TIME AND TERRAIN IN BRITISH ROMANTIC WRITING

Walking and its relationship to our mental and cultural lives has been a topic of huge academic and popular interest in the last few years. Here, Alan Vardy explores the role of walking in one of its most obvious locations within English literature: Romanticism. Through chapters focusing on both canonical and non-canonical writings – including rich ephemera – by Joseph Cottle, Coleridge, Dorothy and William Wordsworth, De Quincey and John Clare, *Time and Terrain in British Romantic Writing* draws out a specific focus on affect studies and the relationship between walking and trauma, examining the link between emotional states and movement through space and time. It also takes up the work of lesser-known Romantic writers such as Elizabeth Smith and Thomas Wilkinson in order to mount a broad and deep exploration of the quotidian, fleeting events that nonetheless constitute our subjective selves.

ALAN VARDY is the author of *John Clare, Politics and Poetry* (2003) and *Constructing Coleridge: The Posthumous Life of the Author* (2010). He is the editor-in-chief of *Essays in Romanticism* (since 2011) and the author of numerous articles and chapters on Romantic writers, including 'Coleridge the Walker' in *The New Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (2022).

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Preface

In April 2010 I travelled to Keswick in the Lake District to give a plenary lecture at the inaugural Robert Southey Conference. On the penultimate day of the conference Eyjafjallajökull erupted in Iceland, trapping me and many other conference-goers behind a giant volcanic cloud. Airlines postponed all flights for a week. Presented with a surprise holiday, we decided to do some fell walking, and I made plans to climb Great Gable with conference organizer and friend Tim Fulford and fellow attendees Michel Gamer and Dahlia Porter. On a crisp, clear morning, we said hello to Wordsworth's ancient yews, and climbed out of the end of Borrowdale at Seathwaite via the Sourmilk Gill waterfalls. The path ascends slowly along the shoulder of the beautiful hanging valley holding the stream; across the way, tiny specks of bright red and blue rock climbers fixed to the side of Raven Crag. The gentle ramble ends with a series of switchbacks onto the side of Green Gable. We pass a school trip sitting en masse on a long rocky zigzag: exhausted young teenagers faintly grumbling and sharing a snack. As we crest the top, the summit of Green Gable ahead and off to the north the long valley of Buttermere and Crummock Water, and, as we rise, the Solway Firth beyond. At the top of Green Gable, the cloud begins to roll in just as we see Great Gable, our destination, across a precipitous U-shaped valley – the aptly named Windy Gap. The bottom of the U funnels a strong, steady wind across us, unchecked by mountains as it sweeps south from the firth. The remarkable views northwest to the sea on the right, and straight down to Stynhead Tarn to the left, prove not quite so grand as to tempt me to linger in the gap. Focus falls ahead to the massive Gable Crag looming above us, its top now quite covered by cloud. Skirting the bottom of the crag, our path leads us up a steady straight ascent to the summit following a series of small way-marker cairns in ever-thickening cloud. The day now transformed: several degrees colder, late sheets of icy snow near the top and the newly condensed North Atlantic settling on us, we arrive at our destination – no views, a common fell-walking outcome. Settling

down to eat our sandwiches, we sit near one another in holes in a small flat boulder-field out of the wind. All at once, I'm consumed by melancholy – the wind, the cold, the damp, the desperate sheltering contribute; beside us a natural basin in the rock converted to a war memorial after the Great War overflows with paper poppies. Dahlia in her pothole next to mine jollies me out of my mood. With no sign of the ceiling lifting, we descend back along the small cairns. Part way down the first steep slope we come across a young French woman concerned that her companion has wandered away towards the face of the mountain. I have an absurd moment of thinking myself a poor Canadian for lacking sufficient French to explain the situation and instead can only pat the top of the cairn next to me with two hands for emphasis and point down the slope to the next one in the hope that the simple method of traveling cairn to cairn will get them off the mountain. We continue on out of the cloud and alter our route back, turning right in Windy Gap and descend to Stynhead Tarn down a very steep, loose-rock track called Aaron's Slack – taking mostly small steps and sliding – bright sun at the bottom. From there a procession down the long stone-step path and back into Borrowdale. The river Derwent sparkling in the sun; the fine day we'd begun in.

What is the status of such experiences, either aesthetically, psychologically, physiologically or emotionally? And what if this list proves impossibly provisional once any of its items is elaborated, revealing an essential fugitiveness in pursuing the causes of the feelings experienced en route? How much of the affective power is down to bodily sensation, unorganized somatic events, themselves so overdetermined as to be unrecoverable? How does being in transit through the landscape condition the mood? We experience a series of fragmented visions as we pivot from partial scene to partial scene, linger at prospects, move on; the kinetic aspect of the walk keeps strong aesthetic judgements at bay, as we navigate the raw stuff of what for a poet could be art. That said, even in my anecdote's use of a fictive present tense lies an effort to create a sense of immediacy, and it performs double duty as an aid to memory as I attempt to conjure precise vivid moments from past events. What is the value of this echoed immediacy in relation to the forever lost original? How is it a response to loss? The neutral reportage of the fictive present gets broken by the editorializing 'I'm consumed by melancholy'. The melancholy itself is a placeholder for ineffable shifts in what we take to be our inwardness, but in this instance, and in most lived experience, overdetermination (no specific cause for the mood can be established) and temporality make the event unknowable despite its affective power. In fact the unknowability conditions

