

The Romantic Poets and Higher Education

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As I often say to my students of Romanticism, the Romantic poets are not good role models for their own undergraduate careers. Four of the six major poets who feature on all university syllabuses in this field of literature went to university. The first of these was William Wordsworth, who attended St John's College, Cambridge, between 1787 and 1791. He had family and school connections that would almost have guaranteed him a college fellowship and then a respectable career in the Church if he achieved a moderate honours degree, but by the start of his second year he had begun to rebel against his family's expectations and turn aside from the path of academic success. During his final long vacation, a time when it was still possible through determined hard study to gain an honours degree, he chose instead to go off on a long holiday on the Continent without telling his guardians, and as a result finished with only a pass degree. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who enrolled at Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1791, was a brilliant student who impressed his tutors, captivated his fellow students, and won a prestigious university prize for a verse composition in Greek in his first year; but he led a double life, alternating periods of devotion to study with wild socialising, heavy drinking, and visits to prostitutes, running up huge debts and experiencing fits of depression and remorse. At the end of 1793 the strain of this double life became too much and he ran off to join the army, disappearing from sight for several months; his family eventually bought his discharge, but he never settled again at Cambridge, and in January 1795 abandoned the University without taking a degree. Ten years later, Lord Byron took up residence at Trinity College, Cambridge, the traditional destination for sons of the nobility. Exempt by virtue of his aristocratic status from the need to take exams to gain a degree, he

embarked instead on a life of conspicuous consumption, hosting riotous parties and excursions to Newmarket and exploring what his most recent biographer has termed the ‘thriving subculture of sodomy’ within the University. Refused permission to bring with him his much-loved dog – something that was expressly forbidden by the College statutes – Byron noticed that the same statutes made no reference to other animals, and so he bought a tame bear, which he took for walks around the town. Having minimally kept the residency requirements and done no academic work whatsoever, Byron took his MA in July 1808. Finally, Percy Shelley enrolled at University College, Oxford, in October 1810. He took with him an idiosyncratic library of books with which he proceeded to organise his own reading schedule in place of the set curriculum, and a mass of chemical and electrical equipment with which he conducted experiments in his room late into the night. His stay at Oxford was as explosive as some of those experiments. In his second term he disseminated a pamphlet on atheism and made little effort to disguise his authorship. When brought before the College authorities he refused to answer questions and challenged the legitimacy of the proceedings, and as a result was expelled.

This dismal record of academic mediocrity, indiscipline, irresponsibility, and contempt for authority has helped spread the idea that Oxbridge was not a vital part of the personal development of the Romantic poets. The consensus seems to be that university was a fairly meaningless interlude on the path of discovering their true selves and true vocation. On the contrary, I shall be arguing that university was a significant rite of passage for each of the four poets. Moreover, their perspectives on university life and the student experience provide an interesting commentary on a period of growing alarm and anxiety over the state of English higher education, when new questions were being asked about what universities were for.

Firstly, though, what was it like to be a university student in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century? You may remember a reality TV programme not so long ago in which a group of GCSE students was miraculously transported to a grammar school as it supposedly was in the 1950s, with the aim of finding out whether standards had declined over the years and whether today's pampered teenagers could cope with a much harsher disciplinary regime. A similar experiment with university students, but with the Tardis programmed for the 1780s, would have greater shock value. The time-travelling undergraduate would enter a world very different to that which he or she might experience today. I say 'he or she', but my politically correct formulation glosses over the most obvious difference between then and now: if our student were female, she would find herself alone in an exclusively male environment in which the only other women were cooks, bedmakers, laundresses and other servants, along with local prostitutes who occasionally visited students in their rooms. This was just one curious aspect of the institutional character of Oxford and Cambridge – which were then, as I perhaps need to make clear, the only universities in England. **[ad lib: Scottish unis & Dissenting Academies, subscription]**

Let me briefly summarise some other key characteristics of these two universities. Students, as I say, were not embarrassed by choice: even the selection of an Oxbridge college was often a foregone conclusion, dictated by school connections and the availability of bursaries, often restricted to students from particular counties. Student recruitment was low, and indeed declined, throughout the eighteenth century: in 1795 the total undergraduate population of Cambridge was 736, while annual admissions to Oxford hovered around 200 in the second half of the century. The two universities were essentially Anglican seminaries, their chief function being to educate the next generation of parish priests: a student with a good honours degree

had reasonable expectations of being elected to a college fellowship, whereupon he drew a modest income while waiting for a church living to fall vacant, a situation which for most could not come soon enough because Fellows were prohibited by statute from marrying. Wordsworth's college, St John's, for example, had forty-six church livings in its own gift: it was simply a case of keeping one's nose clean [or the opposite??] and waiting for one of the occupants to drop dead. Across Cambridge as a whole, the career destinations of over half of all alumni, from the second half of the eighteenth century through much of the nineteenth, lay in the church. Many students, however, despite the negligible entry requirements, had no intention of reading for honours, or even of taking a degree at all: of the cohort of 142 men that matriculated in 1777, only 113 eventually graduated, and only 47 of these with honours.

