Nether Stoical? Re-walking Coleridge and Wordsworth's Quantocks Paths as Post-Pastoral Spaces

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Abstract:

Using the methodology of 'narrative scholarship' to explore walks today made by Coleridge and the Wordsworths out of Nether Stowey this essay relates their themes to contemporary environmental concerns by thinking of this Quantocks space as 'post-pastoral' – a site of both beauty and alarm. This tension is summed up as one between the political stoicism that might emerge from the nether world of the Anthropocene and the well-being of walking this space in times of pandemic. This tension is created in original poems that punctuate the critical and historical enquiry. The scholarship of Jonathan Bate's *Radical Wordsworth* (2020) and Adam Nicolson's *The Making of Poetry* (2019) is discussed, leading to reference to Samantha Walton's *Everybody Needs Beauty: In Search of a Nature Cure* (2021). Finally, John Muir's framing of 'going out' for a walk as really 'going in' leads to the conclusion that both are needed now.

Keywords: Narrative Scholarship, Coleridge, Wordworth, Post-pastoral, Poetry, Anthropocene

Nether Stoical? Re-walking Coleridge and Wordsworth's Quantocks Paths as Post-Pastoral Spaces

In the summer of 1797 the radical speaker and writer John Thelwall, 'regarded by some in government as the most dangerous man in Britain' (Bate 2020, 153) walked from London to Somerset to stay with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Nether Stowey. Four years earlier Thelwall had published a book revealingly titled *The Peripatetic; or, Sketches of the Heart, of Nature and Society; in a Series of Politico-Sentimental Journals, in Verse and Prose of the Eccentric Excursions of Sylvanus Theophrastus*. In it Thelwall had explained that walking was educative: 'the volume of nature is ever open at some page of instruction and delight [...] These fields, these hedgerows, this simple turf, Shall form my Academus' (cited in Nicolson 2019, 112). For Thelwall walking was also 'democratic':

> I have been rambling, according to my wonted practice, in the true democratic way, on foot, from village to village […] I have sat down among the rough clowns, whose tattered garments were soiled with their rustic labours; for I have not forgot that all mankind are equally my brethren (cited in Nicolson 2019, 112).

Thelwall had spent seven months in the Tower and Newgate Prison charged with high treason, for which he would have been hung, drawn and quartered. Having been acquitted, he was now looking for a place to settle with his family, the notorious 'Jacobin fox' seeking a bolt hole away from government attention.

On his first morning in Nether Stowey, Coleridge walked him over to visit William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy who had just rented Alfoxden House three miles away. Wordsworth's biographer, the ecocritic Jonathan Bate, says that 'They spent the day rambling in the hills, talking poetry, philosophy and politics' (2020, 153). The footpaths of the Quantock hills which rose behind the houses of both poets were, that day, not only poetical spaces but politically radical ones where passionate talk 'of the heart' combined interests in both nature and society. The poets' growing awareness of the unity in diversity of nature led to the radical politics of unity in diversity of society. Our modern notion of 'environmental justice' would be a clumsy term for the spiritual dimensions of 'politico-sentimental' (cited in Nicolson 2019, 112) thoughts that were discussed on those footpaths during what local people regarded as the 'eccentric excursions' (cited in Nicolson 2019, 112) of these educated incomers. Indeed, local people had become so suspicious about Wordsworth following Coleridge into the neighbourhood that Coleridge wrote to Thelwall to persuade him not to join them in

settling there with his family: ‘You cannot conceive the tumult, calumnies, & apparatus of threatened persecutions which this event has occasioned round about us’ (Bate 2020, 160).

Those conversations on walks in the hills, reported by local farmers to the authorities, resulted in the Home Office sending a spy, James Walsh, to Somerset. Walsh had previously paid thugs to disrupt Thelwall’s public lectures in London so that they could be closed down. Indeed, it was Walsh who had arrested Thelwall for treason when he was taken to the Tower. Following the suspicious writers on their walks from Nether Stowey, Walsh, who was distinguished by a large nose, was easily spotted, hiding, for example, behind a bank to listen to conversation on the clifftop above the sea at Kilve, ‘our favourite seat’, wrote Coleridge two decades later (Coleridge 1997, 112). In a hilarious passage in *Biographia Literaria* (1847) Coleridge suggests that Walsh must have thought that he had been rumbled when he heard the poets refer to ‘Spy Nozy’ (Ibid.). Today, re-walking Coleridge and Wordsworth’s paths from Nether Stowey, one finds just such a clifftop seat that invites a reflection from our own times when ‘the volume of nature’ is instructing us on sea-level rise, climate change, and radical responses such as Extinction Rebellion.

