

‘A Perfect Package’ – Rethinking the Merz Barn

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Cumbria is a perfect package – it’s got the Lakes, the Pennines, the Dales, Hadrian’s Wall and beautiful coastline. It really is picture postcard.

Ben Fogle, TV presenter

Claife Station is to be restored. The National Trust have at last decided to start work on this ruined folly above Windermere and remove both the unsightly fencing that blocks public access and the greenery that obscures the view. Is there any value in patching up what the National Trust describe as ‘a crumbling shell in imminent danger of collapse’? Their answer is decisive: ‘If we allow it to fall down, it’s gone for ever, taking with it its unique history...Our vision is not to rebuild Claife but to restore the experience of visiting a Picturesque viewing station.’¹

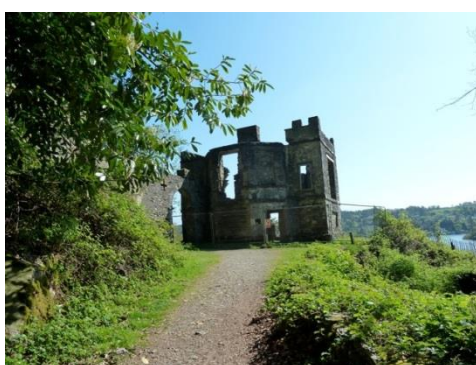


Fig 1. Claife Station today (photos: author)

Patching up a crumbling ruin with a long-lost original in mind, attempting to convey to visitors some spark of its former magic – such concerns are equally familiar to anyone conversant with the latter-day history of Kurt Schwitters’ Merz Barn, only a few miles away from Claife. For either to disappear entirely would be a sad loss, but what form any intervention should take remains a moot point. Their interiors and respective surroundings are beyond any hope of replication, yet in both cases there is something is left to work with. The prospect from Claife Station that was a constituent of the building, indeed its *raison d’être*, has changed considerably over the centuries as regards marks of human intervention, but natural features such as the lake and the distant panorama remain. The Merz Barn was, albeit in a different way, inextricably bound up with its setting, and although the context in which it was created is long gone, some valuable documentary evidence remains. A comparative study of the two sites would make a fascinating exercise, but in this essay I set out with a more modest aim: I wish to take up a suggestion by John Elderfield, who in his 1985 study of Schwitters relates his work more than once to the Picturesque tradition, likening him to those early Picturesque travellers who surveyed landscape through city eyes. Writing in particular of the Schwitters’ late work and the Merz Barn, both created in a non-urban context, Elderfield notes that ‘the concept of the Picturesque is the ultimate source of his attraction to the beauty of ruins and decay and of his discovery of it in framed excerpts. The forms and instances of nature are selected, excerpted and framed for contemplation like pocket-size pictures that formalize, however gently, the rural scene’² Certainly the Merz Barn is situated in the Lake District, the quintessential landscape of the Picturesque, whose tradition lives on in the stock views of the region perpetually framed for tourists on paper, souvenirs and online. I’d like to return to Claife for a consideration of how three authors of the time introduced Picturesque Lakeland to their readers before discussing how this seemingly far-removed aesthetic framework might shape our perception of the Merz Barn today.

West, Wordsworth and Martineau

In his *Guide to the Lakes in Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire* of 1778, Thomas West described the rocky outcrop of Claife Heights as one the finest viewpoints from which discriminating visitors might delight in a panorama of Windermere, England's longest lake and one of the glories of the Lake District. Irregularity and variation were the watchwords of the Picturesque, which is why West delights in instructing his readers to take the road that 'serpentine[s] round a rocky mountain' up to Claife. Here they could contemplate the scene to greatest advantage and gaze upon mountains 'which rise in grandeur on the eye, and swell upon the imagination as they are approached'.³ West's *Guide to the Lakes* was not the first of its kind, but he did prescribe a method of viewing the landscape as if it were a painting, identifying vantage points to further the visitor's aesthetic tastes and providing useful hints for artists. His description of the scenery in terms of art is directed at an educated and discerning public ('the delicate touches of Claude, verified on Coniston lake...the noble scenes of Poussin, exhibited on Windermere...the stupendous, romantic ideas of Salvator Rosa, realized on Derwent-lake') but his tour groups required more than just connoisseurship; they had to be armed with the appropriate equipment. West recommends, for example, a Claude glass (a tinted convex mirror) to enhance the view, as it will 'furnish much amusement in this tour. Where the objects are great and near, it removes them to a due distance, and shows them in the soft colours of nature...The mirror is of the greatest use in sunshine, and the person using it ought always to turn his back on the object that he views.'⁴ That the first tourists (the word entered the English language shortly before West's book appeared) were advised to face the wrong way to appreciate the scenery is just one of the reasons why the Picturesque became the butt of satirists like William Combe, whose intrepid Dr Syntax (Fig. 2) smugly recounts in doggerel the benefits of artistic licence when painting Lakeland at its most lacklustre.⁵

Thus, tho' from truth I haply err/The scene preserves its character.
What man of taste my right will doubt/To put things in, or leave things out?
'Tis more than right, it is a duty/If we consider landscape beauty...
To heighten ev'ry work of art/Fancy should take an active part:
Thus I (which few, I think, can boast)/Have made a landscape of a Post.



Fig. 2. Thomas Rowlandson, 'Doctor Syntax sketching the lake, from William Combe's *The Tour of Dr Syntax in Search of the Picturesque*.

