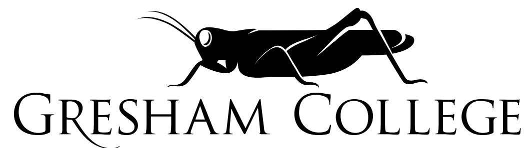

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The Cockney Romantics
John Keats and his Friends

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Welcome to the fifth of my six lectures on William Wordsworth and the age of romanticism. A quick recap on the first four lectures, delivered last autumn and now available online. We began with the origins of romanticism, focusing especially on the idea of strong feeling and on the return to nature. Then we looked at the importance of the French Revolution and the way in which Wordsworth and his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge effected an analogous revolution in poetry in their *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. The third lecture considered the importance of the figure of the child in romantic poetry and the fourth developed the theme of the return to nature by locating Wordsworth in his native Lake District and revealing his influence on subsequent attitudes to natural beauty, culminating in the foundation of the National Trust and the idea of a national park. Now in my final two lectures as Gresham Professor of Rhetoric, I want to turn to the group of poets who are sometimes referred to as the Young Romantics or the second-generation Romantics.

Whereas Wordsworth and Coleridge were shaped by the revolutionary decade of the 1790s, the most famous of these poets were born at that time. But they all died before Coleridge and long before Wordsworth [2], who lived on until 1850, when he died at the age of eighty, a Poet Laureate, a Victorian, a Tory, a country gentleman, a huge influence on the culture of his age, but the author in the second half of his career of a very voluminous and tedious body of poetry. From the point of view of Romantic glamour, there was a lot to be said for dying young, which was of course the fate of the celebrated young Romantics: Lord Byron [3], born 1788 and died of fever in a Greek swamp on his way to fight for freedom in 1825; Percy Bysshe Shelley [4], born the son of a baronet in 1792 and drowned off the coast of Italy in 1822, in his pocket a doubled-back copy of the poems of my main figure today, John Keats [5], born in humble circumstances in suburban London 1795 and died of tuberculosis in Rome in 1821.

At the very beginning of my first lecture, I made the point that when we think of the Romantic artist, we tend to imagine the solitary genius – young, impoverished, perhaps drug-fuelled – lone in his garret. I talked about the inspiration provided by Thomas Chatterton [6] and I suggested one of Joseph Severn's portraits of Keats [7] as an equally iconic example of the idea. But I went on to say that this was also a period where literary *friendship* and indeed co-authorship was a key theme. I am interested in the Romantics as *groups* of authors – not least because that is how they were often labelled, initially by their enemies. Wordsworth, Coleridge and the now lesser known figure of Robert Southey came to be called the Lake Poets. The term was coined as an insult, but eventually took hold as a compliment. The circle around John Keats were also given an insulting name that is now less well known to the general reader: the Cockney Poets. Before introducing the cast of players and going into the origin and the consequences of the Cockney label, I want to say a little more about the idea of literary collaboration.

The obvious example is *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge published anonymously in 1798 [8]. It is intriguing to remember that early readers were not aware that it was a joint production: the 'Advertisement' at the beginning of the book speaks repeatedly of 'the author' as if there were a single author. Successive sentences, defending what Wordsworth (who wrote the preface) clearly thought were two poems in need of an apology, 'The Thorn' and 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', refer to the author without any indication that these two ballads had different authors. We can see the beginning of the end of the

friendship between Wordsworth and Coleridge with the relegation of 'The Ancient Mariner' to the rear of the second edition of the collection in 1800, which had a second volume of poems entirely by Wordsworth, and that gave full credit to him alone on the title page [9]. At the same time, we may say in Wordsworth's defence that the creation of 'the Ancient Mariner' was a joint effort. Coleridge described its origins many years later: 'The work was to have been written in concert with another … My partner [would undertake] the first canto: I the second: and which ever had done first, was to set about the third.' Wordsworth, meanwhile, recollected its origin in a conversation on a walk in the Quantock Hills late in the afternoon on a November day in that year of 1797, then he and Coleridge began 'laying the plan of a ballad':

> Certain parts I myself suggested; for example, some crime was to be committed which would bring upon the Old Navigator, as Coleridge afterwards delighted to call him, the spectral persecution, as a consequence of that crime and his own wanderings. I had been reading in Shelvocke's *Voyages*,[1] a day or two before, that, while doubling Cape Horn, they frequently saw albatrosses in that latitude, the largest sort of sea-fowl, some extending their wings twelve or thirteen feet. 'Suppose,' said I, 'you represent him as having killed one of these birds on entering the South Sea, and that the tutelary spirits of these regions take upon them to avenge the crime.'

He shaped, then, the scheme but very little of the actual writing: 'I had very little share in the composition of it, for I soon found that the style of Coleridge and myself would not assimilate.'