Kilve

The government spy is waiting
on the cliffs of Kilve: Spy Nozy,
nicknamed for *a remarkable feature*
belonging to him, with pencil
and memorandum book in hand

making studies of the tide levels
rising up the cliffs of Kilve.

The giant ammonites are waiting
for release in that storm surge
brought by the icecaps waiting
for release through their *caverns*
measureless to man down
to the sun-warmed sea here
below the cliffs of Kilve.

Bristol radicals are waiting
still, *distributing hand-bills*
of a seditious nature
to the common people,
who travel to the sea-side
and their favourite seat
under the cliffs of Kilve.

Coleridge and Wordsworth were actually discussing the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, who not only denied that monarchs and their governments derived their authority from God, but believed that apprehension of God was to be found in nature – that God and Nature were the same, interchangeable, thing (*Deus sive Natura*) (Coleridge 1997, 393, n112). It was this linking of the democratic with the pantheistic that inspired the poetic radicalism which was to result in the collaborative project of *The Lyrical Ballads* (1800).

The peripatetics of their walking together produced a new poetics of space that represented a radical engagement with the issues of their times. The poets believed that this required challenging reason with intuition, as they did in their poetry. Jonathan Bate makes a clear misreading of Wordsworth's poem 'Anecdote for Fathers' in which the speaker asks his son whether he prefers to be at their present farm in Wales (Wordsworth uses the name of the place where Thelwall actually retreated to instead of settling in Nether Stowey) or back at Kilve. Inexplicably, Bate says 'the boy opts for Liswyn' (2020, 162) whilst in the poem the boy says 'At Kilve I'd rather be / Than here at Liswyn farm'. Asked five times for a reason and the boy replies that he cannot say why. And that's the point of the poem: in children choices are not governed by reason but intuition, a way of knowing from which fathers might learn. Forced to articulate a reason, the boy's eye catches sight of a weathercock and an arbitrary, absurd answer is provided: 'At Kilve there was no weather-cock / And that's the reason why' (Wordsworth 1984, 83).

Walking the coastal path at Kilve today requires a poetics that engages with the issues of our own times. The eye cannot help but be caught by a sight that challenges reason, prompting an intuitive anxiety: the building works underway at the nuclear power station of Hinkley Point. Actually this is Hinkley C, Hinkley A having been decommissioned and Hinkley B functioning until August 2022. The huge cranes and earthworks on the site represent the Chinese financing of French technology to build Hinkley C out on the foreshore below Nether Stowey, on the very edge of the Bristol Channel which has the second highest tidal range in the world of up to fourteen metres, and is unused as an alternative form of energy that does not raise the unsolved issue of

toxic nuclear waste disposal. Since the engineer Thomas Fulljames's 1849 proposal for a Severn barrage there have been a succession of feasibility reports which have included the evolving technology of tidal turbines. In every case the government has ultimately rejected these proposals, although the war in Ukraine has now produced an independent commission to research what is claimed to offer the possibility of producing 7% of UK energy needs (Morris 2022).

Hinkley G

Blinding morning sunlight
reflects from rippled sand
still running with rivulets
of star-pulled tide-drain,
the old energy,
undated as yet,
for decommissioning.

Bate argues that Wordsworth's love of nature, inextricably linked in his mind with love of humankind, prepared the way for John Ruskin's attacks on climate change caused by industrialisation as expressed, for example, in his famous lecture 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century' of 1884 (Ruskin 1908, vol. 34, 9-41). Walking and talking in the 'vernal woods' of the Quantocks' coombes led Wordsworth to a sense of what he calls in the 1850 edition of *The Prelude* 'the moral power […] of the place' (Wordsworth 1971, 473) that might be intuited rather than reasoned. In the poem 'The Tables Turned' Wordsworth contrasts book knowledge with that to be gained from tuning in to the

‘impulses’ of ecology:

> One impulse from a vernal wood
> May teach you more of man;
> Of moral evil and of good,
> Than all the sages can. (1984, 131)

