Introduction

William Wordsworth's poems *The Brothers*, published in 1800, and 'Gipsies', published in 1807, both begin with a denunciation from their different speakers of the apparent idleness of the men and women visible to them. This is the 'priest of Ennerdale' in *The Brothers* censuring the 'tourists' (*Brothers*, 16, 1)[1] he can see from his cottage:

> some glance along,
> Rapid and gay, as if the earth were air,
> And they were butterflies to wheel about
> Long as their summer lasted; some, as wise,
> Upon the forehead of a jutting crag
> Sit perch'd with book and pencil on their knee,
> And look and scribble, scribble on and look,
> Until a man might travel twelve stout miles,
> Or reap an acre of his neighbour's corn.
> (*Brothers*, 2–10)

This judgement clearly contrasts vain movement with honest toil. The objects of the priest's attention 'wheel about' 'as if the earth were air' or sit and 'scribble' for the same length of time it would take a man to 'reap an acre of his neighbour's corn'. Such an opposition between work and leisure is further underlined in the poem's second verse paragraph. There we learn that the priest is not simply surveying the scene before him, but is 'Employed' in his 'winter's work' (*Brothers*, 20):

> Upon the stone
> His Wife sat near him, teasing matted wool,
> While, from the twin cards tooth'd with glittering wire,
> He fed the spindle of his youngest child,
> Who turn'd her large round wheel in the open air
> With back and forward steps.
> (*Brothers*, 20–25)

In 'Gipsies', the poem's speaker describes the 'knot / of human Beings' visible to him with rather more indignation:

> Yet are they here? – the same unbroken knot
> Of human Beings, in the self-same spot!
> Men, Women, Children, yea the frame
> Of the whole Spectacle the same!
> Only their fire seems bolder, yielding light:
> Now deep and red, the colouring of night;
> That on their Gipsy-faces falls,
> Their bed of straw and blanket-walls.
> – Twelve hours, twelve bounteous hours, are gone while I
> Have been a Traveller under open sky,
> Much witnessing of change and chear,
> Yet as I left I find them here!
>
> ('Gipsies', 1–12)[2]

These lines seem to represent a more aggressive sentiment, and a different type of speaker, than the speech with which *The Brothers* begins. Yet there is something similar about the motif. In both cases the speaker attempts to contrast unproductiveness with a type of activity. Both phrase their comparison around the number twelve: 'twelve bounteous hours', 'twelve stout miles'. More importantly however, in both instances it would seem to be questionable whether the inactivity being censured is really as vain, idle or unproductive as the speaker would have us believe. In the case of the opening of *The Brothers*, the reader acquainted with a poem such as *Home at Grasmere* would not find it hard to imagine wheeling about like a butterfly in the landscape as positive behaviour. In that poem, the poet himself performs such activity and celebrates its effects:

> I sate, and stirred in Spirit as I looked,
> I seemed to feel such liberty was mine,
> Such power and joy; but only for this end:
> To flit from field to rock, from rock to field,
> From shore to island, and from isle to shore,
> From open place to covert, from a bed
> Of meadow-flowers into a tuft of wood,
> From high to low, from low to high, yet still
> Within the bounds of this huge Concave[.]
>
> (*Home at Grasmere*, 34–42)[3]

Similarly, were the figure from *The Brothers* the poet himself, or someone like him, one can imagine looking and scribbling being classified as particularly intense and creative activities.

In line with these possibilities, the speaker of 'Gipsies' seems to make the same style of judgement in what might be described as the opposite case. He has been 'a Traveller' 'witnessing' 'change and chear' in much the same way that the tourists in *The Brothers* 'glance along' and 'look'. Yet

his movement 'under open sky' seems to qualify him, in his mind, to censure those remaining in one place. The manner in which the objects of the poet's censure are described seems to confuse matters further. In the brief glimpse the reader is shown of the gypsies, they are an 'unbroken knot'. The impenetrability of their world and the invisibility of what they might be doing is all that characterizes them. Thus neither judgement in *The Brothers* or 'Gipsies' can be said to be verifiable. Both poems begin with an enunciation designed to bolster the activity in which the speaker is engaged.

