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Excerpt

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Introduction: Professionalism and the Lake School of Poetry

When William Wordsworth, Robert Southey, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge – the Lake school – formulated their earliest descriptions of the role of the poet, two models of vocational identity exerted special pressure on their thinking. One was the idea of the professional gentleman. In their association of literary composition with socially useful action, their conviction that the judgment of the poet should control the literary marketplace, and their efforts to correlate personal status with the poet’s special training, the Lake writers modified a progressive version of intellectual labor that was linked, if sometimes problematically, to developments in the established professions of medicine, church, and law. In short, they attempted to write poetry as though writing poetry could duplicate the functions of the professions. The other model, and it is related to the first, is literary. Like the Lake poets, earlier eighteenth-century authors had been stimulated, if occasionally frustrated, by the puzzle of how to write poetry in the face of changing conceptions of intellectual work. While ideals of medical, legal, and theological effectiveness that measured “technique” were competing with those that emphasized “character,” literary production was moving (more slowly and less completely than is sometimes thought) from a patronage- to a market-based model.¹ Eighteenth-century writers developed a body of figural resources such as the poetic wanderer that responded to new constructions of experience, merit, and evaluation, and the Lake writers seized on these resources in order to describe their own professional situation.

To invoke the concept of the “professional” in this context is to allude to a number of separate issues. Kant’s declaration that “beautiful art . . . must not be a matter of remuneration”

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participates in a centuries-long insistence that virtue is dependent on leisure, whereas authors motivated by an “abject devotion to their private interests,” as Isaac Disraeli puts it, “like Atalanta, for the sake of the apples of gold, lose the glory of the race.”² Critics interested in the historical fortunes of this idea have found that the eighteenth century, with its growing consumer economy and expanding book trade, is a crucial developmental period.³ By the end of the century, as Roger Chartier describes the situation, there has emerged a “somewhat paradoxical connection” between a “desired professionalization,” meaning the possibility of earning a living through writing, and “an ideology of literature founded on the radical autonomy of the work of art and the disinterestedness of the creative act.”⁴ Romantic theories that replace didactic or effect-oriented “instrumentalism” with art for its own sake may be understood as a reaction to market conditions, which is to say, as Martha Woodmansee does, that there is an “interest” in “disinterestedness”: “As literature became subject to a market economy, the instrumentalist theory . . . was found to justify the wrong works,” while theories of an autonomous aesthetic sphere justified imaginative writing that was rejected by the marketplace.⁵

The possibility I investigate here, however, is that Romantic authors had a more productive relationship to the idea of audience than rejection followed by reaction, and that the professional model offered a fruitful alternative to the hack and the brilliant recluse. To understate the case, it is not difficult to find Romantic writers explicitly distinguishing their own aims and motivations from commercial ones, but, it should be added, such accounts often come in close proximity to other kinds of concerns. When, in one of his 1802 letters to the gentleman-poet William Sotheby, Coleridge declares that his “*true Call to the Ministry of Song*” gives him confidence in the face of criticism, his sense of vocation and the intellectual independence his ministry entails are forcefully expressed. Nobody ministers in isolation, however, and Coleridge follows up by joking about the money his publisher has lost on his recent translation of *Wallenstein*: “I am sure, that Longman never thinks of me . . . but the ghosts of his departed Guineas dance an ugly Waltz round my idea.”⁶ The ministry of song is logically separable from the dance of the ghostly guineas, but professionalism, which allows disinterest to coexist with the world of business, brings Coleridge’s rhetorical performances into a single line.

Chartier's "somewhat paradoxical connection" between being free and working for pay is not necessarily a paradox, any more than it is only an associative accident for Coleridge to mention his prophetic call at the same time that he dwells upon his latest adventure in publication. The poet sings, but money dances, and sometimes it dances away.

Although getting paid is only part of what the term "professional" means in this context, it is worth remembering that the Lake poets, especially when they were first orienting themselves towards their work, were either willing or felt compelled to associate authorship with remuneration. "[Southey] knew that I published [*Lyrical Ballads*] for money and money alone," Wordsworth would complain in 1799, irked by Southey's unenthusiastic review of the volume. "I care little for the praises of any other professional critic, but as it may help me to pudding."⁷ Southey had responded similarly, a few years earlier, to a qualified review of his own writing. "Have you seen Bob Banyard's review of Joan of Arc? 'a professional man must not step too much out of his way' granted – ergo I abjure public poetry: but a professional man must have a house and furniture – ergo I must write a book first."⁸ The "book" Southey is laboring over is his Welsh epic *Madoc*, and as he mulls over his situation the poem's hero is pressed into un-princely service: "Poor Madoc! If he will buy me chairs tables linens etc. etc. it will be worth more than an eternity of posthumous credit."⁹ A year later, Coleridge would propose that "things necessary for the body" should be purchased "by the labour of the body, and things necessary for the mind by the labour of the mind," but he also laments that, "Alas! this beautiful order of things, if not rendered impossible by the present state of society, is in most instances incompatible with our present state of education."¹⁰ "The beautiful order of things" imagined by Coleridge will require reform at the public and the personal level. Meanwhile, he has been employed as a freelance journalist, as a lecturer, and as a newspaper poet, and he has been preparing to take up a living as a preacher, a fate from which he has only been rescued by a timely annuity settled on him as a form of patronage.

