Affecting Retreats and Academic Follies

The Romantic-Period College in Poets' Spheres

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For much of the twentieth century, the history of English literature in universities was relatively poorly accounted for. Introducing his scrupulous monograph *Institutionalizing English Literature* in 1992, Franklin E. Court opined that 'informative studies on the history of the discipline remain scarce.'[1] Although he noted important predecessor tomes like D. J. Palmer's *The Rise of English Studies* (1965) and Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature* (1987), he was concerned that without a good record of its history, English literary studies might enter the future unaware 'of the diversity informing its own past.'[2] Fortunately, while much still remains to be done, the origins and early ideological preconceptions of university English have now been traced rather more fully. Studies joining Court's include wide-scope projects, such as Robert Crawford's edited collection *The Scottish Invention of English Literature* (1998) and Ted Underwood's *Why Literary Periods Mattered* (2013), alongside more focused case studies, like Maximiliaan van Woudenberg's *Coleridge and Cosmopolitan Intellectualism: The Legacy of the German University* (2018) and my own work tracing literary reading at the University of St Andrews using its library's extensive surviving borrowing records.[3] The larger constellation of research in which these studies participate has made it clear that while English Literature as a formal curricular stalwart was more of a Victorian innovation than a Romantic one, university communities were nevertheless deeply engaged with literary works during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Students and professors employed poems, plays, novels and *belles lettres* for pragmatic, ideological and more idiosyncratic purposes that played major roles in creating the physical and cognitive cultural spaces within which such works were placed and valued.

There remains a great deal more to say about literature in universities, but, in this essay, I propose to take a complementary tack, filling in a different part of the picture regarding the interactions between literary writing and higher education. Rather than looking at how Romantic-period universities represented literature, I propose to examine how Romantic-period literature represented universities. In doing so, I will draw out the social, intellectual and affective affordances of universities and colleges during a time in which their traditional roles were gradually being challenged and reconfigured. While universities have done a great deal to modify how people have thought about literature, literature

has also had an outsize role in determining how people feel about universities. Exploring the emotions universities evoke in literature can help us understand the inertia of institutional conservatism, the ways in which complacency has been challenged and the volatile balance between elitist individualism and socially oriented collectivism in real and imagined college situations.

It would have been interesting to conduct this analysis using fiction as the primary case study, but Romantic-period equivalents of the modern campus novel are thin on the ground. Early nineteenth-century novels sometimes use universities as episodes; the most famous example is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), in which Victor imprudently fails to 'form [his] own friends, and be [his] own protector' at the University of Ingolstadt.[4] However, when Romantic-period fictional characters possess university connections, we commonly join them either after university (as, for example, in Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee*, 1812, in which the protagonist, Lord Colambre, begins as 'a fine scholar, fresh from Cambridge') or out of it (as with the lascivious spendthrift 'Bob Logic, the Oxonian' in Pierce Egan's *Life in London*, 1821).[5] There is, however, a considerable and rather more coherent body of poetry that focuses on university experiences. A high proportion of the male Romantic-period poets who are now considered canonical benefited (although in their own minds often rather ambivalently) from university educations and set down their thoughts in verse, albeit often in sections of larger works or in more desultory pieces. This essay will reflect on these representations, but will place them in the context of a wider field of university-focused poetry, including works by American writers, once-famous poets who have now slipped out of favour, and female and working-class writers who were barred from directly accessing higher education. Considering such works will allow us to trace the dominant traditions of university representation that much canonical Romantic writing reacted against while also examining a wider range of caveats and objections than can be found by simply examining the most obvious sources. In preparing this essay, I drew in part on my pre-existing knowledge, but I also examined every poem in the *Literature Online* collection published between 1750 and 1850 that includes the words 'university', 'college' or 'academy'.[6] In addition, I conducted supplementary searches using the Google Books collection and the Internet Archive.[7] Through doing this, I was able to synthesise an account of poetic responses to universities which, while not wholly comprehensive, is able to differentiate between common tropes and more particular effusions in order properly to credit innovation while tracing significant continuities across the Romantic century and beyond.

Forms of Privilege in the Poetical University

In his 1852 treatise *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman asserts confidently that a university should be 'a place of *teaching* universal *knowledge*'.[8] However, he quickly moves on to imagine an objection to his ideal: that he has 'servilely followed the English idea of a University, to the disparagement of that Knowledge which I profess to be so strenuously upholding', because

an 'academical system' formed on his model could be construed as resulting 'in the production of that antiquated variety of human nature and remnant of feudalism [...] called "a gentleman"'.[9] Newman's raising this spectre reflects back on a key role played by institutions of higher education in previous centuries, and one that they have continued to play subsequently, albeit with variations of degree. While modern universities are usually most comfortable representing themselves as democratic sites for imparting specialised knowledge, these representations are partly designed to elide the manners in which they regulate and enforce systems of social privilege. There is a tension at the heart of the idea of the university between its producing people suited for particular social roles—Newman's graduate could go on to become 'a lawyer, or a pleader, or an orator, or a statesman, or a physician, or a good landlord, or a man of business, or a soldier, or an engineer, or a chemist, or a geologist, or an antiquarian'—and the sense that a university education provides a superior ability to access all these possibilities, allowing the graduate, in Newman's words, to take on 'any one of the sciences or callings I have referred to, of any other for which he has a taste or special talent, with an ease, a grace, a versatility, and a success, to which another is a stranger'.[10] While education in general slowly came to be seen as a universal good during the nineteenth century, higher education has traditionally been and often remains more exclusive in its purporting to validate genuine excellence, producing individuals who are both generally and specifically competent. This has mandated a complex series of tensions in the ways it has been presented.

