

Hydromania: Perspectives on Romantic Swimming

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Hydromania? This was the title of one of three prints of Lyme Regis produced by the caricaturist George Cruikshank, based on sketches by Captain Frederick Marryat (better known as the author of sea stories like *Mr Midshipman Easy*), in 1819 (Figure 1).¹ It depicts in mildly titillating detail assorted women, all completely naked, emerging from bathing machines and enjoying a dip in the shallow water, both with and without the help of professional bathing-women; they are the object of voyeuristic scrutiny by local fishermen and a gentleman on the far right who is making use of a telescope. The subtitle, 'A Touch of the Sub-Lyme and Beautiful', both puns on the name of this fashionable seaside resort and playfully references Edmund Burke's influential 1757 treatise on landscape aesthetics. It might even be argued that, since Burke had drawn explicit analogies between the attributes of a beautiful natural scene and the contours of a woman's body, Cruikshank's print turns Burke's rhetoric back on itself with considerable satiric force.

Fast forward nearly two hundred years to 3 May 2010 and a not totally dissimilar scene on a beach in Turkey. Hundreds of very serious-looking swimmers – mostly British, predominantly male, all clad in wetsuits – congregated on the foreshore at Eceabat to mark the anniversary of the most famous swim undertaken by the most famous swimmer of the Romantic era. Over one hundred hardy individuals braved strong currents, swarms of jellyfish, and a chilly water temperature of thirteen degrees to emulate Lord Byron's feat of crossing the narrow channel of the Hellespont between European and Asiatic Turkey – a performance of which he was inordinately proud and

which he undertook to prove the practicality of the exploits attributed to the mythical Greek youth, Leander, who was said to have swum the Hellespont on a nightly basis to visit his lover on the opposite shore. One of Byron's descendants was among the participants in the bicentennial swim; of the others, according to a *Guardian* journalist, some 'were experienced channel swimmers, others just recreational athletes, but all were united by a love of the water'.²

Here, then, are two very different expressions of hydromania, sea-bathing and endurance swimming – the one associated with the pursuit of health, the other with athletic accomplishment; the one ripe with eroticism, the other tinged with egotistic self-display. Together, they have much to say about the phenomenon that I address in this essay, namely Romantic swimming. In what follows I shall explore the origins and context of the Romantic generation's passion for swimming, consider some of the literary meanings and uses of swimming in writing of that period, and look in particular at the way swimming features in the lives and works of three notable hydromaniacs – Coleridge, Byron, and Keats.

It is worth enquiring into the origins of that curious word, 'hydromania'. According to the *OED*, the first recorded use of 'hydromania', defined simply as 'a mania or craze for water', occurs in a letter written by Robert Southey in 1793. In describing three weeks' holiday spent touring the south of England, Southey mentions some extravagant indoor water features he has seen at a gentleman's estate in Oxfordshire. These have led him to conclude that 'the hydromania is almost as bad as the hydrophobia'.³ Whether the word is actually Southey's coinage cannot be known for sure, but it seems clear that 'hydromania' is of fairly recent derivation, and, as is so

often the case, is formed as a punning antonym to an already existing word, 'hydrophobia'. The latter is recorded in purely medical usage – an 'an aversion to water or other liquids, and difficulty in swallowing them' – as far back as the sixteenth century, and in a more general or colloquial sense of a 'dread or horror of water' is first found in Laurence Sterne's novel, *Tristram Shandy*, in 1760. Sometime towards the end of the eighteenth century, therefore, a craze for water develops in contradiction of, or in tension with, a pre-existing horror of water. When Coleridge, who delighted in word-play, begins a letter in 1821 with the sentence, 'Hydromaniâ Hydrophobia: from Water-lust comes Water-dread'⁴ (he uses both terms as metaphors for mental states or activity) he has things back to front: historically, water-lust succeeded water-dread. Of course, the usages I have quoted are limited and specific, but I believe the narrative they encapsulate mirrors the emergence of other forms of Romantic water-lust in the late eighteenth century.

One of the initial spurs to my interest in this topic was a comment made by the historian Keith Thomas in his well-known study, *Man and the Natural World*. Thomas argues that in early modern England there was widespread anxiety about 'any form of behaviour which threatened to transgress the fragile boundaries between man and the animal creation'; swimming was suspect, Thomas notes, because 'it was essentially a non-human method of progression'.⁵ This philosophical aversion did not go entirely unopposed, as I shall show. Nevertheless, the basic story of swimming, at least in a British context, is one that starts in early modern times when this activity was the object of mistrust or distaste – despised by educators (as Michael West has pointed out) 'as a mechanical rather than a liberal art', frowned upon by certain religious authorities as a

violation of natural hierarchy, and advocated largely as a tool of self-preservation or for its utility in warfare.⁶ These negative attitudes were not decisively challenged until the eighteenth century, when the growing popularity of sea-bathing and the elaboration of a powerful new discourse concerning the health benefits of sea water, administered both externally and internally, began to shift public opinion. Bathing, of course, is not the same thing as swimming: one can bathe without being able to swim, and some guides to sea-bathing advise taking only a single 'plunge' in water of a safe depth. By the end of the century, though, recreational swimming was very much in vogue and, along with walking and mountain-climbing, had become one of those outdoor, very physical pleasures that seem to have been just as important to the Romantic generation as their intellectual or spiritual pursuits.⁷

