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978-0-521-63100-6 - Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle

Jeffrey N. Cox

Excerpt

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## I

A few years ago, when I was attending a conference in Florida, I decided to take an afternoon off to visit a local state park which featured a “restored” section of a swamp – I was intrigued by the notion of repairing a swamp. Upon arriving at the park, I entered a stylish administration building which featured, as its back wall, a two-story plate-glass window overlooking the swamp. From this vantage point, I was told by the park’s information, I could look out at a piece of Florida restored to look the way it had appeared to the first European visitors to this part of the state; the guidebook went on to talk about the work necessary to this restoration, such as the removal of several centuries of accumulated human junk on the site and the nurturing and sometimes the reintroduction of animal populations. I was to be privy here to “natural” Florida.

What interested me about these pronouncements was less the clearly Eurocentric desire behind this project or even its unacknowledged turn to a textualized nature – one reason the landscape could be “restored” to the way it looked to Europeans was that those Europeans wrote and drew descriptions of it – than the way in which this attempt to recover a past involved a conscious effort to remove everything that stood between us and that moment. That is, those behind this park project constructed the past in the present by attempting to remove the intervening history of this particular place, both its accretions and its losses. Oddly, this place was to become the site of a kind of time travel, a spot of time through which we could be transported back to that moment when Europeans first walked on Floridian soil.

Of course, this project announces through its very self-description its inability to give us the past immediately, a lesson learned – perhaps too well – by various recent historicisms.<sup>1</sup> While the presuppositions of this

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project – that one is interested in Florida as it appeared to Europeans, that the nature found in key verbal or pictorial descriptions is “natural,” and so on – were perhaps unconscious ones, it has become a rigorous ritual of historicizing criticism that it announce its preconceptions, define the positionality of its author, sometimes proclaim our inability to know the past in the very act of writing about it. Such confessions are important, but so too is the work undertaken both in attempting to remove the accumulations of temporal junk, the material and mental barriers between us and the past, and in seeking to reintroduce to our sense of the past lost populations, lost groups. On the one hand, we must realize, for example, that the very turn to this swamp as a “natural” backdrop to history depends upon a specific historical intervention – European colonization – which construes life prior to European conquest as “prehistory,” as “natural”; since that spot already and always exists in other times, the decision to return from the “now” of our latest look at the swamp to the “then” of a “first” European gaze reenacts intellectually the colonization that brought the swamp into European history in the first place. On the other hand, our very self-consciousness about this putting into history might enable us truly to see – if not the “prehistory” we eradicate in the very act of distinguishing “history” from some “natural” land before time – at least the past moment that inaugurates our historical investment in this place: we cannot find behind the murk of history the “swamp” as thing-in-itself, but we can perhaps, avoiding the bog of presentism, discover at least *a* past to this place. Our inability to tell the total history of this spot does not mean we cannot tell a history of it. We may not be able to know a “nature” independent of our constructions of it, but we may still be able to know a history precisely because we recognize, after Vico or Marx, that it is something we have made.

That is, admitting our preconceptions is not enough, since what we must then do is attempt to see beyond them; after all, the point of recognizing our own historicity lies in the hope that by doing so we can then self-consciously see the past as something more than a projection from the present. Even if we are finally trapped in some sort of modern historical amusement park, looking through windows of our own devising on pasts at least in part of our own construction, I would still argue, beyond the epistemological issues, that the attempt to know the past has an ethical claim upon us; we must try to know the past just as we must try to know the Other – or, less pretentiously, just as in life we try to let other people be themselves and not just some projection of our fears and

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desires.<sup>2</sup> As the example of the restored swamp was meant to suggest, this turn to the past is not an act of wise passiveness, not some naive hope that the past will speak for itself if only we suppress our own point of view. The turn to the past is an act in the present determined by a particular history, but we can, in remaining historically self-conscious, attempt to make it an act of clearance and reclamation rather than an act of colonizing the past by the present. In this book, I attempt to clear from our view of the cultural landscape of post-Napoleonic England some of the critical “debris” that has masked its contours and to reintroduce into our sense of the scene some “lost” figures, while remaining aware that what is debris for me may be a rich tradition to others, who may also wish that the figures I work to recover would remain forever lost.