Debates about the nature of universities and the kinds of privilege they mediated played out in a range of different manners in the poetry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, although, for reasons in part sociocultural and in part compositional, poets tended to use the convenient two syllables of 'college', rather than using the unwieldy five-syllable 'university'. Poetry, as a relatively privileged discourse itself, played an important role in modelling the university as a site occupied by exceptional individuals, although university poets' exceptional characters were often defined in ways that came at 'universal knowledge' from angles that Newman might have considered rather peculiar. Socially privileged eighteenth-century poets employed two principal modes for representing universities: nostalgia-infused portrayals of affective retreats and comic representations of scholarly foibles; the latter might be further subdivided into the playful and the satirical. However, these traditions often crossed over and hybridised with each other and with other forms. There were also more directly resistant strains in poetry, particularly in verse by women, which sought to pop the pretty bubbles within which universities' proponents sought to set them. Such representations contended that the idealised views promoted by graduates failed to reflect the real nature of academically shaped subjectivities.

Before moving on to specific poems, it will first be useful to establish precisely what constituted the higher education system as represented in Anglophone poetry of this period. Discussions of universities have often been dominated by two English institutions, Oxford and Cambridge, which were cradles for the

social elite and the established church. A considerable proportion of the people later anthologised as the leading poets of their age were associated to a greater or lesser extent with one of these universities, including Samuel Johnson, Thomas Gray, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, Lord Byron and (in a more combative manner) Percy Shelley. However, Cambridge and Oxford were not the only games in town. By the mid-eighteenth century, the four ancient universities in Scotland had been galvanised by the intellectual ferment now characterised as the Scottish Enlightenment, ensuring that their curricula were in many respects more progressive than their English contemporaries, driving developments in new disciplines and professional specialisations.[11] The Scottish universities graduated a number of distinguished poets of their own, including Robert Fergusson, Walter Scott and Thomas Campbell. In Ireland, Trinity College Dublin (the *alma mater* of Thomas Dermody and Thomas Moore) was also well established. In England, those who were not prepared to sign the Thirty-Nine Articles could pursue higher learning in the Dissenting Academies, of which Warrington has become retrospectively the leading light, in part due the reputations of teachers like Joseph Priestley, John Aikin, William Enfield and Gilbert Wakefield and in part due to the poetic advocacy of Anna Laetitia Aikin (later Barbauld). British students could undertake educations at European institutions; Leiden and Göttingen were particularly prized destinations, but wider travels were not uncommon. As I will go on to discuss, North America had its own colleges (influenced heavily by the Scottish model) and developed its own related poetic tradition that engaged with them. As the nineteenth century dawned, a number of further options became available, including the Andersonian Institute in Glasgow, founded in 1796 to promote 'useful learning'; new mechanics' institutes, which began to spread from the early 1820s; and the University of London, in large part the brainchild of Thomas Campbell, also founded during the 1820s. Alternative university environments through which Oxbridge's elegiac authority could be challenged thus became increasingly available in both actual and conceptual terms.

Nevertheless, the old English universities inevitably loomed large in poetic imaginations, reflecting their alignment with the dominant classes who were best positioned to benefit from expressing themselves in verse. Oxbridge's hegemony was often propagated through duelling forms, such as when the Cambridge poet William Mason's 'Isis: An Elegy' (written in 1748) was directly answered by the quintessential Oxford poet, Thomas Warton, in 'The Triumph of Isis' (1749). While opposed in their political characterisations of Oxford, processes of mutual recognition in these poems colluded in siting the universities as locations of uncommon creativity, affect and authority. Lines of Oxbridge poets created powerful sequences of associations that modelled a student experience based on the refinement of a retired, elite subjectivity. Under the influence of the English university towns and classical pastoral, such poems were often both formally conservative and peculiarly bucolic, depicting colleges as established spaces for

clever innocence. This trend can be typified using William Mason's 1753 elegy 'To a Young Nobleman Leaving the University':

> Ere yet, ingenuous Youth, thy steps retire
> From Cam's smooth margin, and the peaceful vale,
> Where Science call'd thee to her studious quire,
> And met thee musing in her cloisters pale;
> Oh! let thy friend (and may he boast the name)
> Breathe from his artless reed one parting lay;
> A lay like this thy early virtues claim,
> And this let voluntary friendship pay.
> Yet, know, the time arrives, the dangerous time,
> When all those Virtues, opening now so fair,
> Transplanted to the world's tempestuous clime,
> Must learn each Passion's boist'rous breath to bear. (ll. 1–12)[12]

This regular, balanced opening includes many of the commonplaces found in poetical portrayals of the eighteenth-century university. It represents its aristocratic addressee as having occupied a place of retreat from the bustle of society at large: the university is an Eden from which he must now go forth into the fallen world. Study is peculiarly abstracted in this space, with learned interactions being modelled not in terms of an institutional bureaucracy or straightforward pedagogical exchanges, but rather as occurring between the student and the natural environment, personified Science and the architectural fabric of the institution. A strong affective relationship between individuals is evoked, but this is not explicitly bound up in educational processes, instead comprising a sensitive masculine friendship between the poet and the poem's subject. Directly didactic elements appear later in the poem, as Mason goes on to discuss the rightness of his dropping his addressee's acquaintance should his adult life not bear out the promise of his youth, while holding out hope that his friend will 'Be, what the purest Muse would wish to sing'.[13] Nevertheless, learning occupies a subservient position in Mason's university, with the nobleman's aristocratic authority shaped not so much by his education as by his environment, connections and inherent virtues. Rather than being a storehouse of knowledge or an imparter of skills, the university is figured as a crucible for privileged kinds of relations. These are framed affectively, but are implicitly tied up with the discerning exercise of power.