Yet the Picturesque's remarkable popularity, the impetus it gave to the Romantic movement, the claims that it was associated with both revolutionary and reactionary politics, and not least, the heated debates it aroused in its time—Ruskin was one who gave it serious attention, particularly in *Modern Painters*—indicate that it cannot easily be dismissed as a passing fad. This is no place for a full analysis of this extraordinarily British phenomenon. Suffice to say that for its detractors, it was highly suspect; this was life masquerading as art, or art posing as life, and either way constituted a precarious balancing act that eluded external control.

Twenty years after West's guide was first published, Claife Heights had been embellished with a Gothic gatehouse, native and exotic trees and shrubs and an extravagant folly: Claife Station, a castellated, octagonal building that became one of the area's most sought-after tourist attractions.⁶ From the ground floor, which contained a dining-room, fireplace and wine store (the owners used it for parties), visitors ascended a spiral stair to a drawing room with six tinted bay windows through which they might experience the Lakes in both space and time. Green, yellow, orange and light blue windows supposedly conveyed an impression of the vista in spring, summer, autumn and winter; a dark blue window evoked a moonlit scene, a lilac window an impending storm. By the end of the 19th century Claife Station's heyday was over, and the ruins passed to the National Trust in 1962.

Claife Station was a kind of archetypal visitor centre, an interior that offered a filtered, framed and formal Lakeland prospect for convenient consumption. Robert Southey came here in 1802 and compared the view favourably with the landscape paintings hung on the walls of its drawing room. William Wordsworth arrived in 1810, the year that his own guide to the Lake District was first published (anonymously) as a preface to a folio volume of select Lakeland views.⁷ In 1835 he published a revised edition entitled *A Guide through the District of the Lakes in the North of England, with a Description of the Scenery, &c. for the Use of Tourists and Residents* that drew extensively on the terminology and conventions of the Picturesque.⁸ The Guide not only lent the Lake District a new identity but also gave it a new demarcation by omitting the industrial areas around its perimeter. More importantly, it is Wordsworth's Lake District, his daffodils, and his landscape-as-cultural-practice that shape public perception of the region even today.

Apart from the very first edition, the text of Wordsworth's *Guide* is not illustrated; the imagination replaces the paintbrush and the Claude glass. He introduces it as a 'Companion for the *Minds* of Persons of taste' (original italics), with all the corresponding social and political ramifications that such a phrase entails. The guide is clearly addressed to a cultivated, prosperous and leisured intelligentsia able to appreciate the landscape in the same way as himself—nature, in other words, as a form of social distinction. Wordsworth often specifies at what time of day and in which season his excursions should best be undertaken, and to enhance his reading of the landscape he adds copious quotations from poems, generally his own, thus further extracting the *Guide* from the unavoidable visual evidence of commercial and communal activities and generating a further surge of reverence for a presumed non-human world. His descriptions generally culminate in the intense, protracted savouring of a Lakeland panorama, so that the contemplation and internalization of the single captured view becomes an end in itself, ennobling for both the poet and by inference, his readers.

Wordsworth resents any intrusions that blight his Lakeland aesthetic—lofty in more than one sense of the word, for as early as page 2 he is already asking his readers to visualize themselves perched on a cloud somewhere between Scafell and Great Gable, two of the highest mountains of Central Lakeland.⁹ Having beguiled us into an illusion of utter freedom, he launches into topics such as Mountains, Light, Surfaces and Colours, Night, and Cottages (the latter invariably described, like their inhabitants, in idyllic terms), which in masterly prose frame the landscape entirely according to his own rules and in ways far more exclusive and restrictive than any painted version. Unlike West, Wordsworth rails against incursions that in his eyes despoil the 'peace, rusticity and happy poverty' (p. 61) of the region, disfigure the 'fine

gradations' of nature' (p. 65) and corrupt the humble-minded, virtuous peasantry. He pinpoints an excess of white houses as a particular eyesore, reasoning that they 'can scarcely be managed with good effect in landscape-painting'; furthermore, even a single white house 'can impair the majesty of a mountain' (p. 74). Apart from the occasional 'gentleman's mansion', most new buildings arouse his mistrust, and in his chapter on Change he attempts to cajole his readers into accepting similar cautionary examples of profanation, defacement, intrusion, discordancy, disfigurement and warping in 'scenes so consecrated' (p. 61).

The widespread improvement of transportation systems in the eighteenth century resulted in a new mobility that gained Wordsworth more readers but also threatened his status as the presiding genius of an area he had virtually made his own, and in 1844 he launched a bitter public campaign against the building of local railways and the working-class day trippers who used them – who, he maintained, should seek their entertainment elsewhere instead of wreaking moral havoc on a temple of nature that they were incapable of appreciating. 'Is then no nook of English ground secure/From rash assault?' he moaned in his sonnet *On the Projected Windermere and Kendal Railway*. What Wordsworth defines as 'taste', 'landscape' and 'nature' emerge as the constructed social values of an urban elite with a common educational, financial and social background and a common interest in appropriating suitable nooks of English ground as a high-cultural and ultimately socio-political model. But even by the time Wordsworth published his first guide, it was all too late.¹⁰ Partly because of his own writings and reputation, the tourist industry was already thriving in the Lake District, and a substantial range of museums, regattas, souvenirs and miscellaneous entertainments were on hand to tempt the increasing number of visitors. By a twist of fate, Wordsworth himself had become part of the tourist route as early as 1816, and his house in Rydal was well on its way to enjoying the status of a Picturesque station in its own right.