The drive of historicisms, new and old, has been to let the past be the past not only so that we can recognize the lives of others different from us but also so that, if even for only a self-conscious moment, we can lift ourselves from our embeddedness in the present and thus perhaps glimpse a potential future also different from our time. Even if the search for such glimpses is like the work of those reclaiming the swamp – a turn to a particular past over against others because it serves present needs – it still might enable us to make our future, to convert the swamp into the utopian space of the park. We are in need of such glimpses and the hope they offer just now, when a “postcommunist,” “postideological,” “postmodern” world seems to offer only more selfishness, greed, oppression, bigotry, and obscurantism. For me, at least, such glimpses come in trying to re-present the work of writers at a “post-Napoleonic,” “postrevolutionary,” “postclassical” moment, writers who, unlike too many today, did not fall prey to cynicism and despair – “despondency” in the Wordsworthian terminology of their day – but who banded together as a group opposed to the powers-that-be and their embrace of the “spirit of money-getting,” “superstition,” and outmoded cultural visions. These writers formed the group around Leigh Hunt, the group labelled in conservative attacks as the Cockney School.

## II

“I propose an association” – with these words Percy Shelley opens his *Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists Who Convinced of the Inadequacy of the Moral and Political State of Ireland to Produce Benefits Which Are Nevertheless Attainable Are Willing to Unite to Accomplish Its Regeneration* (1812). While this title suggests a very particular mission for the association, Shelley makes

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it clear that it will have a much wider scope: “I conceive that an assembly of men meeting to do all the good that opportunity will permit them to do must be in its nature as indefinite and varying as the instances of human vice and misery that precede, occasion, and call for its institution.”<sup>3</sup> Certain that such an association will be opposed by the government, the aristocracy, and the priesthood, Shelley still believes that a group provides the best vehicle for cultural and political reform. In fact, it is in the freely associating group that Shelley sees the best hope of resisting such institutionalized associations as state, church, and class.

Shelley was not alone in desiring a group. Keats wrote to Benjamin Robert Haydon (10 January 1818, *KL*, I: 202), “I will be with you early next week – to night it should be, but we have a sort of a Club every Saturday evening,” a reference to a group that gathered around James Rice. Rice was part of another group which included John Hamilton Reynolds and Benjamin Bailey and a group of young women in Essex. Reynolds, Rice, and Bailey were also members of the Zetosophian Society, “a literary, cultural, and social club composed of fourteen young men, most of them ‘of very considerable genius.’”<sup>4</sup> Reynolds had earlier been part of the Breidden Society in Shropshire, which held an annual festival on Breidden Hill with feasting, poetry, singing, and dancing – and the crowning of the *poet fereat*, there being ferns but no laurels available. We could continue to multiply the groups. Keats was once a member of a circle around George Felton Mathew. Horace Smith was part of an expatriate group at Versailles<sup>5</sup> similar to the one Shelley attempted to create at Pisa when he sought to bring together Byron, Hunt, and even the ill Keats. Benjamin Robert Haydon, the painter of the group, wrote at the time Keats, Shelley, and Hunt came together, “My great object is to form a School” (31 October 1816, *Diary*, II: 64). Byron and Hobhouse once proposed a “Couplet Club,”<sup>6</sup> and Byron belonged to the Whig Club and the Hampden Club. Keats’s supporters Richard Woodhouse and John Taylor at one time founded a Philological Society.<sup>7</sup> These men all turned to associations as a means of cultural production and also as a site of opposition. They sought in a group both an immediate audience not unlike earlier manuscript circles, where one could share one’s thoughts and ideas with a coterie, and a cultural, social, and political project not unlike that pursued by later explicitly avant-garde movements. It will be the argument of this book that what we call the second generation of romantic poets is not merely a temporal gathering of distinct voices but a self-consciously defined group, an association of intellectuals that centered on Leigh Hunt and

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that came to be known as the Cockney School. The visionary company of Shelley, Byron, Keats, Hunt, Reynolds, Smith, Hazlitt, and others may never have formally incorporated itself, but it was defined both internally and externally as a group working to reform culture and society.

