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reads

Robert Southey and the Contexts of English Romanticism
(Ashgate, 2006)

edited by Lynda Pratt

A SMALL VOICE keeps intruding when Coleridgeans talk about Southey, a voice which talks, firstly, of ‘*perpendicular Virtue*’, and then swiftly moves on to accusations of ‘Apostacy’, ‘Infamy’, ‘falsehood & duplicity’, before settling down into a guarded suspicion of his ‘fluency’ and ‘facility’: ‘I fear, that to posterity his wreath will look unseemly’ (CL I 152; I 165-9; I 320). Over the last decade or so, Southey scholars have been attempting to undo the damage caused to Southey’s ‘posterity’ by his having been viewed mainly in light of Coleridgean—and Wordsworthian—distrust. The history of Southey’s reception through the twentieth century has largely been one of neglect and decay. By the 1970s, for instance, it was up to the government of Brazil to restore his neglected grave, a tribute to his authorship of the *History of Brazil* (xix). He had certain devotees who laboured to keep the flame alight during the twentieth century—Jack Simmons, for instance, in his 1945 biography; Kenneth Curry, with his edition of the letters; Marilyn Butler, who reclaimed him for historicist critics in her inaugural lecture at Cambridge in 1987.¹ Recently, however, this critical interest has picked up speed, with substantial biographies by Mark Storey (1997), W. A. Speck (2006) and political and historical studies by David M. Craig, Christopher J. P. Smith, and Lynda Pratt, amongst others.² It has been furthered by the splendid five-volume edition of his *Poetical Works, 1793-1810*—including *Joan of Arc*, *Madoc*, *Thalaba*, *The Curse of Kehama* and his many shorter poems—which appeared in 2004 and which traces and annotates his multiple, multi-lingual sources.³

This essay collection is an ideal companion to that edition: a scholarly celebration of Southey as ‘one of the most prolific, experimental and controversial poets of the day’ (xix). The first we already knew, but this collection does succeed in startling us out of the lingering preconception that prolific might simply mean prolix. It makes an excellent case for the innovative flexibility of his poetry, resistant to categorisation, revisionist and surprising—‘Something between a rough Welsh poney [sic],’ as the *Monthly*

¹ Jack Simmons, *Southey* (London: Collins, 1945); Kenneth Curry, ed., *New Letters of Robert Southey* (London and New York: Columbia University Press, 1965); Marilyn Butler, ‘Repossessing the Past: the Case for an Open Literary History’, in *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History*, eds. Marjorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler, Jerome McGann, Paul Hamilton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 64-84.

² Mark Storey, *Robert Southey: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); W. A. Speck, *Robert Southey: Entire Man of Letters* (New Haven, Ct and London: Yale University Press, 2006); David A. Craig, *Robert Southey and Romantic Apostasy: Political Argument in Britain, 1780-1840* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007); Christopher J. P. Smith, *A Quest for Home: Reading Robert Southey* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997); Lynda Pratt’s excellent articles are too numerous to mention here, but include a special ‘Southey’ issue of *Romanticism on the Net* (2003-4) and ‘Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Joan of Arc’, *N&Q*, n. s. 41 (1994), 335-6.

³ Lynda Pratt, ed., *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793-1810*, 5 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004): I. *Joan of Arc*, ed. Lynda Pratt; II. *Madoc*, ed. Lynda Pratt; III. *Thalaba the Destroyer*, ed. Tim Fulford; IV. *The Curse of Kehama*, ed. Daniel Sanjiv Roberts; V. *Selected Shorter Poems, 1793-1810*, ed. Lynda Pratt.

Review comments about *Madoc*, ‘and a Peruvian sheep’ (xxii). Even his appearance and behaviour seem to have been difficult to pin down: ‘wild, irregular, singular, extreme,’ in the words of Hazlitt, ‘pragmatical, restless, unfixed’ (2). ‘Now blushing under his grey hairs, rosy like a maiden of fifteen,’ muses Thomas Carlyle after a meeting in the 1830s, ‘now slaty almost, like a rattle-snake or fiery serpent [...] How has he not been torn to pieces long since, under such furious pulling this way and that?’ (2). Moreover, of course, he had many different guises, and a startling range of interests and output, which this essay collection nicely refracts: editor, essayist, playwright, historian, moralist, critic, orientalist, polemicist.

