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## **(Re)envisioning the Anti-Urban:**

### **Artistic responses in the *Walking with Wordsworth and Bashō* Exhibition**

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#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, we discuss the exhibition *Wordsworth and Bashō: Walking Poets* held at Dove Cottage in the Lake District, UK in 2014 in the wider context of Romantic anti-urbanism. The main aim of the exhibition was to compare the work of two famous poets in the context of the unique landscape of the Lake District and to explore our relationship to the natural world. In the text that follows, we show how these poets are linked through the agency of walking as well as the wider context of anti-urbanism and then discuss contemporary artistic responses to the poets. We firstly, outline the cultural importance of walking in both the UK and Japan. We then introduce the walking methods of both of the poets, Wordsworth and Bashō, demonstrating that their work was formally, and emotionally structured by their practices of walking. Next, we examine the ways in which walking informed the making of the artistic works in the exhibition itself and we conclude by reflecting further on walking and anti-urbanism more generally. We begin with a theoretical exploration of the practices of walking in the UK and Japan and the Romantic context of walking.

#### **Walking in the UK and Japan.**

Walking has been a central part of historical and contemporary artistic responses to and interventions within the human landscape (Collier, 2016). Walking has

also become an integral part of artistic methods and politicalised responses to changes in landscapes and how they are used. For example, Myers (2011, p. 183) has highlighted how narrative walking practices, “or modes of conversational activity set in motion by the conditions of wayfinding” offer a means of intervening in the politics of mobility. She discusses how the artwork “way from home” provided an “interventional methodology for eliciting and representing the transnational experiences, affects and significances of place for refugees and asylum seekers across the UK” (Myers, 2011: 183).

Walking is also a medium through which we can ‘expressively’ take direct action; walking as performativity agency – walking as action. In the UK, such ‘action’ has manifested itself variously and importantly across the twentieth century including the Jarrow March in 1936 (a walk that was undertaken again 60 years later by the artist Time Brennan) and the mass trespass of Kinder Scout in 1932. In both cases, the ‘walk’ was a means of direct action in the political, social and geographical landscape (Collier 2013).

So the reality is that the relationship between art, walking and the world is a complex one. The idea, the culture, of walking is (and has been) politically and socially value-laden. At various times it has been socially exclusive and yet (for instance) for Wordsworth and the romantics, walking and mobility became a weapon of resistance, a symbol of independence and self-determination. It embodied the free and radical mind (Collier 2013).; freed from the perceived tyrannies of urbanisation.. As Solnit (????) says, ‘travel had its rogue and rebel aspects – straying, going out of bounds, escaping’

This theme of anti-urbanism was a core feature of nineteenth century Romanticism which was central to the 'framing' of nature as a spiritual realm (Blanning, 2010). The urbanised working classes of the industrial revolution who were 'torn increasingly from its ancient roots in the soil by the industrial revolution' had good reason to walk away from the city to the countryside as they ... 'sought to recapture the humanity they had lost in the factories and mines' by walking in the hills and dales of the north of England. 'Unlike the literary figures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the working class could neither desert the towns to live in the countryside nor spend weeks walking through it. But that did not mean that they needed or appreciated it less', and it was out of this need that the early Ramblers' Clubs were formed, and, ultimately, the network of footpaths that crisscross the landscape of Britain (Collier 2013).

The Romantic Gaze constructed through romantic artists' portrayals of nature as a realm of the solitary and the spiritual became challenged by the presence of other leisure and tourism walkers such as the ramblers described above (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998; Whiting and Hannam, 2014). However, the natural realm so central to the Romantic ethic and constructed in romantic ideology as an authentic arena, separate and distinct from the emerging modern urban world, ironically, itself has become an object of consumption, and a space of occupation, by the embodiment of modern alienation, namely the tourist (Buzard, 1993; Stokes, 2012; Whiting and Hannam, 2014).

Furthermore, the irony of this was that the practices and artistic productions of many Romantic writers and poet's themselves became key inscriptions of new meanings of 'sublime' landscape and were distilled into the guide books of the emergent tourism industry (Urry, 2002). In this sense we can see the emergence of one particular strand of Romantic practice that of travel in sublime nature, being appropriated and transformed through cultural emulation and nascent consumer capitalism into a popular activity in the form of nature-based tourism (Whiting and Hannam, 2014).