The other key figure in Wordsworth's immediate circle was of course his sister Dorothy. In an earlier lecture, I looked at the way in which she is introduced at the end of 'Tintern Abbey' as the figure who restores Wordsworth to his unmediated relationship with nature. And, as is well known, Wordsworth's most famous poem was in some sense a collaboration with Dorothy. He didn't wander lonely as a cloud. He was walking with her, and she was the one whose acute eye gave her brother some key words and images [edit quote for verbal delivery]: [10Gowbarrow]

> We were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water-side. We fancied that the sea had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more; and at last, under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful. They grew among the mossy stones about and above them; some rested their heads upon these stones, as on a pillow, for weariness; and the rest tossed and reeled and danced, and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind, that blew upon them over the lake; they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing. This wind blew directly over the lake to them. There was here and there a little knot, and a few stragglers higher up; but they were so few as not to disturb the simplicity, unity, and life of that one busy highway. We rested again and again. The bays were stormy, and we heard the waves at different distances, and in the middle of the water, like the sea …

Those 'mossy stones' provided inspiration for the description of the mysterious Lucy as 'A violet by a mossy stone', but the movement of the daffodils and their motion in harmony with the wind-lapping waves on the lake sowed the seeds for [read selectively]

> I wandered lonely as a cloud
> That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
> When all at once I saw a crowd,
> A host, of golden daffodils;
> Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
> Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
> …
>
> For oft, when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
> They flash upon that inward eye

[1] *A Voyage Round the World, by Way of the Great South Sea.*

Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

For an example of collaboration among the younger generation of Romantics, let's think for a moment about the origin of another of the most famous poems of the age. Have a listen to this: [11]

In Egypt's sandy silence, all alone,
Stands a gigantic Leg, which far off throws
The only shadow that the Desert knows:—
'I am great OZYMANDIAS,' saith the stone,
'The King of Kings; this mighty City shows
'The wonders of my hand.'— The City's gone,—
Naught but the Leg remaining to disclose
The site of this forgotten Babylon.

We wonder,—and some Hunter may express
Wonder like ours, when thro' the wilderness
Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
What powerful but unrecorded race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.

You might initially think that this is a rejected first draft of the sonnet By Percy Bysshe Shelley with which you are surely familiar: [12]

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert … near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;

And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings;
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

In fact, the first poem is by a man called Horace or Horatio Smith. He was a friend whom Shelley praised for his generosity—observing that it was unusual for a stockbroker, Smith's profession, to be so liberal with his fortune. Smith spent Christmas 1817 with Shelley and his wife Mary. They decided to have a little competition. Something similar happened around the same time, when Shelley, Keats and Leigh Hunt, whom we will meet in a moment, set themselves the task of writing a sonnet on the subject of the river Nile in fifteen minutes flat. Keats's was not one of his more memorable works, but at least he finished on time—Leigh Hunt overran by several minutes. On this occasion, Smith and Shelley chose a passage from the ancient Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, which gave a vivid account of a giant statue of the Egyptian Pharaoh Rameses II, together with a quotation of the inscription at its base: 'King of Kings Ozymandias am I. If any want to know how great I am and where I lie, let him outdo me in my work.' The theme, then, was the transience of empires, the hubris of those mighty rulers who, as it were, declare a thousand-year Reich. A much-discussed book in the Shelley household at this time was Volney's *Ruins, or Meditations on Revolutions and Empires* [13], of which Mary had made memorable use the previous year: it is the volume in which Victor Frankenstein's creature, hiding in the woods, gains 'an insight into the manners,

governments, and religions of the different nations of the earth.' Volney writes of the fall of once mighty ancient empires, of the tyranny of the Catholic church, of the evil of men with wealth and power. He combined historical pessimism with revolutionary optimism, prophesying a day when the world will be reunited in a single religion of progressive rationality. From Percy Shelley's point of view, Volney offered a powerful contrast between the inevitability of the fall of kings, emperors and tyrants, on the one hand, and the potential immortality of poets, whom, you will recall, Shelley extolled as the prophets of an as yet unapprehended future of liberty and justice.

Of course Shelley was a better poet than Smith, whose sonnet does not have a line that matches the memorability of 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair', but the forgotten work does offer a striking image of how the British empire will one day go the way of the ancient Egyptian and the monuments of this city of London will become ruins witnessed by a wandering hunter in the age to come—which, perhaps, with climate change and rising sea levels will come sooner rather than later. My point, though, is that a great poem now read in isolation or anthologised among a collection of greatest hits, came from a specific context and was inspired by an occasion of what we might describe as poetic brotherhood or literary sociability.

Both Ozymandias poems were published in early 1818 in a magazine called *The Examiner*, edited by that man Leigh Hunt. Shelley's appeared over the *nom de plume* 'Gilrastes'. They subsequently appeared in respective collections by Shelley and Smith. The latter altered his title to the somewhat pedantic 'On A Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below'. But let's think a little more about that memorable closing line of Shelley's, 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair'.

Here is a letter written by John Keats to his friend the artist Benjamin Robert Haydon, just over a year earlier, on the day after another occasion of what I am calling literary sociability. There had been a glorious evening of conversation with Haydon, Leigh Hunt and other writers: [14]

> To Benjamin Robert Haydon.
> *[London,] November 20, 1816.*
> My dear Sir — Last evening wrought me up, and I cannot forbear sending you the following —
> Yours unfeignedly,
> John Keats.
> Removed to 76 Cheapside.
>
> Great spirits now on earth are sojourning;
> He of the cloud, the cataract, the lake,
> Who on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake,
> Catches his freshness from Archangel's wing:
> He of the rose, the violet, the spring,
> The social smile, the chain for Freedom's sake:
> And lo! — whose stedfastness would never take
> A meaner sound than Raphael's whispering.
> And other spirits there are standing apart
> Upon the forehead of the age to come;
> These, these will give the world another heart,
> And other pulses. Hear ye not the hum
> Of mighty workings in the human mart?
> Listen awhile ye nations, and be dumb.