The rise of sea bathing in the eighteenth century is too well known to need more than a quick summary here. Sir John Floyer's *History of Cold Bathing*, first published in 1715, which assembled masses of evidence from ancient texts, contemporary medical sources, and personal experimentation to prove the value of immersion in cold water to a wide variety of ailments, was one of the weightier advocates of a health argument that was pushed relentlessly to Georgian readers. At the other end of the century Thomas Reid's *Directions for Warm and Cold Sea-Bathing* (1798) continued to press the salutary effects of the sudden shock of cold water rousing the energy of the system and producing a 'general warm glow'.⁸ Successive chapters dealt with the use of sea-bathing to treat scrofula, eruptions, fevers, gout, rheumatism, inflammatory complaints, chlorosis, and oedemas. Rather more worryingly, Reid also recommended drinking half a pint of sea water a day in the belief that this had a strong and beneficial purgative

effect. While this part of his advice would probably not find many takers nowadays, Susie Parr has interestingly pointed to several modern studies apparently confirming the beneficial effects of regular cold-water bathing, including strengthening the immune system, increasing metabolic rate, decreasing blood pressure and cholesterol level, and boosting fertility.⁹

Intense marketing of medicinal sea-bathing was responsible for the rapid development of seaside resorts across the country. The patronage of George III, who famously plunged in the sea at Weymouth in 1789 to the accompaniment of a chamber orchestra, merely gave royal approval to a well-established economic and social trend. Jane Austen, who was herself an enthusiastic bather at Lyme Regis, made the reckless ambitions of seaside entrepreneurs the focus of her last novel, *Sanditon*, left unfinished on her death in 1817. The eponymous resort, an unprepossessing village on the south coast, is the pet project of a Mr Parker, who is intent on attracting a fashionable crowd with the twin attractions of ‘saline air and immersion’:

no person (however upheld for the present by fortuitous aids of exercise and spirits in a semblance of health) could be really in a state of secure and permanent health without spending at least six weeks by the sea every year. – The sea air and sea bathing together were nearly infallible, one or the other of them being a match for every disorder, of the stomach, the lungs or the blood; they were anti-spasmodic, anti-pulmonary, anti-sceptic [*sic*], anti-bilious and anti-rheumatic.¹⁰

As the characteristic ironic tone indicates, Austen had little time for the aggressive marketing of sea air and sea water – a point underlined by the fact that this fragmentary

text is populated almost entirely by hypochondriacs. Nevertheless, she could not get enough herself of the sea water at Lyme, writing to her sister Cassandra on one occasion that 'The Bathing was so delightful this morning . . . that I believe I staid in rather too long. . . . I shall be more careful another time'.¹¹

In some quarters, hydromania of this sort aroused suspicion for different reasons. The beach was a quasi-democratic space where people who led otherwise quite separate lives suddenly found themselves in close and awkward proximity; although customs and regulations varied from resort to resort, there was considerable scope for transgression of gender boundaries as men and women saw each other in various states of undress or even completely naked. The anonymous author of *Observations on Indecent Sea-Bathing* (1805) expresses his horror at the discovery that at several locations in Devon 'the bathing-machines, though destitute of awnings, *are not separated*, and the sexes may be said to bathe promiscuously'. He is also concerned that, at Brighton, men have taken to bathing with no clothes on in full view of the public – 'a most unmanly insult to the Fair Sex'.¹² The pamphlet takes the form of a letter to the *Sun*, the editor of which agrees that, although the right to bathe in the sea is common to all, 'the right of bathing, whether in the sea or in a river, must be *decently exercised*' (11). First-hand evidence that, at Brighton, women have become habituated to the sight of men bathing in the nude – a spectacle that 'neither drove them from the windows, nor prevented them from parading on the Cliff' (8) – leads to sombre reflections on the degeneration of the female character. It is also pointed out that in Napoleonic France a law has recently been passed prohibiting bathing in the Seine without bathing dresses: 'Shall the legitimate, the free, the paternal Government of our

gracious Sovereign', the author asks, 'be destitute of *any* security, just and honourable in its nature, which is employed to give nobility to the ferocious and wide-spreading tyranny of the Gallican despot? At all events, shall the British Fair be familiarized to scenes, which are deemed too gross for the licentious females of profligate France?'