The manner in which *The Brothers* unfolds bears witness to the partiality of the judgement with which it begins. Leonard Ewbank, the figure on whom the priest's attention falls, is neither a 'tourist' nor a 'moping son of idleness' (*Brothers*, 11). By means of dialogue between Leonard and the priest, as well as description by the narrator, it is revealed that Leonard grew up in the valley in which the poem is set, left to go to sea, and is returning to it in an attempt to find his brother. In the case of this one supposed tourist, the priest's accusations turn out to be false. Leonard is not so much idling as making an emotional journey. His appearance of physical inertia – 'tarry[ing]' in the 'churchyard' (*Brothers*, 12) – masks an intense state of mind.

The case of 'Gipsies' is slightly different. The fact that the poem is made up entirely of the utterance of one speaker means that there is no alternative viewpoint to question the indignation we have already witnessed. There is no narrative voice, for example, as there is in *The Brothers*, offering a more impartial commentary on the poem's action. Despite this one-sidedness, however, the poem has been read as undermining, or as ironizing, its own judgements. David Simpson analyses 'the excess of the sublime mood' with which the reader is presented and demonstrates the manner in which it is constructed by reference to Milton's Satan. In this reading, Wordsworth's speaker significantly over-states his case, implying, consequently, 'both a contempt for and an envy of' the gypsies' 'community'. Their 'paradisal society' holds 'the same position for the speaker as do Adam and Eve for Satan'.[4]

The most famous reaction to Wordsworth's 'Gipsies' is the brief account Samuel Taylor Coleridge gives of the poem in the second volume of his *Biographia Literaria*. Occurring amid an account of the defects of Wordsworth's poetry, Coleridge's brief treatment of 'Gipsies' labels it an instance of '*mental* bombast' (Coleridge's emphasis), 'a disproportion of thought to the circumstance and occasion' (*Biog.*, Vol. II, p. 136):

> the poet, without seeming to reflect that the poor tawny wanderers might probably have been tramping for weeks together through road and lane, over

moor and mountain, and consequently must have been right glad to rest themselves, their children and cattle, for one whole day; and overlooking the obvious truth, that such repose might have been quite as necessary for *them*, as a walk of the same continuance was pleasing or healthful for the more fortunate poet; expresses his indignation in a series of lines, the diction and imagery of which would have been rather above, than below the mark, had they been applied to the immense empire of China improgressive for thirty centuries. (*Biog.*, Vol. II, p. 137)

Coleridge anticipates the basis of Simpson's reading, finding the language in which Wordsworth's speaker couches his case to be almost ridiculously over the mark. By offering a possible rationale for the gipsies' lack of movement, however, this passage could also be said to replicate something like the censure of Wordsworth's speaker. Coleridge is suggesting that the 'repose' of the 'poor tawny wanderers' is understandable and acceptable if it is the case that they had been 'tramping for weeks together through road and lane, over moor and mountain'. Coleridge's siding with the gypsies is conditional on the assumption of their activity at other times, just as Wordsworth's speaker uses their twelve hours' inertia as the rationale for his censure.

There is another resonance to the opposition between activity and repose in 'Gipsies' to which Coleridge's commentary gives access. In defining '*mental* bombast, as distinguished from verbal', Coleridge offers the following observation: 'This, by the bye, is a fault of which none but a man of genius is capable. It is the awkwardness and strength of Hercules with the distaff of Omphale' (*Biog.*, Vol. II, p. 136). Coleridge is referring to Hercules' punishment for slaying Iphitus. Given in bondage to Omphale, the Queen of Lydia, for three years, Hercules was dressed 'in woman's clothes' and set 'to spinning wool with the female slaves'.[5] Applied to Wordsworth's poetry, this image serves to depict the poet possessing mental powers too powerful for many of the situations in which he might find himself. His mind is concerned with subjects too great to be attached to many ordinary situations. In terms of reading his poetry, this is a significant criticism. Attaching the type of thoughts Coleridge considers to be in Wordsworth's mind to a quotidian scene of gypsies or of daffodils (another example the *Biographia* gives) leads to a problematic discrepancy for the reader. A simple subject matter clashes with an interpretation sublime enough to seem convoluted. The reader can only 'sink most abruptly' from the poet's thoughts to the subject of the poem (*Biog.*, Vol. II, p. 137).

