Introduction

'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/ But to be young was very heaven', 'The child is father of the man', 'Alas! they had been friends in youth;/ But whispering tongues can poison truth': these famous lines were long taken to be quintessential expressions of Romantic poets' unique contribution to English Literature – the words of young poets, revering youth, embracing revolution, opposing establishments. Readers, by and large, went along with the twentieth-century canon in this regard: prompted by the early deaths of Keats, Shelley and Byron, and excited by the Wordsworth of the 'Great Decade', the Blake of the *Songs* and the Coleridge of 1797–8, they accepted that early nineteenth-century poetry is a poetry of youth. The new, the innocent, the energetic and the revolutionary were idealised, and critics laboured hard to reveal how they were present in Romantic poetry's diction, form, metre, aesthetics, politics and philosophy. While from the 1980s the canon was transformed to include women writers such as Wollstonecraft, Robinson, Hemans and Landon, this transformation did not entirely change the association of Romanticism with youth, and of youth with innovation, since these authors wrote and died young.

This book takes a different course, beginning with the premise that our absorption in the Romantic poets' own mythologisation of youth has caused us to neglect a vital aspect of the writing of those who did not die young – its age, and its recollection of its early forms in later years, a recollection which was often a form of radical innovation. Although we have learnt, since the New Historicist critique of the 1980s, to regard 'Romanticism' as an ideological construction, and to critique its idealisation of imagination, genius and power as timeless aesthetic values, we have not abandoned its love affair with youth and its neglect of age. We have perpetuated its tendency to overlook the later poetry of no longer youthful poets – in particular that of the group called at the time 'Lake poets' – and thus inherited a truncated form of their oeuvres and downplayed their retrospective revision of their past writing.[1] Since the historical effects of

this revision were significant, such ignorance leaves us with an inaccurate picture of their careers and of the 'Romanticism' that was, to a great extent, defined on their terms. It allows us to forget the Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey of the 1820s, which becomes de facto the decade of the second generation Romantics. It leaves unexamined the three poets' rise to popularity and fame in the 1830s and 1840s. It causes us to neglect over half of their writings and to overlook a number of profound poems that ponder, from their particular historical situations, universal human concerns. In *The Late Poetry of the Lake Poets* I investigate these poems for what they say to us now, while also exploring their historical effects in their own time and counting the costs of their omission from 'Romanticism'.[2]

LATE POETRY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'ROMANTICISM'

The obsession of 'Romanticism' with youth began when it was first defined as a movement in the early twentieth century by a professionalising discipline of Literary Criticism seeking to develop critical tools from within its own demarcated field.[3] In the nineteenth century, the later poems of Wordsworth and Southey had been among their most popular; they did not fade from view until literary critics began to adopt the criteria that, between 1815 and 1821, Wordsworth and Coleridge set out for great poetry – imagination, genius, power.[4] These criteria, treated as universal qualities rather than ideological responses to a specific historical situation, led critics backwards in a search for 'Romantic' poems in which they could easily be discerned. In Britain I.A. Richards and in the USA the New Critics sought, after Coleridge's example, to show how poetic imagination was manifest in the stylistic and formal shape of poems, which became, in this process, verbal icons to be assessed by a practical criticism that eschewed contextual and historical questions.[5] This process endorsed the priority given by Coleridge to the short lyrics and personal meditations of Wordsworth's youth: the Lucy poems and *The Prelude* became quintessential Romantic poems; 'Tintern Abbey', the 'Immortality Ode', 'Kubla Khan' and the 'Ancient Mariner' were extolled; later verse that did not fit this bill was passed over. *The Excursion* was absent from the new canon, although it had been Wordsworth's magnum opus for the Victorians. Southey's narrative epics disappeared from view.

The historical situatedness and ideological function of imagination, genius and power were, from the 1980s, subject to critique. New Historicism led away from the canonisation of powerful imaginative poems towards the contextualisation of historically significant writings, and