(10-11) There was virtually no area of British life that was left untouched by the politics of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars; here, we see clearly how the democratic pastimes of sea-bathing and swimming got caught in the riptides of that tumultuous era.

Of course, what some saw as socially or morally retrograde, others found amusing or an object of libidinal investment. The caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson was particularly fond of scenes of river bathing, and gave full rein to his erotic fantasies in depicting scenes of naked men and women entwined on a river bank or of fully-clothed women sneaking a look at nude male swimmers, as in 'A View on the Banks of the Thames' (1807; Figure 2). The fact that swimming naked was the norm – at least for men – until well into the nineteenth century conveys the impression that swimming was a perfectly natural thing to do, and that in this period it perhaps represented part of the Rousseauesque revolt against the chains of social convention. But the question of whether swimming was a natural or unnatural activity was a recurring issue in literature on the topic right from the start. In this regard, one remarkable aspect of the discourse on swimming in the Romantic era is the primitive and anachronistic stare of instructional literature. Until the mid-1810s, there were really only two sources of advice in print for anyone interested in learning to swim. One was a short but much reprinted and quoted letter by Benjamin Franklin, which urges teaching swimming to

children not only as a life-skill that will relieve them in certain situations from ‘painful apprehensions of danger’, but also as a wholesome and enjoyable form of exercise.¹³ The other source was a book by Sir Everard Digby first published in Latin in 1587, then translated and abridged as *A Short Introduction for to Learne to Swimme* by Christopher Middleton in 1595. William Percey’s *The Compleat Swimmer*, which appeared in 1658, was essentially a plagiarism of Digby’s work, which was also translated into French by Melchisedech Thevenot in 1696 and back-translated into English as *The Art of Swimming* a few years later. These are all essentially the same work. At the end of the eighteenth century and in the early decades of the nineteenth public such advice on swimming as appeared in print was invariably still based on Digby and his translators, sometimes with the interpolation of Franklin’s practical guidance. It is curious that, until the appearance of Frost’s *Scientific Swimming* in 1816, textbooks on swimming were tirelessly rehearsing the views of an Elizabethan Cambridge scholar aiming to persuade a suspicious elite audience that swimming should form part of the education of a gentleman.

In Middleton’s translation, Digby’s work begins by establishing a firm philosophical foundation for his practical advice. He argues that, far from swimming being against nature, a human’s ability to swim proves their superiority in the great chain of being: whereas a fish can do nothing but swim, a man can swim without being limited to that medium; moreover, he can perform all sorts of ‘fine feates’ in the water that far exceed the capabilities of fish. ‘So fit is the constitution of mans body’, he declares, ‘that who so dooth but with himselfe thoroughly consider of it, cannot but accord with mee in thys, that a man of all creatures under the circumference of heaven,

naturally excelleth in swimming'.¹⁴ This line is repeated in the many translations and adaptations of Digby that appeared in the next two hundred years: thus William Percey maintains that man, 'as he is the more Noble, and above all other Creatures; so indeed he excels them all in Swimming, nay Fishes themselves', while the anonymous compiler of an early nineteenth-century edition of *The Art of Swimming*, published around 1830 but still essentially a version of Digby, states that man not only swims as naturally as other creatures but 'with more perfection and variety, both for pleasure and advantage'.¹⁵ Throughout the Georgian era, therefore, literature on swimming was bizarrely and anachronistically fighting a two hundred-year-old battle against the dominant Elizabethan view of swimming as unnatural, at the same time as visitors to seaside resorts around the English coast were confronting the spectacle of swimmers bathing *au naturel* and some of the leading writers of the Romantic period were sharing in this most democratic of pleasures and exploring its potential in prose and poetry. What is even more intriguing is that many of the 'fine feates' described and illustrated by Digby and endlessly rehashed by his imitators – which include carrying two birds across a river (Figure 3), cutting one's toenails, and practising a ridiculous manoeuvre called 'the leap of the goat' – have the reverse effect of making swimming appear contrived and *unnatural*.

In the Romantic period, therefore, we have on the one hand a social practice of swimming accelerating in popularity and causing concern to the guardians of public morality, and on the other an instructional literature stuck in the discursive backwaters of the late sixteenth century. What of the poets and novelists who participated in the new water-lust? In the remainder of this essay I intend to focus mainly on poets and