Masking and exalting universities as lazy Edens with benign but potent affective potential was a common strategy in eighteenth-century verse. A lighter version of the trope can be observed in John Duncombe's *An Evening Contemplation in a College* (1753), a gentle parody of the style and subjects of another Cambridge poet, Thomas Gray:

> The Curfew tolls the hour of closing gates,
> With jarring sound the porter turns the key,
> Then in his dreary mansion slumb'ring waits,
> And slowly, sternly quits it—tho' for me.

Now shine the spires beneath the paly moon,
And thro' the cloyster Peace and Silence reign,
Save where some fidler scrapes a drowsy tune,
Or copious bowls inspire a jovial strain:

Save that in yonder cobweb-mantled room,
Where lies a student in profound repose
Oppress'd with ale, wide-echos thro' the gloom
The droning music of his vocal nose. (ll. 1–12)[14]

Duncombe's adroit parody shares with much poetry about the English universities an interest in modelling their sleepiness as a kind of positive dullness, creating a cocooned environment within which the boisterous sociability of the students can be cradled and nurtured while the fellows enjoy the pleasures of the 'lethargic chair' (l. 109).[15] Again, there is a strong emphasis on homosociality: Duncome stresses that in the college environment 'the plagues of matrimonial life' (l. 24) are unfelt, with the fellows being '[c]ontent and happy in a single life' (l. 75).[16] The poem occasionally shades into a comic treatment of universities as sites of ineffectual folly, but Duncombe's satire is made plangent both through his own choices of language and through the strong echoes of the 'Elegy' that he weaves in, with retirement and lack of recognition serving as peculiarly ennobling prospects when conceived as echoes of Gray's mute inglorious Miltons and of those who 'Far from the madding Crowd's ignoble Strife' keep 'the noiseless Tenor of their Way' (ll. 73, 76).[17] By contrast with the chaos of the wider world, the university seems like a somnambulant sanctuary, where essentially innocent inhabitants are licensed to indulge in excesses of leisure.

A more extended treatment of the nostalgic and affective qualities of the English universities can be found in the heroic couplets of Richard Polwhele's 1785 'Epistle to a College-Friend'. Polwhele is now most famous for his attacks on Mary Wollstonecraft in *The Unsex'd Females* (1798), but he was a prolific author in numerous genres and frequently dwelt on his university experiences in writings such as his sonnets to his acquaintances and the comic *Follies of Oxford* (1785). His 'Epistle' begins far from the 'letter'd Groves' (l. 17) that he shared with his compatriot, but plunges quickly into the feelings evoked by strong memories of his halcyon college days:

'Tis then, my vernal Ardors kindling fast,
I hover o'er the Phantom of the past;
And cry: 'how little were they dash'd with Woe—
The Days, when *Euclid* was our only Foe!
Tho' doom'd to stretch Attention on the Rack
That twists the Cranium of the plodding Pack,
We found our mathematic Toils repaid
By the sweet Contrast of the classic Shade;
There met, with all the Enthusiast's glowing Rage,
The trophied Chiefs of many a former Age;

Mus'd o'er the historic Tales that simply tell
How Roman Glory rose, how Athens fell;
And caught each Accent of the Critic's Tongue
That gave new Lustre to Mæonian Song!' (ll. 30–44)[18]

While the formal requirements of mathematical studies are set against the joys of a shared engagement with Greece and Rome in this passage, both subjects are assessed principally in terms of their affect. Examining Euclid is a dubiously worthy toil, while history and the classics provide a kind of transport into a grove-like antiquity, enhanced by sociable converse with the dead. In Polwhele's figuration, university education becomes a form of privileged access to states of mind dependent in part on effort, but also on the generous provision of the time and space necessary to make that effort. In his poem, the privilege of mixing with the best and brightest extends back into the past, allowing students' sensibilities to be converted into elite forms through careful attention to nuance.

However, Polwhele also makes clear that the business of learning was one of the lesser affective attractions of Oxford and its environs:

How often have we climb'd the breezy Mound,
And gaz'd upon the Hamlet's distant Bound;
And, sauntering, criticis'd the pastoral Notes
Of Peasants whistling near their wattled Cotes;
O'erleap'd the Stream, or trod the mossy Plank
That trembled to the quaking Willow-Bank;
And reach'd the forest-Skirts, that struck the Sight
A Mass of Shadow and of yellow Light—
That to pale Crimson, as the Sunbeams sunk,
Resign'd the Brightness of the burnish'd Trunk;
When the Night-Warbler's melancholy Lay
Stealing in liquid Stillness on the Day
'Till each cool Cloud had lost its lilac Hue,
Our Sympathies to every Quaver drew;
And the retiring Landskape seem'd to faint
Into such Shade as MELCHIER lov'd to paint,
'Till, curtain'd all, we heard, slow pacing Home,
The far-off Echoes of the mighty *Tom*! (ll. 65–82)[19]

Scenes like this depend on the university as a source of validation and legitimation for the protagonists' presence and as a form of contrast for the picturesque rural idyll. The juxtaposition of the university and the natural environment allows the poet the demonstrate both delineated knowledge and fine feelings. These produce a kind of balanced interaction that models the form that Newman hoped to see outmoded: the superior consciousness of the gentleman, a man with the leisure to saunter and the assumed right to criticise those positioned as his inferiors.