the affect, perhaps making it available to sublime recuperation in a future reflective mode. Temporality operates in dramatically different ways: first the kinetic properties of the walk and being exposed to the weather keeps us in transit. There may be prospects along the way, but this is no prospect poem with its carefully parsed constituents, but rather a ramble tracking through time to no ultimate destination, either physically or aesthetically. There is pleasure in the day, but extracting its beauty and/or sublimity seems a job for the sociability of the pub, the judgements of collective retrospect – that too may prove difficult by the vast variety of what each has seen; we shared views and experiences in transit, but most of the time, even in company we were essentially alone. I'll return to this observation below when I attempt to parse some of the aspects of my purported melancholy.

I say 'purported' because the other form of temporality at stake is our ability to construct memories – my attempts to find myself there again – from meagre materials. Of necessity written in retrospect, my account leaves out almost everything: the sounds of birds, insects, our footfalls, impressions of the sedge grass in the valley, the sight and sound of the river Derwent in the valley in Borrowdale. This list cannot be completed, so how does memory proceed and why? My working title was *In Transit: Time and Terrain in British Romantic Writing*, as the book concerns both the minutia of unfolding events (somatic, sensational, biochemical, partly registered, unorganized and accumulating – the stuff of the walk) as we track through a landscape, and the sense of being in transit through time as we recall these events (from the pub later in the day, or in a memoir forty years later). Many near-cognate terms for this process thus require de-synonymizing (to borrow from Coleridge). Subtle differences between recall, recollect, reminisce and other apparently cognate terms need to be attended to lest the processes at that end become flattened. On the other hand, terms which appear distinct bleed into one another as we reconjure past events and strive to represent them. For example, the relationship between prolepsis and analepsis cannot be stabilized; such a distinction becomes purely semantic and arbitrary, and ignores the complex nature of temporality by claiming we can simply choose a direction in time and project ourselves imaginatively and figurally.

That other recollection, Wordsworthian art practice, reveals the stakes for aesthetics in these considerations. What I've termed the stuff of the walk remains unorganized, but in many instances may prove to be pre-literary as it awaits verbal form, and/or pre-aesthetic as it reveals beauty or sublimity, and perhaps guides us to make an aesthetic judgement both of the past

events and the writing it engendered. As a result, this book deliberately focuses on many kinds of writing. For instance, William Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper' emerges from his 1802 Scotland tour with his sister Dorothy and (for part of the journey) Coleridge. For my purposes, Dorothy's journal entries and Coleridge's notebook compel my interest for the very fact that they are less finished than Wordsworth's poem. The letters composed during the tour provide rich composites of a day's events at the moment they fall into the past and become reflection – what we might call the compositional now (itself of course a fiction). The manuscript scraps, annotations, scrawled notes, et cetera of the writers I discuss contain rich material for revealing the interplay of time and terrain.

But to return to being 'consumed by melancholy'. This return, post-digression, begins the work of reflection, parsing, investigation, writing. 'Consumed' suggests all else washed away, and that is how it felt. That it was easily dislodged by sociability, the quotidian minutia of unwrapping and enjoying my sandwich and forms of human play does not lessen the intensity of the event itself. To begin this necessarily incomplete account of a sudden mood, start with the body in motion: not a Keatsian 'fit' so much as an accumulation of subtle interactions and interconnections experienced as physiological and biochemical responses to specific stimuli, the weather change felt on the skin, the loss of visibility and the creeping cold after the sunny start. Those specific conditions were equally conditioned by previous events: the heat of the day and the pleasure of company, the elation of the climb up the waterfalls, awash in endorphins strolling through the hanging valley, punctuated by the scene of the deflated school children. Tempting, but clearly this deflated scene, theirs and ours, is not the sufficient cause of future sadness – which is not to say it might not be *a* cause in some complex amalgam of mammalian pleasure suddenly arrested, registered as an impression and lingering to awaken as part of something more complex an hour later. Melancholy must accumulate such baggage as we go. Associations do not come into play often while in transit, but rather in stasis as retrospect at day's end. Walking in company allows the beginnings of such associative exchange – food for a future moments – as we walk and talk. Sheltering in our boulder field at the top of Great Gable isolated us from one another as we worked to get out of the cold mist as best we could. The sheer inexplicability of the war memorial immediately beside us: the continuing trauma of the Great War, the dedication of those who walk to this remote spot each November and place the now strewn poppies, the affecting beauty and pathos of the scene piles on top of the rest and feeds the melancholy. To say the event itself is

overdetermined is to understate the case. Not even a quasi-Freudian process attempting to reveal partial causes, recollection as dreamwork, can address the essential unknowability of the lived event. But lest this seem a pointless book, such experiences, despite their fugitive nature and their dizzying complexity, nonetheless reveal important details about cognitive processing, the underlying complexity of aesthetic judgement, and what Romantic writers choose and struggle to represent. To illustrate, I offer an account of a walk with the same party five days previous which was productive of more familiar stuff in our aesthetic thinking and determinations – terror.

