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Romantic Poetry and Literary Coteries: The Dialect of the Tribe
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015)
By Tim Fulford

THE MYTH OF THE LONELY INSPIRED WRITER has been debunked numerous times since Jack Stillinger published a book called *Multiple Authorship and The Myth of Solitary Genius* a quarter of a century ago, and Tim Fulford's book contributes to its long death by describing a number of literary groups out of which much memorable writing emerged in the Romantic period.[1] He declares his hand early on: 'I replace emphasis on the solitary author—the sublime egotist Wordsworth and damaged archangel Coleridge—or even on an expanded roster of individual authors—with a social history of literary production in groups.' The name he gives these 'intense friendship groups' is 'coteries,' and he describes how they forged particular literary dialects, as the participants minted idioms, quoted one another, swapped jokes, and talked about one another in their verses. This feels as though it is the normal way that things always happen rather than something peculiar to the Romantic period, and indeed Fulford makes no weighty claims about its uniqueness: the critics were not slow to identify sects and gangs and tribes in the contemporary scene, but no more so than the periodical press in the age of Pope or Auden. None of these collective terms was obviously very warm: a 'sect' of poets made them sound like crazy dissenters, 'gang' like a bunch of toughs, and Fulford finds 'tribe' carrying an especially distasteful connotation, so that accusing the Lake poets of forming a tribe was to insinuate they were uncouth like American Indians. The existence of these labels at all suggests that people at the time thought of literary production as the work of sets and cliques, and quite how to pitch the level of contempt in the semi-comical labels is not always straightforward. T.S. Eliot, for instance, is reprimanded for the 'racial condescension' implicit in his formula for the poet's job, 'to purify the dialect of the tribe'; but Eliot was thinking of the elevated praise of Mallarmé for Poe ('*donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*'); and for both of them talk of the 'tribe' was evidence of anthropological sophistication rather than an attempt to smear.

Fulford discusses several groups of writers, and offers some thoughts about their relationships, beginning at length with the group of writers in which Coleridge and Wordsworth came of age. This was once habitually referred to as 'the Wordsworth circle,' but he is having none of that, and much of the energy of the book comes from a spirited attempt to displace Wordsworth from his assumed place. At the centre of this 'Bristol coterie,' in his reading,

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were rather Coleridge and Southey: 'its central publication was not *Lyrical Ballads* (1798); nor was Coleridge's partnership with Wordsworth its dominant relationship.' Southey's *Annual Anthology* (1799, 1800) is said to be 'a foundational collection of the new generation's poetry, as significant as *Lyrical Ballads*' (which at least concedes *some* significance). The group came into being, in this account, through a shared, high-minded, provincial hostility towards the 'commodity fetishism' which London exemplified. Elsewhere the manners of the group are said to constitute 'a powerful proto-marxist literary technique'; but Fulford is no doubt correct to say that the group took its bearings from Cowper's *Task*, so the impulse is not really proto-Marxist so much as a pastoral-minded evangelical moralism, and in fact the evidence he gathers shows writers who were generally very adroit at making their poems successful commodities in the literary marketplace. (Bloomfield and Clare show the market at its hardest.) The role of Mary Robinson, a Londoner, within an extended Bristol circle is explored in some detail, Fulford rescuing her from the obscurity into which she has fallen thanks 'to too exclusive a concentration on *Lyrical Ballads*.' Her poetical friendship with Coleridge, which was conducted in the pages of the *Morning Post*, is a very good example of the literary sociability he has in mind in action. The other figure to be moved into unusual prominence is Southey: indeed, one of the book's principal ambitions is Southey's 'rehabilitation as a more significant player in Romanticism's genesis than Wordsworth.' The attempt to co-author an epic about Mohammed with Coleridge came to nothing, but spilled into 'Kubla Khan' and *Thalaba*, which, though not strictly collaborations, possess something of the energy of a shared enterprise. 'Where high in air a stately palace rose,' writes Southey in *Thalaba*, which has naturally reminded many readers of 'Kubla Khan'—or, conceivably, Fulford speculates, it might be the other way round, if we ignore the date that Coleridge himself gave for the composition of the poem. If that were indeed the case, and Coleridge was borrowing from Southey, then, Fulford says, 'his relationship with Southey is as significant on one of his greatest poems as that with Wordsworth was on "Dejection: An Ode"': well, you can agree that the long and often difficult friendship with Southey was very important to Coleridge, and feel gratitude that Fulford has further established its significance, without necessarily concurring on that point. Southey also played a background role in 'The Pains of Sleep': he received the poem in a letter that also related Coleridge's hectic travels in Scotland after the bitter separation from the Wordsworths. It is the greatest of all his nightmare writings, and usually (because of his subsequent pairing of it with 'Kubla Khan') thought of as a drug poem; but, Fulford suggests, in a new historicist spirit, it may also record in an oblique way Coleridge's recent disturbing exposure to Scottish Jacobinism, something which its belated printing in the *Christabel* volume in 1816 'depoliticized.'

