

Romantic Recluses and Humble Cottages:

Charlotte Smith's *Ethelinde* and the Literary Construction of Grasmere

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Abstract: Charlotte Smith's 1789 novel, *Ethelinde; or, the Recluse of the Lake*, contains the first fictional treatment of Grasmere but has been marginalised in critical accounts of late eighteenth-century cultural responses to the Lake District. The novel was written during the neglected period between the appearance of the picturesque travel guides and the publication of Wordsworth's poetry of place following his arrival in Grasmere in 1799, and reconsideration of this text allows for a more nuanced understanding of the cultural shift from picturesque discourse to Romantic perspectives on the Lakes. This essay explores the contribution which the novel makes to the development of a "literary tourism" in the region and considers the ways in which it moves us beyond the shared aesthetic experience dictated by the picturesque towards a more personal and emotional Romantic response to the landscape. The essay goes on to explore the ways in which the novel prefigures crucial aspects of the kind of life which Wordsworth modelled in Grasmere as well as many of the ideas about the English Lake District which would subsequently come to be identified as Wordsworthian.

Keywords: Charlotte Smith, English Lake District, William Wordsworth, Literary Tourism.

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Critical accounts of late eighteenth-century responses to the Lake District have tended to move from the picturesque travel guides to the transformatory arrival of Wordsworth in the Lakes in December 1799 and his subsequent development of a new poetic treatment of this landscape.¹ Recently, more nuanced readings of this trajectory have been proposed, but further work needs to be done in tracing the late eighteenth-century literary journey which transformed our responses to this region.² One area which continues to be sidelined, is the way in which women writers deal with the Lake District in the crucial period following the publication of Gilpin's *Observations relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* in 1786 and before the appearance of Wordsworth's early Grasmere poetry. As the recovery of many late eighteenth-century women writers has shown, their work in some instances precipitates and influences major developments in canonical Romantic literature. In the neglected pre-Wordsworthian period, following the opening out of the Lakes as an aesthetic space in the 1770s and 80s, a number of popular Romantic-era novelists and poets—including Ann Radcliffe, Amelia Opie and Charlotte Smith—explore the meanings of this landscape in a variety of texts and types of writing, and produce early Lakes-inspired literature.³ Of these women writers Charlotte Smith is particularly crucial, not least because of what we already know of her influence on Wordsworth—the poet who would come to be most closely associated with this region—but also because her 1789 sentimental novel, *Ethelinde; or, the Recluse of the Lake*, contains the first fictional treatment of Grasmere, the location which came subsequently to be identified with Wordsworthian poetics and with a Wordsworth-inspired literary tourism.⁴ Though this text has been neglected by critics interested in Romantic-era responses to the Lakes it needs to be mapped within

our understanding of the development of literary responses to Grasmere and reconsidered in relation to the subsequent trajectory of a Wordsworthian poetry of place.

Smith and the development of Literary Tourism in Grasmere

The complex relationship between literature and geography has emerged as one of the central critical strands in Romantic scholarship over the last two decades and, as critics such as Jonathan Bate have shown, literature plays a key role in shaping our responses to specific natural landscapes.⁵ Smith as a poet of place, in relation to the Sussex Downs, and as a writer of geographically grounded sentimental novels, has begun to emerge as important figure within recent criticism which prioritises spatial and geographical approaches to literature.⁶ During her career, Smith made a significant contribution to the eighteenth-century sentimental novel, and this genre is now recognised as having played a key role in the development of responses to self and the world which we would come to be described as “Romantic.” It also though, as Nicola Watson has demonstrated, affected the way in which we respond to particular landscapes and places, in encouraging a new model of eighteenth-century “literary tourism” connected to sites associated with literary works. Watson argues that Jean Jacques Rousseau’s sentimental novel, *Julie: ou, La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), generated a new “interest in places populated by purely fictional characters and where purely fictional events had taken place;” the tourist phenomenon which followed became an extension of the eighteenth century picturesque tour in which “tourists would travel to Lake Geneva, and subsequently to other romantic landscapes, in search of spots infused with sentiment.”⁷ Watson identifies Walter Scott’s bestselling poem, *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), as the “first instance” of this transferral of “such habits of sentiment onto other specific romantic landscapes in nineteenth-century Britain” (150), but in fact Smith’s Grasmere novel offers an earlier example of this phenomenon.

Rousseau's decision to choose real landscape settings helps to account for the success of his novel and is undoubtedly an important influence on Smith's decision to locate her own novel in the Lakes. Traces of Rousseau's thinking are in evidence throughout Smith's writing but there are a number of specific links between Rousseau's sentimental novel of place and Smith's geographically grounded romance, *Ethelinde*, which indicate a more direct line of influence in this case. Within her Grasmere setting Smith reworks a number of central tableaux from *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, including rescues from the Lake, storms, and emotional meetings between the lovers in rustic glades. Like Rousseau's St Preux before him, Smith's hero—Montgomery—carves his lover's name into the rocks at the site of their trysts, thus writing their emotional experiences into the very landscape itself, and at one point in the narrative he refers directly to the "superior" language of the earlier novel, quoting from St Preux's speech to Julie in an attempt to convince the heroine, Ethelinde, to accept a humble life with him.⁸ Moreover just as our response to the landscape is negotiated in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* by St Preux, an outsider and effectively a tourist himself, so the reader's gaze and emotional commitment in *Ethelinde* is directed by the heroine who travels to Grasmere and views the region primarily as a tourist.