Every new student took his place in a very hierarchical community, since students were not equal: both at Oxford and Cambridge there were several distinct ranks that denoted the social status of the student, the higher ranks requiring higher fees and being differentiated in other ways such as academic dress (which was worn at all times) and more lenient residence and assessment requirements. The lower ranks could be subject to condescension and ill-treatment. At Cambridge, it was only in 1786 that a rule requiring the lowest class of undergraduate to perform menial tasks for tutors and fellow students was finally abolished. On the academic side, just as there was little choice of university, so there was no choice of subject: all students followed the same curriculum, which at both Oxford and Cambridge featured the same wholesome diet of Aristotelian logic and moral philosophy, but which at Cambridge was also heavily biased towards mathematics and Newtonian science, while at Oxford there was greater emphasis on classics. The irony that the two institutions whose main job it was to provide candidates for holy orders undertook no

systematic instruction in theology was much commented on at the time. Formal instruction in anything was in any case thin on the ground: all students were assigned to a tutor, but not all tutors took their duties seriously. Thomas De Quincey, in his recollections of Oxford, claims to have had only one conversation with his college tutor throughout his entire stay: 'It consisted,' he says, 'of three sentences, two of which fell to his share, one to mine.' [professors] The examination system to which students were subject at the end of the eighteenth century was bizarre in the extreme: they were required to undertake a certain number of public 'disputations' and to sit exams which were in a state of transition between oral and written formats. The disputations were public exercises in which one student would present a mathematical or philosophical thesis, and three other students would attempt to pick holes in his argument, the entire exercise being conducted in Latin according to the strict rules of formal logic. The exercises were ridiculed by contemporary commentators, but there's no doubt that many students were terrified of the ordeal. As for the exams, at Cambridge these consisted of both oral dictation of problems and more purely written tests. Again, these were criticised for being insufficiently challenging or for lacking fairness and impartiality. It's an open question how many of today's students would feel comfortable tackling such dissimilar questions as 'If half the earth were taken off by the impulse of a comet, what change would be produced in the moon's orbit' and 'Prove that there is a god, independent of Revelation'. The aim of this process was to produce a results list much more minutely hierarchical than the broad degree classifications we are now familiar with, and to this end examinees were given the chance to go head to head with the student above them in the provisional placing in a bid to improve their position.

For many Oxbridge students, especially the ‘non-reading men’ who had no intention of sitting for honours, academic work was low on their order of priorities. Much time was filled with eating, drinking and socialising, along with traditional rural sports. The diary of Christopher Wordsworth, the poet’s brother, indicates a pattern of a few hours work a day followed by a wine or supper party, with evenings largely given over to conversation. Henry Gunning, a near-contemporary whose *Reminiscences* give one of the most detailed accounts of student life at this time, paints a similar picture, although he also seems to have spent a considerable amount of time shooting snipe and pheasant on the local marshes. These were both relatively well-motivated students who went on to become members of the University community for life. Byron, whose more hard-core socialising I have already mentioned, summed up Cambridge more memorably as ‘a villainous Chaos of Dice and Drunkenness’, and it was perhaps the more colourful cases like his that prompted a host of contemporary commentators to denounce the universities as hotbeds of immorality. At best, in the eyes of one critic, students enjoyed ‘a state of liberty almost absolute’, which they put to no good purpose; at worst, he goes on, universities exceed the army and navy in vice and debauchery, and students learn only how to ‘dissipate their fortunes’, despise their parents, and ‘ridicule all that is serious and sacred’.

Such a critique seems comprehensive – but there was more. Although many writers focused on the moral dangers of university life, others were more concerned with the curriculum and assessment. This was particularly the case with a series of eloquent and incisive articles on education in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1809-10. The *Edinburgh*’s main target is the exclusive privilege given to classical studies at Oxford and the disregard of other branches of learning, such as chemistry, geology, political

economy, and modern languages, which have greater utility and should be cultivated by an institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge. The *Edinburgh* pointedly remarks that, ‘had all the scientific acquirements of the last 300 years been annihilated, or had they never been made at all, it would have produced very little alteration on the system of study at Oxford’. It argues that both Oxford and Cambridge, integral parts of the larger alliance of Church and State, have a vested interest in discouraging open debate and enquiry on moral, religious and political matters among their students. ‘They fancy that mental exertion must end in religious scepticism’, the *Edinburgh* says, and thus confine them to ‘the safe and elegant imbecility of classical learning’. Even more abrasive is its conclusion that ‘An infinite quantity of talent is annually destroyed in the Universities of England, by the miserable jealousy and littleness of ecclesiastical instructors’. At the same time, however, Oxford and Cambridge were also criticised by those who **supported** their Anglican traditions and purpose but who believed they were failing in their task, by not providing graduates destined for the Church with an adequate knowledge of the history and doctrines of Christianity. The universities were therefore under fire from all sides in this period, condemned for being too close to the Church of England or not close enough, for not giving instruction in theology or not purveying enough useful knowledge, for stifling the intellectual and personal development of young men or for being ‘sinkholes of temptation’, poisonous fountains pouring their ‘polluted streams’ of corrupted youth across the country.

To summarise: The time-travelling undergraduate, returning to Oxford or Cambridge around the turn of the eighteenth century, would enter a world that was exclusively male, often raucously, drunkenly, or aggressively so, and highly socially stratified; one in which recreation was as important as education; in which contact

with college tutors was sporadic at best, and university professors were under no obligation to deliver lectures; in which the only choice was between a curriculum biased towards classics and one biased towards mathematics; in which students were compelled to attend chapel several times a week, and could not graduate without subscribing by oath to the official creed of the Church of England, but were given no formal instruction to equip them for the clerical role for which all of them in theory, and most of them in practice, were destined. The English universities awarded degrees that were essential steps on ladders of preferment and patronage within the Church or the Government, but were under attack by Nonconformists for their Anglican exclusivity, by Liberals for their antiquated curriculum, and by conservatives for not attending to the moral welfare of their students. In short, they were widely perceived as backward, corrupt, and chronically unfit for purpose.