poetry, but it is worth noting in passing that swimming makes regular and often significant appearances in Romantic fiction. In Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), for example, the male protagonist, Clarence Hervey, a man of fashion who likes to excel in everything and enjoy the praise of men and women alike, engages in a series of challenges with a male acquaintance. Having already beaten him at wine-tasting and a pedestrian race around Hyde Park, flush with success he accepts a further double-or-quits challenge to a swim in the Serpentine, despite the fact that his only knowledge of swimming is a distant memory of reading Benjamin Franklin's essay on the subject. Inevitably Hervey nearly drowns and is saved only by the ministrations of a passer-by who is evidently familiar with the principles of resuscitation disseminated by the recently-formed Humane Society; his embarrassing lack of aquatic prowess represents a considerable blow to his self-esteem and public image. Few of Clarence's fashionable acquaintance, it seems, can swim, and it is clear that the author of *Practical Education* views this as a deficiency. In Thomas Holcroft's Jacobin novel, *The Adventures of Hugh Trevor* (1794), by contrast, the eponymous hero, a farmer's son, has been given a robust physical education by his father, having been 'taught to sip ale, eat hung beef, ride like a hero, climb trees, run, jump, and swim'.¹⁶ The latter skill becomes instrumental in the plot when he rescues from drowning a man trapped in a carriage which has overturned into a river – this man later turning out to be his formerly estranged grandfather, with whom he is subsequently reconciled. Finally, in Mary Shelley's apocalyptic fiction, *The Last Man* (1826), we see, towards the end of the novel, the last three human survivors of a global epidemic of the plague trying to sail across the Adriatic Sea to Greece. A storm occurs and the boat is capsized. Two of the occupants, including Lord Adrian (a character loosely based on Percy Shelley, who famously could not swim), are drowned,

but Lionel Verney, who has always relished a physical challenge and treats a hostile sea as an opportunity for egotistic self-assertion ('I loved to feel the waves wrap me and strive to overpower me; while I, lord of myself, moved this way or that, in spite of their angry buffetings'), makes his way to shore and becomes literally the 'last man' of the book's title.¹⁷ In all these examples swimming is used to differentiate between characters and is seen as both a valuable life-skill and the expression of a more vital masculinity.

It is in poetry, however, that swimming develops its most complex and intriguing range of meanings in the Romantic period. Charles Sprawson, in an appealing non-academic survey, has written of the fascination with water, or 'love affair with "moistness"' common to many nineteenth-century writers; he notes that the 'passion for bathing really began with the Romantic generation', and that "'swim" was a word that particularly appealed to its poets'.¹⁸ This is a valuable insight, and I shall now look in more detail at three of the poets who feature in Sprawson's untidy narrative.

Coleridge, whose two most famous poems, 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan', feature landscapes of ocean, ice, sacred river and mighty fountain, is a leading example of an enthusiastic Romantic swimmer. Coleridge learned to swim in the river Otter as a child in Devon; when removed to London as a charity schoolboy after his father's death he made illegal bathing expeditions to the New River to the north of the city; on a visit to the Yorkshire coast in 1801 to indulge his illicit love for Sara Hutchinson he bathed regularly and 'frolicked in the Billows', ignoring medical advice to avoid the sea because he had 'Faith in the Ocean';¹⁹ during his stay in Malta he got up before sunrise to swim in the sea; while in later years he visited the then fashionable resort of

Ramsgate ten times between 1819 and 1833, generally for a month or two in the autumn, and delighted in the cold sea-bathing prescribed as part of his health regime.²⁰ At first he found his own private spot a mile along the shore where there was ‘a good roomy arched Cavern’ in which he could deposit his clothes before enjoying ‘a glorious tumble in the waves’. At other times he used the commercial bathing machines (as depicted in Benjamin West’s 1788 painting of *The Bathing Place at Ramsgate* [Figure 4]), relishing the rough seas in which he could dive into the biggest waves off the top step of the ladder and surrender to their power: ‘I watched each time from the top-step for a high Wave coming, and then with my utmost power of projection *shot myself off* into it, for all the world like a Congreve Rocket into a Whale’.²¹

Coleridge’s swimming is a curious mix of childlike physical exuberance and hypochondriacal obsession with the medicinal virtues of sea water. His poem ‘After Bathing in the Sea at Scarborough in Company with T. Hutchinson, August 1801’, the product of his trip to the Northeast with Sara Hutchinson, conjures a range of emotions:

God be with thee, gladsome Ocean!

How gladly greet I thee once more —

Ships and Waves and endless Motion

And Life rejoicing on thy Shore.²²

He expresses confidence in returning health and a proud superiority over the fashionable crowd who tremble at the prospect of cold water; but the ‘Thoughts sublime’ (15), ‘Grieflike Transports’ (18) and ‘Silent Adorations’ (19) point to a more intense, characteristically Romantic response – all the more compelling in that these

'revisited' feelings seem as potent as their originals. The 'endless Motion' of the sea evidently inspired a surge of hope and creativity, as well as renewed spiritual conviction ('God is with me, God is in me' [23]), in one who was always prone to depression and self-pity – leaving aside the vicissitudes of his love life and the effects of his already established opium addiction.

