

Introduction
Locating Romantic-Period Sociability

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A group of modest merchants, lower gentry, and professional men gather in a village tavern to eat, drink, read, and discuss public matters, and also to select the latest publications for their country book club, some of which will make their way back from the club to the households of individual members and circulate further among wives, sons, and daughters. In the aftermath of prohibitions on public meetings imposed by the Two Acts of 1795, members of the London Corresponding Society (LCS) gather over “bread & cheese & porter” in the home of the clerk and aspiring playwright James Powell, unaware that their host is a paid government informer and that their convivial domestic proceedings will find their way back to an alarmed ministry. In the same years, prominent Tory writers and politicians meet for literary and political conversation in the Piccadilly bookshop of the loyalist John Wright, and some men discretely pass through the shop to a first floor room of Wright’s adjoining house to compose and produce *The Anti-Jacobin*. A stage and ring are raised in the Hampshire village of Odiham, and hundreds of people pay half a guinea to see Daniel Mendoza fight Richard Humphries, though conflict spills beyond the ring when, against stout defenses, a mob breaks into the paddock and joins the spectacle. Curious Londoners flock to the Temple of Health in Adelphi Terrace, run by the scientific showman James Graham, where among other wonders they are treated to the famous Celestial Bed, with some couples spending £50 to stay the night and benefit from its supposed procreative powers. In the elegant second floor assembly room of the Lisburn market house, the genteel upper strata of the town’s merchant and professional classes join the lower gentry for music and dancing, making the center of the town’s commercial life the venue for a voluntary associational culture. The radical philosopher William Godwin brings his own unconventional social habits to bear upon existing class and gender norms as he visits women in their homes and is visited by them in his own domestic quarters. In the wake of the Napoleonic wars, and under

the spell of Byron's Childe Harold, British tourists make their way to Rome and the Colosseum by moonlight for an ambiguously introspective and collective experience that epitomizes Romantic sensibility even as it marks the early history of mass tourism. The supposed convenience of the sloop-rigged barges that convey Londoners to the bathing resort of Margate is belied by the distressed attitude of seasick passengers, on their way to a Bartholomew Fair by the sea noted for its confusion of social hierarchies. Ordinary seamen find relief from the hazards of war and severe naval discipline in prodigious drinking and the shipboard pleasures of song and dance and, when docked, the company of wives and women of pleasure.

These episodes are all drawn from the chapters that follow, which explore the range of places within which British Romantic-period sociability took place. The aim is to consider how sociability was shaped by place, by the rooms and buildings, landscapes and seascapes, where people gathered to converse, to eat and drink, and to work and find entertainment. At the same time, it is evident throughout the volume that sociability in turn shaped place, both in the deliberate construction and configuration of venues for people to gather socially, and in the way such gatherings transformed how place was experienced and understood. So, for example, the assumption that members of the LCS could only be alehouse politicians left elites puzzling over domestic radical gatherings, and the perception of Margate as London's East End by the sea led to difficulties in representing a seaside resort that threw together social types that would have remained distinct in London. The aims of the volume are predominantly historical and interpretive rather than theoretical or conceptual. There is, however, explicitly in some essays and implicitly throughout, an effort to move beyond the influential tendency of Jürgen Habermas to privilege rational exchange in a political public sphere that occupied the masculine space of the eighteenth-century coffee house.¹ An interest in forms of social interaction that are not restricted by critical intellect and political aspiration was present already in the publication that introduced Romantic studies to sociability, Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite's 2002 collection of essays, *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770–1840*.² That volume traversed lecture theaters, taverns, parks, and shops, and one aim of this collection is to extend a social reconsideration of Romantic-period literature and culture by more fully exploring the reciprocal involvement of sociability and place. Such an enquiry draws, of course, from recent developments in Romantic and long eighteenth-century studies that stress the public and social, rather than

private and individual, dimensions of literary and aesthetic expression in ways that involve particular locations: theater studies of course, which has notably transformed Romanticism, but also accounts of travel writing, of radical culture, and of the collective dimensions of literary production and reception.