In the eyes of Michael Hofstetter, author of a recent comparative study of the British and German higher education systems in this period, the situation I've described constituted the death of the old Idea of the University. This 'old Idea', according to Hofstetter, had its origins in the Reformation, and the need of the Church of England to defend its position against Roman Catholicism: the statutes governing Oxford and Cambridge in the Romantic period were devised in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, 'when Popery seemed a real threat'. The universities were an arm of the confessional state, charged with preserving the state religion against rival creeds and maintaining a production line of clerics whose job it was to disseminate the true faith. This 'Idea' had currency only so long as 'ideological religious divisions were dominant'; but once religious warfare had petered out with the defeat of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 the universities were left without a clear and present danger to justify their existence. From that point on, according to Hofstetter, Oxford and

Cambridge were searching for a new Idea, and the two alternatives that presented themselves in the early nineteenth century came from the rival creeds of utilitarianism and romanticism. Under the former, universities would become secular and progressive, with curricula focused on modern studies and useful knowledge and providing a degree of student choice, and engaging more directly with the world around them. The Romantic Idea of the university, by contrast, would emphasise the cultivation of individual minds, the close relationship of student and teacher, and an intellectual culture sharply distinguished from the practical ethos of the new industrial age. For Hofstetter, it was this tendency that prevailed, providing stubborn institutional resistance to utilitarianism for over a hundred years.

There are serious problems with this thesis. For example, Hofstetter makes no mention at all of the establishment of London University in 1828. With a wider choice of modern and vocational subjects and operating on an interdenominational basis, this was arguably a major victory for the opposing tendency, and historically the most significant development of the period. His conflation of German and English developments in higher education as representing a single Idea of the university is also unconvincing, since in England there was no mould-breaking body of thought on what universities should be and do corresponding to that which appeared in Germany, and no institutional revolutions comparable to the founding of the new university of Berlin on entirely new principles in 1810. Nevertheless, there **were** changes taking place in the English universities around 1800, and there **were** moves towards articulating a new rationale of higher education. What emerged in the early nineteenth century was an emphasis on both the cultivation of individual minds and the preservation of the culture of the nation-state. This involved reforming and strengthening the late eighteenth-century model of liberal education, and giving it

new purpose: it was no longer about forming the true gentleman or man of taste, but about training citizens for positions of leadership. This has to be seen in the context of the French Revolution and the subsequent cultural backlash in Britain. There was no general appetite for radical plans of social transformation: the emphasis now was on maintaining a delicate balance between tradition and change. In his treatise of 1830 *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, Coleridge implicitly defines an Idea of the university that is dependent on an Idea of the State. A healthy State, he argues, consists in an equipoise between the opposing forces of permanence and progression – as embodied in the landed classes, on the one hand, and the industrial and commercial sector, on the other; to ensure that this play of forces operates to the health of the nation as a whole there needs to be a body of instructors to oversee the moral and cultural development of the people, and this ‘clerisy’, as Coleridge calls it, is identified at least in part with the universities. Coleridge’s priorities were restated a few years later by William Whewell, Fellow and later Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, in his *Principles of English University Education*. Whewell essentially defends the existing form of Cambridge education in every particular, including its intimate tutorial mode of instruction, its quasi-parental authority and discipline, and most importantly its traditional and much-derided curriculum of maths and classics. This curriculum, he insists, not only benefits the student, by providing training in reason and logic and a sense of connection to the origins of civilisation, but also society generally. The reason Whewell favours the traditional maths curriculum so strongly is that he takes mathematical truths to be permanent and universal, as opposed to the ideas circulating in modern science subjects, which will not stand the test of time. Teaching based on eternal truths encourages respect; whereas knowledge based on more shifting foundations produces students who are ‘restless

speculators', putting themselves on a par with their tutors and questioning the way things are. There is a clear and vital connection for Whewell between a curriculum built on truths, or models of excellence, that are assumed to be fixed for all time, and stability and prosperity within the State at large. Respectful students become reliable and productive citizens.

This conservative theory, as developed by Coleridge, Whewell and others, constitutes the pre-history of John Henry Newman's much better-known lectures on *The Idea of a University*, first published in 1852. For Newman, university teachers, if they were doing their job properly, would have no time for research, because their fundamental role was the education of young minds. Although he famously advocated the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself, Newman had very confined notions of what that knowledge should comprise. The aim of a university education should be general mental culture, not 'useful knowledge' or knowledge directed to any specific occupation or purpose. Newman did try to bring the utilitarians onside by arguing that the versatile intellect he was recommending would make the individual better equipped to take up any practical or scientific calling; it's been suggested that he thus stumbled, a hundred years before its time, on the concept of personal transferrable skills. What was more important, for Newman, as for Coleridge and Whewell, was that young men, with minds trained in the permanent rather than progressive branches of education, would be better servants of the State when they went on to fill their roles of leaders and opinion-formers. He says he would prefer a university that did nothing (as Oxford and Cambridge were often alleged to do) to one which taught modern subjects and gave degrees to students who passed exams in whatever subject they chose to study. Newman loathed the new University of London and everything it stood for, memorably calling it a 'bazaar, or

pantechnicon, in which wares of all kinds are heaped together for sale in stalls independent of each other ... to save the purchasers the trouble of running about from shop to shop'. **[ad lib: pantechnicon]**