In Keats's final line, I find it hard not to hear an anticipation of Shelley's 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair'. Keats's 'Listen' becomes Shelley's 'Look'; Keats's 'mighty workings' from the previous line become Shelley's 'works'; Keats's 'ye nations' becomes Shelley's 'ye Mighty', and, decisively, Keats's 'and be dumb' becomes Shelley's 'and despair'. Keats's poem is about the 'great spirits' of the present who will one day be recognized as immortals; Shelley's is about the great rulers of the past who have proved mortal, all too mortal. The politicians die and their monuments are broken; the creative artists live and influence the future through the endurance of their work. In this sense, Keats's poem inspires not just 'Ozymandias', but Shelley's vision of the poets as unacknowledged legislators of the world. Consider the poem's spirits standing apart 'Upon the forehead

of the age to come', one of whom is Keats, self-effacing yet ambitious for his own art. That sense of poets being ahead of the curve, carved upon the face of the future, chimes with the climax of Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry':

> Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

So, who are the three 'great spirits' singled out by Keats? The alleged inheritor of the art of Raphael is, naturally, a flattering reference to Haydon himself, who toiled at grand history paintings in the Renaissance style, among which would be his 'Christ's Entry into Jerusalem', in which he included images of contemporary poets as figures in the crowd. [15] Nor are there any prizes for guessing the identity of

> He of the cloud, the cataract, the lake,
> Who on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake,
> Catches his freshness from Archangel's wing

Cloud, cataract and lake are the Wordsworthian hallmarks. The reference to Helvellyn may be Keats's recollection of one of the 'Poems on the naming of Places' in *Lyrical Ballads*[2] but it could be that Haydon had shared with Keats the manuscript of a recent as yet unpublished Wordsworth poem called '*To ———,* ON HER FIRST ASCENT TO THE SUMMIT OF HELVELLYN', which begins

> Inmate of a mountain Dwelling,
> Thou hast clomb aloft, and gaz'd,
> From the watch-towers of Helvellyn;
> Awed, delighted, and amazed!

It continues with a series of biblical references, then ends with an image of the 'majesty' of what Wordsworth calls 'the power of hills'. In Keats's allusion to the Archangel's wing there may also be a witty nod to the pastoral poem 'Michael'. Michael was the only angel named in the New Testament as an Archangel, so there is a suggestion of divine inspiration, but Keats may be hinting that the 'freshness' of Wordsworth comes from his innovation of giving tragic dignity to ordinary people. 'Michael' is a great poem of parental grief for the loss of a child in war. Its closing sequence has the gravitas of the final moments of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, yet Michael is a shepherd, not a king, proof of the essential argument of *Lyrical Ballads* that men and women do not need noble birth and fine clothes in order to feel deeply. The image of Wordsworth on the summit of Helvellyn certainly impressed itself on Haydon. [16] Years later, in 1842, he would execute the most famous painting of the poet, rapt in contemplation, in that exact location – having returned to the summit on the occasion of his seventieth birthday.

Wordsworth was the inspiration for Keats's sonnet in another sense, too. He had recently published a slender volume of poetry in celebration of the end of the Napoleonic wars, entitled *Thanksgiving Ode, January 18, 1816, with other short pieces, chiefly*. One of the few pieces in this not inspired by 'public events' was a sonnet to 'R. B. Haydon, Esq.' (Wordsworth or his printer gets the initials the wrong way round), extolling the high calling of 'Creative Art', both writing and painting, with its demand for strenuous work 'of mind and heart' and its mission to fashion something enduring in despite of the neglect and distress suffered by the creative artist. This probably gave Keats the idea of writing his own sonnet to Haydon.

He had, however, already had the idea of writing a sonnet in praise of a fellow practitioner of 'Creative Art'. The first poem that John Keats shared with anybody was a sonnet, which he had shown to his schoolmaster Charles Cowden Clarke the previous year. Entitled '*Written on the Day that Mr Leigh Hunt Left Prison*', it began with the image of Hunt in prison for 'showing truth to flatter'd state', then claimed that the liberty of his 'immortal spirit'—'as free / As the sky-searching lark'—could never be constrained. In his poetry, says Keats, Leigh Hunt broke through the stone walls of his prison, roamed in the halls and 'bowers fair' of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, 'culling enchanted flowers', and 'flew / With daring Milton through the fields of air'. Setting up the theme of the immortality of artists in opposition to the ephemerality of politicians, the sonnet ends with a contrast between Hunt's future

[2] 'To Joanna'.

'fame' and the death of the 'wretched crew' of those in government who wield the power of the state. Leigh Hunt's poetic signature was indeed a liberal scattering of flowers and a diction that owes much to Spenser and Milton. His sister-in-law, Elizabeth Kent would later publish an excellent guide to container gardening for city dwellers without gardens of their own: [17] *Flora Domestica, or, the Portable Flower-Garden: with Directions for the Treatment of Plants and Pots and Illustrations from the Works of the Poets*. She was a particular admirer of the 'Northamptonshire Peasant Poet' John Clare, not least because he actually knew his botany, whereas her brother-in-law's flower poetry was shaped more by his readings in ancient mythology and the poetic tradition. Keats's lines in the sonnet to Haydon, 'He of the rose, the violet, the spring, / The social smile, the chain for Freedom's sake', are accordingly a reference to Leigh Hunt.