Polwhele goes on to paint other scenes focused around sociability and nature, including rowing on the rivers, reading Joseph Addison's *Cato* and visiting ruins before he reaches the form's standard turn:

> too soon the dear delusive Dream
> Fled, with the golden Groves of Academe!
> Too soon, in Scenes of vulgar Life, I found
> The Hoarfrost scatter'd by Indifference round[.] (ll. 186–90)[20]

This moment is explicitly elegiac, both mourning and exalting in a time of youth that has passed. However, in the context of a poem in which this time is recalled and reconstituted, it makes a powerful claim for the ongoing currency of a university education, which remains potent as an imaginative resource and a mode of connection. Polwhele may no longer be at university, but he will always have been there, and even in an indifferent locality, this remains a source of comfort and a mark of distinction.

Even those poems that treated the universities as subjects for comedy or parody often mounted genuine defences of the sociable rights of students to self-fashion and constitute affective communities. The Irish poet Thomas Dermody's Burnsian 'Ode to the Collegians' (1792) provides a good example:

> SQUARECAPS, and round, all honest boys,
> May Tutors ne'er cry down your joys,
> Or study, which bright Jest destroys,
> Teaze ye, when mellow!
> Ne SATAN, come, with sawcer eyes,
> In shape of Fellow!
>
> No Porter, with obstrep'rous summons,
> Startle your nap, with early drummings;
> Be yours, short lectures, and long Commons,
> To gar you cheary!
> For, in this life, whatever come on's,
> Let's e'en be merry,
>
> Let all your chamber-girls be pretty,
> Your chums, facete, and free, and witty;
> Your Masters, not inclin'd to fret ye,
> Wi' too much knowledge;
> And then, mon dieu! old Dublin City,
> May boast her College![21]

Dermody's lively poem buys in fully to the idea that sociability between students is the most important pleasure of university life. While the poem seems at times facetious, it leans into performativity to try and carry its claim for the preeminent value of the student experience in a college education. The longer tradition behind Dermody's defence of students' gentlemanly prerogatives indicates that this would have been recognised as an exaggerated but not unreasonable position. If,

as other poems suggest, the most important advantages of being in a university environment were developing connections and building up affective resources, then Dermody's modified curriculum seems in many respects a pragmatic one, maximising the productive possibilities of university freedoms.

The elegiac manner of presenting the university as a place of leisured and privileged sociality persisted well into the nineteenth century in both straightforward and comic variations, although later poems could be more obviously performative and more self-reflexive than earlier verses on the same themes. In his 1842 poem 'The Beginning of Term', from *The Styrian Lake*, Frederick William Faber bemoaned his absence from Oxford in what seems, by contrast with Mason and Polwhele, to begin as an austere, abbreviated tetrameter, opening out into longer lines only when the objects of the poet's desires are directly evoked:

> Dear Oxford! far in hollow hills,
> And kept awake by flooded rills,
> This night I hear the many feet
> That pace thy steeple-shadowed street,
> The tide of youth in merry going
> Beneath the college windows flowing:
> And strange, most strange it seems to me
> At such an hour far off to be.
> I miss the evening thronged with greeting,
> The tumult of the autumnal meeting,
> When every face is fresh of hue,
> As though its life began anew. (ll. 1–12)[22]

Faber's rather conservative figuration would seem to indicate that little had changed in the dominant poetic version of Oxford, which remained a place of inspiring sociality with which the rest of the world struck a necessarily unfavourable contrast. Exalting the qualities of university existence in this fashion had a transatlantic reach, as demonstrated by 'College Lyfe' (1844), a sprightly pastiche of Middle English poetry by the American writer and artist Christopher Pearse Cranch, an associate of the transcendentalist circle around Ralph Waldo Emerson and the creator of the wonderful transcendent eyeball caricatures. Cranch's poem closes:

> O College Lyfe! though manye a payne, I ween,
> Each lazie youthe must needs have oft yfelte,
> Still hast thou pleasaunce rare which few have seen
> Of them who ne'er at lernynge's shryne have knelt.
> Thou art the sweetest lyfe was ever dealte
> To man, from happie starres in heaven that ben;
> Starres, ever bryghte! sweet starres that thus do melt
> With your softe rayes the destynies of men,
> How lyttel of your wondrous influence do we ken![23]

As in Duncombe's poem, the pastiche elements here mark the poet as a willing recipient of the traditions universities sought to uphold in terms both of learn-

ing and of characterising the academic environment as a uniquely enriching one. The university binds together those who have been part of it with bonds of feeling that validate and in part comprise their claims to privileged kinds of perception denied to those who have not been permitted access.