That Smith's novel did indeed engender an early example of literary tourism in Grasmere is revealed by Wordsworth himself in his "Unpublished Tour" of the Lakes, composed between September 1811 and November 1812. Here Wordsworth satirises the fact that Smith's fictional "Grasmere Abbey," the northern residence of principal characters in *Ethelinde*, had entered the public imagination to such an extent that tourists would ask to be taken to see its remains, only for unscrupulous locals to point out a ruined sheep fold:

Conistone Hall [...] is the most interesting piece of architecture these Lakes have to boast of –
Grasmere Abbey having no existence but in the pages of Romance, though the wreck of a

sheep-fold has been more than once archly pointed out as its last remains by a Peasant in answer to questions eagerly put to him by Votaries whose heads were full of Sir Ed.

Newenden & the Recluse of the Lakes. And as it is the duty of a conscientious Guide both to tell what is to be found & to save unnecessary trouble in seeking what is not to be found, I will avail myself of this opportunity to prevent further search after the Dwelling of Miss Evelyn & her ancient Uncle, to assure such female Readers as may have given too eager faith to the narratives of the Minerva Press that no such interesting Residence exists.⁹

Wordsworth's account of tourists coming to Grasmere in search of the fictional Abbey in 1812, more than two decades after *Ethelinde*'s original publication, is indicative not only of the novel's lasting popularity but also its direct influence on readers and travellers. Just as readers of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, fascinated by its loco-specific enactments, went to find the place where Julie's name was carved on the rocks of Meillerie, so readers of *Ethelinde* travelled to Grasmere in search of the Abbey which Smith had imaginatively situated on the shores of the Lake, and where Ethelinde first stays when she visits Grasmere. In both cases, the texts further the development of place-specific tourism by presenting emotionally-connected locations within a real landscape, and Smith is therefore responsible for overlaying imaginative narratives on the Lakes landscape in ways that would play a role in the early cultural construction and appeal of this place to outside visitors—what John Urry would later describe as the “place-myth” of the Lakes.¹⁰ In commenting on Smith's often loco-specific sonnets, Bishop Hunt suggests that she “helped to popularize what might be called the poetry of travel or tourism” (88), but her novels also play a significant part in the development of cultural tourism and—as Wordsworth's tour reveals—it is Smith who first significantly builds on Thomas Gray's popular account of Grasmere as a “little unsuspected paradise” and brings tourists to this vale in search of literary locations which had captured the public imagination.¹¹ Crucially though, Smith offers an imaginative way into the landscape for the

woman reader/tourist in particular; in replacing Rousseau's male tourist with a female visitor Smith offers an important challenge to the male-dominated Lakes discourse of the picturesque travel guide and, though Wordsworth is satirical of the "female Readers" who come to the Lakes in *Ethelinde*'s footsteps, the novel marks an important but neglected stage in the development of Grasmere literary tourism in which the emotional response of the female visitor is prioritised over the aesthetic gaze of the male travel writer or poet.

Looking at nature "with a poet's eye": Smith's treatment of the Lakes landscape

While this novel has been marginalised by recent critics, even those interested in the literary landscapes of the lakes, it is evident that Smith's contemporary reading public were hungry for a new literary treatment of the region which had been so celebrated in the picturesque travel guides and, in the case of Grasmere, eulogised by Gray.¹² If modern critics and readers find something wanting in Smith's descriptions of the Lakes this is largely because we are less attuned to the ways in which Smith's handling of its landscapes offers a subtle development of earlier picturesque perspectives, but also because changing tastes have made us resistant to a model of place-writing in which sentimental discourse and detailed landscape description are woven together. In early Romantic contexts, however, Smith had begun to develop a formidable reputation for her handling of natural scenery, and contemporary reviews of *Ethelinde* indicate that her landscape passages were popular and persuasive elements of the novel. Her "scene painting" is described as being "of that impressive kind which marks the pencil of genius and imagination" and the text's exploration of the effects of this landscape "on the mind of Ethelinde," attracts particular acclaim.¹³ Mary Wollstonecraft, though lamenting Smith's turn from poetry to fiction, praises her handling of the Lakes and observes that:

we perceive in her novel that she looks at nature with a poet's eye. The same quick sensibility which enabled her to produce such apt similes in her sonnets, led her to catch all those alluring charms of nature, which form such enchanting back grounds to the historical part of the pictures she displays in these volumes, and gives them sentiment and interest.¹⁴

Wollstonecraft's observation that Smith "looks at nature with a poet's eye" reminds us that the poetic imagination which led Wordsworth to admire her poetry also informs her novels, raising them above much sentimental fiction of the day. Indeed, in her handling of natural landscapes in *Ethelinde* Smith draws on a technique established in her sonnets in which, as Hunt suggests, the "phenomena of the natural world, and the emotions which they excite, are treated [...] as determinate, historical events in the personal life of the narrator" (88). In the novel, this emotional register is transferred to the heroine and the novel features a series of set pieces in which Ethelinde's sensitivity to particular locations and landscapes allows the reader and literary tourist to share in a journey which is both emotional and physical. Smith encourages a powerful kind of responsiveness through the perspective of Ethelinde, who herself looks on "the face of nature with the taste of a painter, and the enthusiasm of a poet" (15-16). Though Smith does draw on picturesque discourse on a number of occasions, in some passages—and especially those in which the heroine is responding to the landscape—she moves beyond the formulaic language of the picturesque towards a simpler and more sensitive rendering of the scene which displays careful attention to precise details:

the last rays of the sun gave a dull purple hue to the points of the fells which rose above the water and the park; [...] Just above the tallest, which was rendered yet more dark by the wood that covered its side, the evening star arose; and was reflected on the bosom of the lake, now perfectly still and unruffled. Not a breeze sighed among the hills; and nothing was

heard but the low murmur of two or three distant waterfalls, and at intervals the short soft notes of the woodlark.¹⁵

Smith not only celebrates the landscape for its “peaceful beauty” but also, as in Wordsworth’s early Grasmere poetry, suggests the complex relationship between place and the perceiving mind by exploring the way in which “human emotion interact[s] with the landscape.”¹⁶ Even within passages in which Smith draws more extensively on aesthetic discourses of the period, Ethelinde’s capacity to feel deeply and to process her emotions in and through the landscape prioritises a personal responsiveness to the Lakes over a shared response based on specific and strictly dictated aesthetic conventions; as Ethelinde is leaving the Lakes and the young man to whom she has developed a strong attachment the same link between speaker and place which we find in Smith’s sonnets is revealed, and “the deep gloom which hung over the face of nature seemed in correspondence with the heavy heart of Ethelinde” (82).