It would be a mistake to imagine that, at such moments, the poets are merely displaying an opportunistic careerism, or in Coleridge's case a fatalism, that negates their other claims on

behalf of “the ministry of song.” It is important, for example, to distinguish between “publishing” and “writing.” Wordsworth may state that he publishes only for money, but he allows the composition of poetry to stem from a diviner impulse. A similar point may be made about Southey’s plan to renounce “public poetry” once his identity as a professional man is established. It would remain acceptable, even desirable, to write privately, for a close circle of friends and relations. Of the three, Coleridge is most visibly torn between aesthetic idealism and the fallen world of work. Some writing is meant to be sold, for example the Wallenstein translation, but other works, the productions of “Genius,” express a kind of freedom which must be supported differently. “Never pursue literature as a trade!” Coleridge eventually advises, and he, like Southey, is imagining that a gentleman might establish a stable professional life that would enable leisurely, not trade-driven, composition.

Yet if it is difficult to understand these varied careers as expressions of a single-minded entrepreneurialism, it is equally hard to believe that the genteel retirement that an author such as Gray pursued, or the legal career he spent his life avoiding, would really have provided adequate or desirable shelter for the Lake poets’ efforts. These writers measured themselves against their audiences, and against other professionals, from beginning to end. Further, although Wordsworth is the only member of the Lake school whose best achievements may unambiguously be located in his poetry, writing poetry was always, for all of them, the most valued exercise of the author’s calling. Their collective effort may thus be considered an attempt to redeem the idea of professional work for the practice of poetry, an attempt that was sometimes frustrated but other times energised by what eighteenth-century intellectual work was actually turning into. Although the Lake poets court vocational failure and sometimes disaster, their writing has an optimistic and pragmatic core, which may be why, in addition to their irreducible formal gifts, they become such important models for the poets who follow them. Chatterton was believed to have poisoned himself, after all, and Gray’s Bard leaps “headlong” into the “roaring tide” of the Conway River. In the work of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, on the other hand, the poet almost always gets out alive.

I YOUNG POETS, OLD PROFESSIONS

“Professionalism,” then, is one name for the poets’ relationship to their culture, and it frames their relationship to their immediate predecessors. Yet the central importance of the learned professions for these poets has remained under-examined. There have been valuable treatments of poets and individual professions, for example of Coleridge and medicine or, especially, Wordsworth and the law.¹¹ There have also been studies that use the category “professionalism” to describe an aspect of modernity in which Romantic writing is directly implicated. However, in order to understand the way these poets conceived of their actual work, it is also necessary to generalize about the other kinds of work they might have expected to do. While the category of “authorship” has undergone intensive scrutiny in the past thirty years, structuralist and discursive approaches have treated it as a complexly isolated reflection of other kinds of social relations. Recent discussions of copyright, for example, have advanced our sense of the legal contours of authorship, but, by design, they leave the non-specific aspects of authorship unanalyzed.¹² In contrast, I argue that what Alan Liu calls the “vocational imagination,” which is an author’s “need to *place* [the work of writing] in the field of contemporary industry,” is shaped by the “ecology” or the “system” of professional labor.¹³ The ancient, learned professions that provided the basic template for professional identity, as well as other vocational groups that aspired to professional status, compete internally and externally for jurisdiction over tasks and problems of recognized importance, and they compete over the definitions of what successful solutions should look like.¹⁴ For the Lake writers, poets are or should be a central part of this system, based on their training and their variously defined social mission. At a moment when differing versions of social order fill the air, some familiar metaphors – poet as prophet, poet as healer, poet as law-giver – turn out to have unpredictably literal referents.