Resisting and Redefining the College Idyll

However, not every poet was prepared to collude with this vision of university as a transcendental and transformative experience of refinement. While the tradition lingered on into the Victorian period and after, it came under increasing pressure from a range of different directions, including alternative models, nascent Romanticism and accounts by women, who were often less than impressed with the homosocial accounts of affect and privilege pushed by their male contemporaries. Mary Alcock, in a poem with almost the same name as Cranch's—'A College Life' (1799)—took a rather less sanguine view:

> A COLLEGE life! I scorn the odious phrase;
> So dull a theme shall ne'er employ my lays:
> A life indeed! 'twere fitter stil'd a death,
> Unless 'tis life merely to draw your breath;
> By fusty walls coop'd up, as in a pen,
> 'Mongst fusty books, and still more fusty men.
> Can this be life, by gothic rules compell'd
> To part from liberty, or be expell'd?[24]

This is not quite as straightforward an objection as it might seem, because at the end of the poem it is revealed that these words are spoken by an overprivileged Grand Tourist, Florio, whose heroic couplets are dismissed as containing 'much noise and little matter' and likened to the ways that 'puppies yelp, and monkies chatter.'[25] However, the later undercutting does not entirely displace the verve of Alcock's earlier dismissal of academic dullness, and the denigration of Florio connotes a dim view of those who might realistically expect to attend university. In a later rollicking poem, Joanna Baillie expresses a similar scepticism about the ability of a college life to inculcate either scholarly habits or finer feelings:

> And Andrew, wha's Granny is yearning
> To see him a clerical blade,
> Was sent to the college for learning,
> And cam' back a coof as he gaed.[26]

Verse like Alcock's and Baillie's undercuts the claims that characterised university poetry through humour and through modelling keen and pragmatic observations regarding character, thereby denying that a privileged perspective in terms of insight and feeling was the inevitable consequence of a university education.

Such parries were among a number of strategies employed by female poets for challenging the claims to superiority made in men's accounts of the student experience. In 1773, the first published African-American female poet, Phillis Wheatley, offered advice to the young gentlemen of Harvard:

Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights
Above, to traverse the ethereal space,
And mark the systems of revolving worlds. (ll. 7–9)[27]

However, while acknowledging that universities were spaces licensed for the pursuit of elevated thought, Wheatley moves on to invoke a still higher authority in order to impart a moral lesson:

Improve your privileges while they stay,
Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.
Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard;
Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg. (ll. 21–26)[28]

These echoing lines of Miltonic blank verse implicitly rebuke the veneration of classical and secular forms and the exaltation of leisure in other university-focused poetry. They recognise student privilege, but assert a divine order within which this privilege should be cautiously and respectfully exercised. Evoking the sublimity of God trumps celestial knowledge and worldly affections, positioning the students and the poet on equal terms before the Almighty, with the poet implicitly advantaged through her recognising this.

Later female poets employed a related strategy by setting complacent university authority against the vindicated power of the individual genius. Lydia Howard Sigourney's 'Columbus before the University of Salamanca' (1834) is clearly behind the explorer, rather than the institution:

St. Stephen's cloistered hall was proud
In learning's pomp that day,
For there a robed and stately crowd
Pressed on in long array.
A mariner with simple chart
Confronts that conclave high,
While strong ambition stirs his heart,
And burning thoughts of wonder part
From lip and sparkling eye.[29]

In the brief, urgent lines of Sigourney's poem, Columbus's Romantic resistance to authority and his visionary consciousness eclipse the elegiac and picturesque modes commonly employed when depicting universities, activating a sublime ambition that transcends the bonds of filial affection and the evocations of establishment privilege to which college poetry often had recourse.

William Wordsworth took a cognate if less directly oppositional approach in his account of his university career in the third books of *The Prelude* (1805). While he describes his initial arrival in Cambridge as a wondrous experience, leaving him wandering 'Delighted through the motley spectacle' (l. 31), he progresses relatively rapidly to recording 'A feeling that I was not for that hour, | Nor for that place' (ll. 81–82).[30] In the earlier parts of the book, he allows that the university environment engenders certain joys, but for the purposes of his

own self-fashioning, he needs to claim as an individual asset the expanded perspective that had been presented as the general purview of gentlemanly students by previous poets. To achieve this, he works in barbs at Cambridge's course of study, at the naked ambition of his contemporaries and at the dulling effects of leisurely company:

> I did not love,
> Judging not ill perhaps, the timid course
> Of our scholastic studies; could have wished
> To see the river flow with ampler range
> And freer pace; but more, far more, I grieved
> To see displayed among an eager few,
> Who in the field of contest persevered,
> Passions unworthy of youth's generous heart
> And mounting spirit, pitiably repaid,
> When so disturbed, whatever palms are won.
> From these I turned to travel with the shoal
> Of more unthinking natures, easy minds
> And pillowy; yet not wanting love that makes
> The day pass lightly on, when foresight sleeps,
> And wisdom and the pledges interchanged
> With our own inner being are forgot. (III, ll. 493–508)[31]

This passage echoes tropes employed in earlier university poems, but interprets them very differently. While Polwhele found deep communion with the past in elements of the university curriculum, Wordsworth finds his course of studies narrow and shallow. While Duncombe exalts the laziness of the college environment and Dermody celebrates student conviviality, Wordsworth presents these as betrayals of a deeper human potential. Wordsworth also unveils a less convivial side of university life, where students compete directly with each other for scholarly laurels that might lead to positions, fame and patronage. As the book progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that for Wordsworth, while a nascent Romantic might go to university, this can at best be a phase in their development. When he wanders out of town, it is not in company, but to search for 'independent solaces' (l. 101) and 'universal things' (l. 106).[32] In his formulation, these can be found not in books, but in experiences of the natural world that cannot fully be reconciled with university affability, diverting as the latter might sometimes be.