Today, Rydal Mount evokes multiple associations that are lacking in a nearby address – The Knoll, Ambleside. This was the residence of Harriet Martineau, who provides us with an entirely different view of her chosen homeland in her *Complete Guide to the English Lakes* of 1855. For West and Wordsworth, for example, Ambleside is mainly of interest as a starting point for excursions into the surrounding fells. Martineau, however, first points out Fox How, the residence of the Arnold family, then tells us where to find the shops, the inns and the bobbin mill; her interpretation of nature does not automatically exclude, or exist in opposition to, commerce and the lived environment. While on good terms with Wordsworth and his family (she makes frequent reference to him in her *Guide*), Martineau is sceptical about his depictions of the innocent poor, and her unconcealed enthusiasm for the scenery does not blind her to the prevalence of drunkenness and harmful superstitions among its inhabitants. She not only expects her readers to arrive by train, but also expresses the hope that the new railway will prove both economically and culturally beneficial and thus alleviate the abject poverty in the region.

In contrast to West and Wordsworth, Martineau does not specifically address 'persons of taste'. Having met us at Windermere railway station, she leads us eagerly, if critically, along various itineraries, intent on informing and entertaining us all at once, and when we stumble after her to a vantage point where she allows us to soak up the view, she generally steers us to an inn soon afterwards. Martineau's *Preface* leaves her readers in no doubt that she is passionately fond of the Lakes: 'If any think that we have painted it too fair, and that we love it fanatically, let them come and see.' At the same time, she tells tales of hardship and deprivation, speaks out for better land drainage, casts a dubious eye on local products (dirty wool, sapless hay, cheese so hard it was used as flint) and at the end of her book, preceding no less than twenty-two pages of advertisements directed at holiday-makers, she appends a Directory of useful addresses (Fig. 3), from slate-makers and quarrymen to solicitors, artists and local guides. (Some delightful entries here: one would like to have eavesdropped on Miss

Higgins's Fancy Repository in Ambleside or asked Charles Dove how he managed to juggle his listed occupations of farmer, postman and fishmonger.)

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Proctor, Jonathan, lodginghouse, Hill Side Cottage.	Quillinan, Misses, Loughrigg Holme.	Redmayne, Giles, Esq., Brathay Hall.	Reynolds, M. Esq., Clappersgate.
Richards, John, boot & shoemaker	Riddle, Mrs., lodging house, Five-ways House.	Robinson, William, flag-merchant Blue Hill.	Ridgway, Mrs., Low Field.
Robinson, Messrs., M. & J. C., carriers.	Robinson, Brian, farmer, Rock Cottage.	Roberts, Christopher, farmer, Ellers Brow, Skelwith.	Robinson, Mason, clerk, Gun- powder Works, Elterwater.
Rogers, Major, Pull Cottage.	Rollinshaw, Anthony, boot and shoemaker, & lodging house keeper.	Roughsedge, Hornby, Esq. (J.P.) Fox Ghyll.	Salkeld, William, farmer, Skel- with Fold.
Sarginson, James, farmer and lodging house, Skelwith.	Stalker and Higgins, joiners.	Shepherd, Wm., lodgings, Water- head.	Shepherd, James, Esq., surgeon.
Slee, Lancelot, farmer, Arnside.	Slater, Mrs., confectioner and lodging house.	Sproat, John, accountant and lodging house, Fairfield.	Sproat, Wm., boot and shoemaker.
Squires, Mrs., glass dealer and hairdresser.	Stables, Edward, saddler.	Stainton, R., Golden Rule Inn.	Stalker, Betsy, grocer.
			Stalker, Mrs. A., Springfield.
			Stansfield, Mrs., Waterhead.
			Suart, James, Esq., Low Fold.
			Tatham, Rev. J., curate, Rydal.
			Thompson, J., joiner, Blue Hill.
			Thompson, Joseph, boat builder.
			Thompson, John, painter.
			Thompson, Jonathan, grocer.
			Thompson, Miss, lodging house, Walton Cottage.
			Thwaite, Joseph, bread baker.
			Townson, W., White Lion Hotel.
			Townson, Thomas, miller.
			Townson, Benjamin, tax collec- tor, Woodbine Cottage.
			Townley, Robert, Unicorn Inn,
			Troughton, Thomas, bookseller, &c., Stamp Office.
			Troughton, Miss D., lodg'-house.
			Tyson, T., farmer, Waterhead.
			Tyson, Joseph, carpenter.
			Tyson, Joseph, confectioner.
			Walton, Edward, shoemaker.
			Walker, John, grocer and con- fectioner.
			Wilson, John, Esq., solicitor, Cross Brow.
			Wilson, Thos., Esq., Clappersgate
			Wilson, R., farmer, Rydal Nab.
			Woodburn, John, grocer and game dealer.
			Woodburn, Mrs., lodging house.
			Woodhouse, Richard, gardener, Haven Cottage.
			Woof, Mrs., farmer and lodgings, Low Fold.
			Woodend, J., farmer, Nook End.
			Wordsworth, Mrs., widow of the late Wm. Wordsworth, Rydal Mount.
			Wilson, James Christopher, Esq., Compston Lodge.
			Wilson, John, farmer, Grove.
			Winder, Mary, grocer, &c.

Fig. 3. A page from Harriet Martineau's Directory

The archetypically Picturesque engravings in her guide are worth a study in themselves. Mostly schematic in composition (foreground leading to middle-ground lake with mountains as backdrop), they are presented in a fuzzy-edged oval form reminiscent of a Claude glass image, and many depict views of the Lakes that are still standard today. But this is also a thoughtful selection illustrating various aspects of Lakeland life: one shows a weary packhorse hauling a cartload of slate over the bleak heights of Honister Pass (Fig. 4), others portray farmers, fishermen and sightseers.¹¹ Like Wordsworth, Harriet Martineau became a victim of her own success. She complained bitterly of the invasion of her privacy by tourists, so much so that she felt compelled to leave the Lakes at the height of the summer.¹²



Fig. 4. 'Honister Crag', from Harriet Martineau's *Complete Guide to the English Lakes*.