Although the life-stories of the Lake poets have different textures, their early careers are defined by a common body of “life-chances,” a specific combination of material necessity and educational resources.¹⁵ As young men, each was in need of a dependable source of income, and, pursuing a standard trajectory, each followed up on a grammar-school education with

attendance at Oxford or Cambridge. The differences among Wordsworth's rural Hawkshead, Southey's venerable Westminster, and Coleridge's charity school, Christ's Hospital, are thus partially ameliorated by the schools' preparatory function, which is exercised largely informally – as the career of Southey, ejected from Westminster but welcome at Balliol College, demonstrates. The writers were all intended by their families to enter the Church, a fact that bears directly on the ways they would describe the poetic profession, but other options were live at various times. In addition to their clerical prospects, Wordsworth also contemplated the law, and Coleridge and Southey both considered medicine. Further, the extra-professional jobs they imagined for themselves were based, by and large, on the education that suited them for the professions, and those options included work that was or would eventually become “professional” by many definitions: school teaching, tutoring, and journalism are central, and Coleridge's brief experience of military service, his pseudonymous enlistment in the Light Dragoons as “Silas Tomkyn Comberbache,” is anomalous from the point of view of history not because he became a soldier but because he did not enter the army as an officer.

Potential entry into the professions contributes greatly to the writers' sense of identity, but it also generates an ongoing act of resistance toward the old regime. Any profession could be expensive or time-consuming to prepare for – “all professions have their inconveniences,” as Wordsworth would say.¹⁶ More important, the perceived stability of the professions and their participation in the distributive dynamics of the establishment made them emblematic of old-style, oligarchic corruption. Coleridge's 1795 attack on Southey, shortly after the dissolution of Pantisocracy, is illustrative. Coleridge claims to be upset, not for his own sake, but on behalf of their partner George Burnett, who will be left without support now that the utopian community the men had been planning has been abandoned. As a radical intellectual with a short supply of cash, Burnett is financially as well as morally barred from the professions, Coleridge argues, even though professional work is the alternative for which his education has best suited him: “He cannot go into the Church – for you did ‘give him principles’! . . . Nor can he go into the Law – for the same principles declare against it . . . for Law or Physic he could

not take his degrees in or be called to,” Coleridge adds, “without a sinking of many hundred pounds.”¹⁷ While Coleridge is implicitly separating himself from Burnett’s haplessness, their situation is in many ways shared, and he is as precise in distinguishing among the professions as he is at ease combining them. One set of objections bears on the church, a related but extended set to the law (“a wicked profession,” he calls it later in the same letter); and law and physic demand a substantial outlay of capital, whether one is “called to” the bar or “takes his degrees in” medicine.¹⁸ Southey, Coleridge implies, is unfairly advantaged in being able to consider these courses of action. Coleridge might have added what he also knew, which is that Southey had had the option of a Church living available to him, held by his uncle, Herbert Hill, while he and Burnett lacked Southey’s helpful connections.

A critique of established networks is equally implicit in Wordsworth’s earlier declaration, generically representative of his radicalism, that “[h]ereditary distinctions and privileged orders of every species . . . must necessarily counteract the progress of human improvement.”¹⁹ Wordsworth’s sense of “human improvement” owes as much to Smith as to Godwin, since the existence of “privileged orders” is not only an impediment to efficient land use and the enforcement of law but to the proper distribution of places and positions. Significantly, Wordsworth’s temporary intention is to fight these “institutions” as an entrepreneurial journalist, a quasi-profession that would struggle toward legitimacy over the course of the nineteenth century.²⁰ Yet such an appeal to the open market, which offers itself as an answer to inherited privilege, demands some framing. As Wordsworth had earlier written to Mathews:

You certainly are furnished with talents and acquirements which if properly made use of will enable you to get your bread unshackled by the necessity of professing a particular system of opinions. You have still the hope that we may be connected in some method of obtaining an Independence Nothing but the resolution is necessary. The field of Letters is very extensive, and it is astonishing if we cannot find some little corner, which with a little tillage will produce for us the necessities, nay even the comforts of life.²¹

While they tout the magic of the late-century literary marketplace, these lines reveal the problematic that would also define

Wordsworth's ongoing thinking about the relationship of poetic to professional work. The potentially shabby world of full-time journalism is transformed into an agricultural "field" that lies waiting for the desultory, non-competitive, and non-waged tillage of Wordsworth and Mathews, whose actions will require the classical, martial virtue of "resolution," who are figured optimistically as a pair of gentleman farmers, and whose goal is not a steady salary but "independence." Writing may be a trade, but it is not "trade," and it isn't the shop or the factory. It is the proper sphere for educated men of "talents and acquirements," and the independence it offers is multivalent. Wordsworth would be free of the establishment's "system of opinions," and he also wants to be free of its system of handing out money and jobs.

