Reading Lakescapes in Literature and Painting: From Keswick to Buttermere and Crummock Water

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Abstract. This paper attempts to discuss the ways of “digging down through layers of memories and representations” to strengthen the “self-knowledge” of formulating harmonious human relations to nature as well as enjoying the natural sceneries, with the case studies of reading lakescapes in literature and painting, in which Buttermere and Crummock Water are the focus. The study examines some relative verbal and visual representations by some writers and artists and finds that although sharing in some similarities with Derwent Water in landscape features, Buttermere and Crummock Water are more prominent in a setting of stillness, and it is the very contemplation evoked by this feature that adds to their value as landscapes.

Introduction

Nigel Hammett(2012) once mentioned his tour along the road to Crummock Water and eventually to Buttermere. For him the latter is “the most beautiful of all lakes” and he will “never tire of” it. [1] As for the first view of the former, it struck him with the precious stillness of “an early spring day with few people and even fewer cars on the road,” when “it is possible to hear bird song and the bleat of sheep” and “near the lakeside there is the gentle lap of the water on a deserted shoreline.” [1] Feeling “the silence of that first view and from that moment,” Hammett has “enjoyed so much peace of mind and serenity of spirit in this wonderful landscape” [1] of the Lake District that “stands out on the literary and artistic ma[p of England.” [2] “Since the eighteenth century, a wide variety of artists and writers have been drawn to every corner of the region, all looking for inspiration in its unrivalled combination of light, lakes and mountains,”[2] and in the process of this landscaping “the meanings of verbal, visual and built landscapes have a complex interwoven history.” [3] So, if as Schama stated, a “scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock,” [4] such “strata” is composed of a variety of materials including literary texts and paintings. Thus, Hammett’s discussion of lakescapes, which is mainly based on Wordworth’s poetry (verbal materials) that is little related to Crummock Water or Buttermere, seems insufficient. And, even if as Hammett said, “to talk of favourite lakes is perhaps unnecessary” due to the fact that a “walk around other lakes and tarns brings out similar feelings.” [1] it is still necessary to trace the early history of how several more closely connected lakes combined to construe a community and talk of peculiarities of them which might evoke various inspirations for a creative mind.

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relations to nature as well as enjoying the natural sceneries.[4] with the case studies of reading lakescapes, among which Buttermere and Crummock Water will be the focus.

Setting the Scene: From Keswick to Buttermere and Cummock Water

In terms of geomorphology, the whole English Lake District can be seen as a discrete area of small mountains in the northern part of England, which is divided into narrow valleys, many with lakes framed by fells that, as Wordsworth said, diverge like “the spokes of a wheel from a hub somewhere between Great Gable and Scafell.” [5] The seventh and the last “spoke” of this wheel might be seen both as a cultural and a geographical community. Geographically, the seventh “spoke” (the vale of Buttermere) stretches northward from Buttermere to Crummock Water, then follows the river of Coker “through the fertile and beautiful vale of Lorton” with the river being lost in the river of Derwent, while the last “spoke” (Borrowdale), of which “the vale of Keswick is only a continuation,”[5] stretches northward with the river of Derwent as the linkage which flows into and then out of Derwent Water, continuously into and then out of Bassenthwaite Lake and takes in the Coker in the following course. So it might be said that these two “spokes” naturally form a circuit for the travellers, though the passageway set between Borrowdale Fell and Buttermere Fell is more challenging for a hiker. In fact, this striking journey was once missed by the first tourist like Thomas Gray (1716–1771) in the eighteenth century. According to his own travel writing, Gray “was so much intimidated with the accounts of Borrowdale, that he proceeded no farther than Grange.”[6] This is quite understandable because at that time the tourists “who visit the vale of Keswick, and view its lake from Castlerigg, Latig, Swinside, and the vicarage, imagine inaccessible mountains only remain beyond the line of this tract.” [6] However, to some degree the procrastination of taking a further ride up Newland vale to Buttermere and Crummock which could rival Derwent Water contributed to the latter’s popularity as the first cultural lakescape in the same area.