Byron was, as my introductory remarks suggested, a very different kind of swimmer. He learned to swim as a boy in the river Don in Aberdeen; thereafter, wherever this well-travelled aristocrat found himself – Harrow, Cambridge, Brighton, Hastings, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Turkey – he swam, very often on a daily basis. His deformed right foot constituting much less of a handicap in the water than on land, swimming was clearly to some extent an escape from his acute consciousness of his disability. But the freedom and exhilaration Byron found in swimming went beyond such compensatory urges; for him, swimming was an opportunity for egocentric, competitive self-display. The sentiments he attributes to poetic alter-egos like Childe Harold and Manfred – the latter recalls how he loved

to plunge

Into the torrent, and to roll along

On the swift whirl of the new breaking wave

Of river-stream, or ocean, in their flow.

In these my early strength exulted²³

– closely resemble his own pride and joy in accomplishing the extraordinary swimming feats that fed the construction of his legend. The celebrated Hellespont swim, which he ‘plume[d]’ himself on ‘more than I could possibly do on any kind of glory, political, poetical, or rhetorical’,²⁴ and to which he audaciously alluded in the shipwreck scene in Canto 2 of *Don Juan*, was preceded in 1809 by his two-hour crossing of the river Tagus in Lisbon against a dangerous counter-current, and somewhat diminished by his epic race from the Venetian Lido to the far end of the Grand Canal in June 1818, when he was in the water for four and a quarter hours. While these were performances of Olympian bravado, Byron’s swimming could also be a way of managing strong emotions, as when he broke away from the cremation of Shelley’s body and swam out to his boat anchored in the bay – a round trip of around three miles.²⁵ In his final years prolonged swims seem to have been injurious to Byron’s death, yet he persisted in the habit. More than with any other Romantic, swimming was an inseparable part of Byron’s identity, as his Italian neighbours recognised in erecting a plinth referring to him as a ‘noted English swimmer and poet’, seemingly according equal importance to both occupations or activities.²⁶

When considering the obvious ‘hydromania’ of individuals such as Coleridge and Byron, it is tempting to offer broad speculative explanations for the surge in popularity of swimming among the Romantic generation. Like walking, which boomed as a middle-class recreational practice during this period, swimming was an accessible, everyday activity that appealed to those inspired by the democratic and egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution. Although it possessed a nascent infrastructure (in the form of bathing facilities at coastal resorts) and eventually became heavily regulated and

codified, for many young Romantics swimming was an expression of personal freedom and spontaneity and as such their passion for open water, as I shall argue below, finds a direct descendant in today's wild swimming movement. Unlike walking, the state of relative or total undress associated with swimming had the potential to give group participation in the latter a mildly subversive erotic subtext – a dimension of which caricaturists and printmakers of the period were keenly aware. For those enthused by the Romantic discovery of natural landscape and the flourishing trend in landscape art, swimming provided a literally immersive experience of nature and the thrilling possibility of blurring the boundary between spectator and spectacle on which the aesthetics of picturesque beauty and the sublime both depended in different ways. For some men, such as Byron, swimming allowed for the performance of a version of masculinity based on physical prowess and competitive athleticism – a counterweight to the effeminising tendencies of the contemporary cult of sensibility.

Whatever the specific character of the passion in individual cases, there is no doubt that the rapid rise of recreational swimming led to its greater prominence in a range of literal and figurative contexts in Romantic literature. I have already glanced at some fictional instances; I would now like to look at some striking poetic examples. Coleridge's poem, 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', in which the incapacitated speaker goes on a mental walk with his friends through scenery with which he is evidently well acquainted, reaches its rhetorical climax as they watch the sunset from an elevated viewpoint:

So my Friend

Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,

Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round

On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem

Less gross than bodily; and of such hues

As veil the Almighty Spirit, when he makes

Spirits perceive his presence.²⁷

Here, 'swimming sense' denotes a temporary disorientation (a sensation aurally reinforced by the overwhelming sibilance of these lines, in which sound threatens to occlude signification), a suspension of ordinary sense perception, and the threshold of a religious experience. Familiar things lose their material shape and become more spiritual; even the spectator loses his physical identity and becomes a spirit in the presence of a higher Spirit. It is fascinating that swimming is the chosen metaphor for this apparent merging of self and world, this unsustainable moment of revelation.

There is a comparable moment in another of Coleridge's conversation poems, 'Frost at Midnight'. Sitting up at night in his cottage, listening to the quiet breathing of his baby son, the speaker observes a sooty film fluttering on the grate and is mentally transported back to his unhappy schooldays, when he often observed a similar phenomenon and eagerly anticipated the arrival of the stranger – a family member, perhaps – that a popular superstition indicated was thereby imminent:

So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,

Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!