While not attempting to impose a narrative on this diversity of interests or genres, the collection does make clear the continuities, traditions, and shared aims which underlie Southey’s writing. This is the subject of the first essay in the collection, David Fairer’s ‘Southey’s Literary History’, which elegantly shows how Southey mapped a narrative of his own development onto that of English poetry, and English character—an ‘organic’ narrative of literary history which was also a story of personal tradition and inheritance. In Southey’s reading, a continuous stream runs from the ‘strong English sense’ of Chaucer (which he noted approvingly in an 1814 account of the development of English poetry in the *Quarterly Review*) into the eighteenth century—Thomas Warton, Thomas Percy, William Cowper, William Bowles, with Southey himself implicitly following on behind. The school of Pope represented a slight detour into artificiality, but the later eighteenth century marked the revival of ‘true English taste’. This ‘truth’ is something built into the structure of the English language, which with all its defects and roughness, Southey felt, had a ‘condensation and strength’: ‘our national character and our language have acted upon each other,’ he continues in that 1814 article, ‘and the fashion of the style ornate was an attempt in direct contradiction of both’. That praise of strength and concentration is key, Fairer shows, to Southey’s own poetic identity—as is this attempt to create a continuous narrative looping past and present together in one ongoing, flowing course of English poetry. The Southey we glimpse here—self-consciously aware of the ways in which nation and character might be identified; imbued with a strong sense of public duty and responsibility; yet also constantly looking back, retrospectively trying to discern his own narrative—helps us to understand the different, but related topics of the subsequent essays.

His sense of himself as part of a national narrative, for instance, is a persistent theme. Paul Jarman’s essay on the poetry of the 1790s shows Southey contemplating a long, wide-ranging poem, ‘The Kalendar’, in 1798, which would explore rites, feasts, and festivals at home and abroad from a radical viewpoint—from the Dissenting sympathies of a poem rebuking the people for keeping alive ‘Royal Oak Day’ on May 29, to the provocative plea for a particular anniversary to be remembered, ‘July Thirteenth. Charlotte Corde Executed for putting Marat to Death’. Jarman recovers many of the

‘calendar’ poems which might have gone to make up this work, scattered in *The Morning Post* and sketched in his *Common-Place Book*, and allows us to read Southey’s ‘radical poetry manifesto’ of the 1790s more clearly. He stresses the innovative nature of these ‘calendar’ poems, which reflects Southey’s willingness to experiment with genre. Nicola Trott, exploring the ‘Juvenile and Minor Poems’, similarly shows him in a range of poses and voices, playfully apostrophizing gooseberry pies and geese alike. His poetical experiments run alongside his willingness to engage with other forms of experimentation: after drafting *Madoc*, for example, he samples Humphry Davy’s ‘wonder-working gas of delight’ and reels away in befuddled glee: ‘so happy! so gloriously happy! [...] Oh, excellent air-bag!’ (86). It is especially pleasing to move from a discussion of Southey in the ‘calendar’ poems, contemplating a national role with high solemnity, to him making a bid for another form of national renown: ‘with my brother Harry I challenge all England at eating gooseberry pye,’ Trott reports him telling Coleridge in 1807, ‘by myself I challenge all England for good spirits & making a noise’ (85). Even in his dreams, we see Southey’s connection between himself and nation. W. A. Speck’s fascinating essay on his dream-visions shows him as a tiny child dreaming that ‘my head was cut off for cursing the King’ (203), and in 1804, his dreaming self is busy striking Napoleon with an axe, ‘the first time I ever killed him in self-defence’ (209).

Even in play, or in his sleep, Southey sought to engage ‘all England’—and by the time he was made Poet Laureate in 1813, he might have thought he was on course to do so. However, two essays in the collection, by Mark Storey and David M. Craig, explore the irony that ‘by the time Southey was appointed Poet Laureate in 1813 he no longer regarded poetry as his literary vocation’ (101). He was torn between his sense of national responsibility and duty, and his own poetic self-questioning. Through some subtle close readings of his 1816 Laureate poems, *The Poet’s Pilgrimage to Waterloo* and *The Lay of the Laureate*, Storey brings out the tensions of Southey’s desire to identify nation and character, delicately showing how the poems reveal ‘the bafflement at the heart of his public persona’ (92). Craig, meanwhile, shows him in 1812 coveting not the Poet Laureateship, but the position of ‘royal historiographer, complete with its £400 a year’ (104). Disappointed, Southey made the best of the public role open to him, carving out a ‘conception of himself as a public moralist’ (107) through his histories and his contributions to the *Quarterly Review*. Despite his strong sense of public duty and his concept of the role he might occupy in deciding the fate of the nation, Craig concludes that he ‘failed in his desire to influence the public’ (114), partly because of repeated attacks on his authority and style, especially the *Wat Tyler* controversy in 1817, which meant that Radicals and Tories alike viewed him with suspicion.

The collection as a whole bravely engages with this repeated sense of failure and disappointment. Discussing the 45-book *Madoc*, for instance, Nigel Leask admits that it has ‘long been regarded as one of the most spectacular white elephants of English Romanticism’ (133). ‘The poem fails in the highest gifts