As Kate Rigby points out, ‘This is not to say that the place itself has moral sentiments, but that places have the power to elicit and entrain human affections, informing our disposition and shaping our moral sentiments’ (2020, 56). This is pure Spinoza, although ironically he has to be classified as the ‘sage’ who inspired this stanza. The discipline required to receive an ‘impulse from a vernal wood’ is an openness of heart in direct contact with nature – ‘Come forth, and bring with you a heart that / Watches and receives’ (Wordsworth 1984, 131). That call to ‘come forth’ is the second call to the peripatetic in the poem, the earlier one indicating that watching and receiving, that magical reciprocity, should be focussed upon seeing the life-spirit in the materiality of nature: ‘Come forth, into the light of things’ (Ibid.). ‘Things’ in the wood have their individual characteristics and impulses that only walking among them, living with them, recognising them as fellow beings in their creativity and decay (like apparently repulsive water snakes), can reveal to the open-hearted. Ralph Pite has shown how Coleridge’s attention to the subtle ‘“natural connections” in a brook […] with their pauses and transitions’, echo ‘the nearness and separation, the conversation and the silences through which individual people are linked together’ (2020, 26). After walking in the ‘enchanting’ wood Dorothy noted in her journal that ‘each tree, taken singly, was beautiful’ (Woof

2002, 146). Recognising fellow human beings in the same way, as part of our ecology, with empathy and care, is fundamental to a sense of 'moral evil and of good'. It is then a short step to Ruskin's watching and receiving 'The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century' in the polluted clouds driven from industrial Barrow-in-Furness past his home at Brantwood on the shores of Coniston Water.

So what impulses might be received from walking those wooded coombes now from Nether Stowey or from Alfoxden House? How might these woods speak of other woods in our warming world, prompting our sense of 'moral evil and of good'? What might a new poetics of these spaces conjure in our times?

The Coombe

Walked before dinner up the Coombe,
wrote Dorothy in April 1798.
Delicate fingered branches of beech
reach out at the walker stepping
over rooted nets disguised as mosses.
Come forth into the light of things,
wrote William, as though things
could be seen into for their auguries.

At the top of the Coombe we rested
in the last of the leafy shade before
crossing Dorothy's treeless 'Downs':
bracken ravaged swards, hiding sheep.
It was so hot the horse-riders, mother

and daughter, said they'd descend
the Coombe rather than ride directly home.
We would brave that 'thing', the sun.

The Siberian heatwave fired ancient forests,
melted tundra mosses, releasing methane,
megatonnes of carbon dioxide, accelerating
feedback loops that warmed oceans
that changed climates that lit fires in
Australia, California, Pennine moors.
On the Quantocks we shaded under a thorn.
Come forth into the light of things.

The extent of Dorothy's walking independent from William, especially later in the Lake District with her friend Mary Barker, has only recently been recognised, evidenced as much from her letters as her journals (see Bainbridge 2020, 230-242). In 1818 the two women, with a guide, porter and maid, were to make a pioneering ascent of Scafell Pike, the highest mountain in England. In her letter recounting this climb Dorothy's prose appreciates the materiality of nature in the 'huge blocks and stones' of the final ascent with characteristic attention to the 'never-dying lichens, which clouds and dews nourish' (238). It is well known that passages from Dorothy's journals became poems by William, but Terry McCormick makes the point that Dorothy, unlike William, visited local farmers' wives and gleaned stories that inspired major works by William. McCormick (2020, 102) cites one of Dorothy's letters reporting a conversation with a neighbour about

the difficulties facing small fell farmers which, three years later formed the basis for William's poem 'Repentance'.

Dorothy's Alfoxden journal is unerringly enchanted by Quantock spaces of wooded coombes and open downs, her attention to detail clearly receiving more than she articulates of 'the inner light of things'. When she and William and Coleridge have written the same phrase, as in the case of her 'black-blue vault' of the night sky, Pamela Woof points out that on their walks together, 'These were writers who talked, and who recollected each other's phrases' (2002, 278). That is to say that walking in contact with these things – coombe, trees, sky – created the poetic spaces for each other; the light they created in language and communicated to each other as they 'watched and received' these things. Today the poetic spaces of enchantment are still available, but are inevitably countered by the light of knowledge that these things are not unaffected by the consequences of the Anthropocene. Today these are inevitably poetic spaces of new tensions, the pastoral transformed into the post-pastoral, where enchantment cannot be unqualified by the new sense of a darker light of things, an undermining of bright pastoral idealisation with a darker, 'nether knowledge', as it were. It is important to note that the latter does not negate the former; the post-pastoral recognises both awesome beauty and the presence of decay and the death process. Both kinds of light are present in these Quantock spaces. Indeed, the enchantment in walking here must be appreciated if there is to be concern for what is under threat from the Anthropocene that might lead to the kind of political interventions such as those of the radicals from Bristol, following in the tradition of Coleridge and Thelwall who both lectured there, in the Extinction Rebellion

movement, for example.