Other poets now classed as canonical Romantics were also doubtful about the ultimate value of their university experiences. Byron discusses his education in several poems in *Hours of Idleness* (1807), and his accounts display a considerable degree of cynicism about his contemporaries. His Popean 'Thoughts Suggested by a College Examination' presents a case in point:

> The sons of science these, who thus repaid,
> Linger in ease in Granta's sluggish shade;
> Where on Cam's sedgy banks supine they lie,

Unknown—unhonour'd live—unwept for die:
Dull as the pictures which adorn their halls,
They think all learning fix'd within their walls:
In manners rude, in foolish forms precise,
All modern arts affecting to despise;
Yet prizing BENTLEY'S, BRUNCK'S, or PORSON'S note,
More than the verse on which the critic wrote:
Vain as their honours, heavy as their ale,
Sad as their wit, and tedious as their tale;
To friendship dead, though not untaught to feel
When Self and Church demand a bigot zeal.
With eager haste they court the Lord of power,
Whether 'tis PITT or P–TTY rules the hour;
To him, with suppliant smiles, they bend the head,
While distant mitres to their eyes are spread.[33]

There is a certain implicit unpleasantness here in the rich aristocrat sneering at those struggling to better their positions in society, but there is also a clear-eyed refusal to accede to the polite maskings often employed when addressing university sociability. Rather than seeing students and fellows as partaking in leisured thought, Byron figures them variously as drowsy, deadened and possessed by undiscriminating ambition. Instead of delineating a sphere of privilege, Byron paints Cambridge as an enervating trap from which the principal means of escape mandates an abandonment of principles, rather than the development of emotional sensitivity and intelligence. While earlier poets often sought to exalt opportunities for forging meaningful relationships, downplaying the institutionality of universities, Byron sees his college as a blinkered environment that fosters presumptuous posturing, small-minded competition and interpersonal bitterness.

Byron also expresses scepticism about the genuine strength and persistence of the personal and mental connections other poets ascribed to college environments. Addressing his protagonist's home schooling in *Don Juan* (1819–1824), he deliberately garbles the kinds of affective claims usually made regarding a college education:

[...] I'd send him out betimes to college,
For there it was I pick'd up my own knowledge

For there one learns—'tis not for me to boast,
Though I acquired—but I pass over *that*,
As well as all the Greek I since have lost:
I say that there's the place—but '*Verbum sat*.'
I think I pick'd up too, as well as most,
Knowledge of matters—but no matter *what*—
I never married—but, I think, I know
That sons should not be educated so.[34]

Byron is probably thinking here of public school, rather than university, but there was a strong continuity between these kinds of institution in terms of their conceptual figuration, so his comments might reasonably be read in conversation with works like Polwhele's. Rather than employing memories pretending to crystalline clarity, Byron's narrator discusses his education through elisions and evocations of its limitations. The gentlemanly prerogative of discretion is invoked here, but in manner that implies that what is concealed might be underwhelming, or even potentially scandalous. A college education is presented as a better alternative to idiosyncratic systems, and Byron still upholds a sense that it might provide for a student's socialisation, but in his eyes, it is a relatively practical proposition that will lead to modest worldly gains, rather than a retreat into a life-shaping paradise.

One of the period's most psychologically perceptive critiques of the tendency to exalt the experience of higher education is advanced by George Crabbe in the final letter of his 1810 poem *The Borough*:

> At College place a youth, who means to raise
> His state by merit and his name by praise;
> Still much he hazards; there is serious strife
> In the contentions of a scholar's life:
> Not all the mind's attention, care, distress,
> Nor diligence itself, ensure success:
> His jealous heart a rival's powers may dread,
> Till its strong feelings have confused his head,
> And, after days and months, nay, years of pain,
> He finds just lost the object he would gain.
>
> But grant him this and all such life can give,
> For other prospects he begins to live;
> Begins to feel that man was form'd to look
> And long for other objects than a book:
> In his mind's eye his house and glebe he sees,
> And farms and talks with farmers at his ease;
> And time is lost, till fortune sends him forth
> To a rude world unconscious of his worth;
> There in some petty parish to reside,
> The college-boast, then turn'd the village guide:
> And though awhile his flock and dairy please,
> He soon reverts to former joys and ease,
> Glad when a friend shall come to break his rest,
> And speak of all the pleasures they possess'd,
> Of masters, fellows, tutors, all with whom
> They shared those pleasures, never more to come;
> Till both conceive the times by bliss endear'd,
> Which once so dismal and so dull appear'd. (ll. 344–71)[35]

In this passage, Crabbe claims explicitly that the kinds of rose-tinted experiences recounted in poems like Polwhele's are retrospective delusions. For him, the university environment is more likely to provoke contestation and mental anguish. While universities seem to hold out the promise of advancement based on merit, Crabbe is suspicious of these claims, believing that academic forms of preferment are capricious and shaped by subjective judgements and enmities. For Crabbe, convinced that 'the Mind's own Feelings give the Joy' of study, the distracting and competitive environment of the university is likely to disappoint most people until they can depart from it.[36] From a safe distance, they can use the name of their institution as a mark of distinction while reconfiguring their memories to build the educations they would like to have had, through doing so perpetuating a false idea of universities' virtues. In Crabbe's view, having been at university might potentially serve to advance one socially, but the process of being there is unlikely to prove conducive to genuine advancement in terms of knowledge. His version of the university thus seeks to unmask earlier versions as wishful thinking, showing how the glories of college are often constructed retrospectively by graduates for their mutual advantage.