In her deployment of poetic and sentimental strategies to the Lakes landscape Smith begins to open up new literary and creative ways of responding to the region within this crucial period, and thus *Ethelinde* constitutes an important stepping stone between the picturesque travel guides and a later Wordsworthian poetics of place. More unexpectedly perhaps, re-reading this novel specifically in relation to the development of literary constructions of the Lakes reveals that central ideas about the region which came to be closely identified with a Wordsworthian perspective are rehearsed by Smith in this text.

Ethelinde and the Wordsworthian Construction of Grasmere

Smith’s poetic influence on Wordsworth’s nature poetry has been extensively explored but very little has been said about her role specifically in relation to the development of his responses to the Lake District in the years immediately preceding and following his move to Grasmere.¹⁷ This is

partly because the line of influence has been considered predominantly in relation to Smith's poetry rather than her fiction but also because Smith's own nature poetry is strongly influenced by and identified with her own native landscapes of the South (particularly Sussex and the South Downs).¹⁸ However, the fact that *Ethelinde* contains the first fictional appearance of Grasmere and the first sustained treatment of Grasmere in a literary text or work of the imagination, as opposed to a travel guide or journal, is all the more interesting when it is reconsidered alongside the fact that Wordsworth was an admirer of Smith's poetry and acknowledged the influence of her work on the development of his own poetics. In the same year in which *Ethelinde* was published Smith would issue a further edition of *Elegiac Sonnets*—the collection which, when it had first appeared in 1784, had established her place within the early Romantic literary scene. Wordsworth read these poems while still a schoolboy at Hawkshead and purchased a copy of the 1789 edition during his undergraduate years. He admired her work, recognising mutual interests and sympathies from the outset. Two years after the appearance of *Ethelinde*, in the autumn of 1791, Wordsworth visited Smith in Brighton *en route* to France, at which point she gave him letters of introduction to Helen Maria Williams and other radical sympathisers.¹⁹ She also gave him access to some of her unpublished poetry and he copied out versions of two sonnets which would appear later that year in her novel *Celestina* in the back of his copy of *Elegiac Sonnets*.²⁰ Both of the sonnets transcribed are ostensibly the work of the eponymous heroine of *Celestina* and as such they encapsulate poetically the heroine's sensibility and emotional responses. The sonnet "Supposed to have been Written in the Hebrides" is of particular interest in that it represents the heroine's response to a wild and desolate northern landscape. Here, she writes: "I could with *thee* for months and years be blest; [...] / Find all *my* world in this wild solitude!"²¹ Both the letters of introduction and the copying out of these poems suggest that the meeting reinforced Wordsworth's sense of their shared sympathies on poetry, society, politics and nature at this critical time. While Wordsworth was

generally very dismissive of the kind of sentimental novel which dominated the fictional publishing scene and while we can only definitively date his reading of *Ethelinde* to some time pre-1812 (the date of his “Unpublished Tour”), it seems reasonable to surmise that some discussion of Smith’s most recently published novel may have occurred during this 1791 meeting, given the fact that that novel was set in an area of his native region to which Wordsworth had long held a strong attachment.²²

Wordsworth’s rather casual and slightly inaccurate handling of *Ethelinde* in his “Unpublished Tour” has had the effect of distancing him from the novel, as has his general tone of disparagement towards “the pages of Romance” and “female Readers” with their faith in the veracity of romantic fictions. His gendered comments make clear that his own interest was not captured by the central romantic thread of the story or the love interests of a sentimental heroine, whose name he misremembers. However, some elements of the story do appear to have lingered in his memory—not least the “interesting residence” of Grasmere Abbey and the “Recluse of the Lakes”—perhaps because these areas chimed more closely with his own interests and concerns.

While Smith’s approach to the Lake District is certainly not the perspective of an inhabitant, it is nonetheless shaped by her own childhood experiences of a specific natural landscape and she offers a depiction of place which moves beyond the primarily aesthetic gaze of the contemporary travel guides. Though this is partly achieved through her focus on the emotional responsiveness of the heroine to the landscape it also occurs through her exploration of the social and moral significance of the location. In this she offers a reading of the landscape which resonates closely with Wordsworthian ideology both before and after taking up residence in Grasmere. In *Ethelinde* Smith uses the licenses of fiction to develop Gray’s idealisation of “happy” rustic “poverty” (88) and to identify the region with a particular set of values. One of Smith’s recurrent tropes within her fiction

is the attribution of certain symbolic meanings to her main houses and locations, and in *Ethelinde* this occurs with both Grasmere Abbey and the region in which it is situated. Smith presents the reader with a clear opposition between two sets of ideological values which cohere around the binarism between the country, represented by Grasmere, and the city, represented by London and its environs. Though Smith's handling of this standard late eighteenth-century opposition draws on Cowper and others, it is also shaped by her own experiences and by her increasingly traumatised autobiographical rehearsal of these in her poetry and fiction.²³ As Loraine Fletcher suggests, this too reminds us of an important parallel between Smith and Wordsworth, since her "passion for landscape dated like Wordsworth's from childhood, and like his was intensified by residence in the city" (114). In *Ethelinde*, this city/country binarism becomes the means by which her characters' values are identified and established, and through which individual moral values are codified.