Charles Cowden Clarke had introduced young Keats to the paper that Leigh Hunt edited with his brother, in which 'Ozymandias' would soon be published. Published weekly under the title *The Examiner*, [18 LH+titlepage] this was the magazine that had caused the imprisonment and that would give Keats his first break, shape the writers in his circle into a group, and lead to the denomination of that group as the Cockney Poets. John and Leigh Hunt launched the paper in 1808, taking the title from a magazine produced by Jonathan Swift and his fellow-Tories a century before, though coming from the opposite end of the political spectrum. The aim was 'to assist in producing Reform in Parliament, liberality of opinion in general (especially freedom from superstition), and a fusion of literary taste into all subjects whatsoever'. 'Freedom from superstition' was code for religious scepticism. Hunt would make himself unpopular with conservatives by peopling his poems with pagan gods and even writing a mini-epic called *The Story of Rimini* that glorified the adulterous couple Paolo and Francesca whom Dante had placed in the second circle of hell.

Within months of its first issue *The Examiner* was prosecuted for publication of an article entitled 'Military Depravity', which attacked the corrupt, bribery-ridden system of promotions in the army. It was regarded as dangerously seditious to say anything negative about the armed forces at the height of the Peninsular War. The case was dropped, but another one ensued a couple of years later when the Hunt brothers weighed in—under the title 'One Thousand Lashes!!'—on the practice of flogging soldiers for minor disciplinary infractions. This time, they were found not guilty of seditious libel, thanks to a powerful case for the defence mounted by the lawyer Henry Brougham. But in 1811 it was third time lucky for the Attorney General when, provoked by an article in the *Morning Post* that praised the newly-anointed Prince Regent as an 'Adonis in loveliness', *The Examiner* noted that George was actually 'a corpulent gentleman of fifty' who, moreover, was 'a violator of his word, a libertine overhead ears in debt and disgrace, a despiser of domestic ties, the companion of gamblers and demireps, a man who has just closed half a century without one single claim on the gratitude of his country or the respect of posterity!' This cost the Hunt brothers their two years' sentence in separate prisons—though Leigh Hunt didn't have a bad time, as he decked out his cell with flowers and continued to edit the paper from behind bars.

Some months into his sentence, the news was announced that, following the death of the Poet Laureate, Henry James Pye, one of the worst versifiers ever to hold the office, a successor had been appointed in the form of Robert Southey, friend of Wordsworth and Coleridge, who back in the early 1790s had written an inflammatory plays called *Wat Tyler* that welcomed the French Revolution. The Prince Regent had originally wanted Walter Scott, the bestselling poet of the age, but he shrewdly recognised that the post would prove a poisoned chalice and had nominated his friend Southey, who needed the money. More news about the Lake Poets came in that same year of Hunt's imprisonment: William Wordsworth—the man who had welcomed the Revolution with the words 'Bliss was in that dawn to be alive / And to be young was very heaven'—had been appointed Distributor of Stamps for the County of Westmorland. Wordsworth's job was to oversee the sending out of stamps to post offices in the region and the imposition of impressed duty stamps, a tax on legal transactions such as insurance policies and the preparation of documents that could be used in court. We are still familiar today with 'stamp duty' when we buy a house. The office gained him financial security in the form of a salary of £400 a year for not very much work, but the opprobrium of the younger Romantics for his acceptance of an office of the Establishment, a sinecure dished out, moreover, by his patron, the Tory landowning coal magnate Lord Lonsdale. Southey as Laureate and Wordsworth as purveyor of the royal head on the stamps were now in the service of that 'corpulent gentleman of fifty' the Regent. Coleridge, meanwhile, had started writing for the right-wing press, which wasn't much better.

In order to respond to these turncoats, the literary world needed a new injection of liberal talent, and *The Examiner* was the vehicle to provide it. In the spring of 1814, the paper hired a new columnist. William Hazlitt [19] was the son of a dissenting minister who had tried his hand at philosophy, parliamentary reporting and painting, but found his metier as a reviewer, essayist and public lecturer. He had been inspired to become a writer by hearing Coleridge preach and then staying with Wordsworth and Coleridge in the west country when they were composing *Lyrical Ballads*, a visit memorably captured in the essay 'My first acquaintance with poets'. Unlike the poets he so admired, Hazlitt had remained a radical ever since his youth in the 1790s; he saw Napoleon as the sword-arm of revolution and freedom, not its extinguisher. He attacked on three fronts in some of the most scintillating English prose ever written. One of his first contributions was a pair of essays on Hogarth's series of paintings *Marriage-à-la-Mode*, which expose the hypocrisy, avarice and sexual depravity of the upper classes; then there was a two-part review of the newly-arrived actor Edmund Kean [20]playing the part of Iago in *Othello* in a way which suggested that 'the love of power, which is another name for the love of mischief, is natural to man'; and after this Hazlitt produced the first review (lengthy and in three parts) of Wordsworth's epic poem *The Excursion*.

Entitled 'Character of Mr Wordsworth's New Poem', the review begins: 'In power of intellect, in lofty conception, in the depth of feeling, at once simple and sublime, which pervades every part of it and which gives to every object an almost preternatural and preterhuman interest, this work has seldom been surpassed.' If it had felt fully finished and properly selected, Hazlitt asserts, it would have been a national monument, but it has some of the nakedness and confusion of the Lakeland landscape – 'the rude chaos of aboriginal nature'.

