Shifting Interpretations of the English Lake District

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Whereas technological advancements in agriculture and engineering gradually reshaped the British countryside over the course of the eighteenth century, the emergence of new ideas and attitudes about nature and the nation’s landscapes rapidly transformed the way that countryside was perceived. From the Highlands to the Wye Valley, previously neglected parts of Britain quickly became objects of widespread fascination. Within a few decades, the vogue for the Continental Grand Tour was rivalled by an upsurge in domestic tourism and, as one period commentator put it, ‘a desire of being acquainted with whatever is most beautiful, remarkable, or curious in our own Country’ (Goadby 1773, 3). In time, this desire would transform the cultural geography of the entire realm. In few places, however, were its effects more pronounced than amidst the lakes and mountains of Cumberland, Westmorland and northern Lancashire; the semi-peninsular landmass that now forms the county of Cumbria. Before the 1700s this region was generally considered to be an isolated wilderness, a mountainous zone cut off from the kingdom’s main routes and thoroughfares. By the early 1800s it had become a fashionable resort, a haven for well-heeled travellers seeking picturesque scenery and the pleasures of rural retreat. It had become, to speak in the parlance of the age, the ‘District of the Lakes’.

This step change in the perception of the Lake District is firmly attested by the various accounts of the region that began to appear around the time of the Enlightenment. Whereas early modern travellers had portrayed the Lakes as a trackless waste, full of ‘nothing but hideous, hanging Hills, and great Pooles [sic]’ (Legg 1904, 41), by the latter half of the eighteenth century the district was celebrated as a pleasure ground for tourists lured by depictions of (what the poet Thomas Gray dubbed) ‘one of the sweetest landscapes that art ever attempted to imitate’ (Gray 1775, vol. 2, 364). Although it was first advocated by the aficionados of the picturesque (most notably William Gilpin), this conception of the Lake District ultimately proved to be much more than a passing fad. Indeed, by the end of the century it had a firm grip on the popular imagination. The same fells that struck the author Daniel Defoe in the 1720s as a sign that ‘all the pleasant Part of England was at an end’ (Defoe 1726, 225) were praised by surveyors just seventy years later as the gateway to a ‘country…ornamented with many beautiful and extensive lakes; which, with their pleasing accompaniments have of late years made the tour of the lakes a fashionable amusement’ (Bailey and Culley 1797, 177). No longer simply a backcountry to be avoided, the Lake District had become a destination.

The divergence between these earlier and later accounts of the Lake District indicates much more than a mere difference of taste or opinion; it indicates a shift in the perception of England’s rural landscapes that separated the world of eighteenth-century Britain from the one that had preceded it. The word ‘landscape’ itself merits special consideration in this regard. A loanword
derived from the Dutch *landschap*, landscape is, after all, a word used to describe not the natural world *per se*, but an aesthetic apprehension of it (Ritter 1974). Hence, the entries one finds under ‘landscape’ in Dr Johnson’s *Dictionary* of 1755, namely ‘the prospect of a country’, or ‘a picture, representing an extent of space, with the various objects in it’ (Johnson 1755, vol. 2, 8). Similarly, Johnson’s latter-day descendant, the OED Online, defines landscape as, on the one hand, a ‘picture representing natural inland scenery, as distinguished from a sea picture [or] portrait’, and, on the other, a ‘view…of [such] scenery’ (OED Online 2014). Notice here the priority given to pictorial representation (‘picture representing’) and, concomitantly, to spatially distanced spectatorship (‘prospect’, ‘view’). Understood in this way, landscape presupposes not an immersion within nature but a detached perspective on it.

Fittingly, it is precisely this sense of detachment that enabled early tourists to ‘naturalise’ the managed uplands and cultivated valleys of the Lake District, and to portray the region as a pastoral paradise: a place at once untouched by history and at the same time existing in an aesthetic present coterminous with, yet set apart from, the cultured spectator. One need only consider popular eighteenth-century contrivances like the Claude Glass to affirm this. A handheld, convex mirror used to abstract the subject it reflected from its surroundings, the Claude Glass was the *sine qua non* of the serious picturesque tourist. A pocket-sized picture-making and taking device, it served a function not dissimilar to that often fulfilled by smartphones today, enabling the viewer to isolate scenes and to record them for the purpose of display. Indeed, as Malcolm Andrews has observed, this capacity to fix, frame and mount suggests a curious correspondence between early Lakeland tourism and trophy hunting, the difference being that the ‘Picturesque tourist pursued his prey with a Claude Glass rather than a gun’ (Andrews 1989, 68). When viewed through the medium of such a tool, a landscape like that of the Lakes became a spectacle: a thing to be seen with a trained eye from an aesthetically distanced point of view.