Any such ‘nether knowledge’ is absent from Adam Nicolson’s book *The Making of Poetry* (2019), his account of spending a year in the Quantocks walking and thinking about the Wordsworths’ walking, conversing and creating with Coleridge. Like Coleridge, Nicolson invites friends to join him on walks there and in his record of the twenty four topics of their conversation, remarkably, there is no mention of any environmental issue (2019, 92). But what Nicolson does achieve in this book is an articulation of the essential creative and philosophical role of walking, for Coleridge in particular. With quotations from Coleridge’s letters and notebooks, Nicolson absorbs the Spinozian connectedness explored in those perambulatory conversations of 1797-8. He quotes Coleridge’s letter to Robert Southey of 10 September 1802 echoing the argument of Wordsworth in ‘Tables Turned’ that descriptions of nature should ‘by dim analogies’ be connected to ‘the moral world’:

> Nature has her proper interest; & he will know what it is, who believes & feels, that every Thing has a Life of its own, & and that we are all *one Life*. A Poet’s *Heart and Intellect* should be *combined*, *intimately* combined & *unified*, with the great appearances in Nature. (Coleridge 1985, 513)

Nicolson picks up Wordsworth’s notion of ‘voluptuous wandering’ (2019, 89) in *The Prelude* and sees that walking ‘with the great appearances in Nature’ embodies Coleridge’s sense of connection: ‘This was the subject that drew me: poetry-in-life, poetry-in-place, the body in the world as the instrument through which poetry comes into being’ (3).

Nicolson re-enacts Coleridge and the Wordsworths’ multi-day walks to Lynton,

further west up the coast from Kilve. He looks up Coleridge's writing about seabirds from cliff-top walks and finds a fragment from the Notebooks, 'The Sea-Mew'. The gull 'Edges the stiffer Breeze, Now yielding drifts, / Now floats upon the Air, and sends from far / A wildly wailing Note' (2019, 294). Nicolson points out that the role of the albatross in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is derived from the Spinozian notion of connectedness. As Nicolson puts it, for Coleridge 'we are like the birds, part of one world, and what we are is visible in what they are. The mariner shoots the albatross, and in doing that shoots himself. Murder is self-murder. The destruction of birds is a destruction of ourselves' (294). Perhaps that 'wildly wailing Note' in our own times of a pandemic believed by some to originate from a market of wild creatures, might be heard in a church that the poets may well have passed on their walks to Lynton.

The Chained Swan

Beyond Watersmeet there's a chained swan.
Above the thundering river, dipper-dipped,
heron-pierced, grey-wagtail flittered,
boulder-bounding down from Watersmeet,
an oasis of cream-teas at the fishing lodge,
yes, way above that densely oaked ravine
there's a crowned swan in chains.

Beyond the pied flycatchers flitting from
the oaks to stab the air on invisible strings
the birches thin to a rising meadow where
crows congregate at cowpats and a path,

cresting the buzzard-cruised meadow,
descending to a dell and a church, leads
to an angry swan biting her chains.

Beyond the isolated church of Countisbury
the coastal path drops from Butter Hill,
high above the sea, balancing through bracken,
airy, loose and steep, towards the Lyn's mouth.
Raven calls black-flap below. But from that church
echo the distressed cries from a medieval bench-end
of a swan chained to the crown slipped down her neck.

'Dim analogies' connected to 'the moral world' such as this are the necessary images of our times to emerge from walking these post-pastoral spaces. But the final image should not overwhelm the life experienced on what was, for me, one of the most uplifting and, in its last cresting of the coastal cliffs, breath-taking walks of recent years. The poem is an attempt to find this balance in the new poetics of space in footpaths as spaces tensioned between beauty and alarm, comfort and apocalypse, wellbeing and anxiety, escapism and engagement, reconnection and disconnection, a political stoicism and the nether world of the Anthropocene. What is to be avoided is, indeed, what might be called 'the nether stoical' in walking around Nether Stowey, a temptation to apocalyptic fatalism, a desperate doom-orientation of poetic peripatetics. We need to answer Kate Rigby's call for a literature that 'confronts catastrophe' (2014, 213) whilst avoiding Amitav Ghosh's sense of the 'overwhelmingly, urgently, astoundingly real' that paralyses creativity (2016,

27). It took the lockdown of a pandemic to remind us that walking is associated with wellbeing. There is a reason why walking was so essential to Coleridge and Wordsworth during that formative, exhilarating, creative year on the Quantocks. Adam Nicolson catches it when he writes in his introduction, ‘This was the subject that drew me: […] the body in the world as the instrument through which poetry comes into being’ (2019, 3).