And so I brooded all the following morn,

Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
For still I hoped to see the *stranger's* face,
Townsmen, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!²⁸

Here, it is the 'swimming book' that most vividly conveys the speaker's inattention to his familiar surroundings and his withdrawal into an inner world of reverie and brooding anticipation. As with the previous example, swimming is a potent metaphor for the erasure of everyday reality and the entry into a trance-like state that promises – even if it does not here deliver – a fulfilling, transformative experience.

The poetry of Byron offers a crowded mosaic of literal and figurative references to swimming. Here I shall glance solely at *Don Juan*, in which the author's aquatic imagination is constantly associating the act of swimming with intense emotions and liminal situations. I have already mentioned the famous shipwreck scene in Canto 2, in which Byron explicitly aligns his own capabilities in the water with those of his hero:

A better swimmer you could scarce see ever,
He could, perhaps, have pass'd the Hellespont,
As once (a feat on which ourselves we prided)

Leander, Mr Ekenhead, and I did. (*Don Juan*, II. cv. 837-40)

Byron's insistence that his Hellespont crossing proved the practicability of Leander's mythical exploits – that 'a young Greek of the heroic times, in love, and with his limbs in full vigour, might have *succeeded* in such an attempt', as he declared in a letter published in the *London Magazine*²⁹ – suggests the close connection that he posited between athletic and erotic prowess. This link is strengthened in the ensuing description of Juan's relationship with Haidée, a Greek pirate's daughter. The two meet when Juan, the only one of four emaciated survivors from a capsized lifeboat to have made his way to land (one of his companions is eaten by a shark, the other two cannot swim), regains consciousness after having collapsed on the beach. He now sees his new love-interest for the first time: 'slowly by his swimming eyes was seen / A lovely female face of seventeen' (II. cxii. 895-6). While the 'swimming eyes' here are at least partly a reference to Juan's state of dizziness, later in the poem we find swimming used in a fully figurative sense:

Juan and Haidée gazed upon each other

With swimming looks of speechless tenderness,

Which mix'd all feelings, friend, child, lover, brother,

All that the best can mingle and express

When two pure hearts are pour'd in one another,

And love too much, and yet can not love less. (IV. xxvi. 201-6)

Here, swimming is linked to confusion and disorder – it is a love that ‘mix’d all feelings, friend, child, lover, brother’ – and is marked as excessive and transgressive. In the image of ‘two pure hearts . . . pour’d in one another’, water is the solvent of propriety as well as of personal identity. And whereas Coleridge’s ‘swimming sense’ was the gateway to a religious epiphany, Byron’s ‘swimming looks’ betoken a different form of transcendence achieved via sexual union: ‘Love was born *with* them, *in* them, so intense, / It was their very spirit—not a sense’ (IV. xxvii. 215-6).

Byron applies the metaphor of swimming to other kinds of disorientation or self-estrangement. There is an interesting occurrence in the opening stanzas of Canto 9, where the narrator toys with Hamlet’s famous question, ‘To be or not to be’, and alludes to a long history of philosophical scepticism stretching back to ancient Greece:

It is a pleasant voyage perhaps to float,

Like Pyrrho, on a sea of speculation;

But what if carrying sail capsize the boat?

Your wise men don’t know much of navigation;

And swimming long in the abyss of thought

Is apt to tire: a calm and shallow station

Well nigh the shore, where one stoops down and gathers

Some pretty shell, is best for moderate bathers. (IX. xviii. 137-44)

There is a playful echo here of the episode in Canto 2, but it is a form of mental shipwreck that Byron here contemplates and he is not so confident of his ability to get to shore in those circumstances. It is a nice irony that Byron, while using open-water swimming as a metaphor for the pointless, self-disconcerting character of philosophical abstraction, refers to himself – albeit through the persona of the down-to-earth, practically-minded narrator – as a ‘moderate bather’.

That modest appellation would probably be more appropriately applied to John Keats, although hard evidence of the latter’s water-based activity is difficult to come by. He seems to have swum in a pond in the grounds of his school in Enfield and availed himself of the nearby New River at various times for the same purpose. On his northern walking tour in 1818 he definitely bathed in a ‘quite pat and fresh’ Loch Fyne.³⁰ Exactly how good a swimmer Keats was is impossible to determine, but perhaps more important is the fact that habitually, for Keats, ‘water created a glorious torrent of poetry’.³¹ That torrent contains numerous fascinating swimming images and metaphors. In ‘I stood tip-toe’ there is a beautiful picture of the moon ‘lifting her silver rim / Above a cloud, and with a gradual swim / Coming into the blue with all her light’.³² In the climactic scene of *Lamia* where the female protagonist is exposed as a serpent, the narrator pleads for her fiancé Lycius to be spared his disillusionment and pain via some kind of drunken oblivion: ‘let us strip for him / The thyrsus, that his watching eyes may swim / into forgetfulness’ (ii. 225-7). However, in the space remaining I have room to comment only on the most famous introduction of swimming into Keats’s poetry.