'Elterwater's peaceful bowers'

Martineau and Wordsworth represent opposite ends of the spectrum of Picturesque guides, but Wordsworth stands virtually alone in his construction of nature as isolated from modernity. Other writers associated with the Picturesque comment freely on towns, local institutions and economic activities and are at pains to point out at least some of the manifold industrial features of the area. These have a long history: Neolithic greenstone axe head production once flourished in Great Langdale, the Romans undertook extensive forest clearance and built roads and forts, and from the 12th century, the Lake District became home to numerous industries. Evidence of lime and charcoal kilns and abandoned workings of slate, graphite, iron, lead, copper, haematite, graphite, zinc, silver, cobalt, tungsten wolfram and barites mines can be found in the remotest spots, and up to the 20th century the scenery was variously dotted with manufactories such as corn, paper and woollen mills, furnaces, and bobbin and gunpowder works, all with an accompanying record of child labour and appalling disasters. These were not in the main antiquated or backward production sites. Many adopted advanced technologies of their time and some played a crucial role in boosting the military and economic might of Britain. Fifty per cent of the bobbins required for British cotton and wool manufacture came from Lakeland, for instance, while graphite, excavated in the region as early as the 16th century, was primarily used in the manufacture of armaments. By the 18th century, turnpike trusts had ensured better maintenance of roads, and the impact of the French Revolution proved a further key factor in the industrial expansion of the Lake District and its accessibility for visitors. If industry and tourism reaped benefits from the establishment in 1790 of the Ordnance Survey, this was not the national mapping agency's prime purpose. It was set up as a military institution to facilitate the subjugation of Scottish clans and strengthen the country's defences against a feared invasion by ominously unpredictable post-Revolutionary France.

The Lake District's industrial heritage surfaces in the Picturesque vision in a variety of ways. Harriet Martineau, as may be expected, did not simply draw attention to local mines and quarries and those who laboured in them merely for their pictorial qualities. For others, such sites functioned mainly to enhance the obligatory rough and rugged elements of the view (as prescribed by the renowned Picturesque theorist Uvedale Price), and were best regarded with

awe from a safe distance. Wordsworth's *Guide* overlooked them, but Thomas West's guide found room for a few:¹³

And Elterwater's peaceful bowers;
Where the quarry's yawning scar
Hangs hideous in the midnight air!

Elterwater is no longer associated with a Gothic frisson, though it may come as a surprise to some readers that the Elterwater quarry (not to be found on any postcards of the area) still exists as an extensive working mine only a few hundred yards from the Merz Barn (Fig. 5); a detailed map will show a dozen abandoned slate mines in the vicinity. A recent report on the Lake District remarks dryly that 'the role of mining...in shaping the contemporary landscape is sometimes missed by the casual visitor', and emphasizes that the region has always been, and still is, a living and working cultural landscape.¹⁴ Tourism is by no means the only industry left in the Lake District, and it is instructive to read about Elterwater from the standpoint of the Burlington stone factory's Elterwater fact sheet, which waxes enthusiastic on abrasion resistance, compressive strength, modulus of rupture and breaking load at dowels, and estimates that the Elterwater quarry has reserves in excess of seventy years. The mine is unlikely to be the last in the region, for the National Park Authority has designated nearly one hundred Mineral Safeguarding Areas in Lakeland, including thirteen currently operational mines and quarries, to protect valuable mineral deposits and limit developments that would hinder their extraction in future.



Fig. 5. Two aerial views of the Burlington slate mine and Elterwater village.



Harriet Martineau's guidebook mentions Elterwater on account of another once dominant feature: its extensive gunpowder factory, founded on the site of mediaeval textile mills. In operation from 1824 to 1929, it was just one of the many in the Lake District that constituted the country's chief suppliers of blasting powder until the introduction of dynamite. Gunpowder manufacture relied not only on plentiful local resources such as charcoal, wood and water, but also on shipments of saltpetre from India, Chile and Germany and sulphur from Italy and Sicily, transported laboriously along rough tracks up to Elterwater and other factories from local (now silted-up) harbours such as Milnthorpe and Greenodd. Until the early 19th century British gunpowder also formed part of the infamous triangular slave trade. It was shipped to Africa and exchanged for slaves, who were then transported to America and exchanged yet again for cargoes of cotton and tea bound for Britain. Each side of the triangle involved slavery, for the gunpowder exported to Africa was mainly used by slave raiders, and it was slaves who worked on the American plantations. (Harriet Martineau, it may be noted here, was a well-informed, courageous and outspoken abolitionist.)

The Merz Barn

I would guess that most of us who are not locals seek out Kurt Schwitters' Merz Barn in Elterwater with Wordsworth's rather than Martineau's Lake District in mind. 'Wordsworth Country' has become synonymous with the region, just as Weimar is identified with Goethe and Giverny with Monet. 'Wordsworth Country' also triumphed when it came to delineating England's largest national park. Visitors seldom realize that the Lake District National Park is a carefully circumscribed (and in part actively landscaped) area of the Lake District proper that has been divested of most of the coastal strip, including the ports and communities that were instrumental in shaping inland routes and settlements from the earliest times.