In this context, the attraction of the Lake District landscape is complex. Experiences are, in part, the "product of a revolution in cultural values during (mainly) the second half of the eighteenth century, which transformed perceptions of the aesthetics of coastal as well as mountain scenery" (Walton, 2013, p.33). Prior to this time, most people had viewed the mountains as grim, frightening and inhospitable – places to avoid (Nicholson, 1997). Better transport links as well as changes in the cultural appreciation of areas such as the Lake District led to an increasing number of tourists being drawn to the Cumbrian Fells. The Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth who was born in Cockermouth and lived and worked in the Lake District for much of his life, did much to popularise not just an aesthetic, but also an immersive appreciation of these hills, valleys and lakes. Indeed, Hanley (2013, p.113) calls the Lake District 'The Region of Wordsworth's song' and explains that that the Lake District has become known as "Wordsworthshire" because

It is more natural and legitimate to associate Wordsworth with certain parts of England than any other great writer. And for three reasons: he spent the greater part of his life in one district; he drew much of his scenery and human character from the district and used its place-names freely in his poems; and both he and his sister left considerable records of his time and places of composition.

Furthermore, Wordsworth took part in campaigns to 'conserve' the Lake District "as places or enclaves distant and protected from science, industry and the operation of power" (MacNaghten and Urry, 1998, p.24). Thus Wordsworth was central to the envisioning of an anti-urban romantic discourse (Luckin, 2006). However, there is also considerable irony in the fact that it was the rise of the railway and related technology, which drove the Industrial Revolution (and gave rise to the slums), that also enabled people from the city to travel to the countryside in ever increasing numbers, to free themselves from the "impact modern life was having on the body", a body that was being increasingly and physiologically "undermined, superseded and inscribed by technology" (Lewis, 2001, p.64).

Wordsworth also encouraged "meanders" from the everyday routes. In both his *Guide to the Lakes*, and in his poetry, Wordsworth encouraged visitors to stray from the beaten track and experience the Lake District's hidden, natural

treasures; its waterfalls, crags and fell tops; the changing seasons and the working life of the people who lived there, rather than a set of viewing 'stations' on a Picturesque Tour. Wordsworth argued that the Lake District demanded a different eye, one which is not threatened or frightened by the relatively wild and untamed nature. It requires 'a slow and gradual process of culture' (Wordsworth 1984, p.193 cited in MacNaghten and Urry, 1998, p. 211).

The distances walked by the Romantic writers of the period were considerable: William Hazlitt claimed to walk 40 or 50 miles a day; De Quincey walked 70 to 100 miles a week; and Keats covered 642 miles during his 1818 tour of the Lakes and Scotland (Wallace 1993, pp.166-7). By the middle of the nineteenth century "the very highest echelon of English society regarded pedestrian touring as a valuable educational experience" (Wallace 1993, p. 168). Walking had become "particularly associated with 'the intellectual classes' who had begun to develop quite complex justifications, [such as] a 'peripatetic theory' based upon the way that the pedestrian is supposedly re-created with nature" (MacNaghten and Urry, 1998, p. 355).

Since the Romantic period, walking as a leisure activity emphasising this sense of freedom has continued to grow in popularity In the UK (Edensor, 2000). The idea that the countryside is the preserve of the elite was famously contested by the largely working class national Federation of Rambling Clubs which formed in



1905 and emphasised collective walking and contesting the ownership of land. Rambling clubs soon sprang up in the north and began campaigning for the legal 'right to roam' as much of the countryside was privately owned and trespass illegal. Access improved with the introduction of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act in 1949, and in 1951 the first national park in the UK was created. More National Parks followed, helping to improve access for many outdoors enthusiasts. The establishment of The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 further extended the right to roam in England and Wales. Since the turn of the century, there has been a growth in the number of 'Walking Festivals' in the UK where walking can help define a sense of place (touristically). Walking is understood to produce intense feelings of liberation or refreshment, a stronger connection with what is elemental, and a slowing in the otherwise hectic pace of life (Lorimer and Lund, 2008).