Accounts of other types of institutions of higher education often rebuked the transcendental, socially inflected view commonly propagated regarding Oxford and Cambridge, making more modest but also more grounded and specific claims that present an alternative vision of a university's purpose. While John Wilson's evocation of the University of Glasgow in his locodescriptive poem *The Clyde* (1764) paints a picture of a privileged space, the research activities that it describes are both more sublime and more directly pragmatic than the leisurely socialisation depicted by Duncombe and Polwhele:

> Blest they who nature's secret wonders scan,
> Which unprofaned she hides from vulgar man;
> Whose raptured minds, with piercing skill, can trace
> The circling fluids through their mazy race;
> See through what channels, nature upward heaves
> The nourishment of flowers, of fruits, and leaves;
> What strainers separate each; what wondrous art
> May due consistencies, and forms impart;
> The curious texture of the tubes survey,
> And from the pores see subtle odours play:
> How the firm bones their strength and grandeur lend,
> And vitals soft from injury defend;
> How principles, by nature prone to strife,
> Kindly conspire to the support of life:
> Impelled through all the complicated frame,
> How rapid fluids feed the vital flame:
> Whence on the face the glowing beauties rise,
> And all the soul beams genuine from the eyes.
>
> (Part 2, ll. 163–80)[37]

In language reminiscent of verse on the Dissenting academies, Wilson focuses his examination of the university on the disciplines taught, rather than on the experience of being a student, noting severely that at Glasgow, 'sage learning claims the student's care' (l. 197).[38] Rather than an individuated experience, the university is evoked as a group of specialists working towards both individual and collective improvement. In a rather less sublime vein, John Mayne—not a university student, although closely associated with the university through his work with the Foulis Press—presented a similarly dynamic picture in his poem *Glasgow*, first circulated in 1783:

> If ye've a knacky son or twa,
> To Glasgow College send them a';
> Wi' whilk, for gospel, or for law,
> Or classic lair
> Ye'll find few places here awa,
> That can compare!
>
> There ane may be for sma' propyne,
> Physician, Lawyer, or Divine;
> The gem, lang bury'd in the mine,
> Is polished here,
> Till a' its hidden beauties shine,
> And sparkle clear! (ll. 13–24)[39]

Wilson and Mayne both depict an institution that systematically generates knowledge and from which practical skills can be obtained (as Mayne mentions, for a reasonable fee). In Mayne's verses, there is also an egalitarian sense that the university can bring out the intrinsic value in unlikely or neglected materials. In these poems, the University of Glasgow is a place of serious work. Rather than promising leisured access to privilege, it holds out the prospect of empirical knowledge and directed professional training.

While Wilson and Mayne saw the advancement of Enlightenment and the professions as being a major positive contribution made by Scottish universities, some of the most oppositional poetry of the Romantic period constructed these functions in deeply negative manners. In *Jerusalem* (1804–1820), William Blake sees universities as complicit in processes of mechanisation that threaten to destroy creativity and enslave minds:

> I turn my eyes to the Schools & Universities of Europe
> And there behold the Loom of Locke whose Woof rages dire
> Washd by the Water-wheels of Newton. black the cloth
> In heavy wreathes folds over every nation; cruel Works
> Of many Wheels I view, wheel without wheel, with cogs
> tyrannic
> Moving by compulsion each other: not as those in Eden: which
> Wheel within Wheel in freedom revolve in harmony & peace.[40]

In some ways, Blake's perspective is rather peculiar. Few other commentators ascribed to universities the kind of overt ideological power that his machine metaphors imply. While other poets saw universities as practical providers, potential paradises or as rather silly and ineffectual, Blake positions them seriously as part of a fallen world, engaged in tasks of rationalisation and homogenisation, serving—in Louis Althusser's terms—as an important part of the ideological state apparatus.[41] While few contemporaries were as intensely opposed to the idea of systematisation as Blake was, he was somewhat ahead of his time in evoking this discourse in the context of higher education. In the decade after *Jerusalem* was completed, the proliferation of new establishments triggered much soul-searching about the potential consequences of 'The March of Intellect'. W. T. Moncrieff, in an 1830 poem of that name, approached the issue principally as a comic prospect, although not without some level of underlying anxiety creeping through in his periodising:

> We have had England's olden days,
> When fought and bled her sons;
> We too have had her golden days,
> These are her learned ones.
> [...]
> Such is the general thirst for knowledge,
> So little is its scarcity;
> Soon Tooley Street will have its College
> St. Giles its University.[42]

Moncrieff pokes some gentle fun at the spread of erudition, but his account also encodes evidence of a serious urban challenge to the older ideal of the retired English university as a shaper of gentlemen. More functional and specialised kinds of education were developing as mechanics' institutes and other new institutions spread and as forms of knowledge became increasingly distinct from one another, complicating attempts to monopolise the field of intellectual endeavour. While elites could poke fun at increasing literacy, this did not prevent its narrowing the gap between the college-educated and the general populace. This led to an increasing suspicion of models of leisured edification, which could now be tarred with the brushes of amateurism and complacency. Such challenges mandated new rhetorics of higher education that took on some of the systematising properties that Blake deplored and which displayed a new awareness of the university's social responsibilities. The nineteenth-century university was scrutinised by far larger audiences than its eighteenth-century forbears, and this scrutiny and the sociocultural shifts behind it mandated some considerable rethinks.