In the eyes of some modern commentators, for example Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson in their bad-tempered polemic called *The New Idea of the University* (2001), Newman's nightmare prophecy has come true, his pantechnicon parked on the lawn of every university in the land, his ideal of a liberal education biased towards general ideas rather than particular uses or know-hows scattered to the winds in a university system that runs courses and awards degrees in vocational and pseudo-vocational subjects that multiply and proliferate like computer viruses. It's easy to find fault with right-wing doom-mongers like Maskell and Robinson, but the perception of a system in turmoil is more widespread than this. A browse along the shelves devoted to higher education in the library here at UWE reveals titles like *The Crisis of the University*, *The University in Ruins*, *The Modern University and its Discontents*, which collectively suggest trouble at the higher educational mill. This vision of chaos often goes hand in hand with the the perception of a national system slavishly following an American model of higher education – overconsumerised, overbureaucratic and over here. Ironically, unification of higher education at the level of political control has been accompanied by the disintegration of the Idea of the University in every practical and symbolic sense: in arguing the lack of a compelling vision of what universities are for, critics point to the meandering inconsistencies of recent government reports and white papers and the universities' own blandly interchangeable mission statements, while the introduction of tuition fees, with its accompanying premise that higher education is an investment on the part of the student, is taken to signal the repudiation by the State of any national interest in the

production of graduates. Then again, do we need an Idea of the University, in the sense of a single, deeply embedded and controlling principle? Sheldon Rothblatt, one of the most interesting commentators on nineteenth- and twentieth-century university history, argues that there's no reason why universities should have such a principle, but that in Britain, at least, we're very attached to the idea of an Idea of the University. Without one, the university is just another institution, changing its identity and functions as circumstances dictate or in response to external pressures; arguably, this is the situation that now exists, but how much more appealing to work in a university that has the kind of core role in shaping and directing society imagined by Coleridge and Newman. For many of those involved in teaching the arts and humanities, the Idea therefore lingers on, but it's hard to sustain when the reality is of a 'bundling of different functions under the roof of one institution', or a commitment to deliver the greatest number of goods or services to the greatest number of people, a situation for which the proposed alternative titles of a 'multiversity' or even, inevitably, the 'postmodern university', seem more appropriate.

To a scholar of the Romantic period, many areas of debate about today's universities seem eerily reminiscent of conversations that were taking place around 1800. Cynicism about the proliferation of student choice and alleged 'Mickey Mouse' courses was rehearsed for the first time, as I have said, in hostility to the new London University; the regularly repeated criticism that universities are not adequately preparing students for the world of work was anticipated by proponents of useful knowledge and their denunciation of Oxbridge's antiquated and irrelevant curriculum; the complaint that academics devote too much time to their research at the expense of their teaching was foreshadowed in complaints about tutors who spent too much time at Newmarket and professors who didn't give a single lecture

throughout their term of office; focus upon the undergraduate student experience now is not a million miles from concern expressed then that colleges were failing in their duty of care for young people to whom they stood *in loco parentis*.

I began by emphasising how strange the modern undergraduate might find university life in the Romantic period, and now seem to be suggesting that little has changed. The truth, of course, is somewhere in the middle. Things *were* very different two hundred years ago, but they were beginning to change towards something more recognisably modern: in higher education, as in much else, it was an ‘age of transition’. The emergence with Coleridge of an Idea of the university that would pass down through Newman to F. R. Leavis and his apostles in the 1960s is one index of such change. Just as important, was a range of institutional and cultural changes in higher education that were gathering pace in the early 1800s. One of an older generation of historians, G. M. Young, says in passing that Shelley and his intimate friend at Oxford, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, seem to him ‘the first undergraduates, recognizable as such, on record’. Quite what **he** meant by this is not clear, but it does usefully focus the impression of a state of transition. What it **may** refer to is the reimagining of university education, in the minds of Shelley and others of his generation, as a kind of secular rite of passage, a valuable, defining experience even for young people who had no sympathy with Oxbridge’s role in the religious and political establishment. **[ad lib: cradle of modern world]** The general cultural changes of which his own unhappy experience was in a weird way representative have to do with the gradual emergence of a distinctive student subculture in the early nineteenth century. Some notable features of this development were the formation of undergraduate societies of different kinds, such as debating societies **[ad lib: the Apostles]**; the beginnings of student journalism; the growth of competitive team

sports such as cricket and rowing in place of the traditional country recreations; the development of forms of student-centred learning, such as reading parties at home or abroad, outside term-time, as ways of preparing for exams; and, less tangibly, the growth among students of a sentimental attachment to their university or college.

[Fairer: nostalgia] Alongside these developments were the major institutional changes already mentioned, namely the slow, incremental reform of the examining system, which replaced the medieval oral disputations with competitive written exams – a process largely complete by 1830 – as well as the introduction of various incentives to study and measures to recognise academic success. These changes have been construed in the light of a tougher disciplinary regime designed, in the wake of the French Revolution – widely seen as the result of educated men spreading dangerous new philosophies – to control the new breed of self-assertive, free-spirited student and encourage the production of graduates who would lead, rather than subvert, society. In other words, students were becoming more independent, were developing a different mindset and a distinctive subculture, were increasingly likely to think that they, not their teachers, were the ‘essential university’; the universities responded by working them harder, devising tougher examinations, providing incentives, encouraging them to want to achieve within the system, in preparation for a life of good citizenship thereafter.

I want now to look a little more closely at the undergraduate careers of each of the four university-educated Romantic poets, in the context of the general changes I’ve been sketching. In that he left a more substantial literary record of his undergraduate years than any of the others, Wordsworth’s case is an exceptional one, and I shall come to it last. I’ll begin instead with Coleridge, who, as I noted at the beginning, led his chequered university career at Jesus College, Cambridge.