Could it be that Wordsworth's filtered and fossilized Lake District still shapes our ideas today? Certainly many words that frequently crop up in the critical reception of the Merz Barn, such as 'landscape' and 'nature', are recognizably employed in the sense of Wordsworth's cultural constructs. When we read analyses of the Merz Barn wall that describe it as inspired by its environment, as reflecting the surrounding landscape or as inextricably adjoined to its context—in each case to be understood in terms of untouched nature and organic unity—it is worth asking, in view of the age-old industrial history of the region, and not least of Elterwater itself, if it is not pertinent to reconsider received ideas about the Merz Barn and its setting anew. (Whether all those who have written about it have actually seen it and its now detached end wall for themselves is another matter, but proponents of the Picturesque set a precedent here; when Dr Syntax presents his publisher with his completed manuscript, the latter retorts: 'What a fool's errand you have made/(I speak the language of the trade)/...We can get Tours – dont [sic] make wry faces/From those who never saw the places.'¹⁵)

We can account for a certain myopia that has set in within art-historical approaches to the Merz Barn by reminding ourselves that it was long after Schwitters' death that art historians first discovered it on Harry Pierce's estate in Elterwater, named Cylinders after the steel carbon containers used in gunpowder production. When I myself first tramped through the dripping undergrowth of an enchanting woodland wilderness to find it, I immediately fell under the spell of the tumbledown little barn with rusty tools stacked up inside and a solitary owl perched in the rafters. That was in the late 1980s; Mary Burkett, as Director of Abbot Hall Gallery in Kendal, had visited the site well before, in 1965, just previous to the transfer of the barn's end wall to the Hatton Gallery in Newcastle, but even by that time much had changed since Schwitters' death in 1948, and for her the long-neglected gardens bore the hallmarks of a fairy-tale world. She spoke for many of her contemporaries when she described her first encounter with the barn:¹⁶

It was a still day and a couple of students and I pushed open the old wooden gates and went up the path...We cautiously pushed open the door. I can remember well how we all stood still with a mixture of shock, awe and delight. In front of us was a bench on which

there were a few paint brushes, a palette, a paint rag and other objects. Beyond was the Merz Wall glowing in the faint sunlight that filtered through the cobweb-covered windows. It was such a strong atmosphere that we whispered. It was as if the artist had slipped out and would come back at any moment, yet he had died ten years previously. Mr Pierce had kept the barn carefully and not moved anything.

Other early commentators, schooled in the niceties of mainstream Modernism, were utterly baffled by what they saw—nothing new, for since 1919 critics had been bewildered by the bothersome no-man's land between diverse disciplines that Schwitters called Merz. Some art historians sidestepped potentially thorny stylistic issues by discussing the barn from the perspective of earlier or later decades. Roland Alley, an early visitor, described its extant constructions as in 'Schwitters' De Stijl manner in low relief; Kenneth Coutts-Smith maintained that they foreshadowed works of the 1950s.¹⁷ With few exceptions, their approaches have been reflected in examinations of the Merz Barn ever since. (Surprisingly, the Barn has seldom been discussed within the context of what the avant-garde were doing during the art-historically neglected period of the 1940s.)

Those who have considered the Merz Barn in terms of the early 20th century avant-garde have often disparaged it as 'primitivist', 'Expressionist', 'organic', or 'primordial'. This dismissive attitude, prevalent in the writings of both Werner Schmalenbach and Ernst Schwitters, meant that the third Merzbau was virtually ignored even in a major exhibition of Schwitters' late work in 1985 at Museum Ludwig in Cologne. It was John Elderfield's study of Schwitters in the same year that prompted a more constructive approach to the Merz Barn:¹⁸

Schwitters existing (urban) vocabulary had to be severely ruptured to tell of his new surroundings. The damage this did to the quality of his art has certainly been exaggerated [...] after an astonishingly productive career, risks were taken that brought a higher percentage of failed works than previously, but which opened new and daring avenues hitherto little unexplored.

The broader understanding of the avant-garde that emerged in the late 1980s also triggered a radical change in attitudes towards the Merzbauten as a whole, which now came to be perceived as heralds of a post-modern sensibility or as forerunners of conceptual, installation and site-specific art. Undertones of unease, disappointment, disapproval or apology nonetheless continue to sidle into discussions of the Merz Barn, possibly because of an oft-quoted account by Schwitters himself. In a letter to his friend and patron Carola Giedion-Welcker, written at the very time he started work on the barn, he stated that:¹⁹

[Pierce] has interested the government in [Cylinders] and later it will be National Trust [property]. He lets the weeds grow but makes a composition out of them by small touches. Just as I make art out of rubbish. Merzbau 3 will later stand in the middle of a protected area with a wonderful view in all directions and bound up with nature.

A certain caution is required here, however. What sort of nature was Schwitters talking about if Cylinders was to be a 'protected area' containing 'compositions', under the aegis of a nationwide organisation committed to strategic planning and hedged in by the usual profusion of rules and regulations (including, in the case of the National Trust, a strict acquisitions policy that would have deemed Pierce's project quite unacceptable).²⁰ This letter expresses Schwitters' hopes for the future, and his dream setting for the barn turns out to be a highly urbane version of nature entailing a goodly portion of hard physical labour that would have been quite foreign to Wordsworth's readers. (We might also bear in mind here that German coffee-table books have no scruples about referring to a reservoir surrounded by tarred and numbered pathways, leisure centres and forestry office plantations as *Natur pur*.)