Anne D. Wallace characterises Wordsworth’s walking and composing as ‘pure aesthetic practice’ (1993, 198). Rebecca Solnit emphasises the radicalism of Wordsworth’s walking composition as a form of labour (2001, 114). Bate identifies the rhythm of Wordsworth’s walking at Alfoxden with Dorothy in the poems he was composing aloud, ‘measuring the iambic rhythm to their tread’ (2020, 167). At the top of the garden at both Dove Cottage and Rydal Mount was a terrace – a poetic space – specifically for walking composition. Seamus Heaney picked up Hazlitt’s word ‘chaunt’ for the voice of the poets as Hazlitt had heard them at Alfoxden (1980, 64). It contains the word ‘chant’ as well as, to Heaney’s ear, a poetry that is ‘enchaunted’ (65). ‘The continuity of the thing was what was important, the onward inward pouring out’, wrote Heaney (Ibid.). What the space of footpaths offered for the Quantocks poets was a rhythmical ‘enchaunted’ kind of ‘nature cure’, an ancient notion that became institutionalised in modern times, as elaborated in Samantha Walton’s *Everybody Needs Beauty: In Search of the Nature Cure* (2021). As Walton explains, this is the positive potential of the walked space as an environment in tension with parallel and contradictory presences, some of which might bring on ‘eco-anxiety’ (2021, 271). Her answer is that ‘Hope is action, and hope is messy’ and it is reconnective with other people and other

beings, such as birds (287).

During the recent pandemic, walking local paths for exercise has been one of the ways in which a 'nature cure' has been recommended for mental health. People with gardens have been encouraged to engage with their local bird populations, so pastorally decorative spaces have been rediscovered as post-pastoral habitats for wildlife. Dorothy Wordsworth was very alert to bird song on her Quantocks walks, mentioning the songs of the lark, robin, blackbird, thrush, and, on 6 May 1798, of a nightingale. Even when on 1 March 'a thick fog obscured the distant prospect entirely', Dorothy noted in her journal 'the unseen birds singing in the mist' (Woof 2002, 148). She does not record hearing ravens, although she will have heard and seen them above grazing sheep at lambing time. Wordsworth was certainly familiar with them, having climbed to a nest as a boy on Raven Crag, Yewdale, as he memorably recalls in *The Prelude* (1984, 383). Ravens still nest each year in Vinny Coombe and at East Quantoxhead (*Somerset Birds 2019*, 90). Visiting a local ravens' nest during the pandemic, where the young are usually ringed each year, has been a form of nature cure. Dawn visits to this locked and fenced disused quarry have produced a sequence of eight poems titled 'Ravens in Lockdown'. The seventh poem records the activities of the last bird remaining at the nest after its three siblings have flown to the quarry rim.

On Furlough

from adulthood, the last one to leave
the family lockdown waits under this
overhang of rotten tottery blocks.

It really is a shithole now siblings
have flapped and flown. Now dawns
the true meaning of self-isolation,
making your own fun in jumping
off the nest to a block behind that
little bush offering shade and shelter
from the Buzzard's prospecting scans.

Not just on Thursday nights, the others
can be heard play-fighting on the flat balcony
above and even seen on the broken branches
of its buddleia, tempting a break-out, up
onto all that greenery and open space.
One hop more and there's a ledge deep
under another overhang, a cul-de-sac.
On the south rim Mother can be seen
taking off to lead two teenagers flying
for a little local exercise down the west end.

Two days later this bird had joined the others on the quarry rim and a completed nest record of successful fledging could be added to the conservation data for this post-industrial space. A walk in this space had been an inner reconnection with outer nature, a 'watching and receiving' that had also, in a small way, contributed to the moral responsibility for 'the light of things' amongst which we live.

In his journal, a year before he died, John Muir, the founding father of the

American conservation movement, wrote: ‘I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in’ (1992, 17). So if Muir famously framed ‘going out’ as ‘really going in’, today the ‘going in’ view of Wordsworth and Coleridge, of their inner poetic explorations, needs to be turned towards their moral ‘going out’ in concerns for their fellow creatures that so frightened the local people – the very people whose poverty and subjugation they had at heart. As I write this, a *Living Planet Report 2020* from the World Wildlife Fund is published that confirms the Sixth Extinction of our fellow creatures. In the last five decades the world has lost 68% of its mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles (Greenfield 2020). These are some of the fellow inhabitants that not only inspire poetry but share the spaces of our potential and necessary nature cure. The new poetic space of the perambulatory demands a dialogue between its uplifting pastoral qualities that are so essential for our wellbeing, with the post-pastoral awareness of changes underway that, in turn, demand radical action rather than stoical inaction, a poetics of tension rather than escapist complacency, of both celebration and self-examination. Come forth into the contradictory, challenging, multiple lights of things.

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