Coleridge in 1791 was not the conservative thinker who would later fantasise about an intellectual clerisy to keep the nation on the straight and narrow, but a lonely, volatile, hyperactive nineteen-year-old, who threw himself into every aspect of university life, both academic and extracurricular, with ‘hysterical intensity’. In his first year, much of this energy was directed to the pursuit of academic success, and his diligence was rewarded when he won a University prize in July 1792 for his Greek ode on the slave trade. The setting of this subject by the University authorities indicates that abolition of the slave trade was a cause that had support at Cambridge at this time. Cambridge was, in fact, known for its religious and political liberalism around 1790, with recent campaigns to abolish subscription at the University going hand in hand with petitions to parliament to abolish all religious tests. In joining Jesus College Coleridge was in fact entering the main crucible of the reform campaign at the University, since many prominent religious dissenters of the 1770s and 1780s, who drove the reform agenda, were associated with the College. Prime among these was the Unitarian William Frend, who had already been stripped of his tutorship in 1788 for publicly opposing subscription, and was then put on trial by the University in May 1793 following publication of his pamphlet *Peace and Union*, which defended the French revolutionary government’s execution of Louis XVI, urged peaceful negotiation rather than war, and advocated parliamentary reform at home. Frend attracted a lot of support from undergraduates, including Coleridge, who acted as his cheerleader at the trial, but he was found guilty and banished from the University. Frend was an important figure in Coleridge’s Cambridge education, helping to convert him to Unitarianism and politicise his thinking to the point where, soon after leaving Cambridge, he took on enthusiastically the role of public lecturer here in Bristol, speaking against the War and against the slave trade. But his

development of a new identity in this period is hinted at in less obvious ways too. In a book I published several years ago I wrote about the startling rise in popularity of the walking tour in the 1790s – something that had a definite radical flavour at this particular time (because it meant self-consciously adopting a mode of transport associated with the poorer classes) and which seems to have been a significant phenomenon of undergraduate subculture in this decade. Coleridge took off on such a trip with a fellow undergraduate in July 1794, and the letters he wrote on tour are full of a kind of republican swagger as he cheerfully recounts the physical challenges of their expedition and their encounters along the way. Before going into Wales on the tour, the radical backpackers passed through Oxford, where Coleridge made the acquaintance of fellow poet Robert Southey, and hatched with him, in another expression of youthful political idealism, a plan for emigrating to America with a small number of like-minded men and women and establishing a communistic utopia on the banks of the Susquehannah in Pennsylvania. Coleridge wrote to Southey from Wales that he had ‘done nothing but dream’ of this project ‘every step of the Way’; back at Cambridge in October, he wrote that it had become ‘the universal Topic at this University’ – which, however exaggerated, does suggest that Coleridge was not an isolated eccentric but was to some degree in tune with the undergraduate mindset at this time. Although the emigration scheme almost inevitably collapsed a few months later its essential idea – of a self-sufficient extended family that would practise on a small scale the equality and fraternity preached by the French revolutionaries – remained deeply attractive to Coleridge (always insecure and emotionally needy) for much longer.

It was while still wrapped in this dream that Coleridge finally abandoned Cambridge without completing his degree, in January 1795. His later years at the

University had not lived up to the high promise of his first, but despite describing himself as ‘a proverb to the University for idleness’ he had intermittently continued to read and study hard and to strive for academic honours, though increasingly distracted by debt and debauchery. Coleridge also launched his literary publishing career while at Cambridge, placing poems in various local newspapers and announcing his arrival on the political scene by publishing a series of sonnets in the national *Morning Chronicle* on ‘Eminent Contemporaries’ like Edmund Burke, Joseph Priestley, and the Prime Minister William Pitt. In short, Coleridge’s Cambridge years, while on the face of it disastrous – most departments would probably wonder what had gone wrong if a student ran away to join the army in the middle of their third year – helped define his subsequent personality and career. It was here that he began to question his religious beliefs and to take an active interest in the major political controversies of the day, and here that he grew in confidence to make his mark as a poet; it was here too that he experienced the egotistical pleasure, but also the dangers, of being the centre of attention, of being courted by an ever-widening circle of admirers who always expected him to perform.

Next up to University was Byron, who entered Trinity College, Cambridge in October 1805, and had left for good by January 1808, having been absent more often than he was present. Unlike Coleridge, Byron never took the official University course of studies seriously, and openly derided the institution and its inhabitants in two of his ‘juvenile’ poems. In ‘Thoughts Suggested by a College Examination’ he ridicules both the students who dutifully pore over the set classical texts while knowing nothing of English history or native English poetry, and the Fellows who live an inward-looking life of dull pedantry, except when the prospect of some lucrative ecclesiastical office requires them to brown-nose those in positions of

influence. In 'Granta: A Medley', he is mentally transported to a high vantage-point from where he looks down on a similarly uninspiring scene of dozing dons and spineless students, the latter doggedly pursuing the 'unprofitable knowledge' of the traditional mathematical curriculum:

Renouncing every pleasing page

From authors of historic use

Preferring to the letter'd sage,

The square of the hypotenuse.

Despite his having held Cambridge in such low esteem – Byron's reply when challenged as to what his pet bear was doing there, that he was intending to 'sit for a fellowship', was a characteristic insult **[ad lib: double entendre??]** the University nowadays is more than happy to trade on his illustrious name, and Trinity College in particular, where his statue now graces the Wren Library, makes prominent use on its website of the former student who had shown it so much disrespect. But Byron's poetic criticisms and his contemptuous asides in letters may not tell the whole story. He certainly valued aspects of being at Cambridge: a month after first entering his college, at the age of seventeen, he was enjoying the freedom of having escaped the 'fetters' of home and his 'domestic tyrant' of a mother, and with his allowance of £500 a year, one of the largest of any undergraduates (though insufficient, as it turned out, to meet his expenses), he felt he had all the 'Liberty' of a 'Cherokee chief'. In February 1807, during a period of absence from the University lasting roughly a year, he assured his tutor in a letter that he was pursuing a course of reading, just not the one prescribed by the University, and thanked his tutor for his 'friendly attentions'. Byron's final period of residence at Trinity, in the second half of 1807, was perhaps his happiest and most formative, and this had a lot to do with personal relationships.