of the poet's mind,' Wordsworth solemnly adjudged, finding it wanting in both imagination and 'knowledge of human Nature' (133). To some extent, Carol Bolton in her essay, "'Green Savannahs" or "savage lands": Wordsworth and Southey's Romantic America', agrees, suggesting that *Madoc* shows the ideals of Pantisocracy foundering 'in the instability and anxiety of the colonial frontier' (129). Comparing it to Wordsworth's 'Ruth', she argues that whereas Wordsworth claims possession of the Lake District landscape with assurance and certainty, Southey's far-reaching colonial ambitions are less successful. Leask's own essay also contrasts Wordsworth's 'redemptive' rural myth with Southey's epic, which is 'by contrast, "outward bound"' (134). While he does not shy away from addressing the inconsistencies and difficulties of the poem's 'Christian imperialism' (150), he also shows the importance of recognising the different stages of *Madoc*'s composition. He demonstrates its difficult transition between its 1797-1799 version, a resistant, radical, Pantisocratic anti-imperialist epic, and its 1805 transformation—a transition responsible for many of the ambiguities of the completed poem. He argues that the 'context for Southey's shift from a radical Peruvian Pantisocracy to the militant Christian and British imperialism of his imaginary American colony "Caermadoc" was of course the global struggle between Britain and Napoleonic France for imperial paramountcy' (142), so that the revisions and transformations of *Madoc* are mapped onto a larger, international struggle. Joselyn M. Almeida also shows the ways in which the 1805 version of *Madoc* may be read in light of Britain's complex self-identification as an imperial power in the first decades of the nineteenth century. She argues that we should read *Madoc* alongside sources such as James Montgomery's *The West Indies* and Francisco Miranda and James Mill's essay, 'Emancipation of Spanish America' to open up a larger image of transatlantic exchange and debate on emancipation and independence.

Essays like these also allow us to read Southey in a global context. If we see him constructing his own narrative against that of English literary or political history, we also see him imagining an exotic future for himself, tinged with Eastern fantasy. He is tempted by India in 1800; in 1801, he contemplates the possibility of a post as secretary to the ambassador at Constantinople, planning to 'walk up the Pyramids, and ride camels in Arabia' (175). Although, as Diego Saglia points out, 'the Orient of his dreams, made up of leisures and treasures, escapes him', Southey does gather 'an alternative treasure-house of discursive fragments on the material Orient' (176): his luxurious fantasies live again in *Thalaba* (1801) and in his *Common-Place Book*. Saglia's essay, which seems to borrow something of the relish and pleasure of Southey's own descriptions, is complemented in the collection by other discussions of Southey's construction of the East. Tim Fulford, reading *The Curse of Kehama* (1810) in the context of late eighteenth-century scholarship—particularly the translations and history of William 'Persian' Jones—as well as contemporary responses, shows the ways in which the Orient might become

an imagined culture: ‘movable Easts’ (200), as he rather nicely puts it. These might be mapped onto other potentially threatening locations such as Ireland, but in collapsing imaginative boundaries, also serve to underscore that the foreign might well begin at home. The power of Southey’s Oriental imagination is also the focus of Daniel Sanjiv Roberts’ essay, which reinterprets De Quincey’s relationship with Southey, and shows how the glittering ornamentation of *Thalaba* lives again in the younger writer’s work. Beginning with De Quincey’s seventeen-year-old identification as a ‘*Southeian*’, recording feverish reading of *Thalaba* and *Poems* (1797-1799) in his 1803 *Diary*, Southey’s ‘alchemized vision of the orient’ (44) is shown to have exerted a strong influence over De Quincey’s own oriental anxieties—an indebtedness which De Quincey’s later, tetchier comments on Southey’s prose writing help to conceal.

As Roberts suggests, exploring relationships between De Quincey and Southey helps us to re-read ‘the high romantic canon’ (48). These essays open up several different Romantic dialogues—between Southey and Keats, for instance (57; 95; 181), or between genres as diverse as the epic and the dream narrative, the multi-volume history and the common-place book. We see Southey contributing to Romantic canon-formation—as in Nick Groom’s essay which explores Southey’s edition of Chatterton, and uncovers something ‘much more complicated than the usual Romantic mythmongering’ (19) in his dutiful desire to provide for Chatterton’s sister long after his own infatuation with Chatterton’s verse had faded. We also see Southey himself becoming sidelined and forgotten, in Lynda Pratt’s closing essay on the posthumous editing of Robert Southey. This very usefully discusses the ‘factionalised appropriation of the late Poet Laureate’ (220) as his heirs squabbled over their inheritance. The problems set in with Southey’s second marriage to Caroline Bowles in 1839: very soon, Southey’s health deteriorated into what may have been a form of pre-senile dementia. Through unpublished family correspondence showing feuds over possession of manuscripts, and the production of rival editions, Pratt charts the fragmentation and dispersal of Southey’s legacy, which had ‘a significant impact on his later reputation and on subsequent attempts to rethink his life and works’ (237). It is only now, with the emergence of works such as this collection—which also helpfully features a bibliography of Southey criticism—that the full scope and implications of his literary inheritance are becoming clear. As Pratt suggests, he has occupied an ‘ambiguous position in the margins of literary histories of the period [... being] mainly known for his contentious relationships with his contemporaries’ (xviii). Perhaps we can now put those quarrels behind us, and recognise, afresh, that ‘His Genius and acquirements are uncommonly great’ (CL I 152).