However, in spite of the continued interest in walking in the UK, it is apparent that people from different backgrounds may also appreciate walking in the Lake District differently. It is mainly an Anglophone, even an English attraction. The eighteenth-century transformation of attitudes to landscape and scenery in Western Europe was absent in many other societies' who viewed the experience of this kind of landscape as a 'native 'English', or at least Anglophone, cultural possession which was not expected to be shared but which has nonetheless been contested by different migrant groups through artistic engagement (see Tolia-Kelly, 2008; Myers, 2011).

Although the early twenty-first century witnessed a boom in Japanese visitors to the Lake District, it was a boom focused not on an appreciation of Wordsworth's poetry or the scenery it describes, but rather on the whimsical delights of Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit books which were translated into Japanese in 1971 and had become much-loved school texts for the learning of basic English (in Japan) (see Squire, 1993). Whilst many Anglophile visitors to the Lake District are keen to experience it by walking through and in it, encouraged by a series of highly informative and detailed guide books, as well as the cultural associations brought forth by Wordsworth and the Romantic Poets, few Japanese tourists come to the Lake District to walk in the landscape, even though there is a long-standing culture of walking in Japan; as Hunt (2013) says, 'there is a mountain of Japanese guide books to their mountains.- more comprehensive than I have seen for any other country in the world'. However, it seems that this type of appreciation was/is not being promoted abroad. Walton (2013) points out that "Cumbria Tourism and its consultants tend to take landscape aesthetics and literary associations as 'read', and seek to further expansion of tourism by other routes' especially the 'stately homes of Levens, Holker and Lowther Castle". The Head of Marketing & Communications for the Wordsworth Trust, Paul Kleian, further explained that, of course, whilst the landscape itself has little direct finance, the buildings (owned by the National Trust and other private organisations) do have promotional budgets. However Kleian argued that The National Park,

Visit Britain and Cumbria Tourism were becoming increasingly aware (over the last two years especially), that for visitors from large urban conurbations Tokyo, fresh air and being away from urban areas was a major selling point, and they welcomed the chance to explore a cultural landscape without having to wear a pollution mask.

### **Walking Poets**

The most obvious 'similarity' between the Wordsworth's and Bashō is that they were inveterate walker-poets. Wordsworth's contemporary Thomas De Quincey reckoned that Wordsworth walked a distance of 175,000 to 180,000 miles in his lifetime and it could be argued that walking creates one of the main themes around which *The Prelude* is constructed. Two of the most important experiences related in *The Prelude*, for example, found their origins in mountain walks (for instance when overawed by the Ravine of Gondo, the "Gloomy Pass", or during a night walk to the top of Snowdon). Walking was important to Wordsworth because it created *an interaction* between the traveller and the landscape (McCracken, 1988). It was similarly important to Dorothy Wordsworth, who walked incessantly throughout much of her life, both on her own and with companions, recording her observations and encounters in the pages of her *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*.

The same rationale for walking and writing could equally apply to Bashō who made not one but several journeys in Japan. “He sought to experience first hand beautiful scenes such as Mount Yoshino, Sarashini, and the pine-clad islands of Matsushima” (Barnhill, 2005, p. 5). His first journey in 1684 was described in *Nozarashi Kikō* (‘A Weather Beaten Journey’). Other journeys and journals followed (including, in 1687, *Oi no Koumin*, ‘The Records of a Travel-Worn Satchel’ and, in 1688, *Sarashina Kikō*, ‘A Visit to Sarashina Village’). His art reached its greatest form in 1689 in his masterpiece *Oku no Hosomichi*, ‘The Narrow Road to the Deep North’. In this poem/travel book, he recounts his last long walk, completed with his disciple Sora, some 1,200 miles covered over five months beginning in May 1689. The Japanese term *oku* refers to the northern backcountry of the main Japanese island of Honshu, and it also means “deep” in the sense of interior, such as the depths of a mountain and spiritual depths (Barnhill, 2005).