Old acquaintances reappeared and new friends emerged, and he became a member of the newly-formed undergraduate Cambridge Whig Club. Three of these relationships made up what Byron later called ‘a coterie . . . at Cambridge and elsewhere’: Scrope Davies, a conversationalist, wit, gambler and womaniser; Charles Matthews, a star student whom Byron described as his ‘guide, philosopher and friend’, and a militant atheist whose views reinforced Byron’s own scepticism; and John Cam Hobhouse, Byron’s travelling companion on his long tour of Europe and the Near East between 1809 and 1811, a literary collaborator, an important source of biographical material about the poet, and, as his executor, the man who controversially ensured that Byron’s memoirs were burnt after his death. These Cambridge associates were, with Percy Shelley, the most important male friends that Byron made in his life. At Cambridge, too, Byron, like Coleridge, made his entrance onto the literary stage, publishing his first volume of poems, not inappropriately called *Hours of Idleness*, on the back of two earlier privately printed collections. The volume was a success, and contributed to Byron’s increased popularity at Cambridge in his final term there. Personal liberty, independent reading, literary celebrity, decisive friendships – Byron’s hours of idleness as a Cambridge student, away from the family home, were surely a crucial phase in his development. As if by way of physically confirming this assertion of a new self, Byron drastically changed his appearance in his second year, proudly claiming in August 1807 that he had shed nearly four stone in six months and was unrecognisable to former acquaintances. Nor is it necessarily true that Byron owed nothing *intellectually* to his university. It is worth remembering that the Cambridge course of studies was much more science-oriented than that of Oxford: Isaac Newton had preceded Byron at Trinity as its most distinguished alumnus, and by the end of the eighteenth century Newtonian science had penetrated the official

curriculum as well as the unofficial curriculum of college-based teaching. Byron's keen interest in science is evident to any reader of his mature poetry, and his biographer, Fiona MacCarthy, may well be right in arguing a strong link to the 'Cambridge intellectual tradition' he had been spasmodically exposed to.

Percy Shelley, as I mentioned at the beginning, was at Oxford for just two terms in 1810-11. It was, nevertheless, a decisive rite of passage, brief though the passage was, and for many similar reasons to those I've sketched in the cases of Coleridge and Byron. Shelley was not particularly sociable during his time at university, but he made what has been described as one life-defining friendship, with Thomas Jefferson Hogg, who was to become his first biographer, and who provides a superbly colourful account of the undergraduate poet and the intimate relationship they formed. It seems that Shelley went to Oxford with high expectations, and although disappointed by the priggish and narrow-minded college tutors and wholly out of sympathy with Oxford's royalist and High Church traditions, he was elated by the freedom that university afforded and rapidly evolved his own routine, frequently reading for sixteen hours a day, and spending a good deal of time in what Hogg describes as their 'pedestrian steeplechases' in the countryside around Oxford. Between 6 and 10 in the evening he would apparently break off whatever he or they were doing and curl up like a cat on a rug in front of the fire in his room. I mentioned earlier that Shelley took a mass of scientific equipment to help furnish his rooms in college, and although Hogg did not share Shelley's enthusiasm for modern science he was forced to witness or assist in his friend's frequent experiments. It seems that Shelley used his drinking vessels indiscriminately with crucibles, retorts, and other pieces of chemical apparatus, and after an early scare when he found a seven shilling

piece dissolving in the bottom of a cup he was about to pour tea into, Hogg was very careful to inspect the crockery when taking refreshments with his friend.

Shelley said to Hogg at one point that he regretted their period of residence was limited to four years: there was so much to learn, and the college provided such a ‘calm and agreeable retreat’, that he would prefer six or seven at least. These sentiments must have made his involuntary departure a few months later all the more painful. Shelley and Hogg in fact explicitly discussed the positive aspects of the higher education they were experiencing:

We spoke [Hogg remembers] of our happy life, of universities, of what they might be; of what they were. How powerfully they might stimulate the student, how much valuable instruction they might impart! We agreed that, although the least possible benefit was conferred upon us in this respect at Oxford, we were deeply indebted, nevertheless, to the great and good men of former days, who founded those glorious institutions, for devising a scheme of life, which, however deflected from its original direction, still tended to study, and especially for creating establishments that called young men together from all parts of the empire, and for endowing them with a celebrity that was able to induce so many to congregate.

It is clear from this that Shelley had his own Idea of the university – one based on collegiality, opportunities for friendship, encouragements to study and resources to do so; he was aware that this Idea was some way apart from reality, and he was soon to find out how unpleasant that reality could be.