In his early sonnet, ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,’ Keats begins by using an overarching metaphor of travel to describe his reading of poetry, then switches

to a different image to convey his intense delight at perusing for the first time an Elizabethan English translation of Homer's epic poetry:

Oft of one wide expanse had I been told

That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene

Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

When a new planet swims into his ken. (5-10)

The thrill of the astronomer discovering a new planet reworks the language of exploration used in the first eight lines of the poem. But 'swims' introduces a different element: it is hard to imagine a planet swimming, except in so far as it might appear to be floating in some invisible aqueous element, but easier to imagine the 'swimming sense' or consciousness of the astronomer, unable to believe what he is seeing. Swimming again signifies a moment of extraordinary insight when old certainties dissolve and a previously knowable universe becomes more fluid and indeterminate. It is remarkable that Keats consistently reaches for a swimming metaphor when he wants to describe unusual states of mind – whether in a positive way, as here with the representation of a classic experience of the sublime, or in a more negative context, as when he describes his failure to make progress with *Endymion* owing to an 'overwrought' brain. The 'swimming in [his] head' is compared to 'the effects of a Mental Debauch', producing nothing but 'anxiety to go on without the Power to do

so'.³³ From early modern times onwards, as we have seen, swimming has connoted a blurring of boundaries; for Keats it sometimes gestures towards an exciting and productive suspension of normality, while here it signifies more of an intellectual and moral limbo.

In conclusion, the passion for swimming – the hydromania – that developed in the Romantic era is a subject that has received informed coverage in books aimed at the general reader, but has attracted little or no scholarly attention. In this essay I have touched on several aspects of a complex phenomenon. In my remarks on creative writers I have shown how swimming was a liberating, confronting and sometimes transgressive enthusiasm. Water is a transforming medium, and swimming was increasingly valued as a transformative experience; its literary uses were heavily coloured by connotations of change and renewal, of dissolving boundaries and fluid identities. In describing his marathon swim in Venice, Byron declares that he is 'almost amphibious' and adds: 'If I believed in the transmigration of your Hindoos, I should think I had been a *Merman* in some former state of existence, or was going to be turned into one in the next'.³⁴ Modern proponents of the neoromantic wild swimming movement pioneered by Kate Rew, Daniel Start, Rob Fryer and others talk in not dissimilar terms. Rew, for instance, reflects that there 'comes a point if you do front crawl continuously for an hour you kind of lose the sense of your joints. You become quite fish like. You feel like muscle just flexing your way through the water'. Daniel Start talks of the thrill of swimming in white water courses like the river Dart in Devon, where 'You have to very much give yourself over to the forces and move like an eel or an otter with the way the

water is flowing and with just a flick of your flippers or your hands you move in and out. Become part of the flow'.³⁵

The godfather of modern wild swimming is, however, the late writer and filmmaker Roger Deakin, whose influential *Waterlog* (1999) was itself inspired by the well-known short story, 'The Swimmer', by the American writer John Cheever. Cheever's protagonist Ned Merrill decides one day to take the eight-mile journey home across Long Island by traversing every swimming pool along the way, following what his cartographic imagination sees as a 'quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county'. Merrill has 'an inexplicable contempt for men who did not hurl themselves into pools', and regards the 'embrace' of the light green water as 'the resumption of a natural condition'.³⁶ On a much larger scale, Deakin's journey takes him the length and breadth of Britain, immersing him in seas, rivers, lakes and ponds in a rambling, watery picaresque adventure. He too writes of swimming as a transformative experience, valuing the dissolution of his terrestrial identity:

Swimming is a rite of passage, a crossing of boundaries: the line of the shore, the bank of the river, the edge of the pool, the surface itself. When you enter the water, something like metamorphosis happens. Leaving behind the land, you go through the looking-glass surface and enter a new world, in which survival, not ambition or desire, is the dominant aim. . . . You see and experience things when you're swimming in a way that is completely different from any other. You are *in* nature, part and parcel of it, in a far more complete and intense way than on dry land, and your sense of the

present is overwhelming. In wild water you are on equal terms with the animal world around you: in every sense, on the same level.³⁷

Here, as with the reflections of Rew and Start, we are taken all the way back to the world of the Elizabethans and to the underlying anxieties of Sir Everard Digby's pioneering instruction manual: is it natural for a man (or woman) to swim? Do we belong in the water? Is a human being better than a fish? But of course the discourse has shifted fundamentally. Swimming, we still feel, troubles the boundaries between man and nature, human and animal, troubles our sense of self; but we now embrace those uncertainties and instabilities. In shaping that distinctively modern sensibility the Romantic generation, as in so many areas, took the first decisive strokes.

