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# A Seat at the Table: William Lisle Bowles and the Development of Romanticism

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# A Seat at the Table:

William Lisle Bowles

And The

Development of Romanticism

By Jeremy Bradford Savage

I hereby Reaffirm the Lawrence University Honor Code:

\_\_\_\_\_ May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012

Jeremy Savage

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The reader must make himself acquainted with the general style of composition that was at that time deemed poetry, in order to understand and account for the effect produced on me by the Sonnets of Mr. Bowles; for it is peculiar to original genius to become less and less striking, in proportion to its success in improving the taste and judgment of its contemporaries.

-S.T. Coleridge in Biographia Literaria

# INTRODUCTION

Most of our biographical information about the poet William Lisle Bowles comes from the preface provided by George Gilfillan in his edition of The Poetical Works of William Lisle Bowles, which he published just after Bowles's death in 1855. Gilfillan tells us that Bowles "was born in King's Sutton, and baptized there on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 1762" (xiii). We know little about Bowles's early childhood, and what little we do know is taken from his own letters.<sup>1</sup> The only other insight we gain into Bowles's early years comes from his "Sonnet: The Bells at Ostend," which is addressed to the bells at Ostend, where Bowles's father was a clergyman.

In 1776 Bowles was "placed on the Wykeham foundation at [the Winchester School]" (Gilfillan xiii). It was at Winchester, under the tutelage of his master, Dr. Joseph Warton, that Bowles first discovered his love for poetry. Equally significant for Bowles's professional development was the relationship that grew between him and Warton.

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<sup>1</sup> These letters have not been reproduced for the most part, but, I was fortunate enough to be able to study them in the Bodleian Library at Oxford last year. They were only recently donated to the library.

Although neither man gives a full account of their relationship, Bowles's elegy "Monody on the Death of Dr. Warton" leaves little doubt about his love and indebtedness to his former schoolmaster and mentor.

More interesting from a critical perspective is the impression Joseph Warton left on Bowles as a poet. This is a connection that I explain more fully in the first section of the first chapter of this paper. For now, suffice it to say that "[Joseph] Warton stands at the head of one current in subsequent literary taste deploring excessive preoccupation with correctness and valuing sublimity and pathos more highly" (Keymer and Mee citing Jarvis 38). Many critics consider Joseph Warton to be a pre-romantic. It is easy to see how Warton's poetical inclinations, which precede the full-blown Romanticism of the latter part of the eighteenth century, provide a firm foundation for Bowles's later contributions to the Romantic tradition.

After finishing school at Winchester, Bowles was elected a scholar of Trinity College, Oxford in 1781 (Gilfillan xiii). According to Gilfillan, Bowles elected to study at Trinity because Joseph Warton's older brother, Thomas, was a tutor there. Thomas Warton is regarded by many as the catalyst for the revival of the sonnet form, which was largely defunct at the start of the eighteenth century. His poetry has been described as inherently patriotic and celebratory. He was the Poet Laureate of England during the period that Bowles studied with him from 1785-1790. Clarissa Rinaker tell us in her book Thomas Warton: a Biographical and Critical Study: "certainly [Thomas] Warton's greater importance as a man of letters and the superior merit and originality of theme of his sonnets make his influence greater in the revival of the sonnet than that of any of his

predecessors” (33). It was likely that Bowles inherited his use of the sonnet form from his tutor, Thomas Warton.

In 1789, following his failed romantic pursuit of a Miss Romilly, Bowles took a leave from Trinity College to take a walking tour of England. It was during Bowles’s leave from University that he composed his famous *Fourteen Sonnets*.<sup>2</sup> During the same year, Bowles published a number of other longer poems. Between the sonnets and the longer poems there is an observable shift, recognized by Bowles himself, away from the Neoclassical influences of Pope, Gray, and the Warton brothers, and towards what would become known as the poetic elements associated with Romanticism. Three of the most prominent of these qualities that are represented in the majority of Bowles’s collected works are on display in one of his first sonnets: “Sonnet IV: To the River Wenbeck.”<sup>3</sup>

In “To the River Wenbeck,” Bowles displays at least two elements of his poetic that characterize the majority of his published works: a reflective relationship between the natural world and the human pathos of his subject; and a retrospective brand of melancholic reflection that is simultaneously sad and sweet:

As slowly wanders thy forsaken stream,  
WENBECK! the mossy-scatter'd rocks among,  
In fancy's ear still making plaintive song  
To the dark woods above: ah! sure I seem

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<sup>3</sup> Although Bowles was likely introduced to the art of sonnet writing by Warton, his own sonnets differ dramatically from Warton’s model both in language and in Bowles’s treatment of emotional reflection in nature



To meet some friendly Genius in the gloom,  
And in each breeze a pitying voice I hear  
Like sorrow's sighs upon misfortune's tomb.  
Ah! Soothing are your quiet scenes--the tear  
Of him who passes weary on his way  
Shall thank you, as he turns to bid adieu:  
Onward a cheerless pilgrim he may stray,  
Yet oft as musing memory shall review  
The scenes that cheer'd his path with fairer ray,  
Delightful haunts, he will remember you.

Bowles describes the river as “forsaken” because it has been forgotten, left behind, by those people who once cared for it, or spent their time on its banks.<sup>4</sup> This “forsaken” state, as we continue to read the poem, describes both the river, and the speaker of the poem himself. This reading is strengthened later in the poem, when Bowles aligns the “plaintive song” of the river with the “pitying voice,” which is “like sorrow’s sighs upon

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<sup>4</sup> This river, likely more of a stream, cannot be found on a modern map. I found one reference to it in Alexander Keith Johnston’s Dictionary of Geography, Descriptive, Physical, Statistical and Historical, Forming a Complete Gazetteer of the World published in 1862. On Page 355 Johnston describes the town of Davenham, on the Wenbeck 2 miles south of Northwich. This would put the river (or one part of it), just twenty miles or so east of where Bowles grew up, in Kings Sutton, Northhamptonshire. So, it is likely a young Bowles had some encounter with the river, and that the entire sonnet is a recollection of his own youth.

misfortune's tomb" (2-7). Bowles embodies these feelings of abandonment and sorrow in the actual appearance and description of the river itself in order to recreate for his reader the emotional experience he has when he returns to the scenes of his childhood.

These scenes and reflections lend themselves to the sort of sad reflection that characterizes the elegiac form throughout most of the eighteenth century. Keenly aware of this tradition, Bowles consciously departs from it. Although for the first nine lines of the sonnet, Bowles describes how the speaker's sorrowful reflection on how time has changed his experience of the river, the remainder of the poem is focused on how his memories of the scenes themselves will provide him comfort when he continues on his journey, "a cheerless pilgrim" (11). In a way that is typical of most of his sonnets, Bowles first juxtaposes the sad and the comforting aspects of retrospective nostalgic reflection, and then mixes them to create his own brand of bittersweet melancholic reflection.

Gilfillan tells us "the events of [Bowles's] private and professional life were of no particular interest" (xiv). I disagree with his assessment. We know that Bowles entered holy orders and resided as a curate at Donhead St. Andrew in Wiltshire, where he remained from 1792 until 1804. It was during this time of regular employment in 1797 that Bowles first met Coleridge. The only accessible accounts of Bowles's personal character, which Gilfillan overlooks, come from a handful of sources, including: letters about Bowles between Robert Southey and Caroline Bowles (no real relation to William Lisle Bowles, although towards the end of his life Bowles claimed Caroline as a relative after they fostered a friendship); Lord Byron's much later accounts of Bowles's personal character; and Coleridge's letters pertaining to his meeting with Bowles in 1797. From

these sources we can sketch a loose picture of Bowles as a simple man, content to sit at home, reading and writing and preparing sermons for Sundays. This reading of Bowles's character runs parallel to the content of his poetry, which is set many nostalgic, sweet, sentimental, humble, and natural environments. Furthermore, Byron tells us that Bowles was a consummate gentleman with delightful manners. This understanding of Bowles as a man satisfied and content with his simple life in the country is a necessary baseline for my argument. I will discuss, in the second chapter of this paper, the split between Bowles and Coleridge following their initial meeting at Bowles's house, in 1797.

We can forgive Gilfillan's assertion that, "the events of [Bowles's] private and professional life [are] of no particular interest" (Gilfillan xiv), because our critical priorities have evolved in the century and a half since he published his edition of Bowles's works. Recently, historical context has become increasingly significant to understanding not only a particular poet, but also his effects on the other poets of the period as well as his effects on literary taste and culture at that time. In this paper, accounts of Bowles's poetic and personal relationships will give way to a fuller analysis of his role in the development of Romanticism and in the subsequent development of those poets whose names have become firmly attached to the Romantic movement, namely, William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge. I will demonstrate the ways in which Bowles's poetry was radical and progressive at the time in which he wrote it, and the ways that his radical poetic ideologies influence, inspire, and shape the later poetry of poets we more traditionally associate with Romanticism.

The focus of the study of British Romanticism has changed dramatically over the past thirty years. For much of the twentieth century, the bulk of the scholarly work that

was done on the period was done with a focus on a select group of six male poets who comprised what was more or less accepted to be the Romantic canon. In the past three decades, however, there has been a shift in focus away from this myopic investigation of the “Big Six” towards a more balanced effort to understand the other poets and authors of the period. The result has been a better understanding not just of the traditional members of the canon, but also of the Romantic Movement in poetry as a whole.

Lucy Newlyn, the editor of The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge, writes in the introduction of her book, “it would be unthinkable nowadays to design a course on British Romanticism based around the work of six male poets, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and Shelley” (1). Newlyn goes on to tell us that, although those “Big Six” poets are cemented as crucial to the study of the period, “we now want to understand their achievements historically and comparatively” (1). Newlyn’s assertion, which reflects the current collective critical attitude regarding the study of Romanticism is that, what was once a table set for six in a men’s-only club, has been dramatically expanded to make room for a generous handful of other poets who somehow further inform both our understanding of the traditional “big six” Romantics and of Romanticism itself.

These developments in Romantic studies flow directly from the increased prominence of new competing schools of literary criticism. For example, the canon has recently been expanded to include writers whose influence has been revealed by feminist criticism. The fact is that there exists “a great wealth of women’s writing in a period when, after all, female authorship genuinely began to thrive in Britain” (Chandler and McLane 4). Other, formerly minor, poets are now being read and anthologized in

accordance to their political contributions because of an increased interest in cultural critical theory and historicism (Chandler and McLane 4).

These advancements, and the subsequent fruits that they have borne the critical community, constitute a reminder of the benefits to our understanding of the primary sources in a given period that subsequent contextual considerations often bear. Although the cultural and feminist critics have done us a service by directing our attention to authors and poets outside the traditional Romantic Canon, the emphasis placed on these relatively recent schools of criticism has come at a cost. The particular critical schools active in the discussion of Romanticism have dictated the types of poets and authors who have been added to that conversation. As a result, names like Charlotte Smith, Anna Barbauld, and Robert Southey have begun to appear more prominently in anthologies of the poetry of the period, while poets like William Lisle Bowles remain outside of the discussion.<sup>5</sup> These additional critical schools provide important contextual perspectives

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<sup>5</sup> Smith and Barbauld have been added to the canon because their contributions are considerable. They were really only excluded formerly because they were women. Southey was a significant poet in the 1790's, but he was perhaps better known for his political activism. His involvement in political discussions has made him a popular topic for cultural critics because he mirrors the ebb and flow of political sentiment between 1790 and 1815. Cultural critics, who strive to establish parallels between the cultural developments of a period, and the poetry produced within it, focus on Southey because he embodies that connection throughout his career. Bowles is neither a woman nor a political activist and so he has been neglected as these two recent schools in literary

from which we can better understand Romanticism, however, they are not exhaustive and the addition of Bowles to the discussion further informs the way we study the period and the major players within it.

This paper shares a common goal with the cultural and feminist critics. It is a goal summed up particularly well by Newlyn, who tells us: “we now want to understand [the Big Six’s] achievements historically and comparatively” (1). The focus of this paper will be on the career of William Lisle Bowles as it relates to the poetic traditions that precede him, to the poetic careers of his contemporaries and successors, and to our conception of Romanticism as a single, coherent movement in poetry. It is my assertion that Bowles has been misread (when he has been read at all). Reading Bowles thoroughly, paying specific attention to his influence on the beginnings of Romanticism, to his particular influence on Coleridge and to the critical advancements represented by the amalgamation of his actual poetry with his later critical reflections, affords us not only an understanding of Bowles’s active role in the development of Romanticism as it has traditionally been understood, but also significantly alters our understanding of Coleridge, and of Romanticism and to a degree, literary theory as a whole.

There may be passages in this paper that appear to treat Coleridge with less than the reverence with which he has traditionally been addressed. These passages ought not be mistaken as taking aim at Coleridge’s poetic legacy. My assertion is not that Bowles ought to usurp Coleridge alongside Wordsworth at the head of the table of canonical Romantic poets, but simply that, especially in consideration of recent expansion of the criticism have gained popularity. He is nonetheless of critical contextual importance to the period as a whole.

canon, Bowles ought to be awarded a chair and a place in the discussion on account of his influence on both the Romantic tradition itself and on the key players within it.

There is no assertion anywhere in this paper that poems like “Frost at Midnight,” “Kubla Khan,” and “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner” are somehow less important to our conception of Romanticism simply because Bowles might have catalyzed Coleridge’s interest in the reflection of mental and emotional states in nature. My assertion in this paper is that to understand Coleridge fully, and to understand the role he plays in the development of Romanticism fully, we need to study Bowles.

There ought to be no confusion as to Bowles’s place in the study of Romanticism up to this point: he has simply been neglected. In The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry, Chandler and McLane mention Bowles’s sonnets only in a timeline of all the significant publications of the period that is amended to the volume itself. In volume two of the seventh edition of The Norton Anthology of English Literature, published in 1999, Bowles is entirely overlooked. In the few prominent places Bowles has been cited or discussed, he has been characterized as a simple and juvenile influence on Coleridge, an influence that Coleridge, in his good sense, abandons by the latter half of the 1790s.<sup>6</sup>

Although this paper will focus on the reasons for Bowles’s inclusion in the canon, those arguments come with my tacit recognition and the disclaimer that there are in fact

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<sup>6</sup> M.H. Abrams is perhaps the most prominent critic who treats Bowles this way, although Jonathan Wordsworth and A. Harris Fairbanks share his views. This is a position I talk about extensively in the paper itself. It is a view I disagree with and one that I argue is poorly founded on information that is often taken out of context.

some valid reasons for us not including him up to this point. He never wrote a poem as well-crafted as “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner,” nor did he write any criticism that was as broad and thorough as either Wordsworth’s “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” or Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria (although I will argue later that he critically anticipates portions of both of these texts). These are valid reasons to have excluded Bowles through most of the twentieth-century when the critical conception of Romanticism was itself in its infancy.

These reasons lose some of their strength at a time when other minor poets are the subjects of increased critical study. Bowles is owed attention that he has not been given. Beyond his significant influence on Coleridge’s own development, Bowles played a part in catalyzing the development of the Romantic Movement, as we understand it today. Additionally, his poetry and his criticism, although they have gone largely unnoticed lately, were simultaneously predictive and quintessentially Romantic. It is my aim in this paper to be sympathetic to the intricacies of the arguments for and against the inclusion of other minor, and even major poets, in the canon. It is not my goal to put Bowles in the place of any other poet, or group of poets. It is my claim that Bowles ought to be read in addition to these other poets because he offers a unique lens through which we can better understand Romanticism, its development, and the other players who are essential to the concept of the movement.

The paper itself is divided into three chapters, with each chapter subdivided into relevant sections. These chapters address Bowles’s development and influence more or less chronologically. The first chapter is concerned largely with examining the influences on Bowles in his relative youth that shape him as a poet. In the first section, these



influences are traced historically, identified in the earlier poetry, and then highlighted in Bowles's own early work. This exercise allows us to appreciate the ways that Bowles, before he was himself a radical and progressive poet, represented the Neoclassical tradition that precedes him. The second section of this first chapter is focused on the ways in which Bowles identifies these neoclassic influences in his own poetry, and then makes a conscious effort to progress forward from them. By the end of the first chapter we ought to see Bowles as standing on the precipice, about to take the leap firmly into a style of poetry that will come to be recognized as quintessentially Romantic.

The second chapter starts with a discussion of S.T. Coleridge's early obsession with Bowles's poetic style. This is the same poetic strain that we see Bowles identify and embrace at the end of my first chapter. Coleridge's fixation helps to establish Bowles as a transitional bridge between Neoclassicism and Romanticism. Bowles incorporates Neoclassicist tropes in his early poetry, just as Coleridge integrates Bowles's poetic ideologies in his own work in the 1790s. While this role is attributable to Bowles, and is one reason for his relative significance, the assumption that he is strictly a bridge implicitly excludes him from full-fledged membership in both the schools of Neoclassicism and Romanticism. I identify the critical tendency to ascribe only transitional importance to Bowles and thus to relegate him to some space unworthy of extensive study. I criticize this tendency as simultaneously unfounded and unfair to Bowles. My argument in this section is that although Bowles does have transitional importance, it does not lie in his sonnets, but in his earlier work. By the time we are dealing with Bowles's sonnets, we are dealing with a Romantic in the fullest sense, not a predecessor of Coleridge and Wordsworth, but a contemporary and associate.

In the second part of this second chapter I continue to criticize the tendency to treat Bowles strictly as a foundation upon which the beginnings of the Romantic Movement are built. Following a discussion of Bowles's "To the River Itchin" as an influence on Coleridge's "To the River Otter" I reject the assertion by M.H. Abrams that Bowles is merely a juvenile influence on Coleridge, one that Coleridge identifies as such by the end of the eighteenth century and, one that he rejects and abandons by the start of the nineteenth century. In order to defend this position, I present excerpts from letters and other biographical information relevant to the two poets in order to argue that Coleridge's waning enthusiasm for Bowles at the end of the eighteenth century was a result of personal disagreements more than a result of Coleridge's poetical maturation. My central claim, that Coleridge's distancing of himself from Bowles did not necessarily flow from a period of tremendous personal and poetic maturation during the last few years of the eighteenth century, runs counter to the common wisdom that has been established in regards to Coleridge for the better part of the last century. I will argue that it is Bowles's role in refiguring our understanding of Coleridge's maturation and development that makes him so important for us to study.

In the third portion of the second chapter, I consider one of Bowles's longer poems alongside Coleridge's "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement" in order to identify in their respective poems the philosophical and existential differences in opinion that might have given grounds for Coleridge's split from Bowles. In addition to pointing out the differences in these two poems, I present more historical evidence relevant to the poems and to my assertion that Bowles's poem was written in response to

the disagreement Bowles and Coleridge had during their first and last (for forty years) meeting.

It would be easy to conclude my argument at this point: I have argued that Bowles is important not just as a transitional figure, but also as a influential and contextually relevant figure in our efforts to understand the “Big Six” Romantics as well. These arguments alone ought to demonstrate Bowles’s significance to our study of Romanticism. However, I do not want to stop here. In the early Nineteenth-Century, Bowles was involved in a very public dispute with Lord Byron over Bowles’s published edition of Alexander Pope’s works. This dispute marks the first and only time that Bowles publicly shares his poetic ideologies explicitly. For the first time, Bowles tells us why he wrote his sonnets the way that he wrote them. In the third chapter, I explain the Pope controversy in order to highlight Bowles’s poetic beliefs that shape his early poetry. I then place these ideologies in conversation with those poetic positions advocated by William Wordsworth in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. My thesis in the third chapter is that Bowles, even though he never wrote a critical volume like Wordsworth’s, embodied many of the same ideas in his poetry. Bowles’s self-perceived poetic values, I argue, are consistent with my earlier assertions that Bowles ought to be granted a place in the study of Romanticism based not only on his influence on Coleridge and others, but on his role in developing the themes that have become synonymous with Romanticism itself: the employment of natural and rural subjects, the reconciliation of the mental with the emotional and physical, and the use of less formal restraints in the language of the poetry itself, all of which are readily apparent in Bowles’s sonnets and are defended in his critical work.

# CHAPTER I

## Bowles and the Neoclassicists

By virtue of the education he receives under Joseph and Thomas Warton, Bowles is, at least in the beginning, partially a product of their poetic philosophies. Under the influence of the Warton brothers, Bowles acquires an early enthusiasm for the Neoclassical tradition that precedes Romanticism. Although Bowles begins to lay the foundation for Romanticism by advancing from that Neoclassical tradition in his sonnets and subsequent works, he exhibits in his earliest poetry sufficient elements characteristic of that earlier tradition – advocated by Pope, the Wartons, and Gray, among others – to be considered a bridge between Neoclassicism and Romanticism.