Lady Newenden, *Ethelinde*'s cousin, is closely linked to London; she has in fact "never been farther from the metropolis than to some of those places of public resort where all its conveniences and amusements are to be enjoyed" and "had conceived a dread of a journey into Cumberland" (5). She becomes increasingly distressed as the coach takes her further away from the source of her entertainments, flattery, and dissolute lifestyle and towards the remote region of the Lakes. Lady Newenden is defined at the outset by her inability to respond to its landscapes; she is incapable of seeing any beauty in "those dreary looking mountains" and a "deeper gloom" (15) falls on her as they move away from London and towards the Northern fells. She describes the Abbey as like a "family vault" (16) and, on more than one occasion, as a kind of religious retreat, observing that previous incumbents had been left to "wear away in banishment in the nunnery of Grasmere" (18). These allusions are important because they establish the values which define her own life choices and character, especially her desire for material wealth and illicit sexual attentions. Lady Newenden's temper only recovers following a chance meeting with six of her London friends who

are visiting the Lakes and who subsequently join the party at the Abbey: “The acquisition of such a party restored to her Ladyship some degree of good humour. She again heard the soothing voice of adulation, and again felt the consequence given her by fortune. Cards were introduced of an evening, and *ennui* was for the present forgotten” (23). Not only is London connected to trivial amusements and materialistic concerns but it also stands for more disturbing forms of corruption since it is quickly revealed that there is a clandestine understanding between Lady Newenden and one of the new arrivals, Lord Danesforte. By transporting the values of London to Grasmere the inherent corruption of its way of life is revealed more starkly to the reader. Lady Newenden functions as a symbol of what London represents and, as such, she becomes an emblem of negative values in the text—later abandoning her children and succumbing to an illegitimate sexual relationship with Lord Danesforte.

By contrast, Grasmere is connected to the most morally robust characters in the novel and comes to be seen as a repository of an alternative set of values and life choices. Although Ethelinde is in the first instance a visitor she rapidly becomes identified with Grasmere and all that it represents, with her views and values being played off against those of Lady Newenden. The opposition between the two women is revealed at the outset through their opposing responses to the landscape; Ethelinde’s purity, goodness, and moral virtues are established in the opening chapters of the novel primarily through her ability to engage deeply and emotionally with the surrounding natural world. After returning to Denham, the Newenden home on the outskirts of London, the contrast between what the Lakes offers and the lifestyle of Lady Newenden is made explicit to Ethelinde. At Denham there are constant balls, scenes of gaiety, and “dissipation” (97) and the heroine is sharply conscious of the alternative lifestyle available in Grasmere: “Disgusted by the useless and unmeaning parade with which she was surrounded, and weary of society where friendship and sincerity were forgotten, she suffered her imagination to wander towards scenes

more adapted to her taste, and more soothing to her heart: and fancied, that if she could live with Mrs. Montgomery in her cottage, she should be happy” (97). The imagined life in Grasmere is one of “visionary happiness” (97-8) to the heroine and in this respect Smith’s portrayal of the oppositional values represented by London and Grasmere rehearses ideas which would become central to Wordsworth’s Lakes poetry, in particular his portrayal of the corruptions of London as contrasted to the life of continuity and simplicity at Grasmere in poems such as “Michael” and *The Prelude*. Here, as in Wordsworth, the Lakes has a powerful role to play in shaping the humans who live within it, and in the novel those who are responsive to what it offers—especially Ethelinde and the hero, Montgomery—are depicted as moral figures, deeply receptive to human concerns and suffering. Ethelinde is portrayed as a model of both innocence and integrity, and Montgomery is shown repeatedly to be a man of honour, kindness, and fortitude; he is marked by an “openness of heart” and “that proper courage which makes him, though so long lost in indigence and obscurity, fearlessly speak to a fellow-creature” (112).

Sir Edward Newenden (Lady Newenden’s husband) is also grouped with those characters who are defined by their affinity with Grasmere and, unlike Ethelinde, is not visiting the Lakes as a mere tourist. Rather he is returning to his ancient family seat and ancestral home, Grasmere Abbey, on business connected to the estate and in so doing he returns to the region in which he spent a happy childhood). His perspective allows Smith to present Ethelinde’s tourist gaze alongside the point of view offered by someone with longstanding childhood memories of the region, a viewpoint which is paralleled by Smith’s own formative relationship with the South Downs. Sir Edward’s role enables her to attribute meanings to the Lakes which move beyond the fashionable picturesque appreciation of scenery into an account of the close affinity which can exist between man and place and, in this respect, he foregrounds what Fiona Stafford describes as a crucial element of Wordsworth’s later construction of Grasmere, a “unique feeling of belonging to the valley” in which

“powerful personal emotions” are “invested in its well-remembered contours” (p. 43 & 44). At the start of the novel, as Sir Edward once more comes in sight of the Abbey, he is reminded of his childhood spent in the valley, greeting the fells as “old friends” and pointing out that on which he shot his first grouse as a ten-year old boy (15). His empathy with the landscape and with the estate is shown to emerge from his intimate knowledge of the place, which is contrasted with the transient view of the kind of pleasure-seeking visitors whom Lady Newenden welcomes into their home. Though Sir Edward falls in love with Ethelinde during the course of the novel and while this love cannot be sanctioned by the text, his admiration for her purity and goodness is defined by their shared response to the landscape. As the novel proceeds, we witness the conflict between his deep underlying moral virtues, his “greatness of mind” (395), and his love for a woman who seems to echo his own intimate responsiveness to Grasmere. By the end of the novel his moral strength has overcome his earlier feelings and he is able to look on Ethelinde once more as a sister. Having, by this time, separated from his unsuitable wife, he returns to a state of “serenity,” spending the “happiest” part of the year with his children at his Grasmere estate (507). Alongside the main hero, Montgomery, Sir Edward offers a persuasive model of male integrity and in both cases this is shaped by and reflected in their natural affinity with the landscape of the Lakes.