This volume also follows on recent developments in Romantic scholarship in that it is not restricted to literary expression and literary evidence, developing instead a broader cultural history of sociability. That said, several contributors offer sustained readings of literary texts, notably Ina Ferris on satirical representations of country book clubs, Gillian Russell on the assembly room setting of William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, Christopher Rovee on moonlight tours of the Colosseum in Byron's *Manfred* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and Harriet Guest on the Margate episode of Charlotte Smith's *Marchmont*. Beyond this, the ways in which verbal and visual print culture serves to mediate a situated sociability turns out to be a leading concern throughout. Nicholas Rogers' treatment of lower deck sociability in the British navy from the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of the Napoleonic wars, which might seem to be remote from literature and the arts, engages the songs and ballads that were prized as shipboard entertainment. Studies of collective experience and expression are often set against the individual and introspective associations of canonical Romanticism, so that, as Russell and Tuite suggest, "the sociable occupies the position of the other of a solitary or interiorized Romanticism, . . . partly because there has been no critical tradition of representing a Romanticism in which sociability is a value."³ Recent scholarship has gone a long way toward establishing such a tradition. In part to indicate the ways in which a suppression of the social has involved a suppression of the specificities of place, of situated human communication and interaction, but also to demonstrate that even the most canonically introspective Romantic forms were profoundly situated and closely involved with sociability, I want to begin this volume by reframing some of its concerns with respect to a very familiar literary text, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison." The poem can be identified with familiar ways of thinking about social interaction and place that suggest both are meant to be transcended through the individual act of Romantic imagination. While my aim will be to acknowledge a sociable and situated form of Romantic expression, I also want to suggest that such an acknowledgment not only follows from a new attention, for example, to the public cultures of theater and radical assembly, but has been there all along, in the literature and in important strands of critical tradition.

Coleridge laid out the occasion for “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” with the date June 1797, in a brief headnote to the first published version of the poem.⁴ Having long anticipated a visit by some friends, above all Charles Lamb, the poet is prevented by accident and injury (his wife Sara spilled boiling milk on his foot) from joining an evening walk consisting of Lamb with William and Dorothy Wordsworth, and the poem instead finds compensation through individual reflection in the solitude of a garden bower. The stylized setting may already signal literary convention rather than any particular place or available set of human relationships, and Coleridge’s bower has been associated with the influence of William Cowper and with a lyric movement from *hortus conclusus* to consolation in a *locus amoenus*.⁵ With a melodramatic excess that has often been noticed, the poem initially presents the bower as prison rather than conventional refuge or retreat, and figures the loss of companionship and natural beauty in extreme terms of blindness and death. Christopher R. Miller has observed that in its simplest terms the poem “concerns the inability to be in two places at once,” and the extended process of consolation through which this dilemma is overcome begins with a temporal rather than spatial gesture, a potent “meanwhile” that allows the poet to follow his friends in imagination on an evening walk that he has himself devised.⁶ While spiritual typologies and philosophical terms shape the sequence, Anne K. Mellor has offered the most influential account of the poem’s itinerary by mapping a distinct series of landscape categories through which the poet “guides his friends up the ladder of the hierarchically ordered aesthetic experiences of eighteenth-century academic art theory,” from descent into a picturesque dell through emergence upon a “middle-ground” of beauty to a climactic sublimity with intimations of the divine in a vast prospect bathed in sunset.⁷ At the transition from the beautiful to the sublime, Charles Lamb is identified as the poem’s particular addressee, and the ecstatic apprehension of divinity in the veiled form of an “Almighty Spirit” brings the two men together in the poet’s mind: “So my Friend / Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood.” With the problems of distance and separation to some extent alleviated, the poem draws to a close by returning to the lime-tree bower with feelings of release rather than restriction and “delight” rather than pain.

What matters about natural setting, about the places represented in the poem, seems to involve the categorical or the typological rather than the particular, with landscape refined in Mellor’s terms beyond “an object of rational or even aesthetic contemplation” to become “a mode of consciousness.”⁸ Or as Michael Raiger suggests in making the case for a spiritual

rather than psychological “poetics of liberation,” where “the way to liberation is through the power of imagination,” there is even in the poem’s initial thematics of imprisonment a shift from material to spiritual concerns: “the poet has seen the way out of the prison, which we must constantly remind ourselves is a prison not built of a material nature, but of a spiritual nature.”⁹ Raiger contends that the reader is carried along by this movement, and in this sense the address to another may be similarly transformed by imagination, as the verbal construction of an absent friend’s experience in a remote landscape becomes more confident and emphatic over the course of the poem. The process of consolation eventually yields a compensatory realization about the sufficiency of the immediate bower. “No plot so narrow, be but Nature there / No waste so vacant, but may well employ / Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart / Awake to Love and Beauty!”