Increasingly, critics and scholars have speculated about the transition between Neoclassicism and Romanticism.<sup>7</sup> The questions implicitly being asked by these critics are: How do we locate this transition, where does it begin, and where does it end? A

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<sup>7</sup> In his book, Romanticism and the Uses of Genre, David Duff argues that Romanticism itself embodies the “tension between the drive to ‘make it old’ and ‘make it new,’” thus to place the actual transition between Neoclassicism and Romanticism is difficult (vii).

study of Bowles helps to answer this question while simultaneously shedding light on the development of the new tastes in poetry that are borne out of the ashes of Neoclassicism. In the 1780s, Bowles is largely a product of his education. And so, in order to understand Bowles's significance as a transitional figure, we must gain an understanding of the complex Neoclassical influences that appear in his early poetry. This appreciation of the influences on Bowles will allow us to understand the ways in which he progresses from his fundamentally Neoclassical poetic foundation. It may also help us to recognize those poetic elements that will define him as a catalyst for the development of Romanticism.

The first of two sections of this chapter will offer an inspection of Bowles's education. I will highlight Bowles's poetic tribute to a particular poem by Pope in order to establish his enthusiasm for the paragons of poetic taste in the period that precedes his own career. I will also introduce criticism written by Joseph Warton in which Warton addresses that same poem by Pope. Along the way, I will underline the ways in which Bowles mimics Pope, and the ways in which Bowles strays from Pope's example. In this sense, I will point to the ways in which Bowles embodies the transition from Neoclassicism, starting with his qualified endorsement of Pope's example.

In the second section I will inspect a second poem by Bowles, his "Elegy Written at the Hot-wells, Bristol," alongside the famous poem after which he models it: "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" by Thomas Gray. I will demonstrate the ways in which Bowles mimics the qualities of Gray's original that are in line with what is rapidly becoming Bowles's own, new poetic philosophy, while simultaneously rejecting those elements of Gray's original that are reminiscent of the Neoclassical tradition. Towards the end of this section, I will highlight Bowles's explicit departure from the tradition

within which he, by his own acknowledgement, writes in the earliest part of his career. By understanding the reasons behind Bowles's departure from the tradition within which he is educated, we can begin to understand the significance of the differences between Bowles's earlier works and the *Fourteen Sonnets* for which he became famous.

In this departure from Neoclassicism, Bowles embraces nature as an active entity in poetry. Bowles employs nature as a reflective foil, using his descriptions of the natural setting of his poem to talk about his own personal emotional states. The reflexivity that Bowles establishes between the natural world and human emotions allows him to take the mournful elegiac sadness that largely marks the collection of eighteenth century elegies, and manipulate it into his own signature brand of bittersweet melancholy.

Bowles is not the only one to embrace this new style of elegiac melancholic reflection. Soon after reading Bowles's sonnets, most of which feature his newfound brand of reflection, Coleridge becomes enamored with the tone and sentiments of Bowles's poetry, and, in fact, with Bowles himself. This relationship of idolization is enabled and borne of Bowles's explicit departure from the poetic traditions of Pope, Gray, and the Wartons, that influence his earliest poetry.

## Part I

In his early work, Bowles bases his subject matter and his poetic form on the examples set by prominent Neoclassical poets of the eighteenth century, particularly by Pope. Later, however, as he develops his own style, Bowles responds to the critical positions advocated by Joseph Warton in his work *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope* to improve in those poetical areas where Warton believed Pope was lacking. In

this chapter, I will demonstrate the convergence of these influences on Bowles in a single instance, by placing Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" alongside Bowles's own elegiac poem, "The Grave of Howard" After comparing the two poems, I will introduce selections from Warton's essay, supplemented by the modern criticism of David Vieth, in order to show how Bowles has made conscious changes to his rendition of Pope's elegy in order to accommodate Warton's evaluation of Pope's original poem.

One of the reasons the literary community is, and has been for some time, so enamored with Alexander Pope is the level of aptitude he consistently exhibits in his employment of the heroic couplet.<sup>8</sup> Pope's mastery of that formal element of poetry is representative of the emphasis placed collectively on poetic form by Neoclassical poets generally.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The editors of the Eighth Edition of The Norton Anthology of English Literature tell us: "Pope was a master of style. From first to last his verse is notable for its rhythmic variety, despite the apparently rigid metrical unit—the heroic couplet—in which he wrote; for the precision of meaning and the harmony (or expressive disharmony) of his language; and for the union of maximum conciseness with maximum complexity" (2495). I make no pretenses about being an expert on Pope's poetics, but, if there is one quality even a casual reader might take away from reading Pope's poetry, it is his skill with the heroic couplet. It is this formal quality that we see Bowles imitating in his poetic version of Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady."

<sup>9</sup> J. Paul Hunter in his essay, "Formalism and History: Binarism and the Anglophone Couplet" writes: "Those [poets] who did not use couplets for major poems had to justify their choice consciously. My sample counts of poems written between 1590 and 1790

Still, in order to understand his significance as a poet, we need to explore Pope's reasons for focusing so intently on the formal elements of his poetry. In an age when the heroic couplet was a fairly standard device used by the majority of poets, there must be a reason why Pope was particularly determined to go above and beyond in his mastery of the couplet. Helen Deutsch gives us one intelligent hypothesis in her book, Resemblance & Disgrace: Alexander Pope and the Deformation of Culture. Deutsch writes that "For Pope, whether the medium be text or landscape, poetic form was most indisputably exemplified by the heroic couplet . . . it conceived and ordered a world" (2). For Pope, in other words, the couplet was a means to make sense of the physical world, which he perceived as being neither orderly nor commonsensical. Hunter, in his article, chimes in on this line of thinking:

Early-eighteenth-century couplets do use lots of opposites, and they juxtapose them notably, playing them off against each other as alternative representations . . . couplets are unusually well positioned to exploit comparisons and contrasts, and it is not surprising that opposites are repeatedly set against one another . . . We associate the antithetical couplet especially with . . . Pope and his contemporaries. (115-116)

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suggest that for most decades during that period, almost two-thirds of the extant lines are in couplets. Pentameter couplets are three to four times as common as all other couplets . . . put together." It is easy to see how Pope is representative of eighteenth century neoclassicist poetical form owing to his mastery of what was at the time the predominant structural element used by the majority of the poets of that time period.



So, the couplet allowed Pope to point out and comment on what he viewed to be particularly relevant or noteworthy natural contradictions in appearance. Perhaps the most relevant (certainly the most relevant to Pope) of these contradictions, is the physical contradiction presented by Pope's own body.<sup>10</sup>

Deutsch's general thesis is that Pope's obsession with poetic form is itself a sort of heroic couplet: he manufactures his identity as a poet and individual so that he simultaneously epitomizes the perfection of form, and, with his own misshapen appearance, mocks it. If Deutsch's argument is correct, it would have to be accepted that Pope not only had the requisite talent to manage his public appearance so carefully, but that he also had the desire to do so. Samuel Johnson thinks Pope had both qualities; in his Life of Pope, Johnson writes regarding Pope's personal letters, that, "Pope may be said to write always with his reputation in his head" (253). Taken alone, this reflection by Johnson characterizes Pope negatively. However, Johnson also writes, regarding Pope's personal letters that the letters demonstrate Pope's "candour, tenderness, and benevolence," as well as "the purity of his purposes, and the fidelity of his friendship" (253). So, if Johnson is to be believed, then aside from being a tremendous poet, Pope was intently focused on sculpting and maintaining the form of his public appearance and reputation.

Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" is a compelling example for Bowles because it represents the varied critical perspectives that I reference above. The poem itself is comprised entirely of heroic couplets, and yet the subject of the poem

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<sup>10</sup> Pope, after a horseback riding accident at a young age, suffered scoliosis of the spine and was physically deformed. For more on this accident, see Deutsch.

– the love affair between the speaker and an unidentified woman, now deceased – is marked by Pope’s personal qualities as described by Johnson. Finally, the poem is set in a natural scene in a forest, one that would appeal to Warton and to Bowles.

Reading Bowles’s elegy alongside Pope’s poem reveals at once Bowles’s indebtedness to the poetic tradition in which he was educated as well as the foundations for his motivation to move beyond that tradition in his own work. The fact that Bowles chose this poem of Pope’s as his model for his own elegy is unsurprising, as Bowles’s mentor and teacher Joseph Warton thought highly of Pope’s “Elegy.” Warton, in his “Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope,” writes of the elegy:

The Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady...came from the heart, [it] is very tender and pathetic; more so, I think, than any other copy of verses of our author. (Vol VII, Pg. 193)

Given the relationship between Bowles and Warton, Warton’s role in encouraging Bowles’s early poetic pursuits, and Bowles’s professed indebtedness to him and to the Winchester School, it is logical to assume that, if Bowles did not share Warton’s enthusiasm, he would at least have been aware of it enough to make himself familiar with Pope’s elegy.<sup>11</sup> The fact that Bowles models his own elegy after Pope’s original is

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<sup>11</sup> Bowles sets perhaps his most famous and best known sonnet “To the River Itchin” on the banks of the river that runs directly behind the Winchester School. In the poem, which I will explore more closely in the second chapter of this essay, Bowles makes abundantly clear the fondness he has for the memories he made while in school at Winchester. If this sonnet leaves any doubt as to Bowles’s feelings about his school and his beloved teacher, Dr. Joseph Warton, Bowles lays them to rest in his “Monody on the

implicit evidence that he agrees with Warton's positive assessment of "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady."<sup>12</sup>

The formal similarities between Bowles's "Grave of Howard" and Pope's "Elegy" are instantly apparent upon placing the poems side by side. Most visible is Bowles's use of heroic couplets. Looking at the first few lines of each poem reveals that they share the same basic metrical structure. Pope's poem opens:

WHAT beck'ning ghost, along the moonlight shade  
Invites my steps, and points to yonder glade?  
'Tis she!—but why that bleeding bosom gored,  
Why dimly gleams the visionary sword? (1-4)

Bowles's opening lines are composed in the same meter:

Spirit of Death! whose outstretched pennons dread  
Wave o'er the world beneath their shadow spread;  
Who darkly speedest on thy destined way,  
Midst shrieks and cries, and sounds of dire dismay  
Spirit! Behold thy Victory! (1-4)

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Death of Dr. Warton" written upon the death of Warton in 1801. These two poems are the basis for my assumption that Bowles would have shared Warton's enthusiasm and preferences at least enough to familiarize himself with the works that his teacher found to be most relevant.

<sup>12</sup> Although, as I will demonstrate in the following pages, Bowles also valued Joseph Warton's criticisms of Pope, as he also includes Warton's suggested modifications of Pope's elegy in his own elegy.

Both poems are constructed of rhyming couplets and both poems are carefully written in iambic pentameter—with ten syllable lines in which every other syllable is stressed. Not only is this form commonly associated with Pope, but Day and Keegan illustrate the further point that “though [it was] the dominant verse form in the early [eighteenth] century, the heroic couplet falls out of favor after about 1750” (133). Bowles’s decision to write “The Grave of Howard” (1789) in heroic couplets leads to two logical conclusions: first that Bowles intentionally modeled his elegy after Pope’s, with particular attention to Warton’s commentary on the latter; and, secondly, that Bowles knowingly employed an anachronistic form which places his poem firmly within the Neoclassical aesthetic. Bowles would have been familiar with Warton’s critical comments on Pope’s poem as well as with the poem itself. It is this background, in addition to the formal and thematic similarities between the two poems, which provides the foundation for my discussion of the ways in which Bowles deliberately emulates Pope’s elegy while simultaneously making the changes advocated by Warton. In the context of Day’s and Keegan’s comments, the second conclusion can be stated with a higher degree of certainty because their commentary reveals that Bowles use of the heroic couplet was out-dated at the time of the poem’s composition.

The second formal element that Bowles’s poem shares with Pope’s original is that both are elegiac. Pope’s poem is addressed as such “Elegy to the Memory...” and Bowles’s poem is elegiac as it mourns the death and celebrates the accomplishments of a particular individual, the philanthropist John Howard. The fact that Bowles models his elegy after Pope’s poem, even though Thomas Gray and Charlotte Smith had more recently developed the elegiac form and reinvigorated the literary community’s

enthusiasm for it, provides further evidence of Bowles's particular interest in Pope's elegy.<sup>13</sup>

Returning to the opening lines of Bowles's and Pope's elegies reveals that both poems open similarly, by referring to a spirit. Bowles writes:

Spirit of Death! Whose Outstretched pennons dread  
Wave o'er the world beneath their shadow spread; (1-2)

Similarly, Pope writes:

What beck'ning ghost, along the moonlight shade  
Invites my steps, and points to yonder glade? (1-2)

By mimicking especially closely Pope's opening lines, Bowles is taking care to alert his reader to the fact that he is paying tribute to the earlier poem.

One objection to this reading is that, though the poems are addressed similarly, Bowles's poem appears to be addressing death in general, while Pope recognizes the spirit of his poem as the ghost of an unnamed young lady: "'Tis she! —But why that bleeding bosom gored, / why dimly gleams the visionary sword?" (3-4). The

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Gray published his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" in 1751 and Charlotte Smith published her collection of "elegiac sonnets" in 1784. Both of these works were received well in the period. Though Bowles does choose to pay tribute to Gray's elegy in "Elegy Written at the Hot-wells, Bristol," which I will examine later in this chapter, the fact that "The Grave of Howard" mirrors what would have been an obsolete rendition of an elegy at the time Bowles wrote it suggests that Bowles's efforts were not aimed at responding to current developments in popular poetic tastes.

exclamation, “‘Tis she!” suggests that the speaker of the poem has recognized the ghost as the spirit of someone he once knew. Bowles’s address to the spirit is more general in scope; although he makes his way around to talking specifically about the death of a particular person, he does so by a more circuitous route. There is no dispute that Pope’s initial address to this particular young woman is more personal than Bowles’s initial address, and that this personal connection is likely to evoke a strong emotional response from its reader. Yet, by the end, Bowles has provided his reader with a concrete understanding of his subject’s achievements and identity, whereas Pope leaves the face of his “unfortunate lady” obscured.<sup>14</sup> So, by the end of their respective poems, Bowles’s reader knows his subject more intimately than Pope’s reader knows the “Unfortunate Lady”

We must understand the strength of this emotional response, as well as Joseph Warton’s allusion to it in his criticism of Pope and this particular elegy, in order to understand Bowles’s decision to address his own elegy to a figure that would have been instantly recognizable in the eighteenth century. Warton asserts that Pope’s poem is powerful and effective largely because it prioritizes the natural and the real over the imaginary. And yet, the fact that Pope’s subject is, if not imaginary, then at least unknown to the reader qualifies the verisimilitude of his elegy. David Vieth, in his article

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<sup>14</sup> James Baldwin Brown, in his book Memoirs of the Public and Private Life of John Howard, the Philanthropist, describes Howard in the inscription of the book as: “The Christian philanthropist whose career of extraordinary benevolence was suddenly terminated, by the excess of its own exertions, in a remote part of his majesty’s dominions” (v).

“Entrapment in Pope’s *Elegy*,” provides insight into a typical eighteenth century reader’s reaction to Pope’s *elegy*:

A second requirement for a work of entrapment, that it provoke a response whose intensity seems out of all proportion to the cause, is more than fulfilled by the testimony of countless eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers who found the *Elegy* strangely compelling. Not only did they consider it the most moving of all Pope’s poems, but their need to find a basis for its intensity evidently trapped them into postulating a real-life experience as an objective correlative. (426)

This insight reinforces Warton’s assertion that poetry is more powerful when it features real elements and not imaginary ones.

While in his article Vieth generally discusses the concept of emotional entrapment as it is demonstrated in Pope’s poem, his particular analysis of this point is useful to us because it illustrates how a contemporary reader would have responded to Pope’s poem and what the basis for that response would have been. To this end, Vieth suggests that the anonymity of the young woman in Pope’s poem complicated the eighteenth century reader’s emotional reaction because they were unable “to find a basis for its reaction” (426). Vieth continues to suggest that particular readers were determined to fill this void by attempting to align the events and circumstances of the poem with those surrounding various high-profile young women in the period. This desire, typical of eighteenth century readers, to align Pope’s descriptions with known identities in order to provide a basis for their emotions supports Warton’s assertion that real subjects are more effective in poetry than imaginary ones. Warton interprets Pope’s *elegy* in his “*Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*” and suggests:

If this *Elegy* be so excellent, it may be ascribed to this cause; that the occasion of it was real; for it is certainly an indisputable maxim, “That nature is more powerful than fancy; that we can always feel more than we can imagine; and that the most artful fiction can give way to truth.” (262)

Warton makes three claims in this excerpt from his essay on Pope that are particularly relevant to our discussion of Bowles and of Bowles’s own elegy. The first is that the excellence of Pope’s “Elegy” depends on whether or not the “Unfortunate Lady” is “real.”<sup>15</sup> The second is that the natural is more potent than the contrived or man-made. The final claim is that the powers of emotion surpass the powers of imagination. Given the strong teacher-student relationship that has already been established between Warton and Bowles, it is unsurprising that what Warton referred to as an “indisputable maxim” of poetry would significantly influence the poetry of his student.

Warton’s first claim, that there is an inherent connection between having “real” rather than contrived subjects and the positive strength of the emotional reaction of a poem’s readers, influences Bowles’s decision to make the subject of his elegy a well known public figure. In response to the objection anticipated above that Bowles’ poem is addressed generally, Bowles demands of the “Spirit of Death” (1) that he “Assume/ a

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<sup>15</sup> It seems plausible, given the context of the entire quotation as provided above, that Warton is suggesting that the poem is compelling not because it literally describes real-life people and events, but because it is believable. I base this point on the last sentence of the Warton quote, in which he states that the “most artful fiction can give way to truth.” This seems to suggest that fiction, composed artfully enough to appear real, is nearly as compelling as real events.



form more terrible, an ampler plume;/ For he, who wandered o'er the world alone" (5-8). It is in this way that Bowles shapes the generic spirit that he addresses in the opening line of the poem to reflect John Howard, the subject of his poem. This is a rhetorical device by which Bowles launches into a laudatory catalogue of Howard's virtues and heroic feats. Once the spirit expands to reflect Howard's greatness, Bowles begins to relate the feats and circumstances of Howard's life that make him, in Bowles's eyes, such a compelling figure. Again, this narrative structure is adopted from Pope's earlier elegy. The speaker of Pope's poem, once he recognizes the spirit of the young woman, launches into a similar account of her virtues. By placing these two poems side by side, we can begin to see how Bowles's poem, in several ways, shares the same basic premise but with edits inspired by Warton's comments on Pope's elegy. The most obvious difference between the two poems, or at least between the first twenty or so lines of the two poems, is that Pope takes as his subject a woman who is yet anonymous to the reader, while Bowles espouses the virtues of an instantly recognizable and, in Warton's words, "real" figure.

Warton's second claim is that natural settings are more potent and more emotionally evocative than man-made settings. For example, a poem set in a forest will evoke a stronger reaction from its reader than a similar poem set in a garden. This prioritization of natural settings permeates almost all of Bowles's work, in which he almost exclusively employs actual settings and subjects.<sup>16</sup> However, Warton would

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<sup>16</sup> Bowles's prioritization of natural over artificial or imaginary settings distinguishes him from Pope. It would take only a single look at Pope's gardens at Twickenham to see how Pope thought of artificial landscaping and decoration as reflective of sensibility.

likely regard Bowles's and Pope's Elegies as being on equal footing in regards to this particular claim because both poems concern themselves often with the natural settings in which the ghost and grave are positioned respectively.

The third claim Warton makes is that the power of emotions is greater than the power of imagination.<sup>17</sup> In the context of Pope's elegy, Warton's argument can be expanded to speak to the strength of the reader's emotional response. Vieth's article seems to support this reading by suggesting that it is the apparent reality of the identity of the unfortunate woman that provides for a strong reader response. In this light, we can infer that Warton is suggesting that a poem that elicits a strong emotional response has a more powerful effect on the reader than a poem that takes the reader on some flight of fancy.<sup>18</sup> Again, this is in itself a maxim that will appear continuously throughout this paper in regards to Bowles's poetic career. In the context of these two poems, however,

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<sup>17</sup> It deserves mention here, although I will return to it later, that this argument that Warton is making here, that real life experience lends itself to powerful poetry, could well have a connection to Bowles's own decision to write his fourteen sonnets while on his walking tour, distraught over his romantic disappointments.