The symbolic significance of place is further reinforced by the way in which Sir Edward’s ancestral home, Grasmere Abbey, itself blends and merges with the natural world in which it is built:

the abbey, embosomed among the hills, and half concealed by old elms which seemed coeval with the building, appeared with its gothic windows, and long pointed roof of a pale grey stone, bearing every where the marks of great antiquity. The great projecting buttresses

were covered with old fruit trees, which from their knotted trunks seemed to have been planted by the first inhabitants of the mansion.”²⁴

In her creation of this imagined location Smith foreshadows Wordsworth’s later commentary on architecture in the region in his 1810 *Guide to the Lakes*, in which he celebrates the “beautiful forms of the ancient mansions of this country, and of the happy manner in which they harmonize with the forms of Nature.”²⁵ For both Smith and Wordsworth this blending and blurring of a building with the natural world provides symbolic evidence of the ways in which man and nature can work together.

In going on to describe the kind of ancient gothic building which would have “sufficient majesty to preside for a moment in the spectator’s thoughts over the high mountains among which it is embosomed” Wordsworth in fact finds no suitable model in the Lakes and turns instead to an “ancient castellated building, hanging over [...] the peninsular of a lake” (82) in Scotland by way of example. In his “Unpublished Tour” Wordsworth twice refers to Grasmere Abbey as “interesting” and it is perhaps significant that the language he uses in trying to imagine this type of architecture in his *Guide* closely echoes Smith’s earlier description of her imagined “abbey embosomed among the hills” and bearing the marks of “great antiquity.” Indeed, this might suggest that—while he was keen to distance himself from what he perceived as the more overtly feminine aspects of the narrative—Smith’s imaginative construction of an ancient abbey towering over Grasmere lake had made rather more forceful inroads into his imagination.

Smith’s “humble home” and the Wordsworths at Dove Cottage

Smith’s most recent biographer does point to the possibility of a direct line of influence from *Ethelinde* to Wordsworth—not on the basis of Smith’s presentation of Grasmere Abbey, however,

but in relation to a second key Grasmere residence in the novel, the humble cottage which is home to Montgomery and his mother:

It is possible that Wordsworth eventually came to Grasmere by way of *Ethelinde*. He took Dove Cottage on an impulse, but he may well have been remembering consciously or unconsciously the white cottage with its square walled garden a little apart from the village, where Montgomery and his mother live.²⁶

Though Fletcher does not pursue this possibility further there is certainly a strong similarity between the idyllic cottage depicted in the novel and the humble cottage imagined by the Wordsworth siblings and subsequently found by them at Town End. The little white cottage in *Ethelinde* is built near the shore of the Lake and when Wordsworth began to seriously explore the possibility of moving to Grasmere in November 1799 he initially contemplated building a house “by the Lake side”; indeed, he proposes this idea to Dorothy but goes on to mention as an alternative a “small house” which was standing empty (Sélincourt 1: 272) and which would become known to future generations as Dove Cottage. Although not located on the shores of the Lake the windows of their home looked out across a meadow to the lake and physically Dove Cottage, as it was shaped by the Wordsworths, closely resembles the cottage depicted in the novel. Thomas De Quincey describes its parlour as lit by a “perfect and unpretending cottage window, with little diamond panes, embowered, at almost every season of the year, with roses” and Wordsworth notes that shortly after arrival he planned to enclose a small area in the front of the house, “for the sake of a few flowers, and because it will make it more our own.”²⁷ These accounts echo in many respects Smith’s description of the idyllic but humble cottage of the Montgomeries in *Ethelinde*:

In this hamlet [...] she observed one house distinguished from the rest by a small sash window at the end of it, looking into a little court and garden, surrounded with a quick

hedge, and filled with flowers. The whole cottage, for it was still merely a cottage, had a look of neatness and comfort, which convinced Ethelinde it belonged not to a labourer.²⁸

To further the enjoyment of the home she was to share with her brother, one of Dorothy's first plans was to construct "a seat with a summer shed on the highest platform of this our little domestic slip of mountain" and this impulse recalls that of Sir Edward who creates a small retreat on the fells overlooking the lake, to which Ethelinde retreats shortly before she leaves Grasmere:

[the path] led almost perpendicularly up to a little alpine spot among the rocks, whence a stream burst out, whose waters were accumulated probably on the top of the fell, and hurrying down its side, were precipitated from hence into the Lake below. Sir Edward had made a sort of cave under the masses of stone, supported by rude pillars; and though dark tufts of trees concealed it on three sides, yet on the fourth it opened to a view of the Lake, towards the village where the dwelling of Montgomery was situated.²⁹

More important than such physical similarities though are the parallels between the lifestyle imagined by Smith within her fictional cottage and that simple life which the Wordsworths were seeking. In the novel the heroine contemplates: "The asylum which seemed ever open to her on the banks of Grasmere Water, that dear and tranquil cottage whither she thought that, when every other hope failed her she might always turn her weary steps, and find peace" (304). At one point Montgomery wishes that both he and Ethelinde had been born to a "destiny as humble" as that of a shepherd and that "even now you could learn to prefer the quiet comfortable cottage on the border of Grasmere Water, to long long years of separate misery" (369). This is in many ways a fictional realisation of the ideal life which the Wordsworth siblings had repeatedly imagined in letters and other writings throughout the decade prior to them settling in Grasmere. In the year *Ethelinde* was published, Wordsworth was working on one of his first major poetic projects, "An Evening Walk,"

in which he describes a number of alternative rural retreats—including Grasmere, whose “lonely island leads” to “peace”—and, as Lucy Newlyn has shown, Wordsworth and his sister turn repeatedly to their shared fantasy of a life together in a humble rural cottage over the next few years.³⁰ Newlyn traces a number of influences on this fantasy, both personal and literary, and to some extent the parallel imaginings of Smith and the Wordsworths are the result of a similar autobiographical and cultural influences as well as shared political and ideological leanings, but the fact remains that it is Smith who first brings together the more general cultural fashion for humble rural living with a sustained literary treatment of such a life lived in the Vale of Grasmere. At the very least Smith’s imaginative realisation of this fantasy life seems powerfully prophetic but if Wordsworth did indeed read *Ethelinde* during this crucial period, Smith’s descriptions of life in Grasmere in a cottage on the shores of the lake must surely have reinforced and given fuller imaginative life to that fantasy.