Although both the Wordsworths and Bashō have been labelled ‘nature poets’, this could be, perhaps, a little misleading, because they were also very much concerned with people or some form of ‘cultured nature’ (Keene, 1982). In Bashō’s prose, for instance, we encounter a wide variety of people he met ‘on the road’ – each different and individual. A glance at the subjects of some of Wordsworth’s poems (‘The Sailor’s Mother’; ‘Beggars’; ‘The Discharged Soldier’ and ‘The Leech Gatherer’) reveal his interest, too, in the people of the road he met when walking. Their poetry rejects the simple definitions of the landscape as

an “alien and formless substrate awaiting the imposition of human order” (Ingold, 2000), or of “landscape as a ‘cultural image’, that is as first and foremost a symbolic representation ... a *way of seeing* that ‘assumes and reproduces a fundamental distinction between the *ideas of culture* and the *matter of nature*” (Wylie, 2007, p.154). Rather, in their poetry, subject and object, mind and body and, especially, culture and nature, are conjoined rather than made distinct.

### **Artistic Responses in the *Walking with Wordsworth and Basho* Exhibition**

Elder (2014, p.28) suggests that although ‘there are dramatic gaps between the poetic worlds of Wordsworth and Bashō’, it is all the more impressive that there are “deep resonances between these poets that have contributed to making Bashō such an important influence on western poets today ... and ...

Wordsworth so beloved in Japan ... They are kindred writers in part through their shared calling to the margins of their societies, the shifting edges between nature and culture where insight may germinate. Bashō’s narrow path to the interior, *Oku no Hosomichi*, anticipates Wordsworth’s choice, at the beginning of ‘Michael’ and elsewhere, to depart ‘from the public way’.

Encouraged by this synergy, focused around walking, between two writers from different cultures who had never visited the other’s country, colleagues in WALK<sup>xxvii</sup> and Jeff Cowton, Curator of the Wordsworth Trust, decided to embark

on a collaboration, invited contemporary artists to respond to the manuscripts of the Wordsworths and Bashō – to what Cowton called ‘the texture of thought’ that the manuscripts revealed. We aimed to examine these contemporary responses within the comparative context of Western and Eastern attitudes to the natural world and walking; and to explore of the nature of collaboration itself. For although many will be aware that Bashō often worked and wrote collaboratively, undertaking his journeys with companions, it may come as a surprise to realise that Wordsworth was also a creative collaborator (with Coleridge, his sister Dorothy and his wife, Mary) rather than the solitary poet. It was in this spirit of collaboration that artists were invited to work collaboratively – and in the spirit of cultural exchange to encourage artists from the UK and Japan to work together.

Scottish artists Alec Finlay and Ken Cockburn had already had an interest in Bashō and haiku poetry. Both had previously travelled on ‘The Road North’ through their Scottish homeland, guided on their journey by Bashō’s prose poem *Oku no hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Deep North). Following Bashō and Sora, their journey took in 53 ‘stations’, from Pilrig to Pollokshields via Berneray, Glen Lyon, Achnabreck and Kirkmaiden. They left Edinburgh on 16 May 2010, the same date that Bashō and Sora departed Edo in 1689, and finished their journey at Glasgow's Hidden Gardens in May 2011 (Finlay and Cockburn, 2014).<sup>xxx</sup> This journey also provided also them with ideas for their work in the exhibition.

Finlay’s “simple ‘word mntn’ are constructed from wood cubes that, on one level, we may associate with children’s building-blocks. Deceptively playful, the ‘word-

mntn' in fact mask complex layers of literary, artistic, personal and philosophical association. Like much of Finlay's work, they are influenced by Basho's pared back haiku and exemplify the artist's typical concerns with human engagement in landscape." (Colier, 2014, p. 86).

[Insert Figure 1 Here. Finlay's wood cubes.

'In 'The Mulberry Coat', Autumn Richardson draws upon the natural landscape of Japan. "Before setting off on the journeys from which his poetry sprang, Bashō required hand-made coats, hats and shoes, all of which were made from the very plant life that inspired his writing" (Collier, 2014, p.124). 'The Mulberry Coat' is an artistic re-imagining of the garment that Bashō might have worn, made from untreated, unsized kozo (mulberry) paper (made by paper-maker Nao Sakamoto), and sewn with cotton thread. By focussing on the paper clothing itself, Richardson emphasises the materiality of Bashō's writing process, and the value of paper as a form of protection, a means of recording his thoughts, as well as a direct form of contact with the landscape itself.