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that Warton is simultaneously applying this maxim to suggest that Pope must have had some real-life basis for the events of the poem simply because of the strength of it and the strength of the response it elicits. This logic appears flawed, but the means by which he arrives at his conclusion can be easily applied to his criticism in general, and it appears that the positions I have gently extrapolated from Warton's essays are in line not only with the poetic values that his student, Bowles, exhibits, but also with those present in his own poetry.

this criterion is all the more reason for Bowles to so clearly identify the subject of his poem, both in title and in description. As evidenced by all of the speculation in the period, including that encouraged by Warton, there was a great deal of imaginative initiative taken by the poem's collective eighteenth century audience to find some parallel between the circumstances of the poem and the circumstances of real women who were familiar to Pope (Vieth 426, Warton 262-263). It is my argument that Warton implicitly suggests, and Bowles implicitly agrees when he names the subject of his elegy, that this imaginative inquisitiveness encouraged by the anonymity of the subject of Pope's poem detracts from the emotional strength of his readers' responses. By identifying Howard so clearly, and in such a positive and hyperbolic way, Bowles makes a conscious effort to elicit a much stronger emotional response to Howard's death. Not only does Bowles name his subject in the title of his poem, but he also chooses a popular public figure that would have been easily recognized in the period. Whereas Pope leaves very few hints as to the identity of the unfortunate lady, Bowles leaves no doubt that we are celebrating the achievements of John Howard. His logic, as is laid out by the maxim provided by Warton, appears to be that the more compelling a case he can make for Howard's real virtue, and the more unfortunate he can make the actual circumstances of his death appear, the more emotionally powerful the poem will be.

The purpose of this parallel reading has been to demonstrate the ways in which Bowles is a part of the tradition in which he was educated. In order to understand the poet himself, and the ways in which he was radical both in regards to the work he produced, and as a cultural figure, it is critical to understand the foundation on which he begins his career as a poet. The assertion that Bowles is a revolutionary figure is meaningless and

empty without some understanding of the tradition against which he is rebelling. Furthermore, Warton's critical essay provides us with some insight into the values that motivate Bowles's poetry throughout his career, particularly his obsessions with nature and emotional reflection.

## Part II

I have argued in the previous section of this chapter that, at the beginning of his poetic career, Bowles borrowed extensively from the tradition in which he was educated. Formally, he draws from Pope, and ideologically there are strong traces of Joseph Warton's poetic philosophies throughout his work. However, as I discuss in the previous part of this chapter, Bowles intentionally distances himself early on from his Neoclassical influences. In a poetic moment of professional clarity, Bowles declares his intention to progress away from the examples set by Pope, Gray and the Wartons, and towards a poetic style that will continue to mark the vast majority of Bowles's published work going forward.

This turning point for Bowles, I will argue, is coded directly and consciously into his "Elegy Written at the Hot-Wells, Bristol." By placing this poem by Bowles alongside Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," perhaps the most well known elegy of the eighteenth century, I will demonstrate the ways in which Bowles consciously alters Gray's model in order to promote his new poetic values and. These poetic ideologies will come to define both Bowles's poetry and the early stages of Romanticism as a whole.

Particularly visible in this parallel reading of the two elegies is Bowles's characterization of Nature as an active entity, as opposed to a mere passive poetic backdrop. By referring to nature as active, Bowles establishes a firm parallel between the natural world and human emotions. Bowles is able to craft his natural settings in his poetry so that they reflect and mirror the human pathos of his speaker. The reconciliation of the mental, the emotional and the natural, as well as the poetic evocation of intense melancholy, become constants in the majority of Bowles's poetry as he progresses away from the Neoclassical elegy as it is represented by poets like Pope and Gray.<sup>19</sup> It is these same poetic ideologies, presented in Bowles's sonnets that Coleridge becomes so enamored with three years later.

Bowles's "Elegy Written at the Hot-Wells, Bristol" (1789) is at once an imitation and a development of Thomas Gray's famous "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751). Bowles, in his poem, adopts both the form of the Neoclassical elegy and the melancholic reflection that mark Gray's elegy. Although in his poem, Bowles borrows extensively from Gray, both in form and content, his mode of depiction of the natural world and of the melancholy that he posits as being reflected in natural scenes, marks a distinct development away from the literary and poetical tradition that precedes him. Bowles's self-aware movement away from the traditional pastoral described in Gray's poem, towards a more emotional (if not sublime) consideration of nature as reflective of

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<sup>19</sup> In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge later describes Bowles's melancholic reflections in nature as being "so tender and yet so manly, so natural and real, and yet so dignified and harmonious" (4).

his own humanity, is instrumental in separating Bowles from his predecessors and establishing him as a contributor to the development of Romanticism.

Both Bowles's and Gray's elegies are representative of the Neoclassical formal tradition in poetry. A quick glance at Bowles's "Elegy Written at the Hot-Wells, Bristol," and Gray's "An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," reveals obvious formal similarities. Both poems are constructed of strict decasyllabic quatrains with alternating rhyme schemes. The strict rhyme scheme employed in both elegies is an adaptation of Pope's heroic couplet into a four-line heroic quatrain. By employing this structure in his elegy, Gray is in keeping with the formal emphasis in poetry over the majority of the eighteenth century. Bowles's decision to preserve this rhyme scheme and structure in his poem is likely less of an endorsement of that larger Neoclassical former emphasis, and more of a tribute to the notoriety of Gray's original.<sup>20</sup>

Gray's poem is famous for signaling a regeneration of interest in melancholy in poetry as well as a newfound appreciation for the classical pastoral. For Gray, the pastoral involvement of nature supplies an effective backdrop for his invocation of

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Mack, in his book, Thomas Gray: A Life, tells us of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard": "The *Elegy* is an allusively derivative poem—so much so, in fact, that it might be said to stand as a convenient summation of the entire elegiac tradition. The poem's unusually prominent position in the traditions of literary history and influence is thus itself the direct result of the *Elegy's* status as a veritable 'anthology' of the western language of mourning" (12). So, Gray, along with his elegy, becomes synonymous with the elegiac tradition. According to Mack, if you think 'Eighteenth-Century elegy', you think Thomas Gray.

melancholy. While “The Plow-man homeward plods his weary Way” (3), the “glimmering Landscape”(5) provides the background off in the distance as the speaker of the poem reflects on sadness and on death. Nature, in Gray’s poem, serves a passive purpose. It consistently appears in the background of the poem. It is the mere setting that allows us to understand the life of the plowman as typically pastoral.<sup>21</sup>

Although Bowles, like Gray, also recalls the formal poetic mode of Pope and the Neoclassicists, he is likely just as motivated by the influence of Gray himself.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Thorpe, in his book, Eighteenth Century English Poetry, tells us: “ a pastoral was a poem that had as its main function the creation of an image of rural innocence or happiness. It was felt to be literature of smooth verse and light subject matter, and frequently it contained the traditional pastoral elements associated with the classical models (Theocritus, Virgil, Bion, and Moschus): laments of love-struck shepherds; singing or piping contests for carved wooden drinking bowls or fancy flutes; and elegies for dead shepherds” (35-36). It is easy to see how Gray’s elegy fits into this Neoclassical pastoral model. Bowles, however, goes further than simply recounting the death of a shepherd in a pastoral scene. He uses nature not to establish a pastoral setting, but to effectuate his reflection on rejuvenation and growth. It is easy to see how this decision by Bowles breaks from the tradition represented by Gray and his contemporaries.

<sup>22</sup> By the time Bowles writes his elegy, Gray’s poem has been circulated for close to forty years and has garnered remarkable notoriety. However, Bowles’s poem is more than just a passive tribute to Gray’s fame. Bowles references Gray’s well-known elegy pragmatically; it is another well-established baseline from which Bowles builds his own consideration of nature and melancholic emotional reflection. Just as he does with Pope’s

Similarities, even in wording, are revealed by placing the two poems next to each other. Gray's opening line: "The Curfeu tolls the Knell of parting Day" (1) becomes Bowles's: "And long and loud the bell's slow chime is toll'd" (4). Gray's: "Save where the Beetle wheels his droning Flight" (7) becomes Bowles's: "Prone from the cliff the falcon wheels her way" (3). Quintessentially pastoral images like these are the primary device that Gray uses in to set up the melancholic, existential reflection at the end of his poem.<sup>23</sup> For Bowles, the pastoral images provide a foundation in a different way: invoking Gray's use of the pastoral allows Bowles to identify the ways in which Nature has traditionally been treated in Neoclassical poetry, in order to offer his own radical alternative that he proposes for the first time in his elegy.

While Gray, in his poem, employs Nature as a mere passive background, Bowles personifies the natural world in order to employ it actively in reflecting his own

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elegy in writing "The Grave of Howard," Bowles takes the accepted standard, and modifies it to fit better his own poetic philosophy, which advocates the emphasis of the parallel in poetry between nature and the human ethos.

<sup>23</sup> Gray establishes the process of living life in a rural village as monotonous and cyclical. Of the Shepherd, Gray writes "oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn/ Brushing with hasty steps the dews away." The shepherd wakes up each morning and goes through the exact same motions. Every day until "One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill." This existential reflection positions the life of the shepherd as fruitless. For Bowles, however, nature does not enable a fruitless life, but instead has a rejuvenating power.



melancholy emotions.<sup>24</sup> The “pale rocks . . . Uplift their bleak and fullow’d aspect high” (9-10). Instead of fixating on the regrettable aspects of death and dying, Bowles relies on a version of melancholy that appears to contain an internal conflict: it is at once happy and sad. This apparent contradiction is contained in Bowles’s representation of nature later in his elegy. In the sixth quatrain Bowles refers to “every breeze . . . as it whispers by” seeming “to breathe of comfort never to return.” Nature provides comfort, but because of the personal circumstances of “those by drooping sickness worn” (17), that happy comfort becomes bittersweet.<sup>25</sup> This theme of Nature taking on a melancholic hue as a reflection of the personal states of those experiencing it becomes a pervasive theme in Bowles’s poetry and one that sets him apart from his Neoclassical predecessors.

Gray’s “Elegy” serves at once as a foundation and a point of departure for Bowles in another way. While Gray ends his poem with an epitaph, a poetic tribute to a dead lover of Nature, Bowles ends, having been rejuvenated by Nature, by returning to normal life:

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<sup>24</sup> Throughout his later poetry, Bowles highlights what he perceives as a reflexive relationship between natural settings and melancholic emotional reflection.

<sup>25</sup> This is another example of how Bowles depicts nature in his poetry so as to have it reflect the emotional states of his subjects. The sick people are “worn” and “drooping” as a wilting flower or plant might be. These descriptions Bowles employs could be used to describe the sick people, or the natural world in which Bowles figures that sickness. The regeneration that Bowles describes later in the poem would be akin the plants blooming.

Thankful, that to these verdant scenes I owe,  
That he whom late I saw all-drooping pale,  
Rais'd from the couch of sickness and of woe  
Now lives with me their mantling views to hail.

Thankful, that still the landscape beaming bright,  
Of pendant mountains, or of woodland grey,  
Can wake the wonted sense of pure delight,  
And charm awhile my solitary way! (89-96)

Bowles's description of the natural scenes as "verdant" is juxtaposed against his description of the sick man as "all-drooping pale." The contrast of these two descriptions establishes the positive power of Nature, again, a recurring theme in Bowles's poetry.

Beyond signaling the utilitarian application of the themes and tropes of his predecessors by constructing his poem in a way that is simultaneously similar and different from Gray's well-known elegy, Bowles refers explicitly to the progression in literary theory that his elegy embodies. He writes:

I yet survive, now musing other song  
Than that which early sooth'd my thoughtless years;  
Thinking how days and hours have pass'd along,  
Mark'd by much pleasure some, and some by tears! (85-88)

The first two lines of this quatrain are explicitly concerned with demarcating the poetry Bowles has studied up to this point. The second clause in the first line: "now musing other song" unequivocally establishes that Bowles will not be mimicking the sort of

“song” that he has been concerned with up to this point. Any questions about the obligation Bowles feels to the tradition that precedes him and, perhaps more importantly, to the views of the Wartons, have been laid to rest with this quatrain. In that regard, this sort of “song” refers to the Neoclassical poetry in which Bowles’s education is rooted.

The fact that Bowles employs direct allusions to the form and content of one of the most famous of those Neoclassical poems to announce his departure from that tradition makes the departure itself even more dramatic. In the second line of this quatrain, Bowles describes that “song” from which he is departing as: “sooth[ing]” in his “thoughtless years.” Bowles’s description of that period, during which he was interested in that sort of poetry, as “thoughtless” implies that he thinks the bulk of the Neoclassical poetry itself is not thought provoking or powerful. This is a carefully worded, but bold rejection of the tradition that precedes Bowles’s publication of his sonnets.

Bowles continues in the quatrain by defining what will be the content of his poetry going forward. He establishes that his poetry will consider how his experiences have been marked by both gladness and sadness. This blend of emotions in turn establishes the bittersweet melancholy that pervades Bowles’s poetry for the next decade, most notably in his collected sonnets.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Another example of the way Bowles figures emotional and personal states in his descriptions of nature comes in his “elegy.” He describes the sick person in the same terms he uses to describe the rocks that “uplift their bleak and furrowed fronts on high.” At the beginning of the poem, Bowles personifies the rocks. Towards the ends of the poem, Bowles describes the sick person in the natural terms one might use to describe a

This close examination of Bowles's "Elegy" next to Gray's "Elegy," on which it is based, reveals a host of similarities alongside a collection of important differences. These factors in turn reveal a degree of professional self-awareness in Bowles that has never before been associated with him. By reading his "Elegy" next to Gray's poem, we can not only see that Bowles is familiar with the poetic trends that define the half-century which precedes his poetic career, but also that his development of those trends is self aware and intentional. The direction that Bowles chooses to go in his collection of Fourteen Sonnets is driven by his appreciation for nature and for the tender emotions that his reflection on the natural world produces. It is through his self-aware progression away from the formal tradition of Neoclassicism towards a new brand of formally unfettered exploration of the parallels between human emotions and the natural world, that Bowles begins to lay some of the groundwork for the development of the Romantic tradition. The fact that he crafts this foundation after explicitly and consciously rejecting the Neoclassical treatment of emotions and of nature, further recommends him as a relevant figure in the discussion of Romanticism. By consciously advancing away from the influences of Pope, Gray and the Wartons, Bowles establishes himself as a progressive poet, and as an important figure in the development of Romanticism. His newfound enthusiasm for the poetic relationship between nature and the human pathos proves infectious in the decade following his publication of Fourteen Sonnets.

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mountain scene: "Perhaps to these gray rocks and mazy springs/ some heart may come, warmed with the purest fire" (52-53).

## CHAPTER II

### Bowles and Coleridge

There is a near unanimous consensus that Coleridge was enamored with Bowles's poetry early in the 1790s. Coleridge expresses his enthusiasm in Biographia Literaria when he talks about reading the sonnets for the first time after a friend lent him Bowles's pamphlet:

It was a double pleasure to me . . . that I should have received, from a friend so revered, the first knowledge of a poet by whose works, year after year, I was so enthusiastically delighted and inspired. My earliest acquaintances will not have forgotten the undisciplined eagerness and impetuous zeal with which I laboured to make proselytes, not only of my companions, but of all with whom I conversed. Of whatever rank and in whatever place. As my school finances did not permit me to purchase copies, I made, within less than a year and a half, more than forty transcriptions, as the best presents I could offer to those who had in any way won my regard. (17)

Coleridge is nearly hyperbolic in his description of his enthusiasm for Bowles's sonnets. Henry Beers in A History of English Romanticism in the Nineteenth Century details one

of the reasons for Coleridge's enthusiasm: "To Bowles's poems Coleridge ascribes the credit of . . . a strengthened perception of the essentially unpoetic character of Pope's poetry" (34). In other words, Coleridge tells us that part of the reason for his enthusiasm in regards to Bowles was the contrast between Bowles's sonnets and the Neoclassical tradition represented by Pope. This admission by Coleridge places even more emphasis on the conscious decision Bowles makes in his "Elegy Written at the Hot Wells—Bristol" to depart from the example set by Gray. In turn, Coleridge's interest in Bowles flows directly from Bowles's treatment of nature and melancholic reflection by which Bowles differentiates himself from his predecessors. Talking about this tradition represented by Pope and Gray, Coleridge tells us: "The reader . . . must make himself acquainted with the general style of composition that was at that time deemed poetry, in order to understand and account for the effect produced on me by the sonnets . . . of Mr. Bowles" (Biographia Literaria 17). So, Coleridge tells us that, in order to understand the strength of his enthusiasm for Bowles, we must appreciate what he was doing differently. As I identify in the first chapter of this paper, Bowles progresses away from the tradition of Pope and Gray and embraces a melancholic strain reflected in his descriptions of nature. It is this quality in Bowles's poetry that Coleridge embraces and praises in the early 1790's and later in Biographia Literaria.

However, M.H. Abrams tells us that while Coleridge was enamored with Bowles's poetry during his time at Cambridge, he soon matured and developed his poetic style away from Bowles's example (Abrams "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric"). This is a common thread in modern criticism, where authors define

Bowles's influence strictly based on what they recognize to be his most laudable contribution to poetry in the period: helping to inspire the greater genius of Coleridge.<sup>27</sup>

The first section of this chapter will start with a parallel reading of Bowles's "To the River Itchin" (1789) alongside Coleridge's "To the River Otter" (1796) and Thomas Warton's "To the River Lodon" (1777). The first two poems provide the basis for the vast majority of critical work that has been published on the relationship between Bowles and Coleridge.<sup>28</sup> The general critical assertion is that Coleridge's sonnet is based on Bowles's and that this is evidence of the indebtedness Coleridge claims in Biographia Literaria. From this baseline, Abrams specifically argues that a close reading of the two sonnets reveals that Coleridge writes his poem as a decisive progression away from

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<sup>27</sup> Abrams makes this point not only in his essay, but also in The Mirror and the Lamp. A Harris Fairbanks and Jonathan Wordsworth imply the same connection in their articles. Garland Greever in his preface to A Wiltshire Parson and his Friends: The Correspondence of William Lisle Bowles makes the same argument, albeit with a few qualifications that flow from his interpretation of Bowles's letters, to which the later critics make no reference. Perhaps the most significant scholarly source in reference to this consensus on Bowles's significance is also the oldest—George Gilfillan's memoir of Bowles included in his posthumous publication of Bowles's *Poetical Works* in 1855. Gilfillan's text is referenced by all of the critics who come after him and seems to provide the foundation for our modern understanding of Bowles.

<sup>28</sup> The critics I will account for are Jonathan Wordsworth, A. Harris Fairbanks and M.H. Abrams. These three critics represent the vast majority of the work done on Bowles.

Bowles.<sup>29</sup> The suggested conclusion, and one that Abrams shares with A. Harris Fairbanks and Jonathan Wordsworth, is that Bowles serves as a stepping stone in Coleridge's own development, and that he provides a mere foundation for the latter poet's professional ascent. From this point, I will argue that Bowles's poetry is not a mere foundation upon which Coleridge aims to build, but rather that Coleridge sees Bowles as a kind of poetic ideal.<sup>30</sup> In addition, I will argue that because Abrams is

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<sup>29</sup> Abrams cites W.K. Wimsatt in arguing that "'To the River Otter"—though written in express imitation of Bowles's "To the River Itchin" [again, an argument I take issue with], perhaps so early as 1793—has begun to diverge from Bowles's "simple association . . . simply asserted" by involving the thought in the descriptive details so that the design "is latent in the multiform sensuous picture." In their respective articles, Fairbanks and Wordsworth further support the idea that Coleridge is intentionally progressing away from Bowles's poetics.

<sup>30</sup> This conclusion is supported by one of Coleridge's letters, which appears nowhere in any of the above critic's discussions about the relationship between the two men. In his letter to Henry Martin on July 22, 1794 Coleridge writes that Bowles "is still the same, (the added poems will prove it) descriptive, dignified, tender, sublime. The sonnets added are exquisite. Abba Thule has marked beauties, and the little poem at Southampton is a diamond; in whatever light you place it, it reflects beauty and splendour. The "Shakespeare" is sadly unequal to the rest. Yet in whose poems, except those of Bowles, would it not have been excellent?" (Coleridge to Henry Martin, *Biographia Epistolaris*). Coleridge's endorsement of Bowles establishes the latter as the unequivocal ideal, unmatched by any other as Coleridge himself says in the last sentence from the above



unfamiliar with Bowles's work, he takes some of Coleridge's comments out of context and commits a critical misstep in his treatment of Bowles as a result. This simple mistake by such a prominent critic has distorted the way we have read (or not read) Bowles over the past fifty years. I will place Coleridge's comments about Bowles's published works in their proper context to show that the split between Coleridge and Bowles likely had little to do with their respective poetic ideologies and more to do with their personal and philosophical disagreements.

Having first made this argument from a historical perspective, I turn to Coleridge and Bowles's respective poems to support my argument. I will point specifically to two poems, one by each poet, which I argue are written in conversation with each other. My reading of these two poems supports the existence of a philosophical difference of opinion between Coleridge and Bowles that leads to a subsequent misunderstanding and, in turn, to Coleridge's alienation from Bowles. By looking specifically at two poems that have not been placed in conversation, I will further refute Abrams's conclusion that Coleridge knowingly and intentionally distances himself from Bowles as a necessary result of his own maturation in poetic style.