The intriguing parallels between the life of the Montgomeries and the Wordsworths in Grasmere also extends to the model of tripartite domestic relations described by Smith which in some ways foreshadows that developed at Dove Cottage following Wordsworth’s marriage to Mary Hutchinson in 1802. Just as Mary would be absorbed into the pre-established shared life of brother and sister so, following their marriage, is *Ethelinde* absorbed into the life shared between Montgomery and his mother in the “humble abode on the banks of Grasmere Water” (506), the marriage having “made no alteration” in the “simple domestic arrangement” previously enjoyed by mother and son (505). There the trio live a moral and simple life, their ideological values being further reinforced by their decision to refuse additional money from a relative. In a passage which resounds with Wordsworthian principles, the two young lovers declare that they have no intention of leaving the humble cottage in which “we have found happiness, and where we enjoy ‘That best seclusion from a jarring world,’ which, young as we both are, we have both learned to covet” (506).

For Smith's fictional characters "power and beauty of the mountains and lake hold out [...] the promise of a different kind of life" (506) and it is precisely such a life which the Wordsworths would seek and find in Grasmere a decade later.

The "Recluse of the Lake" and Wordsworth's poetic Recluse

To a large extent, Wordsworth conceived the effects of this "different" life in relation to the development of his moral and creative imagination and in this respect too there is an intriguing connection between his self-constructed identity as a poet of place and the sequestered Grasmere lifestyle described and celebrated a decade earlier by Smith in her novel. *Ethelinde* is subtitled "The Recluse of the Lake" and the recluse in question is the young hero, Montgomery, who lives a "remote and solitary" life of "peace and solitude" (46) in the small white cottage with his mother. Wordsworth comes to Grasmere seeking much the same kind of retirement and planning to complete here the great work which was to be the fulfilment of his poetic calling and which was to be titled *The Recluse*. In his detailed commentary on the origins and development of this unfinished project Kenneth Johnston questions "what made Wordsworth call these poems *The Recluse* from this very early stage" and suggests that "since Wordsworth knew personally Charlotte Smith, author of *Ethelinde, or the Recluse of the Lake* [...] there is a good likelihood that this limp Gothic narrative is the Ur-source of his epic's title."³¹ Johnston does not go on to pursue this point beyond suggesting that the novel "makes its contribution to *The Recluse*'s controlling image of a new life reviving old institutions," and indeed his dismissal of the text as a "limp Gothic narrative" works to minimise the extent of influence. That Wordsworth should appropriate from the title of a novel for his major life's work, however, without a more underlying sense of affiliation with ideas expressed in the text seems unlikely and Johnston's account neglects the clear parallels between Wordsworth's

perception of what Grasmere provided and the model of Grasmere-based reclusiveness described in the novel.

Concerted work on the *Recluse* project began almost immediately after Wordsworth had settled in his own Grasmere cottage in the poem which subsequently became known as “Home at Grasmere”—a text which celebrates the area surrounding his home and what it offers in ways which echo many of the ideas already established by Smith about Grasmere in her fictional treatment of this location. Johnston notes, the connotations of the idea of a recluse in this period signified a “desire to escape from evil urban influences, to which poets of Sensibility [...] added responsiveness to Nature” (15) but Smith is an important early proponent and developer of this concept in her fiction; crucially both of these elements are not only present in *Ethelinde* but are here worked through by Smith in relation to the specific “escape” offered by Grasmere. One of the main ideas proposed in *Ethelinde* in relation to the reclusive life is the way in which this provides a moral haven from which the corruptions and injustices of the world can be perceived more clearly; in *Ethelinde* Grasmere does offer a life of peace but more importantly Smith suggests that individual integrity and moral insight are engendered by the alternative lifestyle proposed. Montgomery’s mother notes that in their humble cottage her son “cultivates his excellent understanding; the virtues of his heart are preserved in all their purity; and his passions [...] have here no objects likely to render them too powerful for his reason” (64). Wordsworth too comes increasingly to construct reclusive life in Grasmere in similar terms, as an essential seed-bed for his great epic poem, and by the time he begins more sustained work on the poem from 1800 onwards “The Recluse” refers primarily to the perspective of the author-poet himself, cultivating a life of retirement in the Lakes in order to develop important perspectives on society; as Wordsworth later notes, *The Recluse* had as “its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement.”³² The notion suggested by Montgomery’s mother of this location helping to “cultivate” her son’s understanding

is subtly echoed by Wordsworth in his analysis of the significance of rustic life within a contemporaneous Grasmere text, the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Arguing that the modern world and in particular the “encreasing accumulation of men in cities” has had a detrimental effect on human life, bringing about a “blunt[ing]” of “the discriminating powers of the mind,” he refers us back to “Low and rustic life” as one in which the “essential passions of the heart find a *better soil* in which they can attain their maturity.”³³ While the ideas which were to form the basis of *The Recluse* far exceed the remit or the framework of the ideas dealt with in the novel and—indeed—Wordsworth’s own capacity to realise them, the textual links between the reclusive life imagined in Grasmere by Smith in *Ethelinde* and subsequently developed by Wordsworth certainly go beyond the titular.