Generally referred to as the Queen of the English Lakes, Derwent Water has long been a favourite of visitors to the Lake District. “Of all the lakes in these romantic regions,” Derwent Water “seems to be most generally admired.” [7] In addition to the convenient position to reach, the popularity of this lake also lies in its terrific landscape since the water’s own beauty and its use in composition arriva at a state of “full perfection.” “The full perfection of Keswick consists of three circumstances, beauty, horror, and immensity united... But to give you a complete idea of these three perfections, as they joined in Keswick, would require the united powers of Claude, Salvator[Rosa], and Poussin,” Dr. John Brown (1715–1766) once wrote this in a letter. [6] And as he stated, Derwent Water was really featured in the composition of an amphitheatre. “Instead of a meagre rivulet,” the water was “a noble living lake, ten miles round, of an oblong form,” and “on all sides of this immense amphitheatre, the lofty mountains rise round, piercing the clouds,” in “spiry, fantastic” shapes.[6] As one of the earliest painters whose work consisted largely of Lake District views, Thomas Smith of Derby (~1767) also attempted to catch such a drama of the lakescape with the prints of the great circle of mountains surrounding Derwent Water.

The zeal of both Brown and Smith encouraged other persons to visit this lake with the same perspectives of observation and representation adopted by them. Gray was one of such followers, who admired both Brown and Smith and took his own tour 1769, during which he stayed at the Queen’s Head in Keswick, using it a base for excursions from 3 to 7 October. In
1772, it’s in the same town that William Gilpin (1724–1804) “resolved to fix” the “head-quarters for a few days; and from thence to visit such of the neighbouring lakes, and mountains,”[7] Having toured around the lake, Gilpin showed his preference for the east side and chose this route to Borrowdale, “skirting the eastern coast along the edge of the water.”[7] He argued that an inexperienced conductor might carry people “to some garish stand, where the eye may range far and wide” and “such a view is well calculated” to “obtain a general idea of the whole,” however, “he, who is in quest of the picturesque scenes of the lake, must travel along the rough side-screens that adorn it; and catch it’s beauties, as they arise in smaller portions.”[7] Gilpin went further as an experienced conductor as well as a Picturesque tourist to carry people through the Newland vale to Buttermere and Crummock, which were described in detail in his successful guide book to the lakes. So did his contemporary, Thomas West (1720-1779) who contributed the other of two best selling guides at the end of the eighteenth century. As for the travels published by another contemporary, Captain Joseph Budworth, with an impressive description it turned a native girl named Mary Robinson into the embodiment of natural beauty united with a guileless innocence and thus promoted her as one of the attraction of the Lake District. In general, these initial depictions concerning the two lakes “placed greater emphasis on the wildness” while the later ones “routinely use words like lovely and secluded.”[8] And, with such combined work the seventh and the last “spoke” of the wheel of the Lake District are eventually interwoven into a cultural community as well as a geographical one.

The next section will do a further study on how Buttermere and Crummock Water were observed and represented in the works of writers and artists, among whom most of the attentions will be paid to West, Gilpin, J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), one of the greatest British painters, and Chiang Yee (1903-1977), an Chinese artist who toured the lakeland in 1936.

Reading Buttermere and Crummock Water in Literature and Painting

Reading Buttermere: West, Gilpin and Chiang Yee

At the time of West the ride up Newland vale to Buttermere “remains hitherto unnoticed, though it’s “one of the most pleasing and surprising in in environs of Keswick,” and in a persuasive and almost tempting tone West tried to ensure his readers of such a pleasing and surprising experience with the vivid description of a solemn pastoral scene: “All is naked solitude and simple nature. Here untamed nature holds her reign in solemn silence, amidst the gloom and grandeur dreary solitude” and “all is barrenness, solitude, and silence, only interrupted by the murmurs of a rill, that runs unseen” But if one descended the track on the left, he would see “the highest possible contrast in nature.” In 1755, John Dalton (1709–1763) once wrote an impressive poem to enumerate the contrasting landscape features of Derwent Water: “Horrors like these at first alarm, / But soon with savage grandeur charm, / And raise to noblest thoughts the mind.” The landscape of Buttermere had the same effect, since in contrast to the pastoral scene, “spiral towering mountains, dark, dun, and gloomy at noon-day, rise immediately from the western extremity of the deep narrow dell, and hang over Buttermere.”[6]