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excerpt. Coleridge's description of Bowles as "sublime" is of particular interest in this quote given the concentration of the critical community on the development of that concept in Romantic poetry. See Edmund Burke's book, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.

## Part I

In their respective critical works, both A. Harris Fairbanks and Jonathan Wordsworth establish Bowles as an intermediary who provides a bridge between the eighteenth century sonneteers and the romantics. To establish a poetic trajectory based on three river sonnets, a sequence which starts with Warton, proceeds through Bowles, and ends with Coleridge, is an oversimplification of the differences in the emotional subjects of the three poems. To do so also establishes Coleridge's sonnet as the last in the series, and therefore the most effective, based not on content but simply on chronology. The attempt that both Fairbanks and Wordsworth make to establish this progression reduces the reading of the three poems to a simple discussion of the similarities in poetic form between each poem. Wordsworth and Fairbanks both encourage a reading of the three river sonnets that pays little heed to the distinct differences in the ways the poems treat the relationships between their speakers and Nature.

In his essay, entitled simply "William Lisle Bowles," Jonathan Wordsworth wastes no time establishing a poetic trajectory from Warton, to Bowles, and ending with Coleridge when he says:

[I]t is not surprising that [Coleridge] knew [Bowles's] *Sonnets* rather well, assimilating from them the tender melancholy that Bowles himself had inherited from his Oxford tutor, Thomas Warton, Fellow of Trinity and Poet Laureate.

Warton's sonnet "To the river Lodon" is the inspiration for Bowles's "To the river Itchin, near Winton," just as Bowles inspires Coleridge's "To the river Otter."<sup>(1)</sup>

Wordsworth's description of Bowles as an intermediate step in this poetic progression encourages an incomplete reading of Bowles's sonnet, and of Bowles as a poet.

Wordsworth's assertion that Coleridge assimilated from Bowles's a "tender melancholy" that Bowles had in turn "inherited from his Oxford tutor, Thomas Warton" does not follow logically from Wordsworth's observation of the resemblance in the form of the three river sonnets.<sup>31</sup> There are no striking similarities in the emotional reflections present in each poem, and this fact sheds some doubt on Wordsworth's suggestion that these sonnets are the embodiment of each poet's debt to his predecessor. Wordsworth does not err in arguing that the three river poems are linked through their similarities in form, nor does he stray too far in supposing that each poet inherited what he calls a "tender melancholy" from his predecessor; his error lies in his combination of these two arguments.<sup>32</sup> Wordsworth is wrong to imply that the similarities in poetic form between

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<sup>31</sup> Warton's sonnet does not feature the same melancholic reflection that marks Bowles's poem. Bowles mourns the passing of time and of his childhood. In contrast, Warton celebrates his accomplishments in his adult life.

<sup>32</sup> To clarify, Bowles's trademark melancholy, which Coleridge describes as being "manly" yet "tender," evolves from the more two dimensional elegiac sadness that we see in Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," in Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady," and in Joseph Warton's critical celebration of the latter poem. Bowles does not inherit his trademark melancholic introspectiveness; he inherits a foundation upon which he is able to build his own poetic style. The melancholy that Coleridge talks about is original to Bowles.

each of the three river sonnets warrant reading into them the debt that each poet owes his predecessor for awakening in him the power of melancholic self-reflection.<sup>33</sup>

In his article “‘Dear Native Brook’: Coleridge, Bowles, and Thomas Warton the Younger,” A. Harris Fairbanks exposes a motive behind the sequential pairing of Bowles and Coleridge when he suggests that “it has proved the most convenient example for illustrating the indebtedness to Bowles that Coleridge professes so fervently in the Biographia Literaria”(13). Coleridge describes this indebtedness twice in the Biographia Literaria; his first expression of gratitude is of a very personal sort:

This preposterous pursuit [of my philosophical interests] was, beyond doubt, injurious both to my natural powers, and to the progress of my education. It would perhaps have been destructive, had it been continued; but from this I was auspiciously withdrawn, partly indeed by an accidental introduction to an amiable family, chiefly however, by the genial influence of a style of poetry, so tender and yet so manly, so natural and real, and yet so dignified and harmonious, as the sonnets and other early poems of Mr. Bowles. (4)

Not only does Coleridge credit Bowles with being the inspiration for his initial love of poetry and his decision to pursue it, but he offers a ringing endorsement of Bowles’s

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<sup>33</sup> What debt Bowles does owe for his “inheritance” of the Neoclassical elegiac mode is likely owed more to Gray and Pope than it is to Thomas Warton. Nonetheless, Warton, as Bowles’s tutor at Oxford for seven years, ought to be credited with shaping Bowles’s poetic to a degree. While surely this would include some cultivation of Bowles’s poetic reflections, Thomas Warton’s major contribution to Bowles was in teaching him his mastery of the sonnet form. It was primarily a formal inheritance.

poetry as well. The second passage, in which Coleridge endorses Bowles's poetry, comes two pages later when he says, "Cowper and Bowles were, to the best of my knowledge, the first who combined natural thoughts with natural diction; the first who reconciled the heart with the head" (6). This combination is evident in Bowles's "To the River Itchin" when he details the progression of thoughts and emotions present to him upon visiting the river, in a portrayal of the spontaneity in which they might naturally occur. This spontaneity is literally reflected in the river itself. Not only does the river trigger Bowles's emotional reflection: he connects that reflection to his description of the actual flowing water, but philosophically speaking, a river is metaphorically spontaneous.<sup>34</sup> Bowles uses the image of the river in this instance to connect the spontaneity of thought and memory to his nostalgic emotional reflections triggered by the passing of time.

This reconciliation of the mental with the emotional is a theme that Coleridge, almost thirty years later, was still impressed by when he published the Biographia Literaria. Coleridge's admiration for Bowles is more driven by emotional exploration

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<sup>34</sup>This spontaneity of the river as a philosophical metaphor is noted by Plato, who tells us: "Heraclitus, you know, says that everything moves on and that nothing is at rest; and, comparing existing things to the flow of a river, he says that you could not step into the same river twice" (Plato Cratylus 402A). Bowles, in his sonnet "To the River Itchin" describes his emotional states as being reflected on the "silver breast" of the river: "on which the self-same tints still seem to rest" (2-3). "self-same" in this case ought to be interpreted as referring to the emotions that Bowles describes in the following lines, specifically his "shiv'ring sense of pain" (4).

than it is related to the structure and style of his poetry. However, even if we accept the premise that Coleridge's efforts to imitate Bowles were driven by form instead of by content, Fairbanks tells us that the formal similarities between the three poems suggest that Coleridge was focused as much on Warton's sonnet as he was on Bowles's.<sup>35</sup>

Fairbanks takes issue with the idea that Bowles's "To the River Itchin" provided the model for Coleridge's "To the River Otter" when he says, "since a point worth making so often is worth making accurately, it should be pointed out that while Coleridge indisputably had one eye on Bowles's sonnet, he had the other on a sonnet 'To the River Lodon' by Thomas Warton, the Younger" (313). While Fairbanks acknowledges the common perception that Bowles's sonnet was a direct influence on Coleridge's poem, he goes on to discuss the less explored connection in wording between Coleridge's "To the River Otter" and Thomas Warton's "To the River Lodon." He focuses on the similarities between specific words and phrases in both sonnets which might suggest that Coleridge used Warton as a model just as much, if not more, than he did Bowles:

Coleridge, in his first three lines, adapts a cluster of phrases similarly clustered in lines 7-9 of Warton's sonnet. Warton's "Sweet native stream" becomes

Coleridge's "Dear native Brook! Wild Streamlet . . ."; "the varied interval"

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<sup>35</sup> In the following pages I will outline Fairbanks's argument. Though I will reject the means by which Fairbanks reaches some of his conclusions, but I will, after my own analysis, return to his conclusions in order to suggest that Coleridge's attempts to integrate some of Warton's tropes in his own sonnet were likely borne of his enthusiasm and eagerness to imitate Bowles.

becomes “various-fated years”; and “Much pleasure, more of sorrow” becomes “What happy and what mournful hours.” In the absence of counterparts in Bowles’s sonnet, these echoes, juxtaposed as they are, can hardly be coincidental. (313)

Although he pays close attention to the form and placement of specific phrases in each of the three poems, Fairbanks’s consideration and analysis of the emotional focus of the poems is considerably less careful. After he criticizes the tendency of his literary peers to peg the similarities between Bowles’s sonnet and Coleridge’s poem as an example of Coleridge’s debt to Bowles, as Coleridge details it in the Biographia Literaria, Fairbanks commits a similar error in order to establish Warton as a primary influence on Coleridge’s “To the River Otter.” He argues that “most of the striking similarities between Coleridge’s sonnet and Warton’s should, in the light of the Biographia Literaria, be attributed to the intermediary influence of Bowles” (315) but admits that “Coleridge adopts details of Warton’s sonnet that have no counterpart in Bowles’s” (315). These striking similarities, that both poems address a river, take the form of a sonnet, and are somehow reflective, are all inherently tied to the basic form and construction of the three poems. In contrast, the excerpts from the Biographia Literaria in which Coleridge discusses Bowles are entirely focused on the depth of emotion that Bowles has awakened in him. Coleridge’s remarks are not at all concerned with the form of Bowles’s poetry. This distinction between form and content suggests that the obvious similarities that Fairbanks refers to are those which he accounts for in the next line of his article when he says that “all three of the poems express a mixture of sorrow and joy (or solace, at least)” (315). While this statement is not false, it is an oversimplification of the emotions

expressed in each poem. A closer look into the subject matter of each poem reveals that they are not similar in content at all, but distinctly different in their portrayal of emotional nostalgia. Fairbanks's tendency to simplify the emotional focus of the three sonnets is an attempt to reconcile the striking differences between them in order to establish them as embodiments of the debts which each poet owes his predecessor.<sup>36</sup> By claiming similarities in the emotional subject matter of the three poems, Fairbanks can move on to discuss the less obvious similarities between them in terms of phrasing in order to make his argument that "To the River Otter" is just as, if not more closely based on Warton's "To the River Lodon" than it is on Bowles's "To the River Itchin.'" The evidence he provides is very strong, but his premise that the three poems are expressive of a general mixture of sorrow, joy, and solace, is invalid. It is not necessarily that Fairbanks is wrong, because he makes a strong case for the similarities he sees in syntax and diction; but what he sees to be the most important aspects of the three sonnets are in fact secondary to the contrasting emotions portrayed in each poem. The striking nature of these differences comes to bear in a close reading of the three poems next to Coleridge's Biographia Literaria.

Warton's prioritization of the accomplishments of his adult life over the innocence of his childhood in his sonnet "To the River Lodon" distinguishes him from

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<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that Fairbanks's evaluation of the formal similarities between Warton and Coleridge's sonnets *can* actually be paralleled in an emotional reading of the poems as well. Fairbanks fails to offer such a reading and this is an oversight on his part. I will pick up where he left off in order to make the argument later in this section that Coleridge's evocation of Warton was actually indicative of his enthusiasm for Bowles.



Bowles, Coleridge, and the rest of the Romantics, and sets his poem up as a harsh contrast to their later sonnets. Warton's sonnet focuses on the river as the cause of a brief reflection on the joys of childhood and innocence. This brief recollection of youthful innocence is evident when Warton says:

Ah! What a weary race my feet have run,  
since first I trod thy banks with alders crown'd,  
and thought my way was all through fairy ground,  
beneath thy azure sky, and golden sun. (1-4)

The speaker establishes a distance from reality in the third line of this excerpt when he recalls how he thought the bank of the river was "fairy ground." This distance contrasts his later joy in adulthood, which seems to exist in the absence of his childhood innocence. This innocence is an obstacle that Warton conquers in his journey to become an elite poet.<sup>37</sup> This progression of the speaker as an aspiring author abandoning any recollection of the innocence of childhood in order to be successful is in stark contrast to the other two river sonnets and to Romantic poetry in general. The majority of Warton's sonnet is a reflection on authorship, his growth as a poet, and finally, the satisfaction he has regarding his poetic accomplishments. Warton's sonnet, with specific attention to the

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<sup>37</sup> This ties directly into the criticism of Joseph Warton, Thomas Warton's brother, which was discussed in the first chapter of this paper. Bowles, and apparently T. Warton, both accept the idea that the real is superior to the imaginary. Bowles implicitly disagrees with T. Warton in the latter poet's assertion that this dichotomy of good and bad values in poetry extends to consideration of childhood innocence. Bowles frequently revisits flights of fancy from his youth and uses them as foils to the events of his adult life.

last four lines, illustrates both this satisfaction as well as the completion of his poetic growth:

Ah! What a weary race my feet have run,  
Since first I trod thy banks with alders crowned,  
And thought my way was all through fairy ground,  
Beneath thy azure sky and golden sun:  
Where first my muse to lisp her notes begun!  
While pensive memory traces back the round  
Which fills the varied interval between;  
Much pleasure, more of sorrow, marks the scene.  
Sweet native stream! Those skies and suns so pure  
No more return, to cheer my evening road!  
Yet still one joy remains, that not obscure,  
nor useless, all my vacant days have flow'd,  
from youth's gay dawn to manhood's prime mature;  
nor with the Muse's laurel unbestow'd (1-14)

This excerpt embodies the speaker's sense of accomplishment and pride in leaving behind the innocence of youth. Although he is momentarily taken with the sadness of leaving behind his childhood haunts, this brief instance of melancholy is replaced by the "one joy"(11) that remains. He reflects that his one joy remains that his "vacant days have flow'd" neither obscure nor with the Muse's laurel unbestow'd (11-14). In other words, he has gained great renown, and his days have followed a natural progression "from youth's gay dawn to manhood's prime mature"(13). The closing line of his sonnet

is especially telling. In it he reflects that his days have passed and he has grown up without “the Muse’s laurel unbestow’d”(14). This line pairs with the first two lines of the excerpt in detailing the joy and solace he has found in his achievements. These lines are likely a direct reference to Warton’s appointment as Poet Laureate, suggesting that the poem reflects neither on melancholy nor innocence, but on his own achievements and poetic triumphs. The solace he finds in his success as a poet is in stark contrast to that which he once found as an innocent child in nature, and he implies the former is superior. Warton situates his descriptions of nature and childhood innocence at the beginning of the sonnet and then progresses to the sanctuary he finds in his poetic success later in the poem, and later in life.

Bowles provides a strong contrast to Warton’s satisfied reflection of life and authorship in his own river sonnet “To the River Itchin, Near Winton.”

Itchin, when I behold thy banks again,  
Thy crumbling margin, and thy silver breast,  
On which the self-same tints still seem to rest,  
Why feels my heart the shiv'ring sense of pain?  
Is it, that many a summer's day has past  
Since, in life's morn, I carol'd on thy side?  
Is it, that oft, since then, my heart has sigh'd,  
As Youth, and Hope's delusive gleams, flew fast?  
Is it that those, who circled on thy shore,  
Companions of my youth, now meet now more?  
Whate'er the cause, upon thy banks I bend

Sorrowing, yet feel such solace at my heart,  
As at the meeting of some long-lost friend,  
From whom, in happier hours, we wept to part. (1-14)

In this poem, Bowles ponders the cruelty of adult life and the passing of time while revisiting his childhood haunts. Bowles illustrates this melancholy brought on by nostalgic reflection in the opening lines of the poem when he asks: “why feels my heart the shiv’ring sense of pain?” (3). Not only is Bowles’s word choice in the opening lines of the poem evocative of the intense personal pain and dissatisfaction that he is experiencing, but these sentiments are mirrored in the punctuation of his poem as well. While Warton’s sonnet is composed of a series of energetic and nostalgic exclamations, as if he has walked the path of life and is recounting his journey, Bowles frames his reflection in a series of pleading rhetorical questions, as if by recounting the pains of the passing of time he might escape his heartfelt “shiv’ring sense of pain”(3). Bowles does more than just give an account of his sorrows, he explores them. The way he presents his catalogue of rhetorical questions in the poem mirrors the way his thoughts might progress spontaneously in nature. The first question he asks as to the source of his pain: “Is it—that many a summer’s day has past/ since, in life’s morn I carol’d on thy side?”(5-6). This question focuses on the general sense of discontent that Bowles feels surrounding the passing of time and his own aging.

Taken alone, the above question would be nothing but general melancholy, but when it is combined with the next two questions, for which it sets the stage, the result is a complete picture of the emotional turmoil Bowles, scorned in love, is experiencing upon revisiting the river Itchin. In his next question, Bowles asks, “is it—that oft, since then,

my heart has sigh'd, / as Youth, and Hope's delusive gleams, flew fast?" (7-8). These lines are key to Bowles's depiction of his melancholic emotional state. His association of "Youth" and "Hope" as the entities which have caused him pain, by flying away, provides an example of the toll the passing of time takes. The last question Bowles asks, "Is it—that those, who circled on thy shore, / companions of my youth, now meet no more?" (9-10), is increasingly specific in how it ties into the two questions immediately preceding it.<sup>38</sup> Bowles is struck by the lack of companionship he has in his adult life; with time so goes youth, and for Bowles, the passing of youth has taken his companions as well. This is a specific allusion to Bowles's own life; he was spurned in love by the niece of Sir Samuel Romilly, and it was this rejection that motivated his walking tour of England, during which he wrote his fourteen sonnets, including "To the River Itchin, Near Winton." As a result of his failed love interest, Bowles removed himself from his social circles, choosing instead a long period of exploration and reflection in nature. This personal choice is reflected in the solace he finds in the sublimity of nature in the last four lines of the poem:

What'er the cause, upon thy banks I bend  
sorrowing, yet feel such solace at my heart,  
as at the meeting of some long-lost friend,

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<sup>38</sup> Bowles's sadness comes from the realization that, even upon revisiting his old haunts, he can never really return back to the scenes of his childhood, because by definition they will have changed.

from whom, in happier hours, we wept to part. (11-14)<sup>39</sup>

In the first line of this passage Bowles takes a step back from the emotional questioning he has just finished, and abandons his attempt to discover the source of his pain. In the first two lines he acknowledges that when he bends upon the banks of the river, he feels “such solace at [his] heart” (12). This solace is indisputably brought on by his immersion in nature, and it is a direct contrast to the “shiv’ring sense of pain” (4) he feels in his heart as a result of the passing of time. Although his “heart has sigh’d” (7) at the passing of time, youth and companionship, he finds sanctuary in nature as if he is “meeting some long-lost friend” (13) which is an alternative to the companions he has lost to the passing of time. While Bowles’s introspection is facilitated by the reflection of his emotions in his natural surroundings and his descriptions of our other poets, Warton and Coleridge, both employ nature simply as a backdrop for their reflection.

While Bowles insists that aging and the loss of innocence that accompanies it are painful processes, Coleridge acknowledges more of a balance in the experience of growing up and living in his sonnet “To the River Otter.”

Dear native brook! wild streamlet of the West!  
How many various-fated years have passed,  
What happy and what mournful hours, since last  
I skimmed the smooth thin stone along thy breast,  
Numbering its light leaps! Yet so deep impressed  
Sink the sweet scenes of childhood, that mine eyes

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<sup>39</sup> The river becomes an almost human entity, embodying and literally reflecting human emotion and sharing a personal relationship with the speaker himself.

I never shut amid the sunny ray,  
But straight with all their tints thy waters rise,  
Thy crossing plank, thy marge with willows grey,  
And bedded sand that, veined with various dyes,  
Gleamed through thy bright transparence! On my way,  
Visions of childhood! oft have ye beguiled  
Lone manhood's cares, yet waking fondest sighs:  
Ah! that once more I were a careless child! (1-14)

He begins by reflecting on the passing of time, and concludes by taking solace from his “various fated years” (2) and “mournful hours” (3) in the momentary recollection of his childhood innocence. Coleridge suggests that a certain fascination with the natural world goes hand in hand with youth and innocence when he says, “yet so deep imprest/ sink the sweet scenes of childhood, that mine eyes/ I never shut amid the sunny ray” (5-7). He goes on to define these “scenes of childhood” as purely natural images in the next four lines:

straight with all their tints thy waters rise,  
thy crossing plank, thy marge with willows grey,  
and bedded sand that vein'd with various dyes  
gleam'd through thy bright transparence! (8-11).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Coleridge, unlike Bowles, does not attempt to figure his emotional reflection into his description of the river itself. The “tints” are no longer his own “self-same” tints; the river is lined with grayed trees and shiny sand, both images, although they are vibrant, have no obvious corollary in the human pathos.

For Bowles, encountering the river from his childhood causes tremendous melancholy and forces him to reflect on the dreary state of his adult life. But for Coleridge, the images of the river, which are pure glimpses of nature, cause him to longingly reflect on the innocence of childhood. Bowles feels “such solace” (12), having escaped his adult life by returning to the scenes of his childhood, while Coleridge is intently focused on “lone manhood’s cares” (13).