Yet a shifting sense of address complicates even as it enriches the identification of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” with the group of Coleridge’s “conversation poems.” What kind of conversation is this? For Barbara Leah Harman, who considers the poem’s opening “Well” to be a self-contained utterance that signals “the continuity of self and the continuity of speech in the absence of a community of speakers,” the answer is clear: it is no conversation at all. “The poem substitutes for conversation the self-affirming speech of one person who begins a colloquy with himself” and from this narrates “the gradual awakening of the self to its own powers.”¹⁰ In an account that works instead from “the theatrical sense of ‘scene’” evident in the dramatically illuminated sunset, Miller associates the poem’s lyric speaker with theatrical “speakers of soliloquies,” and concludes that despite the ostensible address to Lamb the poem “often sounds like Coleridge’s own internal dialogue.”¹¹ The tension between self-communion and communication has figured in some of the most compelling recent readings of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison.” In an account that pointedly asks, “What does it mean to *pretend* to talk to some one?,” Adela Pinch takes the poem as an occasion to explore “different modes of having others in mind,” and concludes that Coleridge’s apostrophe to the absent Charles Lamb is a “non-voicing” or “not-speaking” that posits the object of address “as an entity that can never truly be spoken in the real beyond apostrophe’s reach.”¹² For Jon Mee, whose rich study of the “conversable worlds” of the long eighteenth century is shaped throughout by the texture of social circumstance and the value of verbal collision with others, the figure of Charles Lamb is curiously “folded into a kind of monologue.” From this perspective, what the individual act of imagination

risks losing is the potentially challenging and even combative experience of interpersonal exchange. “Coleridge creates a paradise within himself from the imagined community of his friends. In the process, of course, any resistance from others is also short-circuited by an inclusivity that avoids the collision of difference.”¹³

Against this skepticism about Romantic lyric sufficiency, it is worth recalling a critical tradition that was more willing to endorse the rhetorical structure of a poem that seems to dissolve the natural setting and human relationship in the transformative power of the individual imagination. James D. Boulger’s 1965 article, “Imagination and Speculation in Coleridge’s Conversation Poems,” is paradigmatic in part because it is framed by Coleridge’s famous definition of the “secondary Imagination” in chapter 13 of the *Biographia Literaria* as an idealizing and unifying process that “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create.”¹⁴ Setting out from the observation that critics interested in the relationship between Coleridge’s poetry and his organic theory of imagination have struggled with the conversation poems, Boulger acknowledges formal tensions in these poems but still affirms that “the achievement of unity of any sort is a remarkable tribute to the power of Imagination.”¹⁵ To see the conversation poems as a mere “collection of topical references and personal reactions to situations of Coleridge’s early married life” is to overlook the fact they are more “essentially about the maker and especially the making of poetry”:

The central theme in each poem is the imaginative power itself, with subordinate themes of the speculative reason pressing to destroy it. The surface play of scenery and friendly dialogue is a mask for the poet’s inner struggle to organize the ideas about God and Nature which influenced his early life, mainly of “idealistic” (Berkeleyan), traditional Christian, and eighteenth-century mechanist (Hartleian) origin.¹⁶

There could be no more forceful confirmation of the linked denial of place and sociability than Boulger’s dismissal of “the surface play of scenery and friendly dialogue” as “a mask for inner struggle.” Approached through “inner struggle” rather than “surface play,” the poem opens with mechanistic natural associations, reaches a climactic idealism in the sun drenched apprehension of an “Almighty Spirit,” and finds resolution in a delighted return to the bower that makes “the poet’s feelings . . . the unifying force among conflicting elements.” This imaginatively unifying power of individual feeling, rather than topical reference or personal experience, still less situated interaction with others, determines poetic achievement. “The poet’s feelings are . . . responsible for the choice of imagery and description, and for the associations which are grouped around each selection of natural objects.”¹⁷

Boulger is particularly interested in the way patterns of light and dark track imaginative and spiritual confidence, with “the communicating outward movement of the active imagination into nature . . . associated instinctively with light,” and the darkness that closes again toward the end of the poem registering fear and doubt. Yet uncertainty about the final image of the rook in flight has less to do with the connection between poet and friend at a distance than with the capacity of imagination to unify discrete image patterns. The act of blessing the bird becomes “a symbolic attempt” to join light and darkness “by an act of the will” that temporarily, if precariously, yields “the identity of subject and object, in a unity between the active and passive elements in the cosmos.”¹⁸