Coleridge's mental bombast thus highlights the manner in which physical and mental idleness differ in 'Gipsies'. Describing Wordsworth as disproportionately thoughtful to the scene in which he finds himself positions mental, intellectual activity as a category of even more significance to the poem than physical movement. Hence for Coleridge's 'man of genius', travelling 'under open sky' and witnessing 'change and chear' operate euphemistically. It is the poem's second stanza that unpacks this euphemism most clearly. Immediately following the speaker's exclamatory comparison of his movement and the gypsies' inertia, the reader is shown the product of the speaker's contemplation:

> The weary Sun betook himself to rest.
> – Then issued Vesper from the fulgent West,
> Outshining like a visible God
> The glorious path in which he trod.
> ('Gipsies', 13–16)

Whilst the speaker may appear to have been simply walking in the open air, the rhetoric of these lines and the kind of perspective they imply represent the intense thoughts the Wordsworthian persona has in the most quotidian situations.[6] An everyday twilight scene is transformed into a grandly dramatic event in the speaker's mind. The evening star does not simply rise or appear as the sun sets, it is 'issued' 'from the fulgent West'. Likewise, the star is not seen as reflecting the light of the sun, but 'outshin[es]' its 'glorious path' like 'a visible God'. The personification and poetic diction against which Wordsworth had railed in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* are deployed here as markers of an internal world more intense than the quotidian nature of the poem's setting.

Leonard Ewbank's tarrying in the churchyard masked an internal reality and an emotional journey. The speaker of 'Gipsies', similarly, strives to demonstrate the intensity of mental activity his leisurely walk conceals. For Coleridge to describe Wordsworth as a 'tourist' in 'Gipsies', consequently, is not to degrade him in the way the priest of *The Brothers* used that term. Travelling in the poem signifies intellectual occupation. It is for this reason that the poem's speaker considers the gypsies to have no task and to be idle. The poem constructs a scheme of behaviour in which movement implies mental activity while inertia equates to both physical and intellectual idleness. The fact that such intellectual activity is characterized by the second stanza's highly wrought language, additionally, means that the poem represents the difference between mental and physical exertion along the lines of the relative intensity of each experience. While the gypsies are idle, the speaker is the opposite of such a state.

His activity and productivity are represented by the grandiloquence of his language. He is in a state of intense and god-like activity in comparison to the inertia of the gypsies. One need not feel guilt over one's lack of occupation, if one's intellectual work is as significant and as impressive as the movement of the 'Heavens' ('Gipsies', 23). The play of poetic energies, in this portrait, is activity par excellence.

The currents and categories of thought I have picked out in *The Brothers*, 'Gipsies' and Coleridge's reaction to the latter are the subject of the present study. 'Gipsies' and *The Brothers* both depict idle contemplation as a category invisible from certain perspectives but central to both poetic composition and human life more generally. The realm of intellectual activity, in all these examples, possesses an intensity of experience beyond anything offered by physical exertion. On the surface of things, in the two poems, occupation and movement imply a level of activity over and above that of wandering, tarrying and idling. Yet these three texts all contend in their different ways that significant activities take place in states of apparent inertia. Coleridge constructs a portrait of Wordsworth's mind intensely at work in even the most quotidian situations. 'Gipsies' depicts the poetic task as akin to the movement of the stars even in an apparently mundane walk. And *The Brothers* explodes the equation of physical leisure and intellectual idleness. All three texts make the distinctions between activity and idleness, and labour and leisure, central to their development and import.