The last four lines of Coleridge’s “To the River Otter” are in stark contrast to closing lines of “To the River Itchin” in that they establish nature as disruptive as opposed to comforting. When Coleridge addresses his “visions of Childhood” (12) (of which the natural scenes from lines 8-11 are examples) he is accusatory, saying “oft have ye beguil’d/ lone manhood’s cares” (12-13) as if the delusions of childhood are distractions, albeit pleasant ones, from adult life. In the last line of the poem Coleridge exclaims, “Ah! That once more I were a careless Child!” (14) It is important to note that Coleridge qualifies child with “careless,” a direct contrast to “lone manhood’s cares,” suggesting that it is the lack of responsibility and obligations which allow children, free from cares, to revel in their innocence. This sharp contrast between “manhood’s cares” and “careless” childhood is Coleridge’s implication that adult life is more fulfilling in its difficulty, and that childhood is just simple and easy, but not as rewarding. This reading is furthered by Coleridge’s use of the word “beguil’d” to describe the practical effect that recollecting his childhood has on his adult life.<sup>41</sup> Although it does not deny the positive

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<sup>41</sup> Coleridge is primarily concerned with the cost his nostalgic flight of fancy has in regards to his adult productivity. His utilitarian analysis of the costs of youthful reflection belies his analytical and philosophical worldview that he laments thirty years later in



effects of a momentary recollection of childhood innocence, Coleridge's word choice does suggest that these recollections are delusions and counterproductive in his adult life. Coleridge's exclamation, "Ah! That once more I were a careless Child!"(13) suggests the obvious truth that childhood is something to revel in only when you are young, and to even reflect on it for an extended period of time as an adult is to be delusional.

Coleridge's take on the recollection of childhood as being inappropriate for an adult sharply contrasts with Bowles's reflection in his sonnet. To include Bowles's poem in a supposedly progressive sequence of river sonnets, starting with Warton and ending with Coleridge, is to oversimplify Bowles's poem and to force a diminished reading of it. In Biographia Literaria, published twenty years after "To the River Otter," Coleridge indirectly rejects both the idea that "To the River Otter" is the realization of the debt that he owes Bowles, as well as the belief that his own sonnet was the product of his own improvements on Bowles's, when he says:

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Biographia Literaria. Retrospectively, Coleridge sees this quality in his poetry as a weakness that undercuts what he identifies as the "natural" strain in Bowles's poetry. In this instance, that weakness prevents Coleridge from entirely embracing Bowles's message in his poem. He fails to replicate Bowles's established parallel between nature and the human psyche. At the time, this difference of opinion constitutes a fundamental philosophical disagreement between the two poets. Coleridge feels the need for all his endeavors to serve a strictly functional purpose, whereas Bowles finds immeasurable value in his apparently fruitless emotional reflections. This disagreement lays the groundwork for the later split between the two poets that I will describe in the second and third sections of this chapter.

[E]ven at the early period of my juvenile poems, I saw and admitted the superiority of an austerer and more natural style, with an insight not less clear, than I at present possess. My judgment was stronger than were my powers of realizing its dictates...though indeed partly owing to a wrong choice of subjects.

(1)

The “early period” of “juvenile poems” is an allusion to the poems he wrote just after he left university in 1794, which would include “To the River Otter.” Coleridge’s assertion that he “admitted the superiority of an austerer and more natural style” seems to line up directly with his praise of Bowles as the first to “[combine] natural thoughts with natural diction.” The fact that Coleridge admits his own inability to feature the elements of this “natural style” in his own poetry, ought to dispel any notion that “To the River Otter” is the realization of the debt which Coleridge describes himself as owing Bowles because that poem is included those “juvenile poems” that Coleridge is referring to.

The more likely poetic embodiment of this debt, which is more aligned with Coleridge’s reflections in Biographia Literaria, is the first sonnet published in the same pamphlet, which included “To the River Otter.” Coleridge, in the opening line of this poem, entitled “Sonnet I”, exclaims:

My heart has thanked thee, Bowles! For those soft strains,

That, on the still air floating, tremblingly

Wak’d in me Fancy, Love, and Sympathy (1-3)

Coleridge recollects “sonnet I” when he writes Biographia Literaria twenty years later, as is evidenced by the similarity in the language between the two texts. In Biographia Literaria Coleridge describes Bowles as possessing “a style of poetry, so tender and yet

so manly” (16) which directly mirrors his description of Bowles’s “mild and manliest melancholy” in his sonnet (8). The parallel between the thanks Coleridge expresses in this sonnet and the praise he renders Bowles in Biographia Literaria suggests “Sonnet I” as the poetic realization of Coleridge’s gratitude to Bowles, and designates “To the River Otter” as a simple attempt to mimic the form of Bowles’s river sonnet. Coleridge’s experiment with the sonnet form used by his poetic role model should have no bearing on the consideration of Bowles’s poem as its own entity. Coleridge’s deprecation of his own poetic abilities at the time, combined with the major discrepancies between the three river sonnets, and the misrepresentation of “To the River Otter” as Coleridge’s poetic version of the gratitude he expresses to Bowles in Biographia Literaria, all serve to isolate “To the River Itchin” from the sonnets of Warton and Coleridge and remove it from the continuum that Wordsworth argues exists between the three poems.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Coleridge writes in Biographia Literaria his enthusiasm for philosophy and metaphysics: “was, beyond doubt, injurious both to my natural powers, and to the progress of my education. It would perhaps have been destructive, had it been continued; but from this I was auspiciously withdrawn, partly indeed by an accidental introduction to an amiable family, chiefly however, by the genial influence of a style of poetry, so tender and yet so manly, so natural and real, and yet so dignified and harmonious, as the sonnets and other early poems of Mr. Bowles” (16). Coleridge himself, as evidenced by this quote, recognizes that he needed to be rescued, by Bowles, from his philosophical worldview. When we see this very perspective surface in Coleridge’s sonnet, it seems safe to assume that he would have been unhappy, at least by the time he wrote Biographia Literaria, that he pursued his professional goals exclusively.

Examining “To the River Itchin” on its own, while also paying proper attention to Bowles’s emotional struggles, provides a dramatically different reading than considering Bowles’s poem as an intermediary between Warton’s and Coleridge’s poems. Reading “To the River Itchin” in the latter manner suggests Bowles’s intense emotions as one extreme, which is in explicit contrast to the other demonstrated by Warton who stoically represses his emotion by considering his professional life. In this reading, Coleridge’s poem is the realization of the potential of the river sonnet. Coleridge borrows from both his predecessors to craft a poem which considers both the practical as well as the emotional implications of self reflection. However, to read “To the River Itchin” as a preparatory stage in the poetic evolution of the river sonnet, with Coleridge supplying the finished product, is to ignore both the intensity of the emotion that Bowles portrays as well as Coleridge’s respect for that passion. Reading the three poems individually, based on the similarities in their emotional focuses and not those in their form, suggests that perhaps Coleridge was, in fact, focused more on “To the River Lodon” than he was on Bowles’s poem.

In “To the River Lodon,” Warton represses the melancholy he feels upon revisiting his childhood haunts by focusing instead on the poetic accomplishments of his adult life. Coleridge progresses from Warton in that his reflection results in internal conflict. While Warton ends his poem discussing that the joy he finds in his adult accomplishments has replaced his innocent childhood joys, Coleridge is stuck between childhood and adulthood. The recollection of his childhood provides him with pleasure, but this reflection also distracts him from the concerns of his adult life. Coleridge closes his poem by lamenting the fact that he is no longer a child, and thus cannot enjoy the

carefree innocence that goes along with youth. Bowles presents the concepts which Coleridge and Warton wrestle with in a dramatically different light. Bowles barely touches on the importance of the concerns of his adult life; he instead spends almost the entirety of his fourteen lines discussing the pain and melancholy he feels at reflecting on his childhood. This pain is entirely absent from both Coleridge's and Warton's poems, as is the solace Bowles takes in nature at the end of his poem.

This content-focused close reading seems to contradict the form-driven poetic evolution that Wordsworth and Fairbanks both suggest. However, the combination of Fairbank's insights into the formal similarities between Coleridge's and Warton's sonnets, and the analysis of the content of the three poems suggests that Coleridge did not write "To the River Otter" with Bowles's poem in mind, but rather he was focused on Warton's "To the River Lodon." As Fairbanks points out, the formal similarities between "To the River Otter" and "To the River Lodon" are substantial. Warton's "varied interval . . . much pleasure, more of sorrow" (7-8) becomes Coleridge's "various-fated years" (2) and "what happy and what mournful hours" (3). Warton's "Sweet native stream!" (7) becomes Coleridge's "Dear native Brook! Wild Streamlet" (1). Both poets' sonnets are composed of a series of exclamations, which is a stark contrast to Bowles's rhetorical questions. There are also similarities between the content of Warton's and Coleridge's sonnets which are absent in Bowles's. Both poets describe a peculiar conflict between manhood and the recollection of childhood. While Bowles discusses the pain of the obvious conflict between his adult life and his life as a child, Warton and Coleridge both describe a conflict between living and being successful as an adult, and reminiscing on childhood. While Bowles is only concerned with the solace he finds in nature from the

pain of his adult life, both Coleridge and Warton present a more balanced picture of the passing of time, with their “various-fated years” and “varied interval.”

In the previous chapter I discussed the relationship between Bowles and his childhood teacher, Joseph Warton, and also made a brief reference to the fact that Bowles paid poetic tribute to his schoolmaster in two poems, one of which was “To the River Itchin.” These assertions are relevant here because it is my argument that, although Bowles inherited the sonnet form from his tutor at Oxford, Thomas Warton, it appears likely that the emotional melancholy and nostalgia, evoked by Bowles’s experience of nature, flows primarily from the influence of Thomas Warton’s brother, Joseph. This realization further undermines the poetic trajectory traced by Fairbanks and Wordsworth. In the second of Bowles’s poetic tributes to Joseph Warton, “Monody on the Death of Dr. Warton,” Bowles describes the debt he owes to his since deceased mentor: “Oh! I should ill thy gen’rous cares requite, / Thou who didst first inspire my timid muse” (1-2). Bowles goes on to describe in detail those generous cares that Joseph Warton took, “Thy cheering voice, /O WARTON! bid my silent heart rejoice, /And wak’d to love of Nature: every breeze, /On Itchin's brink, was melody” (50-53). It was Bowles’s relationship with Dr. Joseph Warton at the Winchester School that led him to continue on to Trinity College at Oxford University where he would study under Thomas Warton. While it is often assumed that Bowles owed a tremendous debt to Thomas Warton for awakening in him the love of the natural world which he demonstrates in “To the River Itchin,” that debt is likely rooted earlier in his studies under Joseph Warton at Winchester.<sup>43</sup> Thus it is

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<sup>43</sup> Joseph Warton establishes his preference for natural over man-made subjects in his long poem: “The Enthusiast, or, the Lover of Nature” (1744).

conceivable that the pained self reflection that is featured in “To the River Itchin” is more a result of the encouragement of Joseph Warton than it is Bowles’s study under Thomas Warton at Oxford. This possibility is further supported by the fact that the Itchin River is situated by the Winchester School, and thus provides a logical link between the poem and Joseph Warton’s encouragement of Bowles.

It is conceivable, owing to the substantial differences between “To the River Lodon” and “To the River Itchin” in form and content, as well as the additional biographical information provided by Bowles’s other poetry, that Bowles’s poem was not substantially influenced by Thomas Warton’s sonnet “To the River Lodon.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, it seems clear that Coleridge’s “To the River Otter” is derived at least partially from Warton’s “To the River Lodon.” The considerable differences between Bowles’s and Coleridge’s sonnets cast doubt on the assertion that “To the River Otter” is Coleridge’s tribute to Bowles, a poetic version of the thanks he issues in Biographia Literaria. Instead these differences situate “To the River Itchin” simply as an example of the poetic vision and style that Coleridge describes in Biographia Literaria. Coleridge acknowledges that he can recognize and appreciate that heightened style but that, at the time he was writing “To the River Otter”, he failed to realize it in his own poetry. Bowles’s sonnet was an example of Coleridge’s desired effect, and “To the River Otter” is an example of Coleridge’s self-perceived failure. That Coleridge fails, in his sonnet, to realize Bowles’s style towards which he is so enamored, adds credence to the suggestion that Bowles’s influence on Coleridge extends beyond that of a mere juvenile obsession.

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<sup>44</sup> I mean not influenced in content. As I have already established, Bowles inherits the sonnet form from his teacher at Oxford.

## Part II

Critically, there has been a concerted effort to demonstrate that Coleridge, after publishing his conversation poems, makes a conscious decision to distance himself from his youthful enthusiasm for Bowles's poetry because he recognizes Bowles as possessing a simple poetic style and because he has the desire to pursue more mature poetry. At the head of this charge is M.H. Abrams, who asserts that Coleridge's self aware progression away from Bowles is evidence of his tremendous maturity and the beginning of his development into a major poet. This is a misperception on Abrams's part and it will be my argument that, by correcting this misunderstanding in which Bowles is again cast as an intermediary, the picture we have of Coleridge's development into a paragon of Romantic poetry begins to shift. This alteration of the way we perceive Coleridge's growth as a poet bears implications that in turn reshape the way we understand both the growth of the Romantic movement and the players within it. Coleridge's rebellion against his youthful idol was not borne out of personal growth or maturity as Abrams argues. Instead, it flows from a fundamental philosophical disagreement between the two poets over the prioritization of poetry in their respective lives. Coleridge did run away from Bowles, but he did so in an effort to establish himself in Bowles's mold. Coleridge left behind Bowles's sentimental style because he felt he had to in order to provide the very home that he was leaving for his children. These were financial, pragmatic and professional, not ideological decisions.

Abrams attributes to Bowles's sonnets "muted self pity" which he describes as an inferior intermediary step towards the "profound sadness" that Coleridge exhibits in



“Dejection, An Ode.”<sup>45</sup> Abrams’s argument centers on two different statements by Coleridge regarding two different versions of Bowles’s published sonnets. By confusing these texts, Abrams inaccurately portrays Coleridge’s contradicting statements as referring to the same poems, which allows him to conceive that Coleridge achieves a degree of development and critical and philosophical clarity that enables him to disassociate himself from Bowles’s poetry.

Abrams chooses to quote only a segment of the part of a letter from Coleridge to William Sotheby, sent on September 10, 1802, that concerns Bowles. The first line that Abrams includes comes across as unequivocally negative: “There reigns thro’ all the blank verse poems such a perpetual trick of *moralizing* everything—which is very well, occasionally—but never to see or describe any interesting appearance in nature.” This sentence follows immediately on Coleridge’s omitted observation that the “second volume . . . is woefully inferior to its Predecessor.” Bowles published his collected works in two volumes. The entire collection was titled Poems. Abrams’s confusion stems from the distinction between the two volumes themselves: the first volume contains Bowles’s sonnets with some of his earlier, longer poems. The second volume is comprised of almost entirely longer, blank verse poems that Bowles wrote towards the end of the century. Abrams’s mistake is confusing these two volumes. While Coleridge remains, in 1802, impressed with Bowles’s sonnets and earlier works, he is less than thrilled with

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<sup>45</sup> This assertion by Coleridge, made in his 1802 letter to William Sotheby, is that Bowles second volume of his Poems, is inferior to the first volume. Abrams assumes that what Coleridge means is that the entirety of Poems, is inferior to Bowles’s sonnets from the early 1790s. He misreads Coleridge’s letter.

Bowles's latest efforts. Contrary to Abrams's suggestions, Coleridge's letter actually constitutes his continuing enthusiasm for the skill with which Bowles mixes the natural with the emotional and the mental with the physical in order to create a single, interwoven entity.<sup>46</sup> This interconnectedness is the philosophical belief that fuels Coleridge's poetical beliefs.

Abrams's assertion that "Bowles's exaggeration in his later poems of his earlier devices has opened up to Coleridge his inherent failings" (549) is not only unfounded, it is contradictory to the rest of the letter which Abrams cites as support for this conclusion. Coleridge makes it very clear that Bowles's later poems lack the qualities which mark his early sonnets when he comments that the volume of blank verse is "woefully inferior" to the sonnets that precede it. Coleridge again reaffirms his opinion of Bowles's early work later in the letter when he writes that Bowles has "probably weakened his Intellect by the haunting Fear of becoming extravagant." This revelation, when combined with Coleridge's language earlier in the letter and with his unequivocal support of Bowles in the decade preceding the letter, cements the realization that Bowles's early work remains a significant influence on Coleridge even at this point in his career. It is significant that even in this period Coleridge never strays from his original endorsement of Bowles's

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<sup>46</sup> In the letter Coleridge writes that the second volume is inferior to its predecessor.

Abrams assumes that by the "second" volume, Coleridge is referring to the entirety of Poems, which is not the case. Poems was published in two volumes and the first volume contains the poetry for which Bowles was best known—the same poetry in which Coleridge recognizes his ability to "reconcile the heart with the head" (Biographia Literaria 17).

sonnets. The significance of this distinction, and apparently the distinction itself, is lost in Abrams's essay. It is true that Coleridge has become in many ways critical of Bowles, but it is in no way true that this criticism is borne out of an exaggeration of the early devices of which Coleridge is so complementary. In fact, the opposite is true; it is the absence of these early devices in Bowles's later poetry that prompts Coleridge's criticism.

In an effort to explain this shift in Bowles's poetry to Sotheby, Coleridge uses language that is uncannily similar to the language he employs to discuss intellectual degradation in a letter to Bowles on October 16, 1797. To Bowles, talking about the effect of writing primarily for financial success and public recognition, Coleridge writes: "I could not avoid attaching a pecuniary importance to the business; and consequently, became anxious: and such anxieties humble & degrade the mind" (Letter to W.L. Bowles Oct. 16 1797). This statement invites comparison to his criticism of Bowles to Sotheby in his later letter when he writes: "he . . . has probably weakened his intellect by the haunting Fear of becoming extravagant" (Letter to Sotheby 13 Sept. 1802). This "extravagance" that Coleridge refers to can be interpreted either of two ways. The way he likely means it is as an extravagance of language. Bowles does move away from the type of lavish descriptions of nature that mark his earlier sonnets in his blank verse poems. This relative plainness is reflected well in a second sense of this "fear of becoming extravagant" that Coleridge prescribes to Bowles. By the time of their meeting in 1797, Bowles has secured a much more stable lifestyle than Coleridge has. While Bowles has established himself as a parish priest, Coleridge is about to turn down such a post and leave behind his family in order to travel through Europe. While Bowles is content to fortify his secure position in life, Coleridge is unsettled and restless. A comparison

between two poems from this period reflects very clearly this difference in lifestyle philosophy. In “A Garden-Seat At Home” Bowles establishes he is content to gaze out from home upon the pleasant prospect his window offers. Meanwhile, Coleridge begins “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement” by offering a similarly pleasant account of his country home. The difference lies in the way the poets continue their poetic thoughts. Bowles stays at home, satisfied by the view before him. Meanwhile, Coleridge recognizes his responsibility to forge onward and gain a poetic perspective, from the top of the nearby mountain that transcends his existence and the pleasantry that his country cottage represents. This difference is what Coleridge is probably referring to when he writes that Bowles “wants Passion” and possesses a “haunting fear of becoming extravagant.”<sup>47</sup> It is this difference in perspective that catalyzes Coleridge’s rejection of Bowles’s later blank verse. Bowles is content with his own simplicity, both in the way that he lives his life, and in his poetic voice. Bowles is not inclined to venture out to seek the same transcendental experiences that Coleridge seeks, nor does he need to leave home in order to secure his finances. So, when Coleridge derides Bowles for his “fear of becoming extravagant,” he is criticizing Bowles’s contentedness, which is represented in both the way he writes his poetry and the way he lives his life. It is not that Bowles’s poetry has become somehow weak or worse, it is his lack of drive and motivation that Coleridge keys in on and rejects.

Abrams points to the correspondence between Coleridge and Bowles, and to Coleridge’s critical stance regarding Bowles’s poetry, as indicative simultaneously of the inferiority of Bowles’s poetry and to the poetic development and superiority of

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<sup>47</sup> Letter to Sotheby September, 13 1802

Coleridge's work in the last part of the eighteenth century and the subsequent decade. Abrams's depiction of Coleridge's stance on Bowles has two central consequences. First, and most importantly, Abrams leads his reader (and the critical community at large) to an unfounded conception of Coleridge as a poet and a man who is boldly advancing from the tradition out of which he is borne. This misconception paints Coleridge, during a tumultuous period of his personal and professional life, as a stable figure, progressing deliberately towards what he identifies as a superior place in poetry. Abrams introduces this misconception by establishing Bowles as the baseline against which Coleridge is rebelling. This is the second consequence of Abrams's argument: that Abrams's readers, and the critical community, misconceive Bowles, a complacent and perhaps simple-minded man and poet.