It is hard to deny the impressiveness of this cosmic sense of the poem’s scale, yet vastness seems to come at the expense of texture and immediate experience. The same can be said of the proposition that the “communicating outward movement” of the poem involves individual consciousness encountering nature or divinity rather than other people, whether these are friends or readers of the poem. The very notion that “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” completes itself as an act of imagination, or (for Harman) an act of self-authorization, is complicated by Coleridge’s mischievous habit of eroding formal resolution through serialized closing gestures – the final section of the poem offers a curious sequence of aphorisms, precepts, and figures. And there are a host of further challenges to any sense of the poem as a self-contained act of imagination in the complex history of its composition, revision, transmission, publication, and reception. In a revealing study of the versions of Coleridge’s major poems, which indicates how editorial and textual work has transformed our understanding of Romantic literature, Jack Stillinger traces the history of no less than twelve distinct versions of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” beginning with three manuscript letters in advance of print publication: the first to Southey in July 1797, consisting of a fifty-five line poem with no headnote, but with an epistolary explanation of circumstance, and an address within the poem to “my Sister & my Friends” as well as “My gentle-hearted CHARLES”; the second in an undated letter to Charles Lloyd that has partially survived, and that by way of address adds “Sara, and my Friends” to Charles; and the third a seven line excerpt in an October 1797 letter to John Thelwall.¹⁹ Against interpretive claims of imaginative sufficiency, this was clearly a poem that Coleridge wanted to share with his friends. Issues associated with epistolary transmission continue to echo through Stillinger’s fourth version, the first publication of the poem in Robert Southey’s *Annual Anthology* of 1800, a Bristol volume

that included work by others who figure in the social circumstances of the poem (Southey, Lamb, Charles Lloyd). The full title of this first printed version was also notable for the way it identified and located a particular figure of address: “This Lime Tree-Bower My Prison, A Poem, Addressed to Charles Lamb, of the East-India House, London.”²⁰

The accumulation of friends and intimates throughout the early dissemination of the poem is instructional, since it complicates any reading of “gentle-hearted Charles” as an emblematic addressee who facilitates notional conversation, so that that the poem can ascend (or descend) into monologue and self-communion with nature and divinity. On the contrary, the development of Charles as a figure of address can be understood as part of a more social process of communicating with and through several other friends, in ways that richly inflect the poem’s meaning and significance. Critical commentary has explored an intriguing range of individuals and groups identified with “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” each involving distinct local associations. The poem was first composed around six months after Coleridge moved out of Bristol and, with the assistance of his wealthy friend Thomas Poole, settled in a cottage at Nether Stowey. The strategic opening of a gate in the connecting wall between the residences of the two men allowed access from Coleridge’s cottage garden to Poole’s extensive orchard and what would become the poem’s lime-tree bower. Relocation from Bristol to Stowey involved social tensions and reconciliations, beginning with Poole’s worry that the cottage was inadequate and that the inhabitants of Stowey might not welcome a poet with radical associations.²¹ The accommodating gate can be taken as an emblem of the way these stresses were worked through, and the way place can shape and be shaped by sociability and literary expression. If this was a phase of shifting intimacies and allegiances in Coleridge’s private life, there were underlying changes too in the historical relationship between private life and the wider public world. Kelvin Everest considers “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” to be an important poem in part because it reveals “an emerging distance, in English culture, between the poet and his audience,” as Coleridge turns away from “society as a whole” and from explicitly public discourse in favor of “domesticity and retirement,” and seeks companionship in “the small domestic community, of family and friends” at Nether Stowey.²² The conversation poem is distinctive as a literary form in that it requires a specified addressee and auditor distinct from the reader.²³ In this sense, Lamb’s mediating role may have less to do with the poet’s achievement of self-sufficiency than with a rhetorical management of the pressing claims of a wider reading public.