Cylinders

It was only five years before Schwitters began work on his final Merzbau that Harry Pierce, a retired landscape gardener, had purchased a grim, marshy wasteland of boulders, rough

vegetation and derelict buildings in the hamlet of Elterwater and had begun the gruelling task of preparing over twenty-two acres of ground for cultivation, inspired by a vision of graceful gardens and woodlands in 'one of the most beautiful valleys in England'.²¹ By the time Schwitters arrived, Pierce had drawn up general plans for the whole site, established a working farm and completed what he called the 'Augean' task of clearing out the rotting buildings, but the rest of the estate was barely beginning to take shape. To soften the landscape gardener's dreaded prospect of bare newness he had planted flowers, shrubs and saplings, but with mixed results, and four years after Schwitters' death he was still referring to Cylinders as an experiment whose outcome was by no means certain. The disasters and personal tragedies of the post-war years even led him to describe its history as 'largely a tale of woe'. Yet despite the many setbacks, the atmosphere of the place never failed to exert its charm: it conveyed, he wrote, 'great seclusion, a life untroubled...It is a strange feeling in these days of strain and anxiety and it exercises a spell that is not easy to describe'.

Pierce's plans were firmly embedded in the tradition of the 18th century Picturesque landscaped garden and he was acutely aware of the Picturesque's sticking point; the extent to which artifice should modify existing terrain. 'My main idea was only to plant what would look happy in its surroundings and flourish with little attention,' he wrote, 'finally giving the impression of having been planted by Nature: at the same time I wished to introduce a few exotic subjects that...would not offend the nicer critics but would surprise and interest the visitor.' He emphasizes, as Schwitters did in his various Merzbauten, the value of concealment—'all cannot be seen at one glance'—allowing visitors to enjoy 'the continual delight of turning a corner and discovering some fresh view point'. (He did not go as far as incorporating pseudo-ruins or follies into Cylinders, as favoured by the Picturesque, but perhaps we may regard the Merz Barn as a 20th century equivalent.) Pierce meticulously positioned each plant to best effect, while not ruling out serendipitous growths; wild heathers, he wrote, spread among cultivated varieties 'far more happily than any hand could arrange them'. Schwitters was, surprisingly, right about the inclusion of weeds in horticultural compositions, for Pierce mentions preserving a spectacular patch of bracken around a tree stump. As for the projected wild flower garden, it proved far more difficult to plant and maintain than a formal one. Nature in the raw evidently required frequent pep talks, constant surveillance, and a modicum of bullying, for Pierce writes of begging wild flowers 'to accept naturalization', adding that 'they will be watched with care and exhorted to find a home where they may flourish'.



Merz Barn on the Cylinders estate, Elterwater, Langdale, 1948. Photograph: Tate Britain/Sprengel Museum Hannover, Kurt Schwitters Archive

Many of these developments were still to come when Pierce and Schwitters met, and Schwitters found no rural idyll at Cylinders in 1947. Pierce's grandson Edward Thorp has recently pointed out that this was a busy, hard-working place where everyone was expected to labour for long hours,²² and Pierce himself complained that he rarely had time to admire the splendid views that Cylinders commanded. Schwitters was also well aware that up to 1926, this had been part of an industrial site, for plentiful evidence of the old gunpowder works was visible, and indeed still is, in the present-day Langdale Estate just a stone's throw from the barn. (This luxurious holiday complex has even produced a Gunpowder Walk leaflet that directs visitors to the numerous relics of the former factory scattered around the whole park.) We may also note here that the barn itself was not, as is so often stated, by any means old (as in 'old barn', with its tempting connotations of rural, old-fashioned and quaint), but had been a hay store hurriedly erected during the war and was therefore quite new, though it stood on the foundations of a gunpowder store destroyed for safety reasons after the factory closed.

What a completed Merz Barn would have looked like is anyone's guess, given Schwitters' enduring search for fresh impetus, his fascination with the borderline, his urge for balance and his readiness for renegotiation. In his own estimation, he would have needed two or three more years to finish it, and no definite plans are extant. But as with all the Merzbauten, Schwitters retained the working method that he had outlined in the very first description of his studio column in his Merz journal of 1931 (*Merz 21, erstes Veilchenheft*)—a system based not on any abstract concept, but on response to the given: 'So I find some object...take it with me, glue it on, paste it over, paint it according to the rhythm of the total effect, and one day it turns out that some new path has to be created...As a result, there are everywhere objects that overlap, either partially or wholly, as an explicit sign of their invalidation as individual units.' Characteristically, he would take as his starting-point found objects in a found location far removed from the haunts of the avant-garde and build up a sculptural environment informed by features of the immediate surroundings, however adverse or unfavourable. As the barn itself was constructed of rough stones picked up from round about—Harry Pierce's waste products, so to speak—this created a jagged and uneven surface that enabled Schwitters to insert objects from the land around into its deep crevices. There were pebbles, twigs, gentians, and refuse in the form of fragments of man-made articles: binder twine, a slate log splitter, a metal window frame, the rose of a child's watering can, a fragment of cartwheel, a china egg, a piece of guttering, part of gold mirror frame, a metal grid, and a rubber ball. Pierce also lists a picture frame, a twisted drain cover, a damaged drain pipe and old rings. An urban idiom would have been out of place in the Merz Barn, but not an industrial one, and this is just what we find. Evidently the Elterwater quarry did not escape Schwitters' notice, for according to Hilde Goldschmidt, he incorporated found materials from slate mines into the barn's constructions.²³ Pierce also stated that Schwitters used concrete blocks to build the wall or walls that projected into the barn, though as he destroyed all evidence of these after Schwitters' death, this is no longer ascertainable.