Nevertheless, while the powerful ideal of the college-idyll faced some serious challenges from the 1820s on, it continued to linger, being both reinscribed and ironised in poetry and—increasingly—in popular prose writing. In Charles Lamb's essay 'Oxford in the Vacation' (1823), he establishes the attractiveness of the kinds of social performance possible in the university towns:

> I can here play the gentleman, enact the student. To such a one as myself, who has been defrauded in his young years of the sweet food of academic institution, nowhere is so pleasant, to while away a few idle weeks at, as one or other of the Universities. [...] I can rise at the chapel-bell, and dream that it rings for *me*. In moods of humility I can be a Sizar, or a Servitor. When the peacock vein rises, I strut a Gentleman Commoner. In graver moments, I proceed Master of Arts. Indeed I do not think I am much unlike that respectable character. I have seen your dim-eyed vergers, and bed-makers in spectacles, drop a bow or a curtsy, as I pass, wisely mistaking me for something of the sort.[43]

As in many of the Elia essays, Lamb merges gentle self-mockery with cogent critique. His essay is clear on the attractions of received forms of scholarly life, making it apparent that the leisured ideal evoked by eighteenth-century writers like Mason and Duncombe remained available as an attractive imaginative resource. However, Lamb, like many other Romantic-period critics, exposes this ideal as being essentially a performative one. The ease with which Lamb is able to slip into academic roles and the manners in which others collude with him through making their wise mistakes reveal that the rules of the game were widely known. The recognition of this game as a game shows that older authority claims were beginning to weaken. For the new periodical audiences of the 1820s who Lamb was addressing through the *London Magazine*, and the immense Victorian audiences who made his essay collections enduring bestsellers, the closed college remained potentially attractive as a temporary retreat or a literary ideal. However, the tropes of eighteenth-century college poetry were increasingly recognised as tropes and confined to discourses of elite nostalgia, rather than recognised as compelling evocations of higher education's social function.

Nevertheless, while their ironies and their problematic elisions had become increasingly apparent, the traditions of academic comedy and affective university self-fashioning endured long after many of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets who helped to develop them were forgotten. Twentieth-century writing produced a number of notable comic universities, such as Terry Pratchett's Unseen University and David Lodge's Rummidge, and the dreaming spires of Oxford were powerfully activated in works such as Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), which calls up a vanished idyll in manners deeply reminiscent of Polwhele, albeit employing some slightly later ideological and technological reference points:

> Oxford, in those days, was still a city of aquatint. In her spacious and quiet streets men walked and spoke as they had done in Newman's day; her autumnal mists, her grey springtime, and the rare glory of her summer days—such as that day—when the chestnut was in flower and the bells rang out high and clear over her gables and cupolas, exhaled the soft airs of centuries of youth. It was this

> cloistral hush which gave our laughter its resonance, and carried it still, joyously, over the intervening clamour.[44]

While Waugh's Oxford is framed as having passed away, the academic paradise was one that was always depicted as potentially fleeting, available principally as a brief window for the forging of lifelong interests and interpersonal obsessions. We might, perhaps, be uncomfortable with the idea of the university as a temporary residence that allows minds of superior sensibility to interact, but the affect of that ideal remains compelling as a literary resource. While Richard Papen's choice of college in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) embroils him in misfortune, we can see in the moment of his choosing the potent combination of snobbery and longing that this essay has sought to explore:

> Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont. Even the name had an austere Anglican cadence, to my ear at least, which yearned hopelessly for England [...] For a long time I looked at a picture of the building they called Commons. It was suffused with a weak academic light—different from Plano, different from anything I had ever known—a light that made me think of long hours in dusty libraries, and old books, and silence.[45]

While, as I have shown, this tradition has frequently been challenged, and with good cause, the vision of the university as a crucible for elite subjectivity continues to linger powerfully in Anglo-American culture. As Newman recognised, this is a curiously conservative position for institutions that pride themselves on the creation of new knowledge, but one that reflects higher education's status as both a formal, institutional process and a life stage charged with strong feelings both old and new. While they differed on the desirability and practicality of the prospect, Romantic-period poets almost universally acknowledged that the dream of the university was of a place where one might make oneself someone who mattered.

Notes

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6. *Literature Online* is a ProQuest resource containing over a third of a million full-text works of poetry, prose and drama; see <https://literature.proquest.com/>. The survey on which this essay was based was conducted in April and May 2018.
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Referring to this Article

M. Sangster. 'Affecting Retreats and Academic Follies: The Romantic-Period College in Poets' Spheres', *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780–1840*, 25 (Summer 2024) <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20015084>.

Date of acceptance: 16 March 2025.

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