To a degree, Abrams is right. Coleridge does distance himself from Bowles in the latter part of the eighteenth century, but his rebellion flows not from a poetical disagreement, but from a difference in personal values. Coleridge, newly married and without any consistent way to provide for his budding family, lacks the stability and dedication to his home life that Bowles enjoys. Contrasting Coleridge's precarious personal life with Bowles's stable and safe life as a parish priest reveals the grounds on which their disagreement and subsequent estrangement is based. Abrams's most problematic mistake is casting Coleridge as a poet who, by his supposed rejection of Bowles's poetry, demonstrates his own maturation as a poet. Coleridge's rejection, insofar as it can be called that, is borne of anything but his own poetic development. The philosophical discrepancy that exists between the two men is readily apparent in a parallel reading of an example of each of their respective work. Coleridge struggles to

reconcile his personal responsibilities to his family with his professional and poetic goals. This tension between the two distinct aspects of Coleridge's life is readily apparent in his "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement." While Bowles prioritizes his personal life at home, Coleridge leaves his home to pursue his profession. This difference in the priorities of the two poets provides the motivation for the split towards the end of the 1790s that Abrams describes.

### Part III

Based on his conversation poems, the concept of the home to Coleridge is comfortable but physically, professionally and poetically restrictive. Because of this restriction, Coleridge treats his home in his poetry with a sense of almost sorrowful resentment in which he appreciates the comforts of home but bemoans the limits he feels on his ability to pursue his professional goals. This paradox of comfort and resentment is best captured in his 1796 poem "Reflections On Having Left a Place of Retirement." This conflict between the comfort of home and professional achievement runs parallel to another conflict in Coleridge's life: the conflict between his obligation to his family and his professional goals. Bowles has a distinctly two-dimensional relationship with his home, and one that is in apparent contrast to Coleridge's. In his 1798 poem, "A Garden-Seat at Home," Bowles views the home as a personal and professional sanctuary where he finds himself both comfortable and productive. I will argue that Coleridge's estrangement from Bowles during the period between 1798 and 1814 results not from a poetic maturation, as Abrams suggests, but from a degree of jealousy that Coleridge feels

for Bowles.<sup>48</sup> Bowles has done what Coleridge has failed to do: he has gained notoriety, but also provided a stable home, all while maintaining a leisurely lifestyle similar to the pleasant life depicted by Coleridge in “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement.” A close reading of Coleridge and Bowles’s poems together reveals both this jealousy and the internal conflict that Coleridge endures, the same conflict that leads him to abandon his family and travel Europe over the next two years.<sup>49</sup>

In the opening stanza of his poem “Reflections Upon Leaving a Place of Retirement,” Coleridge describes his home as secluded and pleasant with both qualities enhancing the aspect of rejuvenation that marks the place. Coleridge opens the poem describing the plants growing around the cottage. The “tallest Rose” peeping “at the

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<sup>48</sup> Coleridge visited Bowles in October 1797 and reportedly talked much less of him after their meeting. The meeting took place at Donhead, at Bowles’s home described in “A Garden-Seat” (Garland Greever: A Wiltshire Parson and His Friends).

<sup>49</sup> It is at least possible, if not likely, that Coleridge would have embraced collaboration with Bowles similar to his collaboration with Wordsworth. The two men met for the first time to work on Coleridge’s play together in 1797, just after Coleridge had spent large pieces of the last two years travelling and working with Wordsworth. In addition, Coleridge had already spent the last five years trying to get his poetic friends to move to America with him to found his pantisocratic society—a literary community based on collaboration. But this meeting in 1797 at which they worked on Coleridge’s “Osorio,” which was their sole collaborative project, led to their estrangement. I am arguing that this is because Coleridge takes his poetry more seriously as it is innately tied to his livelihood. Meanwhile, poetry for Bowles was a mere avocation.

chamber window” (1-2) speaks directly to the size of the cottage, but indirectly to the place of the house among the flowers. This picture of the house as seamlessly integrated with nature, is enhanced by images of the blossoming myrtles (5) and the “thick Jasmins twin’d”(6) across the porch. All three of these flowers and trees are expressed in fertile terms.<sup>50</sup> The words used to describe them are: “thick,” “tall,” and “blossom[ing]” (1-6). This word choice, coupled with the placement of these lines at the beginning of the poem, suggest that Coleridge views the cottage in the “VALLEY of SECLUSION” (9) as a place of growth and prosperity.

After establishing the cottage and the valley in an unconditionally positive light, Coleridge uses it as a base from which to expand his perspective. Although Coleridge leaves the valley to “[climb] from that low Dell, steep up the stony Mount/ . . . to reach the top” to witness the “goodly scene” and view from the top of the mountain, he does so temporarily (27-29). He does not move to a different home; the experience of omnipresence that Coleridge describes atop the mountain is entwined with his existence rooted in the cottage in the valley. This reading is reinforced by the first line of the next stanza in which Coleridge proclaims: “Ah! Quiet dear Cot, and Mount sublime!/ I was constrain’d to quit you” (47-48). In this proclamation, Coleridge refers to the mountain and the cottage as parallel entities that exist together. To leave one is to leave the other.

There exists a parallel between Coleridge’s description of the experience of climbing the mountain and the act of writing poetry. The act of writing the poem parallels

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<sup>50</sup> Coleridge uses fertile language in describing the valley likely because home for him, at this time, is associated with children and childbirth. He and Sara have just started having children.



Coleridge's task of "climb[ing] with perilous toil" (29). The view from the top of the mountain, which Coleridge calls "sublime" (44), corresponds to the prospect offered by the finished poem. This prospect is Coleridge's poetic motivation. But Coleridge leaves the mountain, and his pleasant "cot" behind.

By leaving behind the mountain, which spurs him to write inspired poetry, Coleridge makes the conscious choice to abandon, at least temporarily what he references as his sublime perspective. Coleridge, as the quote from the letter to Bowles articulates, is forced to make personal and professional decisions that are dictated by his financial needs and not by his poetic maturation. This reading is further supported later in the poem when Coleridge refers to leaving behind the valley and the mountain, which yield "feelings all too delicate for use." The emphasis on the word "use" shifts the criteria on which Coleridge makes his personal decisions from favoring those elements that lend themselves to the art of writing poetry to serving more utilitarian ends.<sup>51</sup> When Coleridge's description of the cottage in the valley is interpreted to be his endorsement of the peaceful home as an effective base from which to engage in poetic exploration of sublime emotion, his decision to leave that setting and the ascent of the poetic mountain behind must flow from the financial demands of supporting his new family.

At a time in Coleridge's life when Abrams asserts that he is undergoing a process of tremendous poetic maturation, Coleridge is in fact making the conscious decision to

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<sup>51</sup> This pragmatic analysis by Coleridge continues the trend I have referenced in Section One of this chapter in regards to his sonnet. The trend is that Coleridge forces himself to analyze the way he spends his time in terms of the benefits his efforts afford him in terms of money and renown.

leave behind not only the setting which he finds most suitable to poetic exploration of the sublime, but also that exploration itself. The conflict that Coleridge is struggling with is one between the pleasures of poetry and the “luxury” of existence that flows from climbing the mountain, and the utility of a professional life. Bowles has, meanwhile, resolved this conflict in his own life. His professional path has yielded him, simultaneously, the opportunities to both help other people and provide for his family while still allowing him the peace and emotional pleasure of being able to continue his poetic explorations. Coleridge has, for his part, failed to balance these competing factors.<sup>52</sup>

Any doubt that Coleridge has one eye on his own circumstances and the other on Bowles’s life and poetry ought to be laid to rest upon consideration of the references to Bowles’s “The Grave of Howard” that are explicit in the second to last stanza of this poem.<sup>53</sup> After admitting that the emotions in his “delicate” poetry are “all too delicate for

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<sup>52</sup> An obvious objection would be that there does not exist a necessary connection between personal maturity and poetic maturity. This may be generally true, but in the case of Coleridge it is false. By the time Coleridge leaves for Europe in 1798, he has already written most of the poems that we read today. Coleridge returns from Malta in 1801 a broken man. His personal immaturity has directly affected his poetry, and, as it turns out, prevented the poetic maturation that Abrams attributes to him. So, if we consider Coleridge to already have matured as of 1797, the way we look at his subsequent poetry must change.

<sup>53</sup> This poem of Bowles’s that we have examined above is an elegy to the memory of the British philanthropist, John Howard, who worked to reform prisons across England and

use,” Coleridge turns his attention to Howard, writing: “Sweet is the tear from some Howard’s eye/ Drops on the cheek of one he lifts from earth . . . ” In these lines Coleridge juxtaposes his own work, which serves no real purpose, to Howard’s life work, which actually affects change. Coleridge points to Howard as superior to himself when he calls him “my benefactor, not my brother man!” Coleridge builds on this point when he exclaims, regarding Howard’s “beneficence,” “Praise, praise it . . . !” In contrast, Coleridge condemns his “Soul” as having “oft . . . scann’st/ The sluggard Pity’s vision-weaving tribe!” The word “scann’st,” combined in context with Coleridge’s comment about his “feelings all too delicate for use,” is referencing Coleridge’s poetry writing. The word itself, “scann’st” may refer to scanning meter, and this reading is further supported by Coleridge’s reference to the “vision-weaving tribe!” At a time when Coleridge is involved in a great deal of poetic discourse with his friends and peers, this “tribe” refers

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Scotland, dedicated his life to his humanitarian efforts. What bears mention now that there is some relationship between Coleridge’s felt obligation to affect some change like Howard has done, is that Howard’s personal life fell to shambles and his philanthropic efforts abroad precluded him from attending to his life at home. That Coleridge knowingly includes a reference to Howard is indicative of two conclusions: first that he is knowingly responding to Bowles poem; and, second, that he approves of Howard’s decision to treat his home life as a secondary priority in an effort to achieve greatness in his *professional* exploits.

to the community of poets of which he is a part.<sup>54</sup> The stanza ends with Coleridge's exclamation that he is going to:

go, and join head, heart, and hand,  
Active and firm, to fight the bloodless fight  
Of Science, Freedom, and the Truth in Christ. (60-62)

Coleridge's emphasis here on "hand" and "active" is contrasted with the passivity of life at home in the pursuit of passive, poetic and personal goals.

The declaration that Coleridge makes in "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement" is that his time is better spent making a name for himself and working for the money necessary to support his family than it is at home writing poetry. The fact that Coleridge invokes Bowles's subject in John Howard in making this assertion of the benevolent power of action is indicative of a growing philosophical rift between the two poets. It is as if Coleridge is calling Bowles out for having put Howard on such a high pedestal and then proceeding to ignore the example set by the famous philanthropist. The fact is, Bowles very visibly does his work (poetical and professional) from home. He offers aid to those in need through his work as a local pastor, but he does all of this from the comfort of his home. He is not forced to leave the comfort of his place in the "valley," nor does he desire to.

We must ask if Coleridge is using this poem to convince someone else, perhaps Bowles, that the cultivation of a life at home is of less importance than taking concrete and visible public action; or is he, having just left a place he held so dear, trying to

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<sup>54</sup>In the context of Coleridge's attempts to establish his pantisocracy, this rejection of the poetic "tribe" is indicative of a change in his personal goals and views.

convince himself of the same thing? It is my assertion that Coleridge's poem is his effort to comfort himself after having had to give up his comfortable place as a poet in order to support his family. Bowles, in his poetic response to Coleridge's poem, makes it clear that he is able to maintain his income without having to sacrifice his home life. If Coleridge's poem is really his own self-reflection, Bowles likely still felt attacked upon reading it. It is easy to see how such a misunderstanding would create the illusion of resentment between the two. Exacerbated by the conceivable jealousy Coleridge might have felt upon comparing his own life to the life of his favorite poet, the rift between the two men might well have been the product of a misunderstanding.

Bowles responds to Coleridge's poem and to what he has perceived as an affront in his poem "A Garden Seat at Home." In the poem, Bowles describes his station at home in Donhead in 1798, just weeks after Coleridge has visited him. It is after this visit that Coleridge alienates himself from Bowles. The poem itself is filled with Bowles's characteristic melancholy sentiment and reflection. In explicit contrast to Coleridge's earlier poem, Bowles opens with the statement "Oh, no; I would not leave thee, my sweet home" (1) as if he were being asked, or told, to leave.<sup>55</sup> His initial description of his house seems to mirror Coleridge's explicitly. Coleridge's "thick jasmins twin[ing]" "across the porch" become Bowles's "mantling woodbine" (2) and Bowles includes Coleridge's "rose" as well. Going even further in the next line, Bowles describes

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<sup>55</sup> It is possible, as I alluded to in a previous note, that Coleridge would have pushed Bowles to join him in founding his pantisocracy. If we read Bowles's opening line as a response to such a request, it places the rest of the poem more firmly in conversation with Coleridge.

Coleridge's blossoming "myrtles" as the "slender woods that the still scene inclose" (3.) These parallel descriptions indicate that Bowles is placing his poem in intentional conversation with Coleridge's earlier poem. From the beginning of Bowles's rendition, however, it is obvious that his poem will end differently. Although Coleridge is "constrain'd to quit" the cottage, Bowles "would not leave . . . [his] sweet home" (1).

As the poem progresses, Bowles continues his conversation with Coleridge's poem. While Coleridge describes the magnificent view from the mountaintop, Bowles describes everything he can see by sticking close to his cottage: "For yon magnificent and ample dome/ that glitters in my sight!" The description of this dome (Wardour Castle) as "ample" suggests that just this old ruined castle is enough magnificence for Bowles.<sup>56</sup> He does not need the view from atop the mountain, just the view from his window. He echoes this sentiment later in the poem when he writes: "I wind my walks . . . /scarce wishing to emerge/ into the troubled ocean of that life/ where all is turbulence, and toil and strife" (12-14). The troubled life that Bowles is referring to is the one lived by Coleridge's "Brethren" as evidenced by the repetition of the word "toil" between the two poems. Bowles does not feel the obligation that Coleridge heeds in his poem. He reflects

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<sup>56</sup> Coleridge had the habit of sharing his poetry with Bowles. With his letter to Bowles on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1797, Coleridge includes a selection of poems, some his own and some belonging to others, some published, others pending publishing. It strikes me as likely that if Bowles had not been already made aware of Coleridge's "reflections," Coleridge might well have shared the poem with Bowles in such a letter. At the least, it seems likely conversation of the poem might have come up during Coleridge's two week visit with Bowles in October, 1797.

that he can still write poetry in seclusion when he writes: [in my] “shaded nice/ I dip the brush, or touch the tuneful string” (15-16). Coleridge writes in his poem that, when he looked at the scene from the mountaintop “it seem’d like Omnipresence.” He goes on to imply that it is the domain of God. Bowles, to close his poem, replies that he is happy to live his lower existence. He reflects that it is “enough if, from their loftier sphere, the rich/ deign my abode to visit . . .” (18-19.)

Coleridge’s poem alone contains evidence of a personal struggle between poetic indulgence and responsibility. This conflict, although it appears resolved by the end of the poem, exists throughout all of Coleridge’s life. Bowles embodies the resolution of Coleridge’s dilemma. As such, when Coleridge abandons the life of the cottage, he is simultaneously rejecting Bowles. His criticism of Bowles, that he lacks “native passion”, refers to Bowles’s unwillingness to abandon his own sentiment, embodied by his home. “A Garden-Seat At Home” is Bowles’s affirmation of his position in this debate. Although the debate between the two poets likely ended with their initial estrangement in 1798, it defined Coleridge’s life. He writes almost twenty years later in Biographia Literaria about Bowles’s poetry:

Well were it for me perhaps, had I never relapsed into the same mental disease; if I had continued to pluck the flower and reap the harvest from the cultivated surface, instead of delving into the unwholesome quicksilver mines of metaphysic depth . . . Still there was a long and blessed interval, during which my natural faculties were allowed to expand, and my original tendencies to develop themselves: my fancy, and the love of nature. (Biographia Literaria 17)

The “cultivated surface Coleridge refers to is likely the fertile glen of the cottage. The “mental disease” and the “unwholesome quicksilver mines of metaphysic depths” are the destinations for which he has forsaken his cottage and his family. Instead of climbing the sacred mount, he has descended into the depths of despair. The period he is referring to as the “long and blessed interval” is the period during which he was so energized and enthused by Bowles’s sonnets.<sup>57</sup> Coleridge closes his poem in 1796 with “My spirit shall revisit thee, dear Cot! / And I shall sigh fond wishes—sweet abode!” (65-68). Twenty years after he writes those lines, Coleridge does just that, but by now he realizes he made the wrong decision. Three years before he publishes Biographia Literaria, Coleridge moves in with the Morgans near Bremhill, which is the town where Bowles is living at the time. He writes in 1815 that proximity to Bowles is “a source of constant gratification to him” (Greever 31). This shift in opinion of Bowles further supports Coleridge’s retrospective change of position in the debate framed in “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement.”

By taking issue with Abrams’s methods in constructing his argument, I offer a reading of the relationship between Bowles and Coleridge that encourages us to refigure the way we view Coleridge’s own development and professional maturation in the latter part of the 1790s. I argue for two distinct conclusions: first, that Bowles’s influence on Coleridge extends beyond the period of Coleridge’s juvenile poems (1794-5) and into the

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<sup>57</sup> Engell and Bate, editors of my version of Biographia Literaria, suggest that this “blessed interval” was until 1800-1802. I would argue, that given the reading of these two poems, the period was more likely earlier, perhaps until around 1798, or even as early as 1796.



early years of the nineteenth century. This argument is significant because it establishes Bowles as an influence on Coleridge during the period in which he produced the majority of his best regarded poetry. Secondly, I argue, counter to the positions advocated by Abrams and other recent critics, that Coleridge was still in the process of maturing as a poet during this period. This reading of Coleridge's development qualifies the lens through which we view his poetry. If we accept my arguments, then when we look at poems like Coleridge's conversation poems, we have to see them as having been written by a poet who was in transition. This prevents us from being tempted into thinking of Romanticism, and of Coleridge himself, as a rigid entity. Instead, having accepted that both Coleridge and the tradition that he represents were under development, we must reconsider the poems themselves as being steps in a process.

The canonical approach recently has been to look at poems like "Frost at Midnight" as indicative of a cultural movement that we now call Romanticism. In the introduction to the latest edition of The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period editors Deidre Shauna Lynch and Jack Stillinger tell us: "It is fair to say that when . . . Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" . . . remarks on an aspect in the natural scene, this attention to the external world serves only as a stimulus to the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking" (13). Lynch and Stillinger make this claim as support for their assertion that the collection of "great Romantic lyrics" of which "Frost at Midnight" is a member, are representative of the Romantic tradition insofar as it exists as a single coherent body of work. My argument is that Bowles allows us to both identify those themes of the connection between personal reflection and nature in "Frost at Midnight" as being present in Bowles's influence on Coleridge. Contrary to what

Abrams would have us believe, Coleridge's maturation is not complete by the end of the eighteenth century, and so, at the most, we can read his conversation poems as being indicative of him, as he exists as a poet in the middle of his own personal and professional development. This argument must not necessarily affect our views of the quality of the poems themselves, only the ways in which we read them as they relate to their author and to the literary tradition within which they are written.

## Chapter III

### Bowles and Byron

In the previous two chapters I have argued that for two chief reasons, Bowles's influence on Romanticism is more significant than we have recognized. First, Bowles is an essential figure in our understanding of the transition between Neoclassicism and Romanticism because, in his own career, Bowles makes this conscious transition in a way that ties him both to the past and the future of English poetry in the 1790s. The second reason is that, through his influence on Coleridge, Bowles has his fingerprints on a fair portion of the criticism and poetry that was published in the last decade of the eighteenth century. This latter point is supplemented by my assertion that Coleridge is in the process of developing in this period, and that by refiguring the extent of Bowles's influence on him, we have to simultaneously reevaluate our perception of Coleridge as a paragon of Romanticism in the eighteenth century, and, of Romanticism itself in that period.

This would be a good place to stop in my argument for Bowles's inclusion in our modern study of the period. I have asserted that he is significant not only directly, by virtue of the poetic ideologies that he advocates and demonstrates in the earliest stages of the growth of Romanticism, but also indirectly, for his influence and relationship with

Coleridge, which extends much further into Coleridge's career than previously accepted. There is, however, more to be said.

No study of William Lisle Bowles would be complete without consideration of what would prove to be his only real foray into the politics of the literary community after the turn of the nineteenth century. This event, a prolonged and public debate with Lord Byron, among others, provides the contemporary critic with a rare window into Bowles's poetic philosophies, not embodied in his poetry, but explicitly stated for the first time in prose. It is my argument that these comments of Bowles's, which he publishes in a series of public letters, substantiate the claims I have been making for the past two chapters in regards to his significance to the development of Romanticism. Bowles's main critical assertion is that Pope's choice of man-made subjects, as opposed to natural subjects, relegates him to an inferior sphere of poetry, since natural subjects inherently evoke a stronger emotional response on the part of the reader.