Yet although the shift in the perception of the Lake District corresponds historically with the ‘discovery’ of landscape, its consequences were hardly limited to the fine arts. They were, in fact, quite tangible. By the late-eighteenth century Lakeland tourism had become a thriving industry, encouraging (and encouraged by) improvements in the local roadways and transport infrastructure. The first stagecoach in the region, the *Flying Machine*, began operating in 1763; by 1773 it was routinely making the journey from Carlisle to London in just three days (Williams 1975, 38). Twenty years later Isabella Matterson’s post coach was running six days a week between the capital and Kendal, and another mail coach was running thrice weekly between Kendal and York, via Leeds (Hobbs 1947, 89). Moreover, by this period more adventurous tourists, like Thomas Pennant (who, though a naturalist and collector, was also drawn to the region for the sake of its scenery) were taking the ‘Over Sands’ coach from Lancaster to Ulverston: a journey of some twenty miles across Morecambe Bay, which involved fording both the Kent and Leven estuaries at low tide. An advertisement for one of these coaches, published in 1781, promises for a fare of five shillings a ‘sober and careful driver’ and as ‘expeditious’ a journey ‘as the tide will permit’ (Fell 1884, 4–5).

By 1781 the first Lakeland tourist museum, Peter Crosthwaite’s of Keswick, had opened its doors to the public. A cabinet of archaeological, geological, biological and aesthetic curiosities, Crosthwaite’s museum focused its visitors’ attention on the scientific and picturesque aspects of the local landscape (over and above its social and agricultural heritage). By 1793, Crosthwaite could boast of having received ‘1540 persons of rank and fashion’ in a single year (Hutchinson
1794, vol. 2, 154). Within three years two other local museums were vying for a cut of this trade: Todhunter’s of Kendal and Hutton’s of Keswick; the latter, to Crosthwaite’s consternation, opened shop just a few doors down the road from his own (Brears 1992). Around the same time these museums were established, new inns and public houses were springing up and many old ones were being renovated in order to accommodate the seasonal onslaught of holidaymakers. Between 1770 and 1800, no fewer than twenty Lakeland guidebooks and tour-books appeared in print and many, like the antiquarian-cum-aesthete Thomas West’s Guide to the Lakes, ran through multiple editions. Given this trend, one can appreciate why, as early as 1778, The Monthly Review was declaring that ‘[t]o make the tour of the Lakes, to speak in fashionable terms, is the ton of the present hour’ (West 1778, 70).

Certainly, by the end of the eighteenth century, tourism in the Lake District had become ‘fashionable’ enough to provoke the sting of the satirist’s pen. The quixotic tour of William Combe’s Dr Syntax (famously illustrated by Rowlandson) is well known, as is Jane Austen’s pot-shot at the picturesque in Northanger Abbey. Parodies of this kind point to a fact with which historians of English culture are only too familiar: namely that by the late 1790s the pioneering spirit of the early Lakeland rambler had been replaced by parasols, picnic baskets and ‘polite and paid-for pretence’ (Nicholson 1955, 109). It is a fact too often overlooked, however, that 1798, the year Wordsworth and Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads was published, also witnessed the popularisation of a new nickname for Lake District tourists. It was in this year that James Plumptre published a theatrical send-up of Lakeland tourism titled The Lakers: A Comic Opera, in Three Acts (Plumptre 1798).

Plumptre’s comedy centres on the picturesque and amorous adventures of Miss Beccabunga Veronique, an amateur botanist, artist and Gothic novelist (loosely modelled on Ann Radcliffe) on holiday in the Lakes. As one might guess, this is parody cut from much the same cloth as Dr Syntax. But even though Plumptre’s play pales in comparison with the pouncing wit of Combe’s poem, it does hold the distinction of having introduced the word ‘lakers’ to the common vernacular. The European Magazine, and London Review was quick to pick up on the novelty of the term and thought it necessary to explain to its readers that ‘[t]he Lakers are those persons who visit the beautiful scenes in Cumberland and Westmorland by distinction styled the Lakes’ (The Lakers 1798, 328). Plumptre was also careful to avoid confusion on this point. As he explained in his Prologue, the title of his play derived from an expression common amongst the inhabitants of the Lakes themselves.

For pleasure, knowledge, many thither hie,
For fashion some, and some – they know not why.
And these same visitors, e’en one and all,
The Natives by the name of Lakers call.