Wordsworth, Hazlitt suggests, was not interested in Claude-like ruins. His mind was 'coeval with the primary forms of things, holds immediately from nature': his focal points were 'a stone, covered with lichens, which has slept in the same spot of ground from the creation of the world', or a thunder-cracked fissure between two mountains, or a 'cavern scooped out by the sea'. No one had written about stones before.

Hazlitt praises *The Excursion* as a 'philosophical pastoral poem' – something different from, and superior to, the descriptive procession that was typical of earlier pastoral poems. Everything in Wordsworth, he argues, is the result of the poet's own reflections on the forms of nature: 'his thoughts are his real subjects'. Hence the solitude of his own heart, as he lives in the deep silence of thought. A seed is sown here for Keats's distinction between what he called 'the egotistical sublime' of Wordsworth and the 'negative capability' of Shakespeare. A germ, too, for Byron's damning of Wordsworth's egotism in *Don Juan*. Similarly, the sequence of the review regarding the Solitary's disillusionment over the French Revolution, his 'loss of confidence in social man', sows the seed for Hazlitt's own critique of Wordsworth's apostasy. Hazlitt turns the Immortality Ode back on Wordsworth by reanimating his own youthful joy at the revolution: [21]

> But though we cannot weave over again the airy, unsubstantial dream, which reason and experience have dispelled –
>
> > What though the radiance, which was once so bright,
> > Be now for ever taken from our sight,
> > Though nothing can bring back the hour
> > Of glory in the grass, of splendour in the flower:—
>
> yet we will never cease, nor be prevented from returning on the wings of imagination to that bright dream of our youth; that glad dawn of the day-star of liberty; that spring-time of the world, in which the hopes and expectations of the human race seemed opening in the same gay career with our own; when France called her children to partake her equal blessings beneath her laughing skies; when the stranger was met in all her villages with dance and festive songs, in celebration of a new and golden era; and when, to the retired and contemplative student, the prospects of human happiness and glory were seen ascending, like the steps of Jacob's ladder, in bright and never-ending succession.

What is impressive about Leigh Hunt, Hazlitt and Keats is that, even as they deplored the turn in Wordsworth's politics, they continued to see the strength in his poetry. Keats said that he regarded Wordsworth's *Excursion*, Haydon's paintings and Hazlitt's criticism as the three things to rejoice at in the modern world.

He made his own appearance in the *Examiner* by way of a sonnet 'To Solitude' in May 1816, his first published poem. More of his poems were included as the months passed. In December, Leigh Hunt wrote a piece called 'Young Poets', in which he introduced both Shelley and Keats to the public, praising them to the skies. The 'Great Spirits' sonnet to Haydon, with its reciprocal praise of Hunt and its glorying in Wordsworth's mountain muse appeared in spring 1817. It was, then, entirely because of Leigh Hunt that Keats became a published poet. In that same year of 1817 his first full-length volume was published, simply entitled *Poems*. *The Examiner* was quick to review it.

The association with Hunt had unfortunate consequences. In October 1817, a bolt came from the blue in the form of an anonymous diatribe, signed Z, in the right-wing *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. It was entitled 'On the Cockney School of Poetry': [22]

> WHILE the whole critical world is occupied with, balancing the merits, whether in theory or in execution, of what is commonly called THE LAKE-SCHOOL, it is strange that no one seems to think it at all necessary to say a single word about another new school of poetry which has of late sprung up among us. This school has not, I believe, as yet received any name; but if I may be permitted to have the honour of christening it, it may henceforth be referred to by the designation of THE COCKNEY SCHOOL. Its chief Doctor and Professor is Mr Leigh Hunt, a man certainly of some talents, of extravagant pretensions both in wit, poetry, and politics, and withal of exquisitely bad taste, and extremely vulgar modes of thinking and manners in all respects. He is a man of little education.

Why 'Cockney', other than to provide a London name to contrast with the 'Lake School' of the rural north? The word was, of course, the 'nick name given to the citizens of London, or persons born within the sound of Bow bell'. This was a full-scale assault on the grounds of class. Great poets, it is said, have always been country gentlemen. Z sneers at the false representation of nature in these upstart urban and suburban writers: [23]

> All the great poets of our country have been men of some rank in society, and there is no vulgarity in any of their writings; but Mr Hunt cannot utter a dedication, or even a note, without betraying the *Shibboleth* of low birth and low habits. He is the ideal of a Cockney Poet. He raves perpetually about 'green fields,' 'jaunty streams,' and 'o'er-arching leafiness,' exactly as a Cheapside shop-keeper does about the beauties of his box on the Camberwell road. Mr Hunt is altogether unacquainted with the face of nature in her magnificent scenes; he has never seen any mountain higher than Highgate-hill, nor reclined by any stream more pastoral than the Serpentine River.

Hunt was also attacked on the grounds of irreligion and lack of patriotism. And then there was his unhealthy interest in sex: [24]

> The extreme moral depravity of the Cockney School is another thing which is for ever thrusting itself upon the public attention, and convincing every man of sense who looks into their productions, that they who sport such sentiments can never be great poets. How could any man of high original genius ever stoop publicly, at the present day, to dip his fingers in the least of those glittering and rancid obscenities which float on the surface of Mr Hunt's Hippocrene? His poetry resembles that of a man who has kept company with kept-mistresses. His muse talks indelicately like a tea-sipping milliner girl. Some excuse for her there might have been, had she been hurried away by imagination or passion; but with her, indecency seems a disease, she appears to speak unclean things from perfect inanition. Surely they who are connected with Mr Hunt by the tender relations of society, have good reason to complain that his muse should have been so prostituted. In Rimini a deadly wound is aimed at the dearest confidences of domestic bliss. The author has voluntarily chosen—a subject not of simple seduction alone—one in which his mind seems absolutely to gloat over all the details of adultery and incest.