Concerning the value of water in the landscape, Gilpin attatched importance to its own beauties, and its use in composition. In the case of Buttermere, Gilpin also discussed the lake’s size, shape, shoreline, the relation to the surroundings and so on: “This lake is small; about a mile and a half in length, and half a mile in breadth; of an oblong form; sweeping, at one end, round a woody promontory. But this sweep is rather forced: and from some points makes too
acute an angle” and some lines of this lake “are rather too square.” [7] Showing his disapproval of such aspects of the lakescape, Gilpin suggested that the visitors hold a lower point which “would soften its abruptness” and take boat to get a better view of one of the lines.[7] “The scenery however about it is grand, and beautiful,” according to Gilpin. [7]

Chiang Yee also showed his preference for the lakescape of Buttermere in general since the lake “seemed then a more than usually calm stretch of water” when “set in a very lovely environment.” [9] Chiang observed the scenery about the lake with the shifting viewpoints thus to obtain the panorama of Buttermere: “My eye was particularly caught by a distant mountain of rugged outline...I looked back towards ‘Robinson Head’...my eyes reached its fringes of tall, slender pines on the slopes. The mountains on the left hand side and those a little farther away to the right made two crescents, which seemed to embrace the whole lake... Far away to the right there stood a group of pines and other trees with stones underneath, which seemed to me a pier stretching out into the lake,” around which “luckily there were no cargo boats.” [9] It was here Chiang echoed West and others’ desires and descriptions concerned the peaceful setting: “It was extremely quiet on the water, even though two or three waterbirds made circles wrinkles when they dipped down to catch fish. It was so calm—not a single breath of air even to set leaves on the trees in vibration. I noticed two camps at the bottom of a hill, but even from them there was no sound rising.” [9]

Figure 1. Buttermere (by J.M.W. Turner, 1798). [10]    Figure 2. Crommock Water (by Chiang Yee, 1937). [9]

**Reading Buttermere: Turner**

Now it might be safe to say that the main factors that contribute to making Hammett “never tired of” are the stillness combined with the contrasting features of landscape Buttermere, however, perhaps Turner might deepen the knowledge of the human relations to this lakescape. Turner made Keswick the base (as Gray and others) for the first four days of his tour to the Lake District in 1797. He sketched a little in the environs of the already popularized Keswick and “took no notice of West’s Stations, nor indeed of any viewpoints suggested by Gray, Gilpin” and so on, “preferring to make his own discoveries.” [8] If as Thompson stated, Turner really “encountered nature in raw and in this process was transformed from a painter of architecture into one connected with the elemental stuff of the world” including “light,” [8] it was the very landscapes involved in the trip to Buttermere which followed his excursion to Lodore Falls and then to Borrowdale that engendered the fruit of a spectacular painting (See Fig. 1), which was exhibited 1798 and denoted a breakthrough “to some kind of transcendentual reality” for Tuner. This painting entitled as *Buttermere Lake, with Part of Cromackwater, Cumberland, a Shower* is “brought alive by its invented rainbow” and reveals the artist’s creative representations concerned with his “own emotional responses” as well as “the revelation of a truth which is not
otherwise apparent.”[8] In the exhibition catalogue Turner quoted a few lines in “Spring” by James Thomson (1700–1748): “Til the western sky the down sun/Looks out effulgent—the rapid radiance instantaneous strikes/The illumined mountains—in a yellow mist/Bestriding earth—the grand ethereal bow/Shoots up immense, and every hue unfold.” [10] Here, the poet’s description of the rainbow is a prominent element. However, the poet merely treats the rainbow as a purely scientific phenomenon, which “is neatly divided into the seven colors of the spectrum from red to violet” when “every hue unfold.” [10] In the center foreground of Turner’s picture, a fishing boat with two figures is floating on the lake, which is “caught in an uncompleted circle of light—an almost supernatural embrace.”[10] This arc of “delicate, evanescent, and ultimately indivisible light”[10] subtly endows both the painting and Buttermere with the spirit of the typology.