What is a group? While I recognize that it is for me in part a strategically slippery site for analysis, it is certainly the case that I associate it with certain words – circle, coterie, even clique – and not with others – corporation, organization, establishment. It appears that the use of the word group in relation to an assemblage of persons arises in the eighteenth century (the *OED* cites 1748 as its first such use) at the moment when modern forms of collective association such as “party” were being defined. It is also interesting that the first uses of “group of people” appear to suggest “confused aggregation.” This is, of course, in contrast to the earliest sense of the word in English, where “group” is used in the fine arts to designate a composed gathering of figures forming a design. On the one hand a formal design and on the other a human happening, a group might appear as a spatial order – as in a group photograph – but is more a temporal project – as in the development of Surrealism.

What is clear to me is that I deploy the concept of a group to avoid certain other locales from which to begin the study of literary culture. To emphasize the group as the site of literary production is, of course, to move away from the idea of the abstract individual as the producer of literary texts; it is even to move away from the more complicated intersubjective model of creation that arises when one discusses close partnerships – Wordsworth and Coleridge, in particular, but also Shelley and Byron or, to use a far less well-known example, James and Horace Smith.<sup>8</sup> Pairs do not comprise groups. Again, while it may make sense to talk about Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and the Shelleys as part of a family of writers,<sup>9</sup> family units, in which relations are a given, do not necessarily form groups in my sense. To begin at the opposite pole from the individual, we also need to see that certain key categories in our contemporary analysis of literature such as race, class, and gender also do not define groups. If it is true that one can betray one’s class but never leave it, then “class” does not define a group in my sense; for “class” points to a subject position always already given, whereas the group defines an intersubjective collectivity always in the process of being imagined. Again, there certainly are gendered groups, but there is no group comprising all women or all men. It is not simply or definitively a

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matter of scale, though I do think that size matters when one is discussing a group as supporting literary production. It is also a question of one's relation to the collectivity under consideration. One finds oneself already part of a race, a class, a gender; these may very well be humanly constructed categories, but they are certainly not constructed by me when I find myself placed in this or that category. The group, on the other hand, is constructed by those who are affiliated with it. When Shelley sees his association opposed by the government (the nation), the aristocracy (class structure), and the priesthood (religion), he also poses the group against such given, institutionalized affiliations. He refuses to be defined by his nationality, class, or religious upbringing; he will choose with whom he will associate. The group names an "elective affinity." Goethe's use of the phrase suggests two linked aspects of belonging to a group. First, one's membership in a group is self-conscious; it is an act of willed identification – one elects to be part of a group. Second, however, one is also elected to a group, selected by both its members and by one's preexisting affinities. Becoming part of a group is an act of self-fashioning that necessarily occurs through the other. It is, in fact, through such affiliations, such self-conscious identifications, that one creates an identity beyond that set by the given categories into which one is cast. It is in the group, in this subjectivity in/as collectivity, that we can find a sense of personhood and the personal that is reduced to neither an empty autonomy nor an abstract difference. While we must never forget that groups are also defined by exclusion – that for there to be a group of "us," some "you" has to be left out – and while (as is clearly the case in the Hunt circle) the dynamic nature of a group means that individuals join and leave, are included and expelled, find themselves sometimes attached to the group, sometimes disgusted with it, finally, for me, the group embodies a project, perhaps utopian, in which a community is both imagined and lived beyond the limits of given collectivities such as those of family or nation.

The suggestion that we examine romantic poetry as a group activity will not sound so strange as it once might have. Given the work of scholars as different as Jerome McGann and Donald Reiman, Jack Stillinger and Marjorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler and Stuart Curran, Nicholas Roe and Susan Wolfson, we no longer necessarily view the romantic poet as the solitary singer declaiming alone on the mountain-top or sitting in isolation, pondering a bird's song. We have come to see the poetry of the romantic period as being a social product, with the text being forged by a collaborative process involving author, editor, type-

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setter, publisher, critic, and reader, and the author herself being conceived as a nexus of interpersonal, cultural, social, and economic forces. I am interested in this book in poetry as a social product in a quite mundane – ordinary and worldly – way; that is, I see the poetry of second-generation romanticism arising from the social interchange of a particular group of men and women. This group I will refer to not by the more usual names of the Keats Circle or the Shelley Circle but as the Cockney School or the Hunt circle, for it was Leigh Hunt who was actually at the center of the group – though, of course, by center I do not mean a fixed point equally distant from all the points on the spatial figure of a circle but a moving person unequally close to all of the people involved in the temporal project of a circle.