interrogated Romanticism in relation to nineteenth-century politics and science, colonialism and empire, gender and sexuality, and visual and print culture.[6] Yet while historicist enquiry became better informed and more wide-ranging, and historicist methodology more sophisticated and self-reflexive,[7] the data on which they were based – the corpus of poetry – was not similarly renewed, although it had been selected by the very twentieth-century literary critics who sought to identify Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey as poets of imagination, power and genius. In other words, the ideological critique of the three poets' aesthetic theories, and of literary criticism's complicity with them, fell short. It was not always accompanied by a critical revision of the canon of their poetry that had been selected to perpetuate 'Romantic' aesthetics. In consequence, the verse that Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge wrote after publishing their theories is still infrequently explored,[8] although now we reject the values and methodology that caused previous generations of professional critics to ignore it in favour of the 'imaginative' poetry they located in a pre-1814 period of their own making. Thus some historicist studies of great methodological subtlety still focus exclusively on Wordsworth's so-called Great Decade[9] and Coleridge's 'annus mirabilis' of 1797–8.[10] Moreover Southey, a poet who was neglected before New Historicist revision of Romanticism, has continued to suffer from neglect in the sense that only now are scholarly editions of his poems being produced that give access to the texts as they were first published.[11] Consequently, though a revival of interest is underway, much of this interest has centred on just two of his pre-1810 Orientalist romances.[12] His explorations of lateness, in such popular Victorian anthology pieces as 'My days among the dead are passed' and 'You are old, Father William' are almost entirely forgotten.

The result of our continuing idealisation of Romantic youth is that we have only a partial and insufficient historical picture of Romanticism insofar as it is still constituted by three of the major figures who have been central to it. What they wrote after 1814 is too often dismissed unexamined as 'apostasy',[13] 'reaction' and 'decline', or passed over in silence as if it did not exist. It is time to extend our view to take in all of their careers, accepting that what we think of them, and of Romanticism, may be changed in the process.

RECOLLECTION, REVISION AND DISCONFIRMATION

How exactly does investigating the late poetry of the Lake poets extend our view and change our minds? It does so by opening a different perspective not just on what they wrote in later years, but on all their work. This

perspective allows them to be seen neither as other-worldly imaginative geniuses nor as disenchanted apostates but as professional writers attempting to take control of their publications so as to shape their careers – trying, in effect, to find means to become recognised, by the public and by posterity, as authors.[14] After 1814–17, when they fulminated against the reading public who did not buy their poetry, and against the reviewers who influenced that reading public, they sought new means to gain both sales and reputation. These included collaboration with others – artists, editors, publishers – who might give them leverage over recognised fields of literary production. In this way they became poets of recollection,[15] repeatedly collecting their poems, old and new, in carefully crafted publications so as to create resonant contexts for their reading. This process repackaged their poetry in ways we have not always attended to: in 1816, for instance, Coleridge published poems he had written many years before in a collection called *Christabel: Kubla Khan, A Vision; The Pains of Sleep*. He added the famous prefaces that helped create the portrait of the Romantic artist as a damaged, drug-fuelled voyager into the unconscious – a visionary dreamer who cannot recall his vision. This portrait is still powerful in popular culture today, and still often associated with the year – 1797 – when, the 1816 preface declares, 'Kubla Khan' was written. Yet it is sometimes forgotten that it is a retrospective rewriting of Coleridge's early years, designed both to glamorise his past and to apologise for his present inability to complete his old poems. It is a belated portrait, a myth-making exercise about age, and the forgetfulness and decline that come with age, which was designed to market Coleridge, in 1816, as a late poet unlike the jacobinical lyrical balladeer of 1798. Examining it in its publication context allows us to see the Romantic myths it helped shape – the Creative Genius and Romantic Fragment – as astute marketing strategies designed to restore Coleridge's reputation. Here, recollection was thoroughly imbricated with print culture: Coleridge was no visionary dreamer but an agent who worked in tandem with collaborators and editors to produce a version of his writing that might give him status and sales. In effect he asserted himself as what was then a social role in the process of construction – an author – a writer recognisable from publications as their originator and owner – by pretending not to be one.

Recollection of past poems was a publication strategy that burgeoned as the poets grew older. It was a successful strategy too – for it reworked their oeuvres in ways that not only revised their reputations in their own day, but also conditioned the way they came down to subsequent generations. It is only by examining their acts of recollection that we can understand