I will return to Lamb, since he is the poem's most persistent and complex figure of address, but Everest's point about the importance to Coleridge of specific friends within a domestic framework can shape a consideration of other individuals involved in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison." Despite Boulger's eagerness to dismiss "topical references" to the poet's "early married life," the domestic circumstances of Coleridge's relationship with Sara Fricker are vividly present from the first letter in which the poem is written out for Southey ("Dear Sara accidentally emptied a skillet of boiling milk on my foot, which confined me during the whole of C. Lamb's stay"²⁴) through the initial published headnote, and the poem is made possible by this at once mundane and disturbing incident of domestic impairment, and the network of deprivations, frustrations, and yearnings it triggers. The milk may well have come from Poole through the newly opened gate in the connecting wall.²⁵ Richard Holmes takes the incident to be evidence of turmoil in Coleridge's married life, and Everest suggests that the poem "manifests a fresh intensity in the potential of Coleridge's ideal retirement" that is antithetically shaped by "actual shortcomings in his domestic life."²⁶ Yet Rachel Crawford has offered the fullest and most compelling interpretive account of Sara in part by challenging a sense of opposition between domestic life with her and lyric transcendence through address to Charles and other friends. Crawford's approach highlights the link between Sara's disabling accident and the poem's other gendered event, the murder by Charles' sister Mary Lamb of their mother, a "strange calamity" that had generated Coleridge's invitation nearly a year before Lamb's visit took place. Against readings that have "dissociated the poem from the disturbing narratives of Sara's and Mary's deeds," and against an oversimplification of "the speaker's experience of nature by applying to it a kind of aesthetic thermometer which grades the landscape into picturesque, beautiful, and sublime portions," Crawford disrupts aesthetic categories by tracing a contaminating picturesque, with female and domestic associations, through even the most sublime landscapes. Acknowledging that the effort to purify the poem is partly Coleridge's own, she argues for a complex logic of sacrifice that at once obscures and "retains traces of Sara's and Mary's narratives."²⁷

Though not as volatile as these two figures of "calamity," other friends have been similarly restored to complex and uneasy presence within the poem, and recent criticism has been particularly attentive to the way lyric communication radiates outward through various circuits of correspondence and social exchange. The three epistolary recipients of the poem are instructive. "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" was written at a time

when Coleridge was estranged from Robert Southey, and in treating the first transmission of the poem to Southey as part of “a breathless appeal for rapprochement,” John Gutteridge has shown that Coleridge infused the closing movement of his poem with two striking allusions to the recent second edition of Southey’s *Poems*: the first to Southey’s “Ode Written on the First of January, 1794” (“To whom all sounds of Mirth are dissonant . . .”), and the second to one of the *Botany Bay Eclogues* (“and thence at eve / When mildly fading sunk the summer sun, / Oft have I loved to mark the rook’s slow course, / And hear his hollow croak . . .”).²⁸ Working back to the first version of the poem, which addresses “My Sister and my Friends!” rather than “My gentle-hearted Charles!,” Gutteridge proposes that by fusing the two passages from Southey in his own closing figure of the creaking flight of the rook at sunset, Coleridge provides a “link between all the friends in the poem.”²⁹ Even allowing for revisions in the published version, the apparently triangular geometry of the final figure – where the bird connects two geographically divided friends – is complicated by the allusion to Southey. Charles Lloyd, the other epistolary recipient of the poem, had moved into the cottage at Nether Stowey in September 1796 as a kind of literary and spiritual disciple who paid £80 a year for accommodation, tutoring, and companionship, but whose mental deterioration strained Coleridge’s ideals of intellectual influence and sympathetic conversation. By March 1797, a few months before the occasion of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” he had to be sent away for medical treatment. Felicity James’ revealing and finely grained study of male sociability and friendship in the relations of Coleridge, Lamb, and Wordsworth suggests that “the growing closeness of Lamb and Lloyd” in London through the early winter of 1797 was negatively shaped by the fact that both men felt Coleridge drifting away, as the formation of “a new community at Nether Stowey” that was centered on the Wordsworths relegated Lamb and Lloyd to “onlookers.”³⁰ Again, Lamb’s strangely pivotal yet peripheral role in the poem can be understood in terms of actual social relationships and specific places as well as spiritual and aesthetic imperatives.

John Thelwall is by most accounts the least well served of the three “Lime-Tree Bower” correspondents, and James cites Nicholas Roe’s account of the way both Coleridge and Poole “sacrificed Thelwall’s residence in the neighborhood” of Nether Stowey “for the company of Wordsworth and Dorothy” to suggest how the poem’s close rendering of intimacy and identification would have pained the marginalized friend.³¹ As troubling as this may be, the emotional force of the poem is enhanced