Shelley’s expulsion hinged on a pamphlet which he co-wrote with Hogg on the subject of religion. Since arriving at Oxford Shelley had been actively pursuing

his ambitions as a writer, publishing a volume of poems and a short Gothic novel, but this short pamphlet, entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*, was a direct challenge to the conservatism of the Oxford establishment. Shelley's voluminous correspondence with Hogg over the Christmas vacation of 1810-11 provide ample evidence of his visceral hatred of institutionalised Christianity, but in theological terms he tended initially to a deist position [ad lib: deism]. Hogg seems to have shifted him to a more pronounced atheist stance, although the pamphlet bears no trace of the passion they shared on matters of religion and is merely a calmly reasoned demonstration that the existence of God cannot be proved on any grounds acceptable to reason. Shelley sent the pamphlet to bishops and heads of colleges as though expecting to initiate a polite debate, and arranged for copies to be displayed in the University bookshop, where it was discovered by a Fellow of another college and immediately withdrawn from sale. It was published anonymously but Shelley's authorship was widely known throughout the University; summoned to account for himself at a meeting with the master of his own college, he rather stupidly refused to acknowledge authorship or to answer any questions about it, and was expelled forthwith. Hogg, by his own account, went in to remonstrate with the Master, was asked the same questions, gave the same answers, and suffered the same fate. Shelley's expulsion led to a lasting breakdown of relations with his father, blasted his prospects of worldly success, and set a pattern of protest, isolation and social exclusion for the rest of his life; in this respect his brief university career was a turning-point like no other. Hogg records Shelley sitting on the sofa, 'repeating, with convulsive vehemence, the words, 'Expelled, expelled!' his head shaking with emotion, and his whole frame quivering'. It really had not occurred to Shelley that he could not so publicly and provocatively challenge the existence of God, in an institution that required subscription to the

Anglican faith at matriculation and graduation, with impunity – it was like preaching vegetarianism in an abattoir; his actions presupposed an idea of the university – of a student’s right to be awkward and challenge received ideas, to protest and rebel without being called seriously to account – that far outran the university he actually belonged to. The best tribute Hogg paid to his friend, however, was to say that all the rewards and all the honours the university might have bestowed ‘would be inadequate to remunerate an individual, whose thirst for knowledge was so intense’, who had been ‘a whole university in himself to me’. **[earlier point]**

Finally, I return (chronologically, that is) to the first of the four major Romantic poets to go to university, William Wordsworth, who went up to St John’s College, Cambridge, in 1787. His case is unique because he has left the most substantial personal record of his time at university – not in the form of letters or journals, but in the form of his verse autobiography, *The Prelude*, an entire book of which is devoted to the Cambridge years. Well before the novel got to grips with this area of life – the earliest examples of a university novel date from the 1830s – this counts as the only significant *literary* interpretation of higher education within the Romantic period, as conventionally defined. I shall therefore focus my brief comments on that poem, although before I do so I just want briefly to note certain themes in Wordsworth’s Cambridge experience that echo the careers of the other three poets. Like all three, he declined to engage fully with the official curriculum, although unlike his near-contemporary – and later close friend – Coleridge he kept in sufficient touch with it to emerge at the end with an ordinary degree. Again like all three, with ample time and resources and very light supervision and discipline he pursued a course of independent studies, which in his case involved the study of modern languages with the help of a private tutor. His decision to cherry-pick those

parts of the exam system he was willing to collude with – which meant leaving aside the mathematical syllabus and most of the natural philosophy – has been persuasively characterised by one of his recent biographers as a typically *partial* rebellion against authority – the rebellion of someone whose pride and egotism prevented him fully committing to the path of conscientious student and social climber, but who couldn't bring himself to so frustrate his family's expectations by disengaging totally. It was the kind of partial rebellion that Shelley probably intended, but which got out of control. Again like the other poets, Wordsworth made lifelong friends at Cambridge, and like Coleridge he was at Cambridge at a time when the French Revolution (which broke out at the end of his second year) was a hot topic of debate among undergraduates. Many of his friends were strong sympathisers with the Revolution, and some maintained their support after the declaration of war in 1793. Along with the ongoing campaigns for university reform and wider constitutional reform, he therefore moved in a politically agitated atmosphere, and was part of a student subculture that had a democratic or republican ethos. As with Coleridge, one way this found expression was his decision to go off on a long walking tour in his final long vacation, which many of his Cambridge friends thought was 'mad and impracticable'. In his case, though, it meant a three-month tour on the Continent, taking him through France a year after the Revolution on a 2000-mile round trip. Just over a year later, with his undistinguished university career at an end, he returned to France for a full year's residence – largely, it seems, to escape his family's desperate attempts to arrange a more conventional future for him. His experiences there, and the political education he underwent, form a substantial part of the autobiographical narrative of *The Prelude*, but his Cambridge friends and the climate of debate at the

University had predisposed him to republican sympathies before his meetings with French patriots and what he describes as a kind of conversion experience.

Like Coleridge but unlike Byron and Shelley, Wordsworth lived into old age and his views on many things went into reverse. He grew to regret not devoting himself to his University studies, and in correspondence with friends who were sending sons to university did not hesitate to advise working hard for honours and keeping an eye on opportunities for worldly advancement – everything he had not done himself. He came to value the current alliance of Church and State and the integral role of the ancient universities in supporting the establishment: he opposed Catholic emancipation and the abolition of religious tests, including the tests for those taking degrees at Oxford and Cambridge, and was strongly opposed to the new London University.