Reading Crummock Water: West, Gilpin and Chiang Yee

The introduction of this paper mentioned the great role of the first impression of Crummock Water played in Hammett’s choosing the Lake District as his haunt to visit, which was mainly concerned with a peaceful property that lakes share in general. In this respect, Hammett was right to say a “walk around other lakes and tarns brings out similar feelings.” However, as this paper argued in the beginning, it is still necessary to do a further study since more features of a landscape might be dug out in the eyes of more people. Thus, this final section will discuss more with West, Gilpin and Chiang as the main figures.

Leaving the village of Buttermere, as West stated, a visitor could see that Crummock Water “soon opens” as “a fine expense of water” which “sweeps away to the right under a rocky promontory.”[6] The beauty of the lake was enhanced by several elements: three small isles; the eastern shore, the whole of which “is diversified with bays, the banks with scattered trees, and a few inclosures, terminated by a hanging wood”[6]; a chain of extremely picturesque pyramidal mountains; the clear water. As the chief theorist of picturesque, perhaps Gilpin had more to say. He preferred this lake to Buttermere considering it “more beautiful.”[11] He also discussed this lake’s shape, size, shoreline, the relation to the surroundings and so on: The lake is “also oblong, wind round promontories, surrounded by mountains” and “a mile longer, the lines it forms are much easier; and tho it has less wood on its bank, the loss is compensated by a richer display of rocky scenery,” with which “much hilly ground is intermixed,” “acting in due subordination to the grand mountains, which inviron the whole lake, break and separate the area of it into smaller parts,” many of which “form little vallies, and other recesses, which are very picturesque.”[11] “Nothing is wanting but a little more wood, to make this lake, and the vale in which it lies, a very enchanting scene,”[11] Gilpin thus suggested, without concealing his appreciation for Crummock Water, which in Chiang Yee’s eyes is “a wild and impressive lake” according to his observation of it: “The shape of its mountain, its colour and its rocky surface, were vividly clear to me, but very changeable” and the variety of the landscape was enhanced by “a cushion of cloud moving about over the top of it like a sort of umbrella to protect it from rain.”[9] Returning to the hill-side, Chiang “stood by a very beautifully shaped pine and looked at the lake again. The whole of it was not visible from that point, but it gave one some general impression and anticipation.” [9] He made this scene the subject of a painting (See Fig. 2).
Summary

Through examining combined materials of visual and verbal materials concerning Buttermere and Crummock Water, this paper has a short study on the process of making such cultural lakescapes. The study starts with the examination of Hammett’s description concerning his first impression of Crummock Water which led to his making the Lake District as the haunt. Viewing Crummock Water, Buttermere and Keswick as a cultural community as well as a geographical one, this paper then discusses the factors which contribute to the popularity of Derwent Water as well as the ones that lead to the procrastination of making the other two join in this cultural map. The analysis of the turning point is fixed upon Gilpin, who extends his favorite route along the east side of Derwent Water to Buttermere through the Newland vale. Next, this paper does a further study on how Buttermere and Crummock Water were observed and represented in the works of writers and artists, among whom most of the attentions are paid to West, Gilpin, J.M.W. Turner and Chiang Yee.

As a part of the academic journey with the attempts of “digging down through layers of memories and representations” of the English Lakes to strengthen the “self-knowledge” of formulating harmonious human relations to nature as well as enjoying the natural sceneries, this study solidifies the viewpoint put forward in the initial part of the paper—it is necessary to trace the early history of how several more closely connected lakes combined to construe a community and talk of peculiarities of them which might envoke various inspirations for a creative mind. Although sharing in some similarities with Derwent Water in landscape features, Buttermere and Crummock Water are more prominent in a setting of stillness. It is the very contemplation evoked by this feature that adds to their value as landscapes, since a person “needs only a lucky combination of a moment of silence and an externally induced ‘gentle shock’ for his mind to perfectly mirror the external world,” and consequently the “union of the mind and the world” could occur “during such privileged moments.” [12]

References