The other coteries discussed in the book take the reader away from Coleridge. There are some interesting pages on Bowles, who features here not for the sonnets that grabbed the young boy at Christ's Hospital, but rather as

the author of *The Missionary*, a Chilean epic that helped shape, largely by reaction, historically-minded works by Southey. But Coleridge comes back again towards the end, the critic of 'an age of personality,' at once mistrustful of the Cockney coterie and, in a roundabout way, one of its principal inspirations. The Cockneys, in Fulford's reading, took over the wandering habits of Romantic verse and conjured them into a new prose genre: 'a certain kind of decidedly masculine walking narrative,' which, as he says, persists to this day. He calls it 'Romanticism Lite', though it sounds quite boozy and high calorie. The example of Leigh Hunt down the pub is merrily throw-away, and the punning habit proves intoxicating, with such audacities as 'philosophy of inn-spiration' and 'not so much the internalization as the canine-ization of the quest romance.' But the book does rightly admit a wider variety of tones to these London writings: the weary suburban plod of good Charles Lamb, the self-hating hell of De Quincey's city.

The book does many things very well, but whether it displaces the solitary writer with a new model of social authorship, I am not so sure: it seems to me that Fulford brings out the individualities of the writers he discusses quite as much as their participation in some shared idiom or other. The poems by Southey, while obviously not utterly dissimilar, do not sound to me *that* much like their Coleridgean partner poems, any more than a thirties poem by Stephen Spender could easily be mistaken for one by W.H. Auden, while you can see that they are coming out of the same background of strife or protest. There is, as Karl Miller once memorably argued, and as Sean Burke set out at impressive length in his study *The Death and Return of the Author*, quite a lot to be said for the author as a way of understanding writing; but then I do not think Fulford has in view anything as metaphysically destructive as the sceptics that Burke was arguing against. That writers work mindful of one another, and sometimes in small groups busy with rivalry and emulation and mutual admiration, is a point worth making, and it certainly works for Coleridge club. I suppose it is the role of Wordsworth in the book that leaves me mostly puzzled. To argue that something or someone is more or less 'central' or 'significant' to 'Romanticism' is to make a claim that feels historical but it is hard to analyse quite what the claim is: if 'Romanticism' is what the late eighteenth century gives to the nineteenth century then it would be hard to dispute the greater 'significance' of Wordsworth, if it matters at all. And, in a way, he might have seemed the natural choice for a book about understanding authorship as a kind of individuality-in-collaboration. Fulford notes in passing Susan Wolfson's account of the Wordsworths writing together in 'a constitutive interaction that brings an author into being not as a subject but as an intersubject,' and his whole attraction to Burke was precisely about a sense of human identity as created and maintained through communities that persist through historical time: no-one was ever more suspicious of unclubbable genius than Burke was.