Equally, if not more significant to gaining an understanding of Bowles as a poet, is the insight into Bowles's character that his public tiff with Byron provides. The exchange with Byron grants a unique perspective that goes a long way towards informing any reading of Bowles in the context of his contemporaries.

Two persistent questions are answered by inspecting Bowles's role in the Pope controversy: how are we to read Bowles in relation to the tradition of Romanticism, and what is his significance as a poet and as an influence on that tradition? These questions are answered directly for the first time in the Pope controversy, when Bowles's personal values and poetic philosophies are explained in clear prose. The result is the confirmation of what I have already argued. Bowles was a cornerstone of the early Romantic values in

poetry: his focus on the natural world as a vehicle for introspection, enhanced by the powerful emotional content of his poetry, anticipates the development of, among others, Coleridge's own poetic philosophies in the period of the 1790s. Furthermore, as discussed in the second chapter of this paper, Bowles's alienation from the poetic community at the end of the 1790s, and specifically from Coleridge, likely had less to do with poetry than it did with a difference in the dispositions of the two men. Byron, in addition to his mudslinging, brings the valid charge against Bowles that he perceives himself to be morally superior to most other men. This claim is evidenced in Bowles's edition of Pope and acknowledged not just by Byron and Bowles's other detractors, but also by Bowles's initial biographer, George Gilfillan's. All of these accounts add credence to the theory I advocated in the last chapter regarding Coleridge's alienation from Bowles.

Three main accounts of Bowles are quoted with regularity. Almost all other critical impressions of Bowles's character appear to be rooted, if not strictly, at least directly in three sources.<sup>58</sup> In order of notoriety, these sources are: 1) Coleridge's account of Bowles in Biographia Literaria, and his letters; George Gilfillan's Essay "Memoir and Criticism on the Works of the Rev. W.L. Bowles" which appears in Gilfillan's 1855 collection of Bowles's works; and Byron's account of Bowles in his Letter to John Murray, entitled "Letter to \*\*\*\*\*, on the Rev. W.L. Bowles's strictures on The Life and Writings of Pope." Of these three critical accounts of Bowles's character, the

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Southey's impression of Bowles which he articulated in letters to Caroline Bowles, are independent and not rooted in any of these other sources, though the sentiments he reflects reappear in Gilfillan's book.

first two are largely consistent with one another. Coleridge depicts Bowles as sentimental and sensitive. Gilfillan quotes this commentary directly and expands upon it to suggest that Bowles was both of these things, adding that his simplicity and naivety precluded him from ever advancing beyond the sweet sadness of his early sonnets.<sup>59</sup> Surprisingly, even though it is written in the context of a public and, at times, unpleasant confrontation between Bowles and himself, Byron's account of Bowles in his letter is perhaps the most flattering of the three. Although Byron goes on to debunk some of Bowles's particular poetic beliefs, and to mock his moralizing, his comments about Bowles's intelligence, work, and persona are all unequivocally positive.<sup>60</sup> A fourth primary source that requires close attention is Bowles's own defense of his work and of his poetic philosophies. It was this essay written in 1819, and later published as a letter, that prompted Byron's response. The essay: "The Invariable Principles of Poetry," will play heavily into my consideration of Bowles's poetical values, and in turn, into my efforts to place him in context of his contemporaries.

Although these four sources, particularly Byron's letter, will account for the bulk of my study of Bowles in this chapter, there is a fair amount of scholarship written on the subject of the Pope controversy. Most of this work focuses, unsurprisingly, on Byron and

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<sup>59</sup> Gilfillan's, in 1855, five years after Bowles's death, was the first scholar to separate Bowles's work, from a critical perspective, as somehow "lower" than that of Coleridge and the other "major" Romantics.

<sup>60</sup> This is not the case in other accounts of Bowles from the period. Southey, hesitant to engage intimately with Bowles's qualities as a poet, is critical of his disposition in letters to Caroline Bowles.

his involvement, treating Bowles as a secondary consideration. However, James Chandler offers a succinct and insightful account of the Pope controversy in his article “The Pope Controversy: Romantic Poetics and the English Canon.” The conclusion Chandler reaches is likely the same conclusion that even a casual reader of the discourse surrounding the controversy would reach as well. That conclusion is that the controversy is as much about the actors, Bowles, Byron, Campbell, and Hazlitt, as it is about Pope’s poetry.

This chapter will revisit the controversy by taking a close look at both Byron’s letter in which he gives a detailed account of the personal politics that form the background to the whole dispute, and Chandler’s essay that approaches the entire ordeal from a more modern, critical perspective. The chapter will have three pieces. In the first, I will provide an account of the dispute itself as well as the major developments within it. In the second piece I will continue on to consider the poetical theories advocated by Bowles and Byron. Finally, I will return with this new information to the question I have aimed to answer throughout this paper: Where does this place Bowles in relation to his contemporaries, and how ought we read him both as a standalone poet, and as a piece of the Romantic puzzle?

## Part I

The Bowles—Byron controversy has just as much, if not more, to do with Bowles and Byron than it does Pope. Although Bowles’s version of Pope’s collected works provides the background for the entire dispute, it is the ways in which Bowles describes Pope as a person and the works he chooses to exclude from the volume that upset Byron.

If not the majority, at least a significant portion, of Byron's criticisms focus on Bowles's tendency to moralize everything and to pass judgment on Pope's character.

Bowles published the first edition of "The Works of Alexander Pope, Esq.: Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Pope" in 1806. The volume garnered negative feedback, mostly centered on Bowles's own critical capacity. This response echoes the similar critical reception that surrounds Bowles's longer works a few years earlier.<sup>61</sup> Among those leading the charge against Bowles's account of Pope was Byron, who wrote a scathing satire in heroic couplets about Bowles and published it in his volume "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" in 1809 (although he presumably had the part about Bowles written in 1807). While Byron's satire sparked a small controversy between Bowles and Byron, that disagreement did not play out until three years later, when the two met at a dinner party. Furthermore, after this initial confrontation, the issues seemed to lay dormant for a few years.

In 1819, in response to the overwhelmingly negative response to his position on Pope, Bowles published an essay, in the form of a letter, called "Invariable Principles of Poetry." This essay revived the dispute surrounding his treatment of Pope. Bowles's central thesis is that Pope, although his work is undoubtedly great in its execution, is inferior in his choice of subject. Bowles argues that, invariably, works that take as their

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<sup>61</sup> M.H. Abrams describes this in The Mirror and the Lamp specifically in regards to Coleridge's reaction to Bowles's Poems Volume II. While I take issue with Abrams's assertion that Coleridge's comments are indicative of his contempt for Bowles's collected *poetry*, I make no move to suggest that Bowles's longer works published in Poems Volume II were met with anything but a negative reaction.



focus natural objects are more poetical than works that focus on art or other manmade objects.<sup>62</sup> Bowles's secondary point is that Pope, aside from being at the head of a secondary tier of poets due to his chosen subject matter, was among a lower class of men for his personal indiscretions and mean behavior. Byron takes offense because he disagrees with the idea that Pope is somehow inferior. Byron's focus in this regard has less to do with Pope's poetics, and Bowles's critique of them, and more to do with Bowles's charge that Pope was a morally repugnant person. The cornerstone of his response to Bowles, and the argument he opens with, is that poets ought not be judged by their personal indiscretions.

The other major player in this controversy is Thomas Campbell, to whom Bowles's "Invariable Principles" is actually addressed.<sup>63</sup> Campbell's disagreement with Bowles seems to center more on an actual critical disagreement, as opposed to a personal dispute: Campbell objects specifically to Bowles's assertion that nature is superior to art as a subject of poetry, an objection that Byron echoes closely later in his letter to John Murray.

The three critics, Byron, Bowles, and Campbell, are linked together in this controversy because in their correspondence they constantly refer to each other's positions. Byron and Campbell both write to and about Bowles in a series of letters

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<sup>62</sup> Bowles recycles this argument from Warton's criticism of Pope, which I consider in the first chapter of this paper.

<sup>63</sup> This letter was addressed to Campbell, but it was forwarded on to Byron as many of the charges Bowles make in the letter apply, if not directly, at least indirectly to Byron, personally and professionally.

leading up to 1825 when Bowles publishes one last essay entitled “A Final Appeal to the Literary Public, Relative to Pope.”<sup>64</sup> Along the way, it is Bowles who does the bulk of writing, publishing seven letters and pamphlets over the course of the controversy.

The two letters that are the most significant to this paper are Byron’s letter to Murray and Bowles’s letter to Campbell, “The Invariable Principles of Poetry.” The former I will discuss now in order to explain why Byron took issue with Bowles’s edition of Pope. The latter letter I will largely reserve for the second and third sections of this chapter.

In his letter to John Murray, Byron writes nine pages before he even mentions Pope, and it takes thirteen pages for him to say anything at all about Pope’s works. There is no point in the letter at which Pope becomes the primary subject of Byron’s critique—throughout its entirety Byron is focused on Bowles’s editing and on his character, which is ironic as Byron says he is ill fit to judge the latter: “Of Mr. Bowles’s “*character*” I will not do him the *injustice* to judge from the edition of Pope” (10). Byron’s impression of Bowles is largely favorable. He refers to him as “an amiable, well informed, and extremely able man” (10). Byron takes his praise even further a page later, when, although he is unequivocally critical of Bowles’s edition of Pope, he is hyperbolic when describing Bowles’s personal characteristics:

Mr. Bowles the individual, and Mr. Bowles the editor, appear the two most opposite things imaginable . . . What I saw of Mr Bowles increased my surprise

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<sup>64</sup> This letter will not be examined in this essay, the discussion had run its course at this point, and Bowles’s final word has little to do with Poetry and more to do with saving face on a personal and professional level.

and regret that he should ever have lent his talents to such a task [as his edition of Pope]. If he had been a fool, there would have been some excuse for him if he had been a needy or a bad man, his conduct would have been intelligible; but he is the opposite of all these . . . to me the whole thing is unaccountable. (11)

Throughout the first eleven pages of his letter, Byron makes the repeated assertion that his criticisms of Bowles are not personal, but that they pertain entirely to his edition of Pope. However, as soon as Byron changes his focus from praising Bowles, to criticizing the volume of Pope, it becomes clear that his real agenda stands in stark contrast to what he insists are his genuine motives.

Byron quotes Bowles as describing some of Pope's letters to Martha Blount (written early in Pope's life) as "so *gross* as to imply the *grossest* licentiousness" (12). Byron asks, rhetorically, "Is this sufficient ground for such a sweeping denunciation?" (12). Byron's answer is an unequivocal 'no', he takes aim at what he perceives to be Bowles's tendency to place himself on a pedestal of morality and purity. Byron attacks Bowles's perception of Pope as licentious, by arguing first that criticizing Pope's character is not a valid reason, even if those criticisms themselves are valid, for debunking his poetry. From there, Byron does precisely what he promised not to do: he sets his sights on attacking Bowles personally.

In modern critical discussions, the Bowles-Byron controversy is seen more as a reflection of the two men themselves, and of the tendencies of both of them have to spend

at least as much time disparaging one another as they do commenting on poetry.<sup>65</sup> It is easy to see where this perception comes from. For example, on page 15 of his letter, Byron refers extensively to a story he has heard from a “much better authority” about Bowles’s own licentious youthful escapades:

Mr. Bowles was not always a clergyman; and when he was a very young man, was he never seduced into as much [as Pope’s “licentiousness”]? I could tell a much better story of Mr. Bowles than Cibber’s, upon much better authority . . . But . . . is he the less now a pious or good man, for not having always been a priest? No such thing; I am willing to believe him a good man, almost as good a man as Pope, but no better. (353)

Byron insists that to “brand Mr. Bowles with a “libertine sort of love,” or with “licentiousness”” would not make him “less now a pious or a good man, for not having always been a priest.” Such a charge, beyond having no bearing on a critical discussion of Pope, would (and did) evoke the strongest of reactions from Bowles, whose livelihood and position as a parish priest depended on his moral authority. It would have been easy for Byron to make his point: that Bowles’s criticism of Pope on moral grounds had nothing to do with his poetical works. However, Byron took it further and, under the guise of responding to Bowles’s comments on Pope, took the opportunity to attack him personally on moral grounds. This episode is indicative of the tone of much of the rest of Byron’s letter, in which he spends less time evaluating the poetical merits of Pope

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<sup>65</sup> In his essay, James Chandler cites J.J. Van Rennes’s book: Bowles, Byron and the Pope Controversy (1966) as focusing primarily “on the tone in which [the debate] is carried on” (483).

himself, and more time looking for angles from which to ridicule Bowles. Reading the letter suggests the conclusion that Byron is less concerned with the critical consequences of Bowles's initial edition of Pope and subsequent discourse, and more focused on what he perceives to be personal attacks, against the lifestyle that he himself lives, coming from Bowles.

Bowles's concerns in his initial published letter, "Invariable Principles of Poetry", are twofold: First, he is concerned that his poetical criticisms of Pope are misrepresented and second, he is concerned that his portrayal of Pope's moral lapses have been exaggerated. Both of these misrepresentations Bowles argues are the result of Campbell, like Byron, "[taking his] opinion, not from the book itself, but from the representation of that very Review (35).<sup>66</sup> Bowles takes this point further, protesting that it:

Does appear to [him], by [Campbell] using the very same observations which were made in that Review, both with regard to criticism and the Life: your criticisms on both were derived, at *second-hand*, from the same source. (35)

Bowles's implicit objection is that Campbell and Byron likely have not read his original edition of Pope and instead have both based their attacks on the (unfounded, according to Bowles) review released in response to his publication of the edition. He writes to Campbell: "Could this utterly escape your notice, if you had (I will not say read [my] criticism,) but only *looked* at the first two sentences?" (21). In the above sentence Bowles

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<sup>66</sup> Bowles is referencing a review of his volume of Pope's works that was published in The Quarterly Review and written by George Taylor. It is Bowles's assertion that both Pope and Campbell quote directly from this review and not from his book itself.

unabashedly calls Campbell out for having spoken without reading Bowles's original work. This is a charge that Byron admits to in his letter to Murray.

Bowles organizes his responses to his criticisms in two different groups: those pertaining to his poetical criticisms of Pope and those charging him with a self-perceived moral supremacy. Bowles's essential position in regards to Pope's poetry is that, by focusing his work on man-made, as opposed to natural subjects, Pope relegates himself to a secondary class of poets who choose to focus their talents, however extensive, on depicting an inferior subject matter. We will look specifically at the intricacies and merits of these different theoretical perspectives in the next section of this chapter. For now, suffice it to say that Bowles in his letter focuses both on undermining Campbell's argument that legendary poets have focused primarily on manmade objects and on negating Byron's satire in English Bards and Scotch Reviewers by arguing that he was misquoted.

Bowles quotes Campbell in his letter in order to assert that he has been misquoted and misrepresented:

The writer of [Pope's life] has kept in the shade his good qualities, and *exaggerated* his bad...[the] editor's virtuous indignation on this might well have been spared. (32) <sup>67</sup>

As a side note, just reading the discourse between Bowles and Campbell suggests that this criticism is not new to Bowles and is one that has been inferred for a long time.

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<sup>67</sup> Bowles adds that he "can only draw the inference, that the good qualities of the poet's heart must have been studiously and invidiously concealed, and the bad ones thus *exaggerated*" (33).

Bowles suggests explicitly that he “feel[s] happy in an opportunity, the only one I ever may have, of meeting this charge. It has often been said, in prose, and verse” (33).

Bowles spends the remaining thirteen pages of his letter quoting his own work to demonstrate that his allegations pertaining to Pope’s “*Moral Character*” (32) have been anything but a central feature of his criticism. Instead, Bowles suggests that he has chosen to exclude facts and anecdotes that he knows to be true, by virtue of Pope’s personal letters that he has in his possession, which paint the poet in a derogatory light. Bowles’s assertion is that the criticism that he has endured is due to misquotations like Byron’s and an overall misperception that has flowed directly from people not reading his own work for themselves.

Bowles makes some legitimate arguments that support the conclusion that he has been mistreated and misquoted in reviews by prominent figures on the literary scene. Nothing he says is explosive enough to warrant the response he gets from Byron who paints him, on third-hand information, as an ex-philanderer turned priest.<sup>68</sup> There are three plausible conclusions: that Byron and Campbell are legitimately repulsed by Bowles’s character and what they perceive as his “self-righteousness”; or that they, feel the need to disparage Bowles to cover up their own, now publicized, mistakes in misquoting him. Of course, it is also possible that Byron and Campbell’s attacks against Bowles flow from a strong resentment for the brand of poetics that he advocates both in his initial publication of his version of Pope’s works and his subsequent letters on the subject. More likely, it is the combination of these three factors that leads Byron and Campbell to attack Bowles.

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<sup>68</sup> This episode is described earlier in this section of this chapter.

## Part II

In both his Life and Writings of Pope and the correspondence he shared with Campbell and Byron in the twenty years following his initial publication of that work, Bowles asserts unequivocally that Pope's choice of subject matter places him in an inferior class of poets who focus on manmade, rather than natural subjects. Byron, in his rejection of this claim focuses specifically on one assertion. Byron writes in his letter to Murray:

Mr. Bowles asserts that Campbell's "Ship of the Line" derives all its poetry not from "art" but from "nature"... "Take away the waves, the winds, the sun, &c. &c. *one* will become a stripe of blue bunting; and the other a piece of coarse canvas on three tall poles." Very true; take away the "waves," "the winds," and there will be no ship at all, not only for poetical, but for any other purpose; and take away "the sun," and we must read Mr. Bowles's pamphlet by candle-light. But the "poetry" of the "Ship" does *not* depend on "the waves," &c.; on the contrary, the "Ship of the Line" confers its own poetry upon the waters, and heightens *theirs* . . . if the sun shone neither upon pyramids, nor fleets, nor fortresses, would its beams be equally poetical? I think not: the poetry is at least reciprocal. (19-20)

Byron's point, which he continues over the course of the next ten pages, is that the natural entities that Bowles refers to as being superior, are not as compelling as subjects of poetry in the absence of manmade objects to enhance the scene and to "break [their] vast but fatiguing monotony" (21). While Byron falls short of insisting that Bowles's



assertion that the natural surroundings of manmade objects imbue the images of those objects with poetic meaning and significance, he does insist on some sort of relationship between the two classes of objects. Byron's point is essentially that, just as Bowles describes the manmade objects that Pope chooses as the subjects for his poems as deriving their poetry from the natural scenes in which they are set, so too are those natural scenes enhanced by the inclusion of manmade objects.

This assertion seems to flow from yet another mischaracterization of Bowles. Bowles's original point is a subtle one; his argument is an argument of degrees. In consideration of Campbell's "Ship of the Line" Bowles argues that the ship derives its poetical poignancy from the natural setting in which it is described:

Let us examine the ship which you have described so beautifully. On what does the poetical beauty depend? Not on art, but NATURE . . . What I said respecting descriptive poetry, in my Essay on the poetical Character of POPE, was not with a view of shewing that a poet should be a botanist, or even a Dutch painter; but that no one could be 'pre-eminent' as a great (descriptive) poet without this knowledge, which peculiarly distinguishes COWPER and THOMSON. Why is COWPER so eminent as a descriptive poet? Because he is the most accurate describer of the works of external nature, and for that reason is superior, as a descriptive poet, to Pope. ("Invariable Principles of Poetry" 12-13)<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Bowles does not pretend that by choosing not to include descriptions of natural settings in descriptive poems, poets cannot be *good* or even *great*. What Bowles is asserting is that in order to be in the *highest* class of descriptive poets, a poet must supplement his descriptions of manmade objects with parallel descriptions of their natural surroundings.

Byron, in his later letter to Murray, paints Bowles as arguing that this is a dichotomous relationship where the poetic quality of a poem is derived *either* from its natural elements *or* from its manmade subjects:

But the “poetry” of the “Ship” does *not* depend on “the waves” &c. ; on the contrary, the “Ship of the Line” confers its own poetry upon the waters, and heightens *theirs*. I do not deny, that the “waves and winds,” and above all “the sun,” are highly poetical; we know it to our cost, by the many descriptions of them in verse: but if the waves bore only the foam upon their bosoms, if the winds wafted only the sea-weed to the shore, if the sun shone neither upon pyramids, nor fleets, nor fortresses, would its beams be equally poetical? The relationship is at least reciprocal. (356)

Such a hyperbolic view is at least close to misinformed as Byron makes it out to be: any poet, regardless of the school in which they counted themselves a member, would disagree that natural imagery *must* exist at the exclusion of manmade elements. Certainly Bowles, as evidenced by his own poetry would not advocate such a position. Byron’s assertion that “the relationship is at least reciprocal” assumes that Bowles is suggesting otherwise—which is not the case. Bowles argues that nature enhances the poetry of the ship, not that *all* the poetry of the ship comes from its natural surroundings.