According to the *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1811), 'the interpretation of the word Cockney, is, a young person coaxed or conquered, made wanton; or a nestle cock, delicately bred and brought up, so as, when arrived at man's estate, to be unable to bear the least hardship': these implications of both sexual profligacy and effeminacy served Z's damaging purposes very well indeed. A subsequent essay in the same series would raise the temperature still further:

> our hatred and contempt of Leigh Hunt, we say, is not so much owing to these and other causes, as to the odious and unnatural harlotry of his polluted muse. We were the first to brand with a burning iron the false face of this kept-mistress of a demoralizing incendiary. We tore off her gaudy veil and transparent drapery, and exhibited the painted cheeks and writhing limbs of the prostitute.

Wordsworth, meanwhile, was reclaimed for the political right: [25]

> How such an indelicate writer as Mr Hunt can pretend to be an admirer of Mr Wordsworth, is to us a thing altogether inexplicable. One great charm of Wordsworth's noble compositions consists in the dignified purity of thought, and the patriarchal simplicity of feeling, with which they are throughout penetrated and imbued. We can conceive a vicious man admiring with distant awe the spectacle of virtue and purity; but if he does so sincerely, he must also do so with the profoundest feeling of the error of his own ways, and the resolution to amend them. His admiration must be humble and silent, not pert and loquacious. Mr Hunt praises the purity of Wordsworth as if he himself were pure, his dignity as if he also were dignified … For the person who writes Rimini, to admire the Excursion, is just as impossible as it would be for a Chinese polisher of cherry-stones, or gilder of tea-cups, to burst into tears at the sight of the Theseus or the Torso.

Inevitably, it was only a matter of time before Keats was caught in the cross-fire. Another Tory newspaper, William Gifford's *Quarterly Review*, picked up the Cockney moniker and published an excoriating review by John Wilson Croker of his romance *Endymion* in April 1818:

> It is not that Mr. Keats, (if that be his real name, for we almost doubt that any man in his senses would put his real name to such a rhapsody,) it is not, we say, that the author has not powers of language, rays of fancy, and gleams of genius — he has all these; but he is unhappily a disciple of the new school of what has been somewhere called Cockney poetry; which may be defined to consist of the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language.

A few months later, *Blackwood's* rubbed salt in the wound in the form of an article headed 'On the Cockney School of Poetry IV'. Class was, again, the animus. How dare a mere trainee apothecary write poetry. Medical metaphors are cruelly applied:

> Whether Mr John had been sent home with a diuretic or composing draught to some patient far gone in the poetical mania, we have not heard. This much is certain, that he has caught the infection, and that thoroughly. For some time we were in hopes, that he might get off with a violent fit or two; but of late the symptoms are terrible.

Z attacks Keats's recently published long romance: 'The phrenzy of the 'Poems' was bad enough in its way, but it did not alarm us half so seriously as the calm, settled, imperturbable drivelling idiocy of *Endymion*.' Then he gets into full stride with an assault on the 'Great spirits' sonnet to Haydon: [26]

> The absurdity of the thought in this sonnet is, however, if possible, surpassed in another, 'addressed to Haydon' the painter, that clever, but most affected artist, who as little resembles Raphael in genius as he does in person, notwithstanding the foppery of having his hair curled over his shoulders in the old Italian fashion. In this exquisite piece it will be observed, that Mr Keats classes together WORDSWORTH, HUNT, and HAYDON, as the three greatest spirits of the age, and that he alludes to himself, and some others of the rising brood of Cockneys, as likely to attain hereafter an equally honourable elevation. Wordsworth and Hunt! what a juxtaposition! The purest, the loftiest, and, we do not fear to say it, the most classical of living English poets, joined together in the same compliment with the meanest, the filthiest, and the most vulgar of Cockney poetasters.

A passage of protest against tyranny in the third book of *Endymion* leads Z to add: 'We had almost forgot to mention, that Keats belongs to the Cockney School of Politics, as well as the Cockney School of Poetry.'

In his poem *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats*, Shelley went so far as to imply—as others among Keats's friends explicitly said—that these assaults were the cause of Keats's death.

> Our Adonais has drunk poison—oh!
> What deaf and viperous murderer could crown
> Life's early cup with such a draught of woe?

The poem goes on to demand that 'The nameless worm' who wrote the attacks in *Blackwood's* should 'now itself disown'. Shelley voices a splendid curse: [27]

> Live thou, whose infamy is not thy fame!
> Live! fear no heavier chastisement from me,
> Thou noteless blot on a remember'd name!
> But be thyself, and know thyself to be!
> And ever at thy season be thou free
> To spill the venom when thy fangs o'erflow;
> Remorse and Self-contempt shall cling to thee;
> Hot Shame shall burn upon thy secret brow,
> And like a beaten hound tremble thou shalt—as now.