[Insert Figure 2 here: Autumn Richardson's 'The Mulberry Coat']

In Andrew Richardson's work *The Ghostly Language of Ancient Earth*,

extracts from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* are mapped onto a three-dimensional interactive map of the landscape of Grasmere and the surrounding area. The interactive screen version of the map allows viewers to explore the text-landscape, to view it from different angles and perspectives or even to follow, to walk along, a specific 'path' of words. These word paths are directly linked to the shape of Wordsworth's poetry, as the number and length of words in each verse line determines the path's change of direction. In re-presenting the contours of the landscape Wordsworth wrote about, Richardson returns the poet's words literally and metaphorically to the topography that was so much a part of the poet's life and work. In turn, Richardson allows us to explore the contours of this landscape through touch-screen. We are able to track our own path through the topographical lines of the map, whilst simultaneously following the poetic lines of Wordsworth's most famous literary masterpiece. In so doing, our fingers take us for a walk both literally and imaginatively.

[Insert Figure 3 here. Andrew Richardson's *The Ghostly Language of Ancient Earth*]

Work by Mike Collier relates directly to walks undertaken 'in the footsteps' of others, including Bashō and Wordsworth, in Kurabane and Nikko in Japan following short sections of Bashō's route in the Narrow Road to the Deep North as well as many of the same Lake District routes described by Dorothy Wordsworth in her journals (see Figure 4 below). Writing in the catalogue for the



exhibition, Carol McKay (2014) explains that in his “creative reworking, Collier has deliberately selected journal entries that describe favourite routes Dorothy followed – and ones he has walked a number of times: an ascent of Fairfield foiled by weather, followed two days later by a walk ‘upon Helvellyn, glorious, glorious sights.’”

[Insert Figure 4 here. Artwork by Mile Collier.]

Walking is also integral to Brian Thompson’s artistic practice. He is continuously fascinated by the physical journeys we make in and through places, and how these are mapped, recorded and valued, and he often walks with friends whose initials are noted in each work’s title. Sensitivity to the physicality and aesthetics of materials is also central to his work. Each individual sculpture is fabricated from materials that have some relevance to the particular walks that inspired them. Three of the smaller sculptures exhibited here were inspired by walks in and around the Lake District made ‘in the footsteps of Wordsworth’, whilst two more had their origins in walks made in Japan with Mike Collier whilst following paths once trodden by Bashō.

[Insert figure 5 here. Sculpture by Brian Thompson.]

## **Conclusion**

*Wordsworth and Bashō: Walking Poets*, opened in May 2014 at Dove Cottage. It re-explored traditions of 'nature' poetry through both a Western and a Japanese cultural context. Manuscripts and facsimiles were re-interpreted by contemporary artists working in a wide range of media, including fine art, music, textiles and sculpture. The exhibition ran for six months, closing in November 2014, after 33,000 visitors. The exhibition demonstrated the complex interactions between poetic interpretations of nature and responses to the modern city through walking and contemporary artistic responses to the poetry, walking in the Lake District and more generally the re-envisioning of the anti-urban.

The poetry and prose of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, and that of Bashō, (as well as the artists in the exhibition) urge us to value nature for what it is – and not for its economic value (what we might term 'costing nature'). Costing nature 'tells us that it (nature) possesses no inherent value; that it is worthy of protection only when it performs a service for us; that it is replaceable. <sup>xxxix</sup> Those who believe that they can protect nature by adopting this 'frame' of economic rationalism are stepping into a trap their opponents have set. The strongest arguments (explains the writer George Monbiot) that opponents can deploy – arguments based on valuing nature for itself – cannot, just now, be heard. That is why it is more important than ever that the poetry, prose and art of the Wordsworths and Bashō *is* heard and understood – and shown alongside the work of contemporary artists whose own work connects us to the earth; and why, too, we have much to learn from the Japanese and Eastern approaches to nature.

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<sup>xxvii</sup> WALK (Walking, Art, Landskip and Knowledge) is an interdisciplinary research centre at the University of Sunderland looking at how cultural practitioners creatively engage with the world as they walk through it. My colleagues in this project were Prof. Brian Thompson and Janet Ross

<sup>xxx</sup> See <http://www.theroadnorth.co.uk/>

<sup>xxxi</sup> George Monbiot, 'Can you put a price on the beauty of Smithy Wood?', *Guardian*, 22 April 2014, p.27.