The proximity of professional to authorial careers is not surprising, since in each case so much could depend on a certain kind of educational background, and the Lake writers share this proximity with a wide body of precedent poets. Thomas Akenside is announced as "M.D." on the title page of *Pleasures of Imagination*; William Collins narrowly avoided becoming a clergyman; Thomas Gray spent much of his life preparing for a legal career he would never enter; Edward Young, as I will discuss, took orders, and other chapters of this book detail James Beattie's academic career and William Cowper's disastrous experience with the law. Further, while the professional or near-professional gentleman-author is one central figure for the Lake poets, just as relevant are poets such as Richard Savage and Thomas Chatterton, at either end of the century, who were excluded by circumstances from that profile yet were highly sensitive to the currents of professional authority that swirled around them. For writers of the Lake poets' generation, the stories of these marginal careers are also formative, insofar as Savage and Chatterton enact both the resistance and the imaginative accommodation that defines the Lake poets' response to professional work.

The history of the British professions unfolds within a number of overlapping chronological frameworks. While the institutional structure of the eighteenth-century professions, which includes the Universities, the Royal College of Physicians, and the Inns of Court, is medieval, the professions begin to take their modern form after 1688, when the anti-professional backlash of the civil wars and the subsequent court-centered regimes of Charles II and

James II give way to a revitalization of professional privilege.²² Patterns of education also change after the wars, and professional preparation becomes more clearly separated from the generic education of the gentleman.²³ All of these shifts have precedents before 1642, and all provide connections between earlier and later professional forms. As Rosemary O'Day suggests, the development of a specifically professional ethic entails the dismantling of the early modern responsibilities of the aristocratic leader, but it also involves a recombination of those "humanist" tendencies on behalf of the professional project.²⁴ Romantic writers are able to draw on the oppositional heritage of various Whig and Country versions of patriotic "virtue" (versions that are not always mutually compatible) largely because professional self-justification makes formerly aristocratic values available in the context of authorized and sometimes regulated intellectual labor.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, the professions move toward the acknowledgment of new sources of status and of purportedly more rational measurements of effectiveness, but the process is not especially linear or evolutionary. As Roy Porter describes eighteenth-century medicine, for example, action on the part of apothecaries, lay practitioners, and (for Porter, most important) a growing population of clients makes "medicine a more lucrative profession, and doctors . . . more prestigious," not because medical science becomes more technically proficient, but because a greater number of people are in a position to demand, and potentially to supply, "health."²⁵ More generally, during the early-century period that sees Queen Anne's bounty improve the status of the lower clergy by augmenting poorer church livings, the Act of 1729 combine attorneys and lawyers in the hope of regularizing their effectiveness, and, between 1720 and 1750, the founding of most of London's great teaching hospitals, demographic pressure is encouraging consolidation and specialization, increasing the chances of individual and collective mobility while contributing to the "intellectual" significance of intellectual work. Geoffrey Holmes, who has demonstrated that the Augustan professions "expanded and diversified [and] became increasingly valuable as instruments of social fusion," also describes the "rise in academic standards" that the professions experience during this early period.²⁶ Yet as an important counter-example, a post-1688 regularization of the church "career-structure" is immediately

followed by increasing pluralism, elite defense of privilege, and a “chaotic” reward-structure.²⁷

The process of rationalization would accelerate in the nineteenth century, when, as Magali Sarfatti Larson has phrased it, the “move by merit against birth” that defines certain kinds of professionalism is energized by industrial take-off and political reform.²⁸ The years of the Lake poets’ early careers are marked, however, by a confluence of factors that are crucial for later developments. New possibilities for political radicalism stimulated by events in France come together with the population’s ever-increasing desire for professional service and its hostility towards the establishment’s attempts to control intellectual work, all of which opens up new ways of imagining and pursuing a poetic or a professional career. In the intensified circumstances of the 1790s, when it has become more desirable than ever to look beyond the borders of the established professions and when the demand for “careers open to talents” would emerge as an international imperative, the Lake poets set out to find ways of exploiting both their status as potential professional gentlemen and new and emerging ways of thinking about work. These circumstances go some way toward substantiating Clifford Siskin’s signal observation that the actual language of modern professionalism gets “written up” between the landmark phases of early eighteenth-century and mid- and late-Victorian professional growth.²⁹ I would add, though, that changes and inconsistencies within this period and within the professions themselves are central to associated developments in literary representation. Unlike the Foucauldian “disciplines” they may superficially resemble, that is, the professions are a real object of knowledge that binds the Lake poets to their precursors.³⁰ Their history thus offers one concrete and specific way of talking about a “long eighteenth century” that is marked by difference as well as continuity.

II ROMANTIC PROFESSIONALISM, THEN AND NOW

To move from a disparate and long-term phenomenon such as “the rise of the professions” to the specifics of three connected poetic careers is to raise a biographical and historical question, but it is not only that. It is to begin to re-examine the matter of whether