The account Wordsworth gives of Cambridge in *The Prelude* predates the conservatism of his later years. It is, however, still a retrospective account: begun in 1801 and finished in 1804, Book 3 of the poem is separated from the phase of life it describes by at least ten years. Less important than any fading of the memory this might entail is the fact that the Book takes its place in a poem whose overall theme is the growth of a poet's mind – the mind of someone who had to come to terms with the realities of human life and society to find his destiny as a poet, but whose deepest influences had come from nature rather than other people (and who wants to teach other people the importance of such influences). Cambridge was never going to have a major part in this version of the past, and much of Book 3 has a satirical flavour, with Wordsworth heavily patronising his former undergraduate self. Everything is geared to conveying the message that he did not truly belong at Cambridge – that he was 'not for that hour / Nor for that place'. The imagery he uses is consistently

negative: he was a ‘lodger’, a ‘captive’, a ‘vagrant’, a ‘floating island’; Cambridge was an ‘eddy’ sucking him in; it was unreal – he was the dreamer, everyone else the dream; he was a spectator only, the University and its inhabitants a ‘pageant’, a piece of theatre, a ‘museum’ through which he roved, a ‘cabinet’ of curiosities. He emphasises his dislike of the narrow range of the curriculum and the competitive pressures of the examination system, with all the attendant emotions of envy, pride, shame and anxiety. Cambridge was, however, a place of temptation, and he confesses that his outer personality changed in response to these new surroundings, giving in to what he calls, perhaps euphemistically, ‘idleness and joy’, while his ‘under-soul’, that part of him that retained the deep connection with nature established during his childhood in the Lake District, was ‘locked up’ or repressed. It seems the best Wordsworth can say of the Cambridge he attended is that it constituted a useful halfway house – or, as he puts it, a ‘midway residence’ – between the rural environment of his childhood and the ‘real world’ of human conflict. It seems he is striving to reconcile with his master-narrative of a chosen son discovering his true vocation as a poet a phase of his life that might seem to have retarded or even derailed that journey.

However, as though to compensate for this largely negative representation of Cambridge, Wordsworth also provides an ‘image of a place’ that would have earned his respect, and made him give to ‘science and to arts’ the same ‘homage’ that he gave to nature. Essentially, this is **his** Idea of a University, and it is one we might now regard as very traditional: a place where students would be enthused with the joy of ‘knowledge . . . sincerely sought / For its own sake’, where the beautiful and inspiring architecture would be matched by the ‘dignity’ of young minds engrossed in their studies, where honours and rewards went only to those who had earned them

through merit. As he often does when trying to praise aspects of human society and civilisation, Wordsworth plucks some analogies from the natural world, but his choice is a curious one. His ideal university would be

a domain

For quiet things to wander in, a haunt
 In which the heron might delight to feed
 By the shy rivers, and the pelican
 Upon the cypress-spire in lonely thought
 Might sit and sun himself.

It is difficult to know what to make of this: quiet, solitary birds in a quiet, secluded landscape – it's not a plausible metaphor for any university that has ever existed, or is ever likely to exist. It seems to deny the very essence of a university: congregating people in one place and providing for collective as well as individual learning experiences – something which Wordsworth undoubtedly benefited from.

Wordsworth uses one other interesting phrase of his 'image of a place' in Book 3: as opposed to the gaudy 'trappings' of the real Cambridge, he says it should have a plainness and simplicity he calls 'republican'. In a much later Book of the poem dealing with his experiences in France, this word crops up again, this time in connection with his memories of the real Cambridge. He is grateful to the University, he says, for having held up to his eyes 'something . . . of a republic, where all stood thus far / Upon equal ground', 'one community' of 'Scholars and gentlemen'. Once again, it is hard to reconcile this description with the historical Cambridge, riddled as it was with inequality and corruption; but maybe what this does, in suggesting that Wordsworth was thus pre-programmed to welcome the French Revolution, is provide some meagre acknowledgement (largely missing in Book 3) that Cambridge in the

early 1790s was more than a dormitory for sleeping dons: there was open political debate, enthusiastic talk of what was going on across the Channel, a lively student subculture – all of which did not pass Wordsworth by.

To conclude. Higher education in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a strange entity, and one that seemed ripe for reform. The two ancient universities were held in low public esteem, criticised for being a corrupt arm of a corrupt political establishment; for having drifted from their original mission, or not having a mission appropriate to the time and circumstances; for teaching an outdated curriculum that was irrelevant to the needs of society; for not giving enough attention to teaching and not taking sufficient care of their students. The conventional picture is that Oxbridge was resistant to change and required the Royal Commissions of the 1850s before they set about putting their houses in order. This is a simplified and misleading account, as I've tried to argue. It is also the conventional view that university did little for the Romantic poets, perhaps relying on the always congenial assumption that creative genius has little to learn from formal academic study. On the contrary, I've argued that unreformed Cambridge and unreformed Oxford played a significant part in the lives, careers and intellectual histories of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and Shelley, albeit **not** by delivering prescribed learning outcomes in a rigorously monitored and quality-assured manner. **Their** universities were congregations of young people who had almost unlimited time and freedom to develop as individuals; as students they could pay lip-service to the official curriculum and follow their own course of reading without fear of retribution; their social life had equal weighting with their academic life, and they formed important lifelong friendships, some of which proved essential to their writing careers and the posthumous fate of their reputation; the assessment system placed

such light demands upon them that they were able to get on with the serious business of launching their literary careers. True, on the face of it, Wordsworth's university career was undistinguished, Coleridge's was disastrous, Byron's was scandalous, and Shelley's a tragicomedy. But the poets had the last laugh. It's their names that are remembered, their achievements that are commemorated; the conscientious students who jumped through all the hoops are mostly anonymous entries in the alumni lists. The college that booted Shelley out of Oxford now boasts a beautiful memorial to him just inside the main entrance, houses an archive of his papers, and teaches his poetry to new generations of undergraduates. **[It seems to me that these poets had an idea of the university; they believed in the idea; to some extent they lived it before it became a reality – and there's nothing more romantic than that.]** It's a sobering thought that if I were fortunate enough to teach a student whose name would still matter in two hundred years' time, it might be the student who never attended classes, didn't do the 'required reading', continually missed assessment deadlines, and showed no interest at all in what job they might do with the degree that, sad to say, we probably wouldn't give them.