Hunt himself clearly saw writing as a social activity or even what we would call an ideological activity. In “Politics and Poetics,” first published in Hunt’s journal the *Reflector* (1.2 [1811]) and reprinted in the second edition of *The Feast of the Poets* (1815), Hunt offers a socialized scene of writing. He depicts himself writing not in splendid isolation, alone with nature, but at a desk in the city surrounded by historical and political texts. While he might long for a quiet tête-à-tête with his muse, he finds his writing shaped by many external pressures: by financial concerns, as “the punctual fiend, that bawls for copy” (l. 114), waits for him to finish the journalism he writes to earn a living; by political worries, as he remains aware that the government watches, ever ready to prosecute anything it can label seditious or libellous; even by physical pressures, as exhaustion, headaches, and the “Blue Daemon” (l. 28) of depression threaten him. As he places himself (in the original version) in the company of such public and politicized writers as Gifford, Sheridan, Canning, and Scott, Hunt sees his writing being shaped as much by editors’ pens and government writs as it is by some internal muse.

For Hunt and for poets such as Shelley and Keats who entered his circle, poetry was a social activity in an immediate way, as they wrote for the highly politicized *Examiner*, as they penned occasional verse to one another, and as they participated in Hunt’s much-maligned sonnet-writing contests. The *Examiner* is, in a sense, the textual home of the group, setting forth common ideological positions and publishing the verse of the circle’s members; it also defines the project of being a group, distinguishing the *Examiner*’s writers and readers from organization by party – the weekly’s motto is “Party is the madness of many for the gain of a few” – and suggesting that while the opponents of the group may be tagged by reductive because collective names – i.e., “borough mon-

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gers,” “pensioners,” “apostates,” and “toad-eaters” – those within the group are both so particularized and so fully integrated within the circle that one can allude to them without naming them, certain that they will be recognized by the “knowing ones.” Later chapters will attempt to detail the work of this circle. At this point, I want to suggest why I conceive of the group as an important focus for an attempt to construct a literary history.

### III

Historical thinking works against abstraction; literary history works against abstracting literary texts from the larger range of human activities of which they are a part. As that old historicist Hegel notes, abstraction is a process of isolation, of drawing something away. Abstraction is often defined in opposition to particularity – the abstraction is too far removed from the rich details of life. Hegel sees it in opposition to totalization – the abstracted detail has been removed from the rich totality of which it is a part. Historicist resistance to abstraction and its attendant reductionism follows both paths, towards the particularity of “thick” description and towards the totality summed up in Fredric Jameson’s account of “Hegel’s great dictum, ‘the true is the whole,’ [which] is less an affirmation of some place of truth which Hegel himself (or others) might occupy, than it is a perspective and a method whereby the ‘false’ and the ideological can be unmasked and made visible.”<sup>10</sup> Abstractions can be dissolved into details that escape containment within the abstraction, or abstractions can be seen as strategies of containment that can be revealed as limited only from the perspective of a totality that escapes containment. Abstractions can be shattered against the particular or the whole. Either way, they are found to be procrustean resting points for the mind.