This study argues that behind these distinctions and oppositions there lies a tapestry of discourses, literary, philosophical, educational and economic, in which the relation of activity and idleness was explored in the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century. It aims to pick out some of the main threads in that tapestry. The first chapter of this study investigates the political economy of Scottish Enlightenment philosophers Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. It explores the model of the 'division of labour' that Smith and Ferguson use to explain the progress of society from primitive to polished states. In both philosophers' hands the division of labour relies on the idea that man has always naturally been inclined to labour and to trade for his own subsistence. Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* of 1767 and Smith's *Wealth of Nations* of 1776 both describe the workings and manifold outcomes of these twin activities. My analysis is interested in the appearances made by a notion of repose or idleness in these systems as well as in Smith's earlier *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). The chapter seeks to demonstrate that idleness and contemplation hold a pertinence for Smith and Ferguson's

thought that neither philosopher can negate, despite their various tactics for doing so.

The second chapter follows on from the theme of the division of labour by exploring two seemingly opposed systems of education that frame their ambitions around that model of societal organization. Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian education strives to supply the division of labour with useful workers, while Friedrich Schiller's notion of aesthetic education sets itself in opposition to the effects advanced specialization has on a working population. The chapter focuses on Bentham's penal thought in his *Panopticon Letters* of 1791; his more directly educational thought in the *Chrestomathia*, published in 1815; and on Schiller's philosophical treatise *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* of 1795. My inquiry into these models is again interested in the importance they assign to contemplation and to repose. In this instance both Bentham and Schiller orientate their educational aims around the category of idle thought. For Bentham the idle individual is prey to a kind of nebulous malaise that will sap his or her ability to labour. For Schiller labourers untutored in how to contemplate the world around them will become stunted and lopsided, able only to work at their repetitive tasks rather than interact with their fellow men.

The study's third chapter moves from philosophical and educational systems to a consideration of a string of literary accounts of human capability that can be placed in dialogue with the texts of the previous two chapters. William Cowper's *The Task* of 1784, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' of 1798 and 'Effusion xxxv' of 1795, and Mary Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian Letters of 1796, all depict idle thought as especially potent, but as the site of specific physical dangers to the individual. The chapter demonstrates that this series of accounts anticipates the parameters of Schiller's thought but might also be described as offering a significantly more in-depth analysis of aesthetic contemplation. In this sense the English thought of this period is not to be seen as following behind the German theory of which Schiller is a representative, but as exploring comparable terrain in a slightly different manner.

The final chapter of this investigation looks at Coleridge's thought in more detail. In addition to the Schiller-like trajectory of thought in 'Frost at Midnight' and the 'Effusion', Coleridge's interests before these poems together with his philosophy after them amount to a consistent and sustained interest in the parameters of idle contemplation. The chapter thus considers the Pantisocracy scheme planned out by Coleridge and Robert Southey, which aimed to set up a society of communal property and labour in Pennsylvania. It goes on to explore the various strands of

thought in the *Biographia Literaria* (published in 1817) that come together in Coleridge's definition of poetic capability. And finally it examines the manner in which Coleridge's last major work, *On the Constitution of Church and State* of 1829, attempts to offer the fruits of poetic idleness to a community at large. The chapter considers the connections to be drawn between Coleridge and Schiller's thought, seeking to demonstrate the closer parallels between *Church and State* and the *Aesthetic Letters* than between the *Biographia* and that work.

The study ends with an Epilogue considering the afterlife of the Coleridgean and Cowperian model of aesthetic contemplation at the mid-point of the nineteenth century. In his first two novels, *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850), Charles Kingsley mounts a series of arguments against aesthetic consciousness, founded in a series of allusions to Wordsworth's 'Three years she grew in sun and shower' (1800). The epilogue considers these arguments alongside John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1873), and the connections that work makes between aesthetics and politics, in order to assess the resilience of the late-eighteenth-century model of aesthetic contemplation two decades after Coleridge's *Church and State*. It finds significant affinities between Mill's simplified version of aesthetic psychology and the parameters of Kingsley's critique.