our own position as inheritors of bodies of writing that were crafted and recrafted for effect. Take, for example, Coleridge's poem, 'The Blossoming of the Solitary Date Tree', first published in his *Poetical Works* in 1828 with a preface in which Coleridge portrayed himself as an aged poet no longer able to summon the power to complete an old poem. This preface developed the strategy of the 1816 prefaces in a new direction – inducting readers into a way of reading that does not just excuse but actually depends on the author's lateness, loss and decline – his inability to complete works for the press. Thus the text was presented to readers, and came down to posterity, as a belated early work – another Romantic Fragment. Yet it was not simply an incomplete poem of 1802, now placed in a context of belatedness by its collection in 1828, for Coleridge had substantially revised it – actually making it *less* complete than it was in its original manuscript. Fragmentation, forgetting and loss – influential elements of the received picture of Coleridge the other-worldly Romantic – were constructed by him late in his career not just by recontextualising old works in new collections but also by formally deconstructing them – distressing them, as it were, as an antique dealer might distress a shiny cabinet to give it the appearance of age, so increasing its value.[16] For Coleridge, the value of this activity lay in selling to the public, present and future, a version of himself they might buy because it fitted a certain ideal of the poet – a figure too removed from the world of getting and spending to fit the commercial world in which poets were professionals who finished their poems. Here, recollection allowed him to market himself as someone above the market – a strategy still used by advertisers of luxury goods and one that befitted a poetry collection priced higher than any Coleridge had before published.

Collected Editions, in fact, themselves reflect aging poets' claim to be valuable. They reveal them eager to sum their careers up, to recollect the past before it is too late (revising past words they had come to regret/improving hasty compositions) and to turn themselves into the monuments that are multi-volume books.[17] Wordsworth issued nine Collected Poems, each differently arranged, as he tried to achieve authority. Coleridge produced just one, but understood it was a last bid to achieve reputation. Southey edited a massive ten volume edition, revising individual poems heavily and placing them in new sequences. With retrospective prefaces reflecting on his career, and beautiful illustrations, *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey, Collected by Himself* (1837–38) emphasised his editorial act of recollection in its very title as part of its bid to embody Southey as an author – to be his legacy to posterity. He was just in time, for he lapsed into dementia soon after publication.

Neglect of late poetry has resulted in the status and impact of Collected Editions being obscured by modern scholarly editions, which remove poems from their places in the editions in which they were collected in the poets' lifetimes, denuding them of the contexts that shaped readers' experience of them at the time and subsequently, until the scholarly editions themselves appeared. A case in point is a poem published in the *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems* volume of the Cornell Wordsworth edition – a sonnet about a stone circle that Wordsworth first published in 1822 and included, in a new context, in his 1836–38 *Poetical Works* – themselves part of a publication strategy concocted with publisher Edward Moxon. He positioned it carefully in relation to others: recollecting old poems was a means for him to create new relationships between them and to demonstrate that he was what Coleridge, in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), had asked him to be – a poet of imagination. Assiduous about his reputation, Wordsworth performed recollections of this kind time and again, succeeding in throwing off old perceptions that his poetry was puerile, perverse and pompous to the extent that he became one of the few poets able to command high prices for his volumes. Furthermore, Victorian critics, reading him in these Collected Editions, did recognise him as a poet of imagination.[18] Yet the Cornell Wordsworth does not reflect these editions, preferring a mixture of chronological and thematic arrangement that also makes it difficult to discern poems' positioning in the different publications in which they appeared before they were included in Wordsworth's Collected Editions. The sonnet on the stone circle was revised and recollected in no fewer than five publications over Wordsworth's lifetime. On each occasion, it was read in a new context, first as a topographic poem in Wordsworth's prose *Guide to the Lakes* (1822), then as a 'Miscellaneous Sonnet' in the 1827 *Poetical Works*, then as a tour poem in *Yarrow Revisited* (2nd edition 1836), and again as a tour poem in the 1836–38 *Poetical Works*, revised in later editions of the 1840s. Wordsworth kept refashioning his work in pursuit of popularity: when his sequences of tour poems won good reviews and sales in the 1820s and 1830s, he produced more, reusing old poems to do so. Thus, as he presented himself as a tour poet, recollection became a means of developing a new direction: the retrospective enabled innovation.