But then the poem turns beautifully to the idea of Keats's poetic immortality: 'He has outsoar'd the shadow of our night; / Envy and calumny and hate and pain'. Shelley does not imagine the dead poet's afterlife in terms of the heavenly bliss of orthodox Christianity: this, remember, was a man who was sent down from Oxford for writing a pamphlet called *The Necessity of Atheism*. Immortality come instead in the form of a reunion with nature: 'He is a portion of the loveliness / Which once he made more lovely': [28]

> He is made one with Nature: there is heard
> His voice in all her music, from the moan
> Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;
> He is a presence to be felt and known
> In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,
> Spreading itself where'er that Power may move
> Which has withdrawn his being to its own;
> Which wields the world with never-wearied love,
> Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above.

The inclusion of 'night's sweet bird'—the nightingale—is an especially delicate touch, a nod to the most musical of Keats's odes.

Keats was deeply wounded by the attacks in *Blackwood's*, but it cannot really be said that he was killed by his bad reviews. He was killed by tuberculosis. It might even be suggested that the constant harping on his association with the Cockney style led him to rid his poetry of Leigh Huntisms and find the mature style that he achieved in 1819, the breathtaking year of productivity that produced the odes and *The Fall of Hyperion*. But the Cockney Poets controversy did prove fatal for another man.

John Scott [29] was a close associate of Leigh Hunt. He started his career editing another radical newspaper for him, *The Statesman*, before establishing a sequence of liberal magazines of his own, notably *The Champion*. In January 1820, as the influence of *The Examiner* was waning, he launched a new monthly, *The London Magazine*. He worked indefatigably, writing about a third of the paper himself, giving a new platform to Hazlitt and providing a forum for two other London-based prose writers, Thomas De Quincey and Charles Lamb. The former's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* and the latter's *Essays of Elia* were first published in serial form in the *London*.

John Scott's editorials began to make hits at 'the mean insincerity, and vulgar slander of Z' in *Blackwood's*. What kind of artistic judgment was being shown in references to Haydon's greasy hair and the fact that Keats had walked the hospitals as a trainee apothecary? In November 1820, he launched a full-scale assault in a long article headed

'Blackwood's Magazine'. It was a 'poisonous infection', a 'threatening plague', 'the most foul and livid spot, indicative of an accursed taint in the literature of the day'. Scott dared to use a word loaded with risk: 'The *honour* of the literature of the present day we consider as now at stake'. In particular, he pointed to the great Sir Walter Scott's connections to the Tory *Blackwood's* circle in Edinburgh, demanding that 'the brightest ornament of his country's modern literary history' should be cleared of 'a diseased, false, affected, profligate, whining, and hypocritical character' by means of a clear announcement as to the identity of Z ensuring public knowledge that Sir Walter was not implicated. There was no response from Edinburgh, so in the next issue John Scott upped his game. An article called 'The Mohock Magazine' accused *Blackwood's* of infamy, cowardice, selfishness, stupidity, anti-social enormities, insensibility, insensitivity, spite, 'and when the poisonous stimulus exercises its full strength, treachery and malignity darken the aspect, and corrupt the influence of what may be termed the literary pleasures of general society … Iscariot treachery, and Iago malice'. He set his sights on the contributor and co-editor 'Christopher North', a pseudonym for the minor Lake Poet John Wilson, who, having earlier eulogized Wordsworth in both poetry and prose was now libelling him. Then there was the accusation that Coleridge was 'a still greater quack than Leigh Hunt', not to mention the unauthorized publication by *Blackwood's* of one of his private letters. Naturally, John Scott also sprang to the defence of Keats, letting it be known how profoundly the young poet, who was by now at death's door, had been affected by the Cockney School essays.

On Wednesday 10 January 1821, John Scott receive a call from a gentleman acting on behalf of J. G. Lockhart, whom everyone in the literary world suspected, correctly, was Z. Only a year older than Keats, Lockhart has been a brilliant student. Too good for school, he was sent to Glasgow University at the age of 12, became Snell Exhibitioner at Balliol College Oxford at 14, and took a first-class degree in Greats at 19. During a continental tour, he had paid homage to Goethe and obtained permission to translate Friedrich Schlegel's lectures on the history of literature into English. Back in an Edinburgh culture dominated by Francis Jeffrey's Whig *Edinburgh Review*, he set up *Blackwood's* as a Tory rival, with the support of Sir Walter Scott, whose daughter he married at exactly the time the Cockney controversy blew up and whose biography he would write.

John Scott of the *London* had named Lockhart as 'an understood, though unavowed, conductor of BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE'. Lockhart's London friend, a Mr Christie, now asked if he, John Scott, was the author of a series of three articles discussing the conduct and management of Blackwood's which Lockhart considered 'offensive to his feelings, and injurious to his honour'. That key word, honour. Scott said that he would reply within a couple of hours. He did so, with the cautious undertaking that if Lockhart's motives in putting the inquiry should 'turn out to be such as gentlemen usually respect' he would give an explicit answer.

The gentleman came back and said that Lockhart did not intend to commence legal proceedings but wished for a public apology. Scott replied that if he were to admit that he was editor of the *London*, would Lockhart admit that he was editor of *Blackwood's*. He also said that Lockhart should have come to London and confronted him face to face. He then sent a further note, questioning whether Lockhart was really offended since the most damning article had been in print for over a month without any complaint and asking whether he was acting as 'a *gentleman*, assailed in his honourable feelings by the indecent use of his name in print; or as a *professional scandal-monger*, who had long profited by fraudulent and cowardly concealment'.