While the move towards detail and that towards the whole seem opposed, we ideally want a method that will unite the quiddity of the particularized with the perspective of the totalized. We gesture towards such a method in, for example, discussing the merger of psychoanalysis and Marxism, in proclaiming that the “personal is the political,” in finding the transcendent in the local, in identifying history as “ground” and “horizon.” As Jameson suggests, no one can keep in mental play the vast dialectical power that would be needed to pay attention to all the details and to forge them into ever fuller approximations of the totality, to fill our abstractions with ever more particulars while opening them up



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to ever larger constructions of the whole. The truth of the matter is that in practice we tend towards one or the other pole; in simple terms, when we do literary history, we are likely to move, on the one hand, towards the biography of discrete individuals and the anecdote (the biography, as it were, of the discrete event) and, on the other, towards an analysis based on extremely large categories such as class or race or gender. When one makes the move towards the particular individual, the unique text, the striking event, one can be accused of replacing history with biography, of offering another formalism, or of hiding grand narratives within only seemingly random stories. When one moves towards totalization, one is likely to be seen running roughshod over the minutiae of the event, the text, the individual and thus of being not totalizing but totalitarian. And these are the objections that historical scholars themselves bring against historicist work, including their own: no one is harder on historicizing than historicists. In a real sense, what historical scholarship teaches us is skepticism, a doubt of grand narratives and a concern that in fact the devil is in the details and he is doing something we do not like.

It strikes me that there is a certain plausibility in starting somewhere in the middle, with neither the supposedly individual subject, individual fact, or individual text nor the hypothetically totalized community, history, culture. Alan Liu, in critiquing the “romanticism of the detail,” has suggested that “what may be the single most promising, if also problematic, front of cultural criticism [is] its exploration of the communally ‘parochial,’ ‘local,’ and ‘regional’”; he offers “‘localism’ as the underexplored zone between the discretely individual and the massively collective.”<sup>11</sup> There are clearly many entry points into this middle ground, as we can see in studies ranging from the collective institution of the Renaissance theater to printing houses in the nineteenth century, from women’s coterie circles to the construction of the institution of slavery and thus of “race.” For me, the best way into this “underexplored zone” when discussing the second generation of romantics is through the notion of the group. Of course, this middle ground of the group – located somewhere between, say, the biographical subject and, say, the nation – occupies conceptually the same place as does abstraction lying between the particular and the whole. However, I would propose the group as a dynamic position and project that through its ties to both the individual and the collective, the particular and the whole, stands in for abstraction in order to allow us to stand beyond it. Put another way, any formulation of a group may itself be an abstraction,

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but thinking through the group, as it now presents highlighted subjects and now suggests widening associations, offers tactics for resisting even one's own abstractions.

Offering a model of such an approach, Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Search for a Method*, sought in the notion of a group a point of mediation between a class-based definition of an ideology and an individual's espousal of that ideology. Using the example of the idea of nature in the eighteenth century, Sartre explains the relationship between an idea as it is held within a general cultural moment and the same concept as it is held by an individual defined as a member of a group:

Outside of precise acts of ideation, of writing, or of verbal designation, the Idea of Nature has no material being (still less an existence) in the eighteenth century. Yet it is real, for each individual takes it as something Other than his own specific act as reader or thinker insofar as it is also the thought of thousands of *other* thinkers. Thus the intellectual grasps his thought as being at once *his* and *other*. He thinks *in* the idea rather than the idea being *in* his thought; and this signifies that it is the sign of his belonging to a determined group (since its functions, ideology, etc., are known) and an undefined group (since the individual will never know all members nor even the total number).<sup>12</sup>

Keats, for example, is both part of a particular group – the Hunt circle – and of a series of ever larger undefined groups – writers, students of medicine, the “middle” class, men. When he engages a particular ideological issue – say, attitudes towards sexuality – he is not merely expressing a personal position but espousing notions that can be tied to the interests of both his particular group and other larger groups. We may never be able to reconstruct in full detail what the individual Keats thought about sex or usefully totalize the ideology of sex held by early-nineteenth-century bourgeois men, but we can come to understand the collective position affirmed by Keats and those with whom he allied himself as they define themselves in opposition to others within their historical moment, as they identify themselves as part of a group by, for example, espousing a particular sexual ideology. Remembering Sartre's warning about the status of the idea of the group – “the *group* never has and never can have the type of metaphysical existence which people try to give it. We repeat with Marxism: there are only men and real relations between men” (p. 6) – we can still work towards a fuller understanding of Keats's texts by placing him and them within the concrete network of human (which, of course, includes intellectual and literary) relations and oppositions surrounding Hunt.

Whether or not groups are a significant feature of differing historical