We left Keswick and followed the road beside the River Greta to the village of Threlkeld. From there we began our ascent of Blencathra via Hall's Fell. Blencathra, also called Saddleback, has a massive flat summit and thus many routes to the top, some gradual, some scrambles, one the notorious Sharp Edge, an inclined exposed arête. We opt for something in the middle, easy with maybe a brief frisson of danger. I'm in the lead and as the path grows steeper and bends towards the edge of the ridge line, there's a small section of scrambling, ending as I hoist myself onto the final short ledge. As I pull myself up to waist height, a sudden view down a cliff face and into the adjacent valley induces the sense that had I pulled only slightly harder on the ledge, I might have launched myself over and onto the valley floor hundreds of feet below. In an effort at British understatement, I say: 'this next bit is rather steep'. Redirecting my gaze to our route, I climb up onto a short exposed arête, worn smooth by thousands of walkers: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, down. I land with a satisfying thud on a round turfy patch. The sweeping view to my right plunges downwards and away to Scales Tarn, a small blue jewel nestled at the base of a towering slightly concave crag. Tracking up the face of the cliff, my gaze finally rests on Sharp Edge, silhouetted, a party of walkers clinging, moving, clinging, moving . . .. I swing back around to my left to discover Michael with his hands down gripping the smooth stone, frozen on the arête. Panic flows down the line to Dahlia; Tim skirts her and talks Michael back off the rock a foothold at a time. The path no longer an option, I try to direct my friends from my perch as they pick their way along tuffs of dried grass up the critical slope. Looking for small rocky fissures in the hillside, I call down tentative directions as they swing wide of the rock outcrop. Picking their way along, they rejoin the path directly below and I scramble to rejoin them. There's a small 'chimney' section that we shimmy up, and then a scramble over a mound of turf and rock to the sudden broad expanse of the flat summit of Blencathra. After the

verticality of our ascent, the undulating plain of the summit seems incongruous. Dahila lies flat on her back with her arms out; I join her and feel the pull of gravity through my solar plexus anchoring me to the earth.

This reminiscence, like the former, attempts to elicit a sense of immediacy, but with different and grander aesthetic stakes. The potential sublimity of the scene is available only to me. My experiences on and around the rock precipice constitute the classic topos; I literally landed in a safe place from which to judge the sweeping grandeur of the scene and recuperate the frisson of danger generated by skirting the abyss. Glancing back over my shoulder brings to an end both experience and judgement. My friend's terror cannot be recuperated; he experiences what Burke calls the 'simply terrible' in which actual danger places us in a singular moment lacking the distance necessary to aesthetic judgement. Moved by care, the slowly unfolding events break me out of my momentary sublime isolation and into 'the passions belonging to society', in another Burkean phrase. But alas, anxiety over my friends' safety makes any transition from one aesthetic state to another, the beauty Burke locates in such passions, fugitive – an intellectual possibility, but an absurdity in the lived experience. If anything I find myself at risk of exploiting Michael's terror for my aesthetic pleasure in the heightened excitement of the scene, and again now in its representation in this preface. Such ethical risk is endemic in sublime experiences. The question of whether memory can rescue these events in the calm of recollection, or in the greater immediacy of the subsequent safety of the dome of Blencathra for that matter, points to the sort of complex messy questions that occupy this book. I want to think that our shared, if utterly various, experiences on Hall's Fell were pre-aesthetic, inchoate but moving towards something. Alas I have to recognize that they were merely unorganized with no certain value or reliable means to make value. Unless beauty is a name for the affective condition of love and concern for our friends, the experience, as intense as it was, remains un-plottable. From the perspective of Burkean passions, the resemblance seems clear enough. Yet how can aesthetics retain meaning in the absence of a set of agreed-on formal qualities which engender our specific responses? Plotting affective experiences by resemblance (my concern for my friends and Burkean beauty in this instance) can only devolve into a subjective morass. That is not to say that attempts to do so are not valuable. One of the most important books in the field addressing such questions, Thomas Pfau's *Romantic Moods* offers a brilliant, complex account of Romantic melancholy by isolating its essential psycho-social features despite understanding a 'mood' as a 'substratum of conscious

awareness' that by definition evades 'discernment' (Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 10). The result is a conceptual tour de force; however, my interest in melancholy has the opposite critical goals. I'm interested in events that cannot be plotted in a schematic account, not even one as capacious as Pfau's. One of the primary aims of this book is to see what if anything can be gained by parsing what is admittedly a mess – the hopelessly overdetermined nature of our quotidian selves. Partial discernment of things which cannot be discerned proves generative provided it's accepted as an end in itself.

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