In sum, examining the three poets' recollection of their poems in their publications provides a historical understanding of how they made their oeuvres and shaped the reputations that have come down to us. It also highlights their changing relationships with print culture. But recollection was not just a matter of publishing complete poems in a new order or a

new format. It cannot, therefore, be comprehended solely by a book-history methodology that attends to the publication and consumption of poetry without considering its form, style and subject-matter, its meanings and its manuscript origins. Recollection went hand in hand with revision, a process by which individual poems, old and new, were rewritten to reflect the changed perspective and needs of older poets, whether those needs were to do with achieving public reputation or memorialising an increasingly distant past. Wordsworth, for instance, revised his nature poetry so as to present the British landscape as a shared cultural heritage, rather than, as in the 1805 *Prelude*, a proving ground for the poet's own selfhood – avowedly a historical place, to which the poet is a guide, rather than a ground for his own spiritual self-discovery. Late Wordsworthian nature – and this was the Romantic nature popular with the reading public in the poets' own lifetimes[19] – was significantly different from that of Wordsworth's youth: it was a ground on which he questioned his own authority and revised the egotistical sublime of his former poetry in the direction of a more communal and traditional voice. As such, it should alter our critical perspective on his relationship with nature – a relationship that has elicited some of the most powerful criticism of the last twenty-five years. Numerous critics have sought to refute, complicate or nuance the contention that nature became for Wordsworth a category by means of which history (meaning in practice contemporary political issues) could be displaced or denied. But nearly all of us, nearly all of the time, have based our discussions on the same, early, corpus of poetry.[20] Here I show how his later work was neither an escape from history as New Historicist critics argued in the 1980s,[21] nor, on any simple level, an ecological poetry, as eco-critics suggested in the 1990s,[22] but a topographic writing allied with guidebooks and local histories, and preoccupied with the landscape as a place marked by the deeds of past Britons – a historicised nationalism.[23]

Before the production of publications comes the crafting of manuscripts. In *The Late Poetry of the Lake Poets* I consider the manuscript culture and practices that Wordsworth and Coleridge elaborated in later years, aiming to uncover how new poems were constructed by collecting and revising fragments of old ones – a recycling activity that renewed the textual past even as the poets wrote about time, memory and recollection. I examine their habit of manuscript assemblage and disassemblage – involving the incorporation of lines and fragments written at an earlier time into new whole poems, and often a way of formally making these poems re-present the poet's textual past even as they take a new perspective on its pastness.[24] Formal recollection retrieves past work, and the past occasions which that

work represented, against the depredations of time. Wordsworth and Coleridge, I shall show, were adept at this process; they produced some incisive poems that pondered their relationship to their past, and to their past work, both explicitly and by making these poems archives of old fragments. Here I examine a process that I call, after Stephen Prickett, 'disconfirmation'[25] – late work that re-collects a 'whole way of seeing and feeling' to which a poet had earlier been committed, but revises it so as to disclose a changed perspective from which it appears 'partial [and] inadequate' unless revalued in the light of new needs. We see that Wordsworth was a corrective reader and rewriter of his own verse, writing new poems that redefined older ones as well as revising both old and new poems: what he wrote in 1798 or 1805 should not be taken as the last word about him.

'LAKE POETRY' AND LATE POETRY

What prompted the three poets' development of strategies of recollection, revision and disconfirmation? And when did they start to develop them? To answer these questions, it is necessary to ask another: why Lake poetry? The term 'Lake poetry' had powerful historical effects not only on the poets' reception in their own lifetimes but also on the direction that their writing took after 1807, and especially after 1814. It is not too much to say that it was one of the decisive influences on what, when and how they wrote (and did not write) and how they published (or did not publish). It is surprising, then, that few scholars have considered its lasting effects in detail.[26]

When Francis Jeffrey began his 1814 review of *The Excursion* 'This will never do' and proceeded to damn its style as 'the natural drawl of the Lakers',[27] he triggered a change in the poetry not just of Wordsworth, but also of Wordsworth's fellow residents of the Lake District, Southey and Coleridge. That change encompassed the genres, forms and style in which they wrote, and affected their poetics and their understandings of the poet's relationship to his readers. It was not a sudden but a gradual change that continued as they aged, and that involved a retrospective transformation of their earlier verse. It also prompted ongoing revision of the politics of their poetry, and eventually reshaped their reputations in their own era. The Lake poets, as they became known, were late born – or rather made; they were products of reviewers' critiques, readers' perceptions and the poets' own responses to both the critiques and the perceptions. Their poetry and their poetics were recollected late into their careers: old works were reworked with hindsight; new ones reconfigured their earlier styles and

subjects; lateness, with its attendant emotions of retrospection and regret, became a consciously adopted position.