The fact that just about all the texts we will consider here bear an implicit reference to the inquiries of Smith and Ferguson with which my investigation begins means that idle contemplation will be consistently defined in relation to a notion of labour. As in Wordsworth's 'Gipsies', all the analyses and examples of aesthetic capability from Schiller onwards will be contending that intellectual activity can be work-like in many important ways. Beginning the investigation with Smith and Ferguson's thought gives access to this important orientation of those texts that seek to define poetic capability. It should also be remarked that the notion of idle contemplation emerging out of this investigation is one animated by a deliberate sense of paradox. Whilst Smith and Ferguson strive to delimit idleness as a simple negation of the characteristics that are responsible for the progression of the species, every other writer this study considers portrays idle thought as containing elements of several different, often antithetical faculties. Thus the attempt of the speaker of Wordsworth's 'Gipsies' to define his essential activity will be made several times in the texts that follow, often with even more clarity and precision.

Also, as is the case in the priest's speech that begins *The Brothers*, many of the accounts this investigation will study construct a hierarchy of human occupations conforming to their various agendas. Noticeably, for

Schiller and those that anticipate or follow his concerns, such a hierarchy is the opposite of the priest's, supporting the priorities followed by the text of *The Brothers* as a whole. Idle contemplation is repeatedly raised above manual labour in terms of the number of faculties it sets in play. Wheeling about in the landscape, or looking and scribbling intensely, become occupations of more importance to one's humanity as a whole than continuing with one's repetitive work. This study will explore the psychological explanations offered for this inversion of priorities, and will chart the wider consequences of such stances.

It remains to be explained, finally, why this set of texts has been selected as the matter of an investigation into the notions of idleness and contemplation in this period. Beginning with Smith and Ferguson's model of the division of labour and ending with Coleridge's direct and premeditated attempt to expose the flaws in that method of describing and administering society, this study charts the construction of the category of idle, aesthetic contemplation in this period up until the very point at which this category is put to work in opposition to the political economy that inflected, and indeed anticipated, its parameters. The study is thus bounded by a kind of circular movement of growth and confrontation. In this scheme, importantly, Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* fulfils a dual function. In addition to offering a counterpart to Bentham's thought – insofar as both philosophers concern themselves with a society organized by the division of labour as Smith and Ferguson describe it,[7] both interpreting this situation rather differently – Schiller also serves as a more general point of comparison, one relevant to the entire British tradition this study considers. The *Aesthetic Letters* represent a handily complete model of how idle contemplation relates to a nation's political circumstances, and thus offer the opportunity of understanding the English-language attempts to map out this connection very clearly. This investigation thus uses Schiller as a point of comparison and contrast, at once in and out of synch with the circle of texts it sets out to consider, enabling it to chart the various ways in which the British thought of this period formulates the notion of idle contemplation and positions it in a scheme of human behaviours and engagements.

CHAPTER 1

The division of labour

I want to begin by offering some observations on the pictures of the division of labour and commercial society put forward by Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. The purpose of my doing this is to explore the significances of a notion of idleness or repose to these models, with a view to demonstrating that the positions from which Smith and Ferguson write turn on a conception of what it means to be in a state of inactivity. I seek to show that the concept of idle, private contemplation as somehow a purer, more intense and necessary mode of existence is almost impossible for them to avoid, despite their various tactics for doing so. Thus these two systems of thought, propounding fundamentally different priorities for the individual to follow and activities for him or her to engage in, must be seen to have important logistical similarities. Such similarities, moreover, carry important consequences for how we position both projects in relation to the type of thought that succeeds and opposes them. As we will see, these two versions of a grand narrative in fact open up fields of thought far removed from their premises and aims.

Smith, to begin with, builds his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* of 1776 around the concept of the division of labour. He not only uses this model of specialization to explain the progress of the arts to their present state in eighteenth-century Britain, but also positions it as a vital stage in man's 'necessary' (*WN*, p. 25) emancipation from the state of nature. Unlike other races of animals, he tells us, humans obtain what they are most in need of by means of 'treaty, by barter, and by purchase' (*WN*, p. 27), by virtue of an inherent 'propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another', which 'originally gives occasion to the division of labour'. His picture of this process is interesting. Imagining a 'tribe of hunters or shepherds', Smith suggests:

> a particular person makes bows and arrows, for example, with more readiness and dexterity than any other. He frequently exchanges them for cattle or for