(Plumptre 1798, xv)

These couplets clearly evince the rationale behind Plumptre’s title; however, there is more here than immediately meets the eye. For as Plumptre would have known in the local dialects of Cumberland and Westmorland, the word ‘lake’, like its cognate ‘lark’, means ‘to frolic or play’. In his essay ‘To the Lakers’, Thomas De Quincey elaborates on the pejorative implications of this pun. ‘There is’, De Quincey explains, ‘a pleasant ambiguity and a lurking satire’ in the expression the Lakers:
For the word lake (from the old Gothic, laikan, ludere) is universally applied to children playing; and the simple people, who till the soil of Westmoreland and Cumberland, cannot view in any other light than that of childish laking, the migrating propensities of all the great people from the south, who annually come up like shoals of herrings from their own fertile pastures to the rocky grounds of the north.

(De Quincey 1823, 497)

To speak of a laker was, therefore, not only to speak of a tourist but also of someone ludicrous, even childish. Certainly, given the propensities of the district’s more famous tourists and off-comers, including De Quincey himself, it is not difficult to see why the expression caught on.

In lampooning the Lakers, satirists like Plumptre and Combe were targeting the pretensions of eighteenth-century picturesque tourists. Today, however, it is not these tourists who we tend to credit (or blame, as the case may be) for the affectations of modern Lakeland tourists; that distinction goes to William Wordsworth. Hence those memorable lines from W H Auden’s Letter to Lord Byron:

The mountain-snob is a Wordsworthian fruit;
He tears his clothes and doesn’t shave his chin,
He wears a very pretty little boot,
He chooses the least comfortable inn[.]

(Auden 1937, 6)

True to Auden’s words, it is Wordsworth and his circle (not the travellers and tourists who preceded them) who are commonly known as ‘the Lakers’, and it is Wordsworth in particular whom we regard as the great poet of the Lakes. His works, more so than those of any other writer, have come to dominate the district’s landscape, imbuing it with both an elite cultural status and a quintessentially English blend of Quietism and muscular Christianity. Yet, as the foregoing pages attest, Wordsworth’s works constitute only one chapter in a long history of writing about the Lakes – a history that can be traced back into the eighteenth century. As Plumptre’s ‘Opera’ goes to show, after all, the mountain snob was a cultural commonplace well before Wordsworth found himself ‘Home at Grasmere’.

Since Wordsworth’s time, a number of celebrated writers have populated the Lake District with cherished associations. From John Ruskin and Harriet Martineau to Hugh Walpole and Alfred Wainwright, the Lakes and their environs have inspired the works of an array of cultural icons. The region’s ties with twentieth-century children’s fiction are particularly notable, and include (amongst others) Arthur Ransome’s Swallows and Amazons series, Geoffrey Trease’s Bannermere novels, as well as, of course, several of Beatrix Potter’s tales (Mackenzie 2008). Even Wilbert Awdry’s The Railway Series merits a place on the long list of titles. The Island of Sodor is, after all, just a short train ride over Morecambe Bay from Barrow-in-Furness (Awdry and Awdry 1987). Indeed, many of us have come to know something of the literary culture of the Lakes, albeit perhaps unwittingly, long before our first encounter with ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud’.

When considered in this light, the Wordsworthian image of the Lake District, with its rustics, rainbows and its dancing daffodils, appears as what it is: one of a number of potential images of the region that happens to have attained a prevailing cultural prestige. But why, one
wonders? Why has this image remained so central to the enjoyment of the Lakes to so many and for so long?

Any answer to these questions must necessarily be tentative, but it seems likely that this appeal has less to do with Wordsworth’s poetry per se than with the way that his writings were embraced by nineteenth-century readers as a frame through which to view the Lakeland landscape. Not unlike the Claude Glass of the previous century, for many nineteenth-century readers Wordsworth’s works provided a cultural lens that one could hold up to enhance the experience of the natural world.

Literary historians have generally attributed the rise of this sort of touristic ‘reading’ to the Victorian ‘love-affair with biography’ and literary celebrity, and the concomitant ‘impulse to naturalise’ authors and their works ‘to particular places’ (Watson 2006, 106, 201). With respect to Wordsworthian tourism in the Lake District, however, there are additional factors to consider, not least the way Wordsworth’s writings helped to foster a belief in the ‘spiritual benefits to be derived from the contemplation of Nature’ and, as a result, lent moral credibility to the growth of the Lake District as a resort ‘whose stock in trade was scenery’ (Walton and McGloin 1981, 154). What for many eighteenth-century tourists had been aesthetic, Wordsworth invested with a higher power. As Norman Nicholson, who has written at length about this development, has surmised:

For the agnostic, the earnest high-principled materialist of the Victorian age, [Wordsworth’s poetry] threw a glimmer of the transcendental over what was still rather a purposeless creed, an empty house rather than a new building. For the rest, it covered hill and dale, farm and inn, wagonette and picnic-basket, with the fat, yellow, comfortable warmth of religiosity.