Schwitters was as ever concerned to draw attention to process—in England he studiously disregarded complaints about the brushstrokes visible on his landscapes—and tool marks are clearly discernible on the plaster he modelled on to the coarse dry-stone walling. All the Merzbauten provided ironic commentaries upon themselves, and Schwitters was obviously gratified by the ambivalence of the completed surface; Pierce relates that he was delighted with the resulting leaf-like patterns. If the final effect of the remaining wall does indeed, as Lloyd Gibson argues elsewhere, reflect a biomorphic *Zeitgeist* that also crops up in the series of colourful abstractions that Schwitters painted from 1930 onwards, the details—harsh edges, sharp angles, rusty nails and blood-red elements—bear the marks of the human and transient that provided the oxygen of Merz. Carola Giedion-Welcker, Schwitters' friend and patron, expressed it thus: 'Weathering – Schwittering', [*Verwitterung – Verschwitterung*], as he once said, to give things their inner lustre, their tragic beauty; patina, the incursion of time, a sign of

the transitory nature of all that exists.²⁴ One of the few art historians to have seen Schwitters' original Merzbau, she remarked of it in a tribute written for his 60th birthday, 'In Schwitters' case the idyll is somewhat eerie, for beneath, one senses a shattered world, coming apart at the seams.'²⁵ The essence of his work, she continued, lay in his elevation of the absurd and inconsequential to the level of an artistic medium to effect an unmediated, deeply sensuous mindfulness of the *comédie humaine*. The artist received her article just as he was beginning work on the barn, and in his elated reply he wrote that it was the best that had ever been written about him; 'einfach marvellous'.²⁶

Myths and legends

A further assumption that goes hand-in-hand with commentaries about the supposedly regressive Merz Barn is that it provided Schwitters with a personal refuge or a retreat, and thus somehow betrays all the 20th century avant-garde stood for; one study even describes it as a 'haven of withdrawal and site of inner emigration'.²⁷ Yet all the Merzbauten were designed to function as interactive spaces, and it depressed Schwitters beyond measure that through a series of hostile circumstances, the ground-breaking sculptural interiors he conceived for the public domain were one after another either condemned to the private sphere or, in the case of his abortive plan to build a Merzbau in the United States or in Switzerland, doomed from the outset.

The lack of a protected space of organized culture such as a museum that would have automatically identified the Merzbauten as 'art', while integral to Schwitters' endeavours to create a fluid interface between art and life, have opened them up to a whole palette of conflicting interpretations. They were, however, never in any sense strongholds or havens. In the case of the first Merzbau, to construct—and continually expand on—a large and conspicuously avant-garde experiment under the vigilant eyes of the Nazis and exhibit photos of it MoMA in New York is hardly commensurate with the idea of a hermitage. In Norwegian exile, Schwitters often expressed his distress at the lack of visitors to the Lysaker Merzbau, constructed by himself at considerable risk to life and limb and, moreover, in the face of bitter opposition from the local authorities. Schwitters was understandably overjoyed at the prospect of creating a third Merzbau that would be open to the public and not constantly under threat, and Cylinders offered him a final chance to realize his ambitions, for as he put it himself, 'there is so little time'.²⁸ The barn was quite the opposite of a haven of inner emigration, for in the few months that he worked on it, often in atrocious weather, he was in great pain and gravely ill. Despite the efforts of his small band of helpers, his final collapse in December was arguably brought on by these protracted extremes of physical strain.

One might question, therefore, where the idea of the Merz Barn as purely private activity or sanctuary comes from, for there is nothing in the sources to back it up. It is, however, perfectly explicable for those for who do not see the Lake District National Park as a staged natural wilderness (Fig. 6) but as an aesthetic sphere infused with Wordsworthian versions of the pristine beauties of nature and unspoiled landscape in which the needs of local communities and the realm of everyday activities take at best second place. This attitude leads in turn to the supposition that an escape from Modernism was what Schwitters sought, found and eventually implemented in the constructions of his last Merzbau. To impose a Wordsworthian agenda of nature on Schwitters from without soon leads to a distortion, not to say falsification, of what contemporary sources tell us about the Merz Barn.

There are of course numerous reasons for preserving areas of outstanding natural beauty; many who read this will gain untold pleasure and sustenance from such places and will share Schwitters' and Pierce's love of Lakeland. Judging by their efforts in Elterwater, both men would also have sympathised with Harriet Martineau's pragmatic, serviceable approach to nature as habitat rather than with Wordsworth's interpretation of nature as a retreat from social obligations and the world of work. The ingenuous safeguarding of scenic leisure areas

that diverts attention from sites of urban decay is no longer sustainable, even more so in view of the new century's accelerated search for so-called 'green' energies, and to prioritize the interests of 'nature-lovers' over the requirements of the local population ultimately leads to the emptying of communities such as Elterwater, as any of its few remaining residents will confirm. 'Heaven preserve us from the preservers', a 20th century Lake poet and Cumbrian native pray pleaded, in a heartfelt appeal to protect Lakeland from being 'smothered in good taste, embalmed in admiration'.²⁹

Misled, entertained or challenged?

