up with the second edition of the *Guide*, his sonnet sequence, *The River Duddon* (1820), confirmed him as a widely read topographic poet who evokes the resonances of a visitable place: a place that can be visited by his readers rather than just revisited by him in quest of childhood hauntings. For instance, in the third edition of the *Guide*, titled *A Description of the Scenery of the Lakes* (1822), Wordsworth adds a new sonnet on the standing stone known locally as "Long Meg and her Daughters." While he might once have turned his stone into a ballad, it now becomes a carefully considered repository of local tradition and belief, both recent and prehistoric. Wordsworth has become a national writer, accepting orthodoxy as a "commitment to the beliefs of the ordinary people who once inhabited the landscape" (258). Since his poetry can still revitalize the myths by which people endow the places they love with meaning, he is simply the latest observer of a place embodying a distinctive history of naming. In the texture of the sonnet Fulford finds "syntax and sense becom[ing] mazy" amid a "thrust of exhortation...diverted into appositional phrases" (266). This may not be so remote from Wordsworth's earlier practice, as Simon Jarvis has shown in his *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (2007). Fulford acknowledges, however, that even while revising his prevailing sensibility, Wordsworth does not reject his earlier poetics. The late Wordsworth, Fulford concludes, "was both a metaphysical and a commercial poet" (266).

Fulford's book complements Brian Goldberg's *The Lake Poets and Professional Identity* (2007), which highlights the years before Jeffrey coined the phrase "Lake poets" in 1814, though a "new school" had been much discussed earlier and Jeffrey was already using the derogatory term "Laker" by 1807. Nevertheless, Goldberg remains a useful corrective to Fulford because he foregrounds the emergence of poetry as a cultural product: not a commodity but something professionally wrought and therefore worth a fee.

At some points, Fulford's keen historicism depends on a micro-contextualizion of events that is not equal to what proceeds from them. Coleridge's concept of the imagination may well have begun as the germ of a riposte to Jeffrey's label, but this hardly explains how much it shaped the future course of literature and criticism. How should such a historicist insight re-shape our cultural memory of the imaginative? Similarly, is it true, as Fulford argues, that what the later Wordsworth names in nature does not summon a deconstructive abyss but actual material objects already inscribed on the tourist circuit? Despite a wonderful reading of the sonics involved here, such a concretion remains either leaky or over-absorbent and demands from a punctual materialization more than it can deliver.

At this late stage of historicism, we cannot expect a book such as this to offer much in the way of a theoretical restatement: there are no asides on the problematic dynamics of personal/impersonal agency or on the relation of history to temporality (save a passing remark on the role of aging in human experience generally). Fulford's detailed analyses are still shadowed by the specter of history as the real and literature as the mythic, while a suspicion of connoisseurship hovers over much of the pre-war twentienth century criticism he considers. Further, though Fulford's astute use of private letters and journals (mainly edited in the last century) give current perspectives a huge leverage over those of any Victorian public, they may also distort the dynamics of historical reception as much as illuminate it. Nonetheless, this study includes many brilliantly resourceful close readings of unfamiliar poems. Fulford's critical style is enlivened by daring coinages that show off his writerly verve and reinternalize the literary as a presence within what he has to say. Not the least virtue of this learned book is not just how much its trenchant re-assessments inform us, but how well it displays the author's relish of and commitment to poetry.

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## Tim Fulford responds to Peter Larkin

As Proust remarked, each sees the other in the light shed by his own concerns. Peter Larkin's appreciative and thoughtful review of my book is very much coloured by his commitment to deconstruction and its legacy; what he sees in my book is both a more limited and diminishing historicism and a more persistent and unconscious metaphysic than I thought I had written.

I don't, for instance, think I positioned history as the real and literature as the mythic; nor, I hope, did I rest content with situating poetry in "a micro-contextualization of events that is not equal to what proceeds from them." The aim of my historicist study is larger: to show how much of what we call Romanticism is questioned when we investigate the later careers of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, when they redefined their work in response to critical attacks and commercial demands. From the 1820s they embraced, and turned to their own advantage, the dismissive accusation that they were "Lake poets"-- provincial, puerile, namby-pamby ruralists. They also learned to write in a commercial literary market to which they had formerly been hostile: the critical concepts that emerged from that hostility in 1815--such as "imagination" and "power"--were not the final or definitive expression of their relationship to the reading public. We need to understand the "micro" contexts of 1807, 1815-17 and 1820 precisely because doing so helps us understand how and why, in the twentieth-century, academic criticism, universalising and de-historicizing its own historical and institutional biases, neglected their later poetry--poetry popular with the Victorians--and defined "Romanticism" in terms of the concepts put forward in 1815-17.

To answer Peter's question, Coleridge's concept of the imagination shaped the future course of literature and criticism because generations were educated to use it--and they were educated to do so because its divorce of "true" literature from commercial writing, and its separation of the poet from the mass reading public, spoke to the anxieties of a university-based discipline of literary criticism that needed, so as to claim institutional and cultural authority, to find a concept that would allow the defence of a canon. To re-historicize the origins of this concept, now that the university-based discipline is more relaxed about (and diminished in) its authority and its canon, does not necessarily confine the concept to a limited past; it allows us to be clearer-eyed about the historical situatedness of our own critical values--what we've inherited and why. In the same movement, re-historicization also helps us to see that later in their lives (as well as earlier), the Romantic poets wrote in a different, less-embattled and less-defensive mode that literary critics have too long neglected and that, in our present historical situation, we can again find valuable--not least for its relative openness to popular publication and to popular cultural forms of enquiry into historical identity (forms that guardians of "high" culture still view pejoratively as tourism, sightseeing and heritage). Exploring the later Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey allows us to move beyond the by-now ossified critical positions of the 1980s and 1990s: they were not simply, for better or worse (depending on whether you are a New Critic or a New Historicist) high-priests of Imagination; nor, pacé deconstructionists, were they prophets of a Nature that is merely a screen for language itself. Wordsworth's nature changed, as did the abysses he found when he summoned it to his words; it changed because his understanding of its historical production altered as he aged and because the contexts within which he wrote changed. So, against what Peter claims, I read the later Wordsworth as a poet who does indeed summon a deconstructive abyss--*but not the same abyss every time*--precisely because the "actual material objects" he summons--rocks, stones, trees--have been inscribed differently, at different times, by the discourses of the "tourist circuit" (and many other discourses including antiquarian history and geology). If my critical method, in trying to register both effects of material objects and effects deriving from the nature of language itself, is "leaky or over-absorbent" in Peter's terms-- or, in my terms, a mixture of Hartman and historicism--then I'll live with that. Though my critical boots may be permeable, I'm aiming not at a waterproof criticism that leaves purity intact but a tactile exploration of poetic paths made in place and time.

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