Why should Jeffrey's 1814 review have been so potent? Because it was the culmination of a line of criticism that he had been leading for twelve years. He first attacked what he termed the 'sect' or 'school' that wrote from the Lakes in 1802, when his *Edinburgh Review* article on Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* listed the jacobinical innovations he thought Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth had together introduced into English poetry. These included

> [t]he antisocial principles, and distempered sensibility of Rousseau – his discontent with the present constitution of society – his paradoxical morality, and his perpetual hankerings after some unattainable state of voluptuous virtue and perfection. The simplicity and energy ... of Kotzebue and Schiller ... The homeliness and harshness of some of Cowper's language and versification ... [and] an affectation of great simplicity and familiarity of language.

The innovations amounted to a 'new system' that was a 'depravation of language' and a 'debasement of all those feelings which poetry is designed to communicate'. It combined 'perpetual exaggeration of thought' with 'splenetic and idle discontent with the existing institutions of society'.[28]

In 1805 Jeffrey intensified his critique in a review of Southey's *Madoc*; he then returned to the attack in an 1807 piece on Wordsworth's *Poems in Two Volumes*. Identifying a 'brotherhood of poets, who have haunted for some years about the lakes of Cumberland', he saw 'vulgarity, affectation, and silliness ... Childishness, conceit, and affectation' as their chief traits.[29] That they persisted in these traits demonstrated a 'settled perversity of taste or understanding, which has been fostered, if not altogether created', by 'long habits of seclusion'[30] among the lakes and mountains: had they exposed themselves to a wider intellectual world, they would have abandoned their strange overvaluation of vulgar language and of their own experience. To be a Lake poet, then, was not necessarily to write about the Lakes but was nonetheless to be marked by living there.

The aspect of the Lake poets' 'system' that Jeffrey most disliked was the attempt in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to widen the language of poetry so that it embraced the sociolect not just of gentlefolk – the 'refined' tongue of the upper and upper-middle classes – but also that of rustics and labourers. By affiliating poetry with the words and the concerns of the rural lower classes, the Lake poets undermined the linguistic hierarchy – in Jeffrey's eyes a hierarchy on which aesthetic, moral and political judgement depended – that poetry was expected to support. Hence his attack on their

attachment to the commonplace, the trivial and the vulgar was motivated by the politics of language: he renewed the attack so often and made it so vehemently because he viewed Wordsworth's, Southey's and Coleridge's poetry as at root dangerously democratic and jacobinical.[31]

The *Edinburgh Review*, as Henry Cockburn described it, represented 'an entire and instant change of every thing that the public had been accustomed to in that sort of composition'.[32] Highly popular, it spawned both imitators and opponents – journals that responded in kind to its innovation of publishing reviews that were new in their length, detail and judicial tone. Jeffrey, a lawyer, effectively set the pattern for an expanded periodical culture in which partisan bias was disguised as forensic examination. A Whig who attacked both Tories to his right and Jacobins to his left, Jeffrey affected magisterial objectivity, dissecting books for evidence that disclosed the tendency of their authors' characters. Older critical modes, in which the author was politely treated as a gentleman, whatever his book said, gave way to a new 'age of personality'[33] in which the critic did not merely find faults in the book but treated those faults as proof of their author's guilt – the guilt in question usually being his or her espousal of views or innovations that reviewers thought likely to threaten the established social order. Thus radicals and former radicals such as John Thelwall and William Godwin were attacked in the *Edinburgh*, establishing a pattern that was followed in other journals' belittling of Anna Barbauld and John Keats and that culminated in the scurrilous attacks published in *Blackwood's Magazine* – attacks so personal that they led to a duel between its editor and one of those it attacked, John Scott, editor of the rival *London Magazine*.[34]

The Lake poets were thus neither paranoid nor exaggerating when they blamed Jeffrey for blighting their careers and their characters. By 1807 they had recognised that the new reviewing culture was losing them reputation and sales at a time when succeeding on the publishing market, rather than writing as a hobby or under a benefactor's patronage, was increasingly essential.[35] They complained bitterly in private – Southey's response to Jeffrey's review of *Poems in Two Volumes* is typical of many of their letters:

> I am not blind to Wordsworths faults;—nor familiar as we are with each other, is there that kind of intimacy between us which would be likely in any degree to blind me. But when I see a man take up the Poems of W. & passing over pieces of such beauty as the Tintern Abbey,—the Leech-Gatherer,—the Brothers, Michael, the Song at Brougham Castle &c., fix upon the weeds of the collection, & join in with the yelping pack of curs who are attempting to hunt him down,—I cannot but feel that it is no mark of a generous or a good spirit . . . This is a malicious age,