¹ The other two prints are reproduced in C. Wanklyn, *Lyme Regis: A Retrospect* (London, 1927).

² Becky Horsbrugh, 'The Hellespont Swim: Following in Byron's Wake', *The Guardian*, 6 May 2010. See <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/may/06/hellespont-swim-byron>, accessed 15 July 2014.

³ Southey to Thomas Phillipps Lamb, 3 April 1793, *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Lynda Pratt, Tim Fulford and Ian Packer, Romantic Circles Electronic Edition, Appendix 1, Letter A.

⁴ Coleridge to Thomas Allsopp, 3 December 1821, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford, 1956-71; henceforth *CLSTC*), v. 188.

⁵ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London, 1983), 38-9.

⁶ Michael West, 'Spenser, Everard Digby, and the Renaissance Art of Swimming', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 26.1 (1983), 11-22, 14.

⁷ I have explored the Romantic cult of the walking tour in my *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (Basingstoke, 1997). On mountaineering, see Simon Bainbridge, 'Romantic Writers and Mountaineering', *Romanticism*, 18.1 (2012), 1-15.

⁸ Thomas Reid, *Directions for Warm and Cold Sea-Bathing; with Observations on their Application and Effects in Different Diseases*, 2nd ed. (London, 1798), 4.

⁹ Susie Parr, *The Story of Swimming: A Social History of Bathing in Britain* (Stockport, 2011), 44-7.

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- ¹⁰ Jane Austen, *Sanditon*, ed. Margaret Drabble (London, 1974), 163.
- ¹¹ Austen to Cassandra Austen, 14 September 1804, *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 4th ed. (Oxford, 2011), 99.
- ¹² *Observations on Indecent Sea-Bathing, as Practised at Different Watering-Places on the Coasts of this Kingdom* (London, 1805), 5, 8.
- ¹³ Benjamin Franklin, *Experiments and Observations on Electricity, Made at Philadelphia in America* (London, 1769), 468.
- ¹⁴ Christopher Middleton, *A Short introduction for to Learne to Swimme* (London, 1595), n.p.
- ¹⁵ William Percey, *The Compleat Swimmer: Or, the Art of Swimming* (London, 1658), Preface, n.p.; *The Art of Swimming Made Safe and Easy* (London, c.1830), 5.
- ¹⁶ Thomas Holcroft, *The Adventures of Hugh Trevor*, ed. Seamus Deane (Oxford, 1973), 17.
- ¹⁷ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, ed. Morton D. Paley (Oxford, 1994), 442-3.
- ¹⁸ Charles Sprawson, *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero* (London, 1992), 32, 134.
- ¹⁹ Coleridge to Robert Southey, 11 August 1801, *CLSTC*, ii. 751.
- ²⁰ See Allan Clayson, 'Coleridge's Holidays at Ramsgate', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series 16 (2000), 15-23.
- ²¹ Coleridge to James Gillman, c.19 August 1819, *CLSTC*, iv. 946; Coleridge to James Gillman, 31 October 1821, *CLSTC*, v. 185.
- ²² *Poetical Works* (henceforth *PW*), ed. J. C. C. Mays, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 16, 3 vols in 6 parts (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), I. ii.

658, lines 1-4. Subsequent line references will be incorporated parenthetically in the text.

²³ *Manfred*, II. ii. 65-9. All quotations from Byron's poetry are from *Byron*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, Oxford Authors (Oxford, 1986). Subsequent references will be incorporated parenthetically in the text.

²⁴ Byron to Francis Hodgson, 4 July 1810, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols (London, 1973-94), i. 253.

²⁵ See Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London, 2002), 430-1.

²⁶ Sprawson, *Haunts*, 102.

²⁷ *PW*, I. i. 352-3, lines 37-44.

²⁸ *PW*, I. i. 455, lines 34-43.

²⁹ 'Swimming across the Hellespont: Letter from the Right Honourable Lord Byron to Mr Murray', *The London Magazine*, 3 (April 1821), 363-5, 364.

³⁰ Keats to Tom Keats, 17-21 July 1818, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford, 1970), 130.

³¹ Nicholas Roe, *John Keats* (New Haven and London, 2012), 239.

³² *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London, 1978), 83, lines 113-15. All references to Keats's poetry are to this edition; subsequent line references will be incorporated in the main text.

³³ Keats to Taylor and Hessey, 16 May 1817, *Letters*, 16.

³⁴ Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron: Noted during a Residence with his Lordship at Pisa, in the Years 1821 and 1822* (London, 1824), 137, 139.

³⁵ Qtd in Parr, *Story of Swimming*, 172.

³⁶ John Cheever, 'The Swimmer', in *Collected Stories and Other Writings* (New York, 2009), 726-37, 727.

³⁷ Roger Deakin, *Waterlog: A Swimmer's Journey through Britain* (London, 1999), 3-4.