Returning to Elderfield's thesis that Schwitters' late work bears comparison with the Picturesque, there are certainly some parallels to be found between the Picturesque and Merz, as far as it at all possible to generalize about such hodgepodes of wide-ranging, fuzzy and ambiguous ideas. Both were born in a time of massive social upheaval, rapid advances in communications and the breakdown of traditional hierarchies. The Picturesque was attracted to the ruined and disintegrating; decay became a fundamental component in the playground of contending forces that was Merz. Much in the dynamics of the Merz of interwar years is reminiscent of the Picturesque's pivotal position between Enlightenment and Romanticism: the Picturesque, as we have seen, could effortlessly cross boundaries between art, literature and landscape gardening, while Merz thrived on flexibility and interdisciplinarity. Both cultivated uncertainty and doubt, and their borders were so imprecise that they could absorb and generate effects in many other spheres. Both were able to blend opposites – the natural and artificial, the formal and irregular – because their focus lay on shifting relationships between their different elements rather than on the elements themselves. Like the Picturesque, Merz was not designed to provide answers but rather irritate from within conventional discourses by questioning or undermining rigid control mechanisms. As one study of the Picturesque concludes: 'Deciding whether one is being misled, entertained or challenged is an integral part of the picturesque experience.'³⁰ We might well replace the word picturesque with Merz Barn here, with the proviso that Schwitters renders decisions superfluous.



Fig. 6. Derwentwater Foreshore Project, 2012 (photo courtesy of Stella Birchall).

Notes

- 1 Current Appeals: Claife Station: <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/hawkshead-and-claife-viewing-station-viewing-station/donate-now/>
- 2 Elderfield 1985, p. 215.
- 3 West 1796, p 55-9.
- 4 Ibid., p. 12.
- 5 Combe 1815, p. 11.
- 6 Thomas West's rambling (excuse the pun) narrative mentions over twenty stations, and more were added in later editions of the book. See <http://booksinwernicke.blogspot.de/> (keyword Picturesque).
- 7 The Guide was also appended to a volume of Wordsworth's poems published in 1920.
- 8 Wordsworth 1835. Subsequent quotations (with page numbers in brackets) are from this edition. The word tourist was in use by 1772 and tourism by 1811.
- 9 Named Great Gavel and Scawfell in the original; Wordsworth envisages a position at the very heart of the tourist Lake District.
- 10 Oshikawa 2010, p. 102.
- 11 Since the 17th century, packhorses had negotiated the steep and notoriously treacherous route from Honister slate mine (now a popular visitor attraction) down to Piel Harbour (which lies outside the Lake District National Park).
- 12 Martineau 1877, p 266-7. Martineau gives an amusing account of tourists lurking behind bushes in her garden and staring at her through the windows.
- 13 From a lengthy and fervent poem entitled Written at Ambleside, Westmorland, in the Summer of 1797 by the Rev. James Plumtree, appended to a later edition of West's Guide.
- 14 The Lake District National Park Landscape Character Assessment and Guidelines report, Chris Blandford Associates, 2008. The first large-scale industry of the Lake District was established in 1560, when German miners were brought to Keswick to work in the copper and lead mines.
- 15 Combe 1812, p. 203 (see note 5).
- 16 Kurt Schwitters Society Newsletter, September 2012, p. 5. Pierce had altered more than she realized, demolishing a central wall immediately after Schwitters' death and adding his own plaster curlicues to the end wall.
- 17 Alley 1958, p. 15; Coutts-Smith 1970, p. 130.
- 18 Elderfield 1985, p. 239. Elderfield had previously published several articles on the barn.
- 19 [Er hat die Regierung dafür interessiert und es wird später National Trust. Er lässt das Unkraut wachsen aber macht durch small touches eine Komposition daraus. Genau wie ich aus rubbish Kunst mache [...]] Der Merzbau 3 wird später im Centrum des Naturschutzparkes stehen mit einer wunderbaren Aussicht nach allen Seiten und verbunden mit der Natur.] Letter to Carola Giedion-Welcker, 19.8.47 in Giedion-Welcker 1973, 506. Pierce's death in 1966 marked the cessation of the Cylinders project.
- 20 Schwitters' undated statement on the future of the Merz Barn expresses the hope that an art institution might take it over. 'Suggestions for the agreement [sic.] Pierce - Schwitters concerning Merz Barn', Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hannover.
- 21 This and subsequent citations come from Harry Pierce, Cylinders Farm, Elterwater, Ambleside, Cumbria. An Experiment, ca. 1952, unpublished typescript, edited by Celia Larner. Many thanks to Celia for permission to quote from this booklet.
- 22 Kurt Schwitters Society Newsletter, October 2011, p. 7.
- 23 Hodin 1974, p. 61. Gwyneth Alban-Davis wrote that he collected material for the barn from the site of the gunpowder factory opposite Cylinders; Alban-Davis 1992, p. 7.
- 24 [Verwitterung – Verschwitterung' wie er einst meinte, um den Dingen ihren inneren Glanz zu geben, ihre tragische Schönheit; die Patina, Einbruch der Zeit, Zeichen der Vergänglichkeit alles Existenten.] Giedion-Welcker 1973, p. 283.
- 25 [Die Idylle bei Schwitters ist etwas gespenstig, denn man spürt eine aus ihren Fugen geratene, erschütterte Welt darunter, durchsetzt von Krieg, Inflation, von sozialen Spannungen.] Ibid, 286.
- 26 Letter of 19.8.47, *ibid*, 506.
- 27 [...zum Hort des Rückzugs und zur Stätte einer inneren Emigration.] Elger 1986, 254.
- 28 Alban-Davis 1992, p. 10. Schwitters had already made a will during a serious illness in July 1947.
- 29 Nicholson 1963, p. 180. Nicholson called public attention to industrial coastal towns excluded from the boundaries of the Lake District National Park when it was formed in 1951.
- 30 Robinson 1991, p. xii.

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See also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsjDe3eUGm4> and <http://www.countryside-catchup.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/take-steps-to-station.html>