Though this novel continues to be neglected within more sustained critical studies of Smith in relation to Romantic contexts, the “Recluse” connection has proved a tantalising one and there has been some wider critical acknowledgement of a possible line of influence between Smith’s novel and Wordsworth’s poetic project.³⁴ Elizabeth Fay comments that although “*Ethelinde* does not provide a philosophic epical treatment of the meditative life as Wordsworth aimed to do, it does treat the reclusive sensibility” and she refers to Wordsworth being “Imaginatively stimulated by this feminine model.”³⁵ Most recently the connection has been made by Stuart Curran in his introduction to *Ethelinde* within *The Works of Charlotte Smith*, in which he observes “Surely, it cannot be cannot be merely coincidental” that the title of Wordsworth’s “major epic effort [...]—*The Recluse*—would directly reflect Smith’s own” and suggests that in “this respect, though never finished, this project is the most enduring critical notice of *Ethelinde*.”³⁶ Direct lines of influence are of course difficult to substantiate but, given the ideological and imaginative connections between Wordsworth and Smith (what Jacqueline Labbe describes as their “creative writing

partnership”), our own “critical notice” of this novel in relation to the development of Lake District literature and Wordsworth’s poetry of place is certainly long overdue.³⁷

Conclusion

In her later poetry Smith would return repeatedly, almost obsessively, to the idea of a life which rejected the trappings of civilised society in favour of one lived in harmony with nature. Within her late work this Rousseauistic vision had been taken to a more extreme conclusion, with hermits living outside civilisation in wild caves, but her first experimentation with the idea of a life of rural retreat begins with her construction of a little cottage by the shores of Grasmere. Stephen Gill argues that in “Home at Grasmere” Wordsworth “recognized the lure of the Arcadian myth and dismissed it” but to a large extent Smith had already developed ideas about Grasmere beyond the “unsuspected paradise” proposed by Gray into something more complex—a way of life which was defined by an emotional responsiveness to the natural landscape, solitary but intellectual contemplation, humble requirements, a moral perspective on man and society, and a rejection of the commercial values and corrupting forces of the modern urban environment: in short a construction of Grasmere which was well on its way to becoming the vision which would become closely and irrevocably associated with Wordsworth.³⁸

Since Wordsworth’s only specific known allusion to *Ethelinde* occurs in his “Unpublished Tour” any mapping of trajectories of influence must remain speculative. What we can say with certainty is that Gray’s seminal reading of Grasmere received significant literary development prior to Wordsworth’s arrival in the Lakes in 1799 and key ideas about the region which would come to be identified as Wordsworthian were already being rehearsed and worked through in literary texts during the decade before his arrival. As *Ethelinde* reveals, the “place-myth” of the Lakes was in the

process of literary construction prior to the evolution of Wordsworth's major poetry of place.³⁹

While Wordsworth would go on to unfold, develop and foster this "myth" in important ways, the role played by popular and influential writers such as Charlotte Smith in shaping responses to the region needs to be acknowledged and written back into our accounts of the cultural construction of the Lakes.

Notes

¹ The movement from the picturesque to Wordsworth has been widely and extensively discussed, but see for example: Norman Nicholson, *The Lakers: The Adventures of the First Tourists* (London: Hale, 1955) and Ian Thompson, *The English Lakes: A History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

² Many new and interesting lines of enquiry are now being explored - see for example Julia S. Carlson, "Topographical Measures: Wordsworth's and Crosthwaite's Lines on the Lake District," *Romanticism* 16.1 (2010): 72-93.

³ For a discussion of Radcliffe's contribution to the development of Romantic-era Lakes literature see Penny Bradshaw, introduction to *Ann Radcliffe's Observations during a Tour to the Lakes of Lancashire, Westmoreland, and Cumberland* (Carlisle: Bookcase, 2014): 5-85.

⁴ Charlotte Smith (1749-1806), a celebrated poet and novelist of the Romantic period, is increasingly recognised as a key influence on the development of Romanticism—see for example, Jacqueline Labbe, *Writing Romanticism: Charlotte Smith and William Wordsworth, 1784-1807* (London: Palgrave, 2011). *Ethelinde*, Smith's second novel, features a complex plot which centres on the trials and experiences of the eponymous heroine, the daughter of once noble father, reduced emotionally by bereavement and financially by a predilection to gaming. At the opening of the novel, Ethelinde has arrived for a prolonged visit with her cousins, Sir Edward and Lady Newenden, the former an accomplished and good man, the latter a heartless woman of fashion. Having travelled with them to her cousin's family home in Grasmere, she meets and falls in love with a young man, also in straightened circumstances: Montgomery (the "Recluse of the Lake"), who lives with his mother in a cottage by the lakeside. Following many and various plot developments and twists, including, notably: Lady Newenden's infidelities with Lord Danesforte—a dishonourable man about town who secretly desires Ethelinde; the death of Ethelinde's father; and Montgomery's journey to India in an attempt to earn sufficient money to enable him to marry Ethelinde, the latter is made financially independent by the unexpected reappearance of his mother's long lost half-brother and the two young people are finally able to make a life together in Grasmere.

⁵ In his seminal study, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991), Jonathan Bate makes a powerful case for the analogy between "poet and geographer, poem and map" and explores the ongoing importance of Wordsworth's writing in terms of the way we perceive and think about the natural world.

⁶ See for example Jacqueline Labbe, *Romantic Visualities: Landscape, Gender and Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

⁷ Nicola Watson, *The Literary Tourist* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2006), 132.

⁸ Stuart Curran, ed., *Ethelinde; or, The Recluse of the Lake* by Charlotte Smith, *The Works of Charlotte Smith*, 14 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005-2007), 3: 370.