A week later, Christie called again with a letter from Lockhart, demanding an apology and alluding 'to the other alternative'. Scott saw that the letter was dated in London and suggested that it was time for Lockhart to make a public statement in the London press that he was indeed responsible for the Cockney School attacks. His continued silence would be acknowledgment that he had been 'actively and secretly engaged, as a paid writer, in a long-continued series of anonymous outrages on truth and character, evidently projected under sordid motives, and carried into effect under evasion, denial, and artifice'. Christie replied that Lockhart was a gentleman and that the things said about him in the articles in the *London* were libellous. But he couldn't come up with any particular examples. They were at an impasse. Christie demanded that Scott should 'name his friend' – i.e. propose a second. Scott declined. He would not do so until Lockhart told the truth about whether he had written the articles.

That evening he drew up a memorandum laying out his position and sent it to Christie the next morning. It concluded by saying that if Lockhart made a disavowal of having had any involvement with the *Blackwood's* attack, Scott would meet him in the honourable way. He named Horatio Smith, author of the other Ozymandias sonnet, as his second, and gave his address to Christie, who duly called on Smith and showed him the whole

correspondence. Smith concluded that the call was irregular, since the precondition had not been met. He reiterated to Christie that if Lockhart admitted to writing the attack on the Cockneys, he was authorized to offer satisfaction. The two men, as Smith put in, differed in their view of the conduct which Scott was bound to adopt.

Lockhart finally wrote to Scott, dispatching the letter via his friend. He said that it was not customary for a gentleman to make preconditions in such a case; he would answer any accusations pertaining to Scott's 'personal feelings and honour', but otherwise it was necessary for him to have satisfaction. Scott wrote back, holding his ground. The disavowal had to be made before satisfaction was offered. It was the weekend and Smith had gone to the country, so Scott turned to another literary friend, P. G. Patmore, asking him to act as second, apologising for the short notice. Christie, meanwhile, went to Smith's house with Lockhart's final refusal to agree to the precondition. Not finding Smith, he went to Scott, who said that in the absence of the disavowal the correspondence was terminated. That same evening, Scott received a personal letter from Lockhart containing 'abusive epithets'.

It was the end of the road. They were ill met by moonlight on the night of Friday 16 February 1821, in a wooded knoll on Primrose Hill, [30] not far from the Chalk Farm Tavern, where John Scott had left half a bottle of wine, saying that he would return to finish it later. The pistols were primed, and the seconds consulted. Both men fired. Both deliberately missed. The seconds should have declared that honour had been duly satisfied. But Christie's second, James Traill, was a stickler for the etiquette of the duel (which was by this time illegal, which is why they were meeting at night). Christie had fired in the air, whereas Scott had taken aim at Christie. How could one be sure that he had missed deliberately, and was not just a bad shot? For honour to be satisfied, there would have to be a second shot on equal terms. Scott took the ball below his ribs. It passed through into the stomach. The attending surgeon took one look at the wound and fled. The other three men got Scott back to the tavern, then ran away to avoid arrest. For two days, Scott lay in the tavern, his family watching over, together with their doctor, George Darling (who was also doctor to John Keats and John Clare). The bullet was removed from the abdomen, and there was hope for a day. But then Scott's fever returned, and he died the following night.

Blackwood's seems to have been unrepentant. A poem in the April issue, in praise of Lockhart's fellow-editor "Christopher North', spoke of 'gruff-looking Z', 'wet with the blood of the Cockneys'. Lockhart himself allegedly fell into depression as the result of the affair. He would soon leave the paper and become editor of that other Tory journal, the *Quarterly Review*.

And what of Keats. [31] All through that January and February of 1821, as literary crossfire escalated towards real bullets, he lay desperately ill in Rome. His stomach, like Scott's, was ruined, but in his case due to the ravage of his tuberculosis. He asked for a bottle of opium to kill himself. He would write, **'**I shall soon be laid in the quiet grave—thank God for the quiet grave—O! I can feel the cold earth upon me—the daisies growing over me—O for this quiet—it will be my first'. He died at 11pm on February 23rd, two nights after the editor who had defended the honour of the Cockneys. They laid him to rest in the English Protestant cemetery. Keats supposedly wanted nothing but some enigmatic words on the gravestone: 'Here lies one whose name was writ on water', a suggestion of being forgotten, not living, as he had said he hoped, to live 'among the English Poets after my death'. But his friends chose instead (and later regretted) words that allude to the wounding articles in *Blackwood's* and the *Quarterly*:

> This grave contains all that was Mortal of a Young English Poet Who on his Death Bed, in the Bitterness of his Heart at the Malicious Power of his Enemies Desired these Words to be engraven on his Tomb Stone: *Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water.*

Keats's last poem, meanwhile, was a fragment, its wrenching, mysterious voice anything but vulgar or affected. It sounds as if it is addressed to a lover who has rejected the poet, in the manner of John Donne's 'The Apparition', where he imagines his own ghost returning to haunt an unfaithful lover. It could be a fragment from a projected drama in the Jacobean style; it could be aimed at Fanny Brawne. But might it also be a magnanimous reaching out to those cruel reviewers, Croker and Lockhart, an appeal to their consciences, a very gentlemanly, far from Cockney, holding out for a handshake of reconciliation from beyond the grave to which he knew he was going?

> This living hand, now warm and capable

Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd—see here it is—
I hold it towards you.

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