One of Bowles’s best-regarded sonnets, Sonnet XI from his original fourteen, takes as its subject the (manmade) bells at Ostend. The poem reads:

How sweet the tuneful bells' responsive peal!  
As when, at opening morn, the fragrant breeze  
Breathes on the trembling sense of wan disease,

So piercing to my heart their force I feel!  
And hark! with lessening cadence now they fall,  
And now, along the white and level tide,  
They fling their melancholy music wide,  
Bidding me many a tender thought recall  
Of summer-days, and those delightful years,  
When by my native streams, in life's fair prime,  
The mournful magic of their mingling chime  
First wak'd my wond'ring childhood into tears!  
But seeming now, when all those days are o'er,  
The sounds of joy, once heard, and heard no more. (1-14)

The first line of the sonnet exclaims the sweetness of “the tuneful bells responsive peal!” From there, Bowles takes us on a journey typical of his early sonnets. The octave establishes a strong parallel between the manmade bells and Nature. Bowles, in the first quatrain likens the peal of the bells to “the fragrant breeze” and he feels the “force” “piercing to [his] heart” of both the breeze and the bells. Had Byron been as familiar with Bowles’s poetical beliefs and works as he pretends to be, he would not have ascribed the position he describes to him unless he did so with the intent to deceive his reader. In the first line of the second quatrain of his sonnet above, Bowles returns his reader’s focus to the bells. He writes “And hark! With lessening cadence now they fall” where “they” refers clearly to the bells again. Once more, in the next three lines, Bowles draws parallels between the bells and another of his trademark poetic subjects: his melancholy and sentimental consideration of his youth. The poem continues as such and Bowles

credits the bells with having awakened his own poetic sensitivity and sentimentality. In the closing couplet of the poem, Bowles refers to the bells as the “sound of joy” unequivocally establishing them as inherently and powerfully emotional. Moreover, by associating the bells so strongly with nature, Bowles places the two entities in a complimentary relationship in which the emotions conveyed by the two are similar, if not identical.

After examining a poem like “Sonnet XI,” it is difficult to attribute much truth or value to the criticisms made by Byron in his letter to Murray. It appears more likely that his account of Bowles’s poetic values and beliefs was carefully presented, much as Byron accuses Bowles of selectively presenting his account of Pope’s moral character, to affect a negative response to Bowles by his readers. This similarity, between the charges levied against Bowles by Byron and the means by which Byron elucidates those charges is no accident. Byron apparently feels justified because he has perceived, incorrectly as Bowles points out, that Bowles has played unfairly in criticizing Pope on moral grounds. Byron perceives this as, in turn, justifying him in resorting to the same sort of maneuver in order to debunk Bowles’s critical theories.

Bowles, as evidenced both by what he actually writes in prose and by his own poetry, advocates a symbiotic relationship between the natural and the manmade in poetry. Indeed, Bowles attributes the majority of the emotional energy and poetic power to natural imagery, but believes the experience of manmade sensations can provide a viable medium for the expression of those natural images.<sup>70</sup> Byron poses the question

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<sup>70</sup> The hills in Bowles’s sonnet literally reflect the sound of the tolling of the bells. This is consistent with Bowles’s tendency to reflect the human pathos in his natural images. The

rhetorically: “Is the sea itself a more attractive, a more moral, a more poetical object, with or without a ship?” (21.) The implication of this question, and what Byron suggests is an obvious answer, is that the sea, even if it is moral and compelling on its own, becomes *more* appealing poetically with a ship tossing amongst its waves. Bowles would not, as evidenced in both the poem and the criticism above, dispute this charge; he would simply say that the sea is a necessary condition for the realization of the poetry of the ship itself. In this case, Byron shrugs that comment off as an obvious tautology, but if the example itself changes, say to the example of the bells tolling at Ostend, it becomes clear that Byron has missed Bowles’s point in refusing to honestly consider the comment that the poetry of the manmade objects depends on the natural imagery with which it is associated for its poignancy. Even in the absence of a *necessary* association between the bells and, say, the morning or the “fragrant breeze” Bowles associates the manmade bells with natural imagery as a means to articulate the emotional power that they convey.

Moving away from the example of the ship, if we place Bowles’s comments in the context of his sonnet, the claim becomes: “take away the fragrant breeze and all you have is the sound of metal on metal.” The assertion is not that the ship practically relies on the breeze and therefore must rely poetically as well; it is that the emotional content conveyed by natural imagery enriches the manmade subjects of poems. By failing to emphasize accordingly the natural settings and elements in poetry, a poet overlooks the potential of his poem to affect an even greater emotional response in his reader. This is Bowles’s claim and Byron never responds to it in earnest.

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additional parallel between natural sensations and human experiences reinforces that aforementioned reflexivity.

## Part III

The question becomes: where do Bowles's poetic views place him in context of the other prominent poets of the period? We already have established that his place among poets in the school of Byron and Campbell is tenuous at best, for personal, if not poetic reasons. But where does he stand in relationship to those poets like Coleridge, and Wordsworth?

My assertion, plainly stated, is that the poetical theories that Bowles advocates in his "Invariable Principles of Poetry" are in line not only with his own work but also with the poetic theories advocated by prominent figures both in the period and in our current conception of the essential canon of Romantic poetry. Furthermore, the fact that Bowles advocated these theories prior to those prominent figures articulating them, if not explicitly in prose, than implicitly in verse, is evidence that he ought to be counted as a significant figure in the tradition we refer to retrospectively as Romanticism. In previous portions of this paper, I have advocated Bowles's importance based both on his influence on Coleridge and other prominent Romantics and on the content and quality of his sonnets. My assertion that he wrote his poetry in accordance to a collected set of poetic principles that he had determined is evidenced by the consistency of the appearance of those principles in his sonnets, from his first publication in 1789 all the way to his last in 1844. However, given the weight of the burden of proof of aiming to subvert what has become a fairly standard conception of the significance of Wordsworth and Coleridge to the Romantic canon, I am extending this argument to suggest that Bowles anticipates not only Coleridge's "juvenile" fancies, but also the theoretical positions which we,

collectively, understand as definitive of Wordsworth's significance as a revolutionary poet and founding father of Romanticism. To make my argument I will place a portion of Bowles's letter to Campbell next to one of the well-known passages of Wordsworth's Preface. From there I will respond to an obvious objection: that Bowles's letter came twenty years after Wordsworth's Preface and could potentially flow from that source. Finally, after establishing Bowles's relevance relative to Wordsworth, and having already made such a claim relative to Coleridge, I will explain my theory that the political shift in the first decade of the nineteenth century was largely responsible for Bowles's alienation from the major poets of the second wave of Romanticism.

Bowles, in his letter to Campbell, succinctly reiterates his argument from his publication of Pope's collected works. Bowles lists three premises that are as follows:

1<sup>st</sup>: *Works of nature*, speaking of those *more* beautiful and sublime, are *more* sublime and beautiful than works of art; therefore more poetical.

2<sup>nd</sup>: The passions of the human heart, which are the same in all ages, and which are the causes of the sublime and pathetic in sentiment, are more *poetical* than *artificial manners*.

3<sup>rd</sup>: The great poet of human passions is the most consummate master of his art and the heroic, the lofty, and the pathetic, as belonging to this class, are distinguished.

4<sup>th</sup>: If these premises be true, the descriptive poet, who paints from an intimate knowledge of external nature, is more poetical, supposing the fidelity and execution equal, *not* than the painter of human passions, but the painter of

external circumstances in *artificial life*; as COWPER paints a morning walk, and POPE a game of cards!! (22.)

Wordsworth, in his “Preface,” makes claims that directly correspond with the first two of Bowles’s premises. These claims do not appear in the same order in Wordsworth’s essay as they do in Bowles’s letter, but they effect the same conclusion. The claims are:

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity . . . and speak a . . . more emphatic language . . . the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and . . . in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (5)

The focus of this comparison between Bowles’s first premise, and the above principle, articulated by Wordsworth in his Preface, is on the assertion, common between the two poets, that nature provides the most powerful subject and setting for poetry and is therefore itself “more poetical.” Wordsworth’s reference to “humble and rustic life” can be reasonably interpreted to include situations surrounded by nature, like the scene depicted in Bowles’s “From a Garden Seat at Home” Such a scene is far-removed from art and artifice, or as Bowles writes in that poem “the thronged ways/ of glittering vice” (6-7) and is thus superior to those “fickle tastes” that Wordsworth references (5)

Wordsworth’s employment of natural imagery in his assertion of the above principle is further evidence of his belief, shared with Bowles, that natural subjects are superior to manmade and artificial subjects. He writes that the “passions of the heart find a better *soil*” and that the “manners of rural life *germinate* from those elementary feelings” (emphasis mine). These two lines culminate in Wordsworth’s assertion that



these “passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” This principle, besides echoing Bowles’s first premise that “works of *nature* . . . are *more* sublime and beautiful than works of art” also reiterates Bowles’s second premise that states that “the passions of the human heart . . . are the causes of the sublime and pathetic in sentiment.”

This assertion of causality between human passions and the sublime is prominent in both Bowles’s and Wordsworth’s critical comments. Wordsworth speaks by making constant metaphorical references to nature and to growth, suggesting that human passions, entwined with images of nature, grow like plants from mere seeds to full grown trees—where the trees are the recreation by the poet for his reader of sublime experiences. Bowles makes the same assertion, but does so much more directly, matter-of-factly in stating that human passions “are the causes of the sublime.”

Bowles and Wordsworth also share the same position regarding the poetic value of man-made art. Wordsworth insists that poets who write in accordance with their own experiences (an example set by Bowles whose sonnets flow directly from his walking tour taken in the late 1780s), transcend the work of those poets who “separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes” (5). A perfect example of such behavior exists in the picturesque controversy, which was rooted in the shift away from the manicured and carefully constructed lawns of the early eighteenth century, littered with “art” such as fake temples or pools or statues, and towards landscapes that reflected the natural features of the land. This is the sort of thing Wordsworth is talking about when he refers to “arbitrary and capricious habits” and “fickle tastes, and fickle appetites.” Bowles weighs

in on tastes like those common in landscape architecture in the first half of the eighteenth century as well when he refers to “works of art” and “artificial manners.”<sup>71</sup>

The implicit distinction between the two competing trends in landscape architecture, which is mirrored in both Bowles’s and Wordsworth’s discussion of poetry, is the distinction between the temporary and the permanent. It can be said that a lawn that is designed to reflect the natural features of the land reflects that which is permanent, whereas a lawn designed to reflect the tastes of that day and age will be fleeting, always requiring upkeep in order to avoid returning to its natural state. The same can be said, and is said by both Bowles and Wordsworth, about poetry that takes as its subject nature and the passions that flow easily from the natural and “rustic” world. Poems set or addressed to nature “are more durable”, according to Wordsworth. “The passions of the human heart . . . are the same in all ages,” Bowles insists. Wordsworth echoes this sentiment when he says that the passions of men are incorporated with the “beautiful and permanent

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<sup>71</sup> Anna Seward responded to Richard Payne Knight’s poem “The Landscape: A Didactic Poem” (1795) by calling his positions in regards to landscaping the “Jacobinism of taste”. Knight advocated free flowing gardens which allowed for the landscape to take on its natural form without restrictions. This contradicted the popular taste in landscape architecture advocated by prominent architects like Uvedale Price and Humphry Repton, who favored restrained, orderly, and ornamental gardens. The entire debate became an avenue for the debate over essential human rights as they related to the French Revolution and the threat of revolution in England. It was in this light that Seward made her remarks.

forms of nature.”<sup>72</sup> As such, permanence of subject matter becomes a quality that both Bowles and Wordsworth distinguish as being necessary to a poem, or a poet’s, membership in the highest class of poetry.

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<sup>72</sup> When he makes his scathing comment regarding the title of Bowles’s letter to Campbell, Byron writes: “I do hate that word ‘*invariable*’. What is there of *human*, be it poetry, philosophy, wit, wisdom, science, power, glory, mind, matter, life, or death, which is ‘*invariable*’? Of all arrogant baptisms of a book, this title to a pamphlet appears the most complacently conceited” (18). Here, he is simultaneously rejecting this assertion by Wordsworth, as it makes basically the same claim. That Byron did not include Wordsworth’s assertion that in the condition of poetry that combines nature with the passions of the human heart, “the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and *permanent* forms of nature” (5) (emphasis mine), is odd since it advocates a similar position from a more prominent author. Were Byron to want to make his argument stronger, he would have attacked the more prominent poet. It seems clear that Wordsworth is talking about natural forms in the Platonic sense, and poetry that adheres to the principles that Wordsworth advocates allows the reader to experience these platonic forms of nature in a way that resonates with the passions of their human heart to cause a sublime experience for that reader. So, essentially, Wordsworth argues that while these principles themselves are not forms, they are the sole means he identifies in poetry for a poet to render a sublime experience of the forms of nature for his reader. As such, the principles themselves become the immutable means to create an experience of immutable ends. It seems fair, as such, to refer to the principles themselves as the immutable, or invariable, principles of poetry since no alternative method to create a

Bowles establishes this two-tiered concept of poetry in his third premise, where he states: “The great poet of human passions is the most consummate master of his art.” Wordsworth, for his part, implies a similar concept when he distinguishes himself, as writing in a language that is “arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language” than that “which is frequently substituted for it by [those] Poets, who . . . separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression” (5). This is Wordsworth’s way of making the same claim that Bowles makes when he compares Cowper’s painting of “a morning walk” with Pope’s painting of “a game of cards”. The former is more poetic according to both Bowles and Wordsworth.

My argument here is not that Bowles ought to supplant Wordsworth in his seat at the head of the table of poets who are deemed essentially relevant to our conception of Romantic poetry as a whole by virtue of his significant contribution to the growth of that tradition and his exhibition and articulation, in prose and in poetry, of many of the principles that are vital to at least the first wave of that tradition. My argument is that, for the reasons articulated throughout this paper and most importantly, on account of the explicit parallels between the theory Bowles advocates in his letter and articulates in the entire body of his poetry, written over the course of fifty plus years, and Wordsworth’s own theory articulated in his *Premise* written in 1800, Bowles ought to be given a seat at

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sublime experience for the reader appears to exist. As such, Byron’s decision to ridicule Bowles on the title of his work, assuming he was familiar with Wordsworth’s work, which seems likely, must have been a conscious decision to pick on what he perceived to be a weaker proponent of a poetic philosophy he disagreed with.

that table of poets, with whom familiarity with is absolutely essential to the cultivation of any sort of honest understanding of the tradition of Romantic poetry.

As noted earlier, one obvious objection to this claim will be that Bowles's letter appears almost twenty years after Wordsworth's Preface and could have conceivably been based, if not directly, indirectly on the principles advocated therein. I have alluded to my response to this criticism throughout this chapter, but to articulate it clearly: this objection might hold water were it not for the existence of Bowles's substantial collection of poetry written before the publication of Lyrical Ballads. To deny Bowles any credit for or ownership of the ideas he advocates in his letter would be to assume that in order for a poet, or a person for that matter, to be given the credit and recognition for the ideas advocated in their work, those ideas must be entirely original and must not be rooted in the earlier works of another person.

The decade and a half long controversy between Bowles and Byron is significant because it serves as an indicator of how the views of the literary community were changing in general in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Bowles's position is representative of the poetic perspective in the last decade of the eighteenth century when such an emphasis was placed on the power of natural imagery in poetry. I would venture so far as to say that Bowles's position would have met with, if not agreement, at least with less resistance had he published his edition of Pope ten years earlier than he did. Even more likely is that Bowles's "Invariable Principles of Poetry" would have resonated with the poetic community in the 1790s much the same way that his sonnets did. Bowles's sonnets instantiate the principles laid out by Bowles in his critical essay, but they do so thirty years before Bowles writes the essay.

The two sides of the Byron-Bowles controversy are representative of the shift in the popular perspective regarding both poetry and politics, from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, to the beginning decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in England. Bowles still lives his life the same way he did in the 1790s. He is representative of that world-view. Meanwhile, the radical poets who Bowles inspired have become more conservative as the Romantic emphasis on nature gives way to a more balanced conception of life and living in general. Bowles continues to represent the former perspective while Byron is emblematic of the latter position. The change that is reflected in the comparison of Byron and Bowles is simultaneously evident in the examination of the evolution of Coleridge throughout the same period. Simply put, the radical liberal who once attempted to convince his friends and peers to leave England in order to establish an ideal literary society, has become a staunch social conservative, along with his other radical counterparts. Bowles, on the other hand, has not. As a result, Bowles continues to reflect the values of the 1790s, while the popular figureheads of that radicalism have abandoned their initial political positions. This transition, has by the time Bowles publishes his version of Pope, implemented itself in the poetics of the period as well.

These positions can be clearly identified as influences on Bowles's work throughout his life. As such, Bowles's position in the Byron—Bowles controversy surrounding Pope can be seen at once as the same position that helped to catalyze the initial growth of the Romantic movement and as a barometer for the change that occurs within the bounds of that same movement over the course of the next thirty years.

## CONCLUSION

At the very beginning of his poetic career, Bowles is best described as a “Pre-Romantic.” The Neoclassical elements he features in his poetry are the same elements that the Romantic poetic strain evolves out of. Particularly relevant to this evolution are Joseph Warton’s assertion that natural subjects are superior to manmade subjects in poetry, and Gray’s mournful elegiac reflection in his “Elegy Written at a Country Churchyard.” By situating himself in conversation with these two poets, Bowles does not respond to these ideologies, but embodies them in his earliest poetry. The fact that he adopts the formal elements of this earlier tradition further reinforces this classification. However, in a self-professed poetic moment of professional self-awareness, Bowles consciously abandons those influences of Pope, Gray and Warton in order to begin to develop his own poetic style.

Bowles builds his new poetic around the association of natural images with the emotional states of the human pathos. Bowles positions his descriptions of the natural settings of his poems in such a way so that they reflect the emotional and mental states of the speakers of his poems. In addition, Bowles shirks the formal restraints that he inherits from Pope and Gray very early on in order to adopt his own, formally chaotic and ever-changing sonnet form.

This new strain of poetry grabs the attention of S.T. Coleridge early in the 1790s, and holds his enthusiasm into the start of the nineteenth century (contrary to common critical consensus). Not only does Bowles's self-professed shift in poetic ideology play a role in harkening in the Romantic era in poetry, but his sustained influence on Coleridge cements the popularity of these poetic philosophies by putting them in the hands of more dedicated poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth.

Reexamining Bowles's poetic in the context of his public debate with Byron over Bowles's published edition of Pope's works, it becomes clear in retrospect that Bowles, in his poetry, anticipates the same ideas Wordsworth articulates in his "Preface" in 1800. For example, Bowles takes the sonnet form, which is traditionally governed by strict formal restraints, and bends and breaks the rhyme scheme and structure of the lines in order to "Blend natural thought with natural diction" (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 6). In his poetry Bowles cultivates a relationship between melancholic nostalgia and the natural scenes and settings that trigger those emotions. By writing those emotions into his descriptions of nature, Bowles preempts Wordsworth's effort to set his reflections in natural and rural settings.

Bowles, throughout the 1790s not only provides us with a convenient transitional figure who embodies the shift from Neoclassicism to Romanticism, but also, both directly and indirectly, catalyzes the development of Romanticism. For at least the past century we have studied Romanticism with hardly a mention of William Lisle Bowles. As a result, we have misunderstood Coleridge's development as an individual and as a poet, and, more importantly, we have placed the development of Romanticism in the last five



years of the eighteenth century, when, in fact, the ideas that we consider synonymous were appearing in Bowles' poetry at the end of the 1780s.

This new understanding of Bowles that I have posited in this essay may not change the way we understand poems like "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" or "Tintern Abbey," but it will necessarily change how we understand the roles Wordsworth and Coleridge play in the development of the Romantic strain in poetry. Bowles's significance to the study of Romanticism does not match that of Wordsworth and Coleridge. However, our understanding of those two poets, their ideas, and the movement in poetry that they help define, cannot be complete without a proper understanding of William Lisle Bowles.

Furthermore, the study of Romanticism, in a way, has been instrumental to the development of literary theory across time-periods. As Chandler and McLane write: "The names F.R. Leavis, Northrop Frye, M.H. Abrams, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man form only the beginnings of a long litany of critics who drew far-reaching implications for the larger enterprise of literary studies from their engagements with Romantic poetry" (3). The addition of Smith and Baurbaud in the Romantic Canon have, as Chandler and McLane point out, helped to establish feminist criticism as an important perspective in literary criticism across time periods. Similarly for the cultural critics, readings of poets like Southey and Burns prove how fruitful an understanding of the socio-economic contexts of a time period can be to informing readings of poetry from the same period. In the same way, this study of Bowles ought to highlight the critical importance of gaining a thorough understanding of the personal development of the

major poets we study, so that we can accurately understand their role in the poetic advancements that we attribute to them.

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