⁹ W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, eds., *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974), 2: 307-8.

¹⁰ John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995), 194.

¹¹ William Roberts, ed., *Thomas Gray's Journal of his Visit to the Lake District in October 1769* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2001), 88. As studies of Lake District literature have noted, Gray's *Journal* "established Grasmere for the first time in the Arcadian canon of Lake District landscapes." See John Murdoch, *The Discovery of the Lake District* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984), 16. Smith was herself an admirer of Gray's poetry and *Ethelinde* carries his *Journal* with her during her journey to the Lakes.

¹² In *A Literary Guide to the Lake District* Grevel Lindop acknowledges that Grasmere “makes its first fictional appearance” in *Ethelinde* but he dismisses the text as a “wonderfully absurd sentimental-Gothic novel,” commenting that there “is disappointingly little landscape-description, and one guesses that Mrs Smith had never been anywhere near Grasmere” (Sigma: Cheshire, 2005), 58. Elizabeth Fay also argues, in *Becoming Wordsworthian: A Performative Aesthetic*, that Smith’s “descriptions read like guidebook transcriptions” and suggests that the novel’s “landscapes contain enough picturesque and pictorial language, as well as inaccurate detail, that they could be based on any of the available watercolor sketchbooks of the Lakes as easily as on her own memories” (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 29. These responses can be compared to the more contemporaneous assessment of Sir Walter Scott who, commenting on the landscape passages of Ann Radcliffe, suggests that those are “far from equal in accuracy and truth to those of her contemporary Mrs Charlotte Smith, whose sketches are so very graphical, that an artist would find little difficulty in actually painting from them “Prefatory Memoir to Mrs Ann Radcliffe”, prefixed to *The Novels of Mrs Ann Radcliffe*, Ballantyne’s Novelist’s Library (London: Hurst, Robinson; Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1824), i-xxxix (xxix-xxx).

¹³ “Review of *Ethelinde; or, the Recluse of the Lake*, by Charlotte Smith,” *The Edinburgh Magazine*, March 1790: 203-6 (205).

¹⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, “Review of *Ethelinde; or, the Recluse of the Lake*, by Charlotte Smith,” *Analytical Review*, December 1789: 484-6 (484).

¹⁵ *Ethelinde*, 20.

¹⁶ Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments: The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 44 & 45.

¹⁷ Smith’s influence on Wordsworth’s poetry was first explored by Bishop Hunt in his essay “Wordsworth and Charlotte Smith,” *The Wordsworth Circle*, 1 (1970): 85-103 and has been discussed in more detail by recent critics, especially Labbe (2011).

¹⁸ As Labbe (2011) notes: “Both Smith and Wordsworth are identified with specific landscapes: the South Downs in Sussex, the Lake District in Cumbria” and the “interconnectedness of place and poetry for Smith and Wordsworth makes it harder to detach place from the poet” (78-9).

¹⁹ Ernest de Sélincourt, ed., *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 8 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967), 1: 69.

²⁰ See Wordsworth’s edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* (London: Cadell, 1789) in the Wordsworth Trust Collection (195.R89, verso 83).

²¹ Stuart Curran, ed., *The Poems of Charlotte Smith* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 47: 1. 6 & 8.

²² In his account of Wordsworth’s reading, Duncan Wu gives the suggested date of reading *Ethelinde* as “by Nov. 1812” on the basis of the reference to the novel in the “Unpublished Tour”—see *Wordsworth’s Reading 1800-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 194.

²³ Smith spent her early years roaming around the Sussex Downs on her father’s estate at Bignor. At 15 she was married off to the son of a Director of the East India Company and was moved to Cheapside. Her husband, Benjamin Smith, proved a profligate who squandered away both of their inheritances on gambling and illicit sexual liaisons. For the rest of her life she presented the opposition between country and city through the lens of her own autobiography. The country came to be associated by her with personal and intellectual freedom, happiness and moral rectitude, while the city came to be connected with the corrupting values of commercialism and social and economic injustice.

²⁴ Smith, *Ethelinde*, 16.

²⁵ Ernest de Sélincourt, ed., *Guide to the Lakes*, by William Wordsworth (London: Lincoln, 2004), 81.

²⁶ Fletcher, 112.

²⁷ Thomas De Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 128; Sélincourt 1: 275.

²⁸ Smith, *Ethelinde*, 23.

²⁹ Sélincourt, 1: 274; Smith, *Ethelinde*, 72.

³⁰ Smith's poetry also informs this, his first major Lake District poem, and in recalling the importance of his childhood experiences within this landscape Wordsworth quotes from Smith's sonnet, "To the South Downs," which describes her own childhood happiness and influences.

See Lucy Newlyn, *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: "All in Each Other"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³¹ Kenneth Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984), 9 & 13.

³² Hutchinson, 589.

³³ Hutchinson, 735 (my italics).

³⁴ While Labbe in particular has undertaken extensive critical work on Smith in texts which include *Romantic Visualities: Landscape, Gender and Romanticism* (Palgrave: Basingstoke, 1998), *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry and the Culture of Gender* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) and *Writing Romanticism* (2011), in none of these studies does she make any direct reference to the significance of *Ethelinde* in relation to Wordsworth's poetry. In his earlier account of the influence of Smith on Wordsworth Hunt does mention the novel but only to note in passing that "At some point Wordsworth no doubt saw or heard about Smith's second novel, *Ethelinde, or the Recluse of the Lake* (1789) [...] which received high praise for its description of the scenery of the Lakes" (100).

³⁵ Fay, 29.

³⁶ Curran, introduction to *Ethelinde*, xiii.

³⁷ Labbe (2011), 6.

³⁸ Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), 181.

³⁹ Urry, 194.