(Nicholson 1955, 183)

But regardless of whether it was spiritual sentimentalism or a desire for rational re-enchantment that attracted Wordsworth’s admirers to the Lakes, one thing is for certain: by the high Victorian period the desire to read his works on the district had begun to have an appreciable effect on the local tourist trade. There was not then, of course, the full range of themed commodities that one finds today: no Wordsworth shortbread, no daffodil tea towels. But there were plenty of souvenir guidebooks, gift-books and prints to assist holidaymakers in parcelling up the Lakes into discrete Wordsworthian views.

Consider a representative publication from the period such as Alfred William Bennett’s 1864 anthology Our English Lakes, Mountains, and Waterfalls, as seen by William Wordsworth. Printed in small quarto, and priced at 18s in elegant cloth or 25s in gilt-tooled morocco, this sumptuous Wordsworth reader was the first book to pair original photographs of the Lake District (taken by the pioneering landscape photographer Thomas Ogle) with selections from Wordsworth’s collected works. As Bennett notes in his brief ‘Introduction’, this combination of word and image – part poetic, part picturesque – attests to the twofold ambition of the volume, which aimed to showcase those ‘portions’ of ‘Wordsworth’s Poetical Writings…as refer expressly to the scenery of his beloved native country’ and ‘as far as practical’ to classify them ‘under the heads of the different Lakes or other objects of interest in each locality’ (Bennett 1864, iii). The contents page accompanying these comments helps to clarify the topological arrangement of the collection, as it groups poems under sections with titles such as ‘Rydale’, ‘Langdale’ and ‘Grasmere’.
As these grouping suggest, *Our English Lakes* is as much a poetic picture book as it is a photographic and lyric guide – an itinerary in which each section acts as a staging post in a literary tour. Admittedly, the collection does contain a small clutch of poems that are not affixed to any particular place and which thus seem to have been included to help fill out the volume and the literary landscape it surveys. By and large, however, the poems Bennett includes are emphatically linked to identifiable scenes – and this, as he explains, is precisely the point:

By this arrangement, it is believed that not only will the Reader be able, with the assistance of the Photographic Illustrations, which have been taken by Mr T Ogle, specially for this work, to appreciate the more fully Wordsworth's wonderfully true descriptions of the beauties of Nature; but the Tourist will have the additional pleasure of identifying with his own favourite spot any of the Poet's verses which refer especially to it.

(Bennett 1864, v-vi)

In so many words, more than simply encouraging the reader to follow imaginatively in the poet's footsteps (and, therefore, to envision 'our English Lakes, Mountains, and Waterfalls' as Wordsworth would have seen them), Bennett's book invites us to experience the Lakeland landscape through the medium of Wordsworth's verse.

It is difficult to say how many readers took Bennett's advice and carried his collection with them into the field. Given its lavish production and its price, it would seem safe to assume that the book made more appearances in the drawing rooms of Mayfair than on the Westmorland fells. Although that may be the case, the volume was certainly well received. Some 1350 copies were sold in its first few months and by the summer of 1865 a new edition was heading to press. A third edition followed in 1868, shortly before Bennett sold his business to Provost & Co, who revised and reissued the collection again in 1870. Sales of the volume seem to taper off during the early 1880s, when the publishing rights passed to W H Beer & Co. Crucially, however, this had more to do with the saturation of the market that Bennett's collection had helped to create, rather than with any decline in interest in viewing the Lakes through the medium of Wordsworth's works. Indeed, the last quarter of the nineteenth century yielded a bumper crop of books and essays with titles such as 'Walks and Visits in Wordsworth Country' (Yarnall 1876); 'Wanderings in Wordsworthshire' (Frith 1881); 'In Wordsworth's Country' (Burroughs 1884); and *Through the Wordsworth Country* (Goodwin and Knight 1887), affirming that the appeal for such publications had, if anything, increased.

Of course, not all nineteenth-century readers shared Bennett's belief in the insights Wordsworth's poems could offer about the places to which they referred. Oscar Wilde, for his part, pithily dismissed the settings of Wordsworth's works as a poetic pretence, claiming that the elder bard simply 'found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there' (Wilde 1889, 42). Yet, such opinions notwithstanding, this way of appreciating Wordsworth's works prevailed throughout the rest of the century, and has gone on to shape tourists' perceptions of the Lake District unto the present day. What was once a wilderness turned pastoral paradise is now regarded as a national preserve: a landscape, steeped in literature and culture, that for some embodies notions of England's 'green and pleasant land' and for others calls to mind the more general pleasure of personal communion with the natural world. In either case, surveying the history of Lakeland tourism reminds us that in speaking of nature we speak of something not
universally consistent, but culturally conditioned: something shaped by taste and circumstance, and by shifting interpretations of the world.

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