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Lynda Pratt

The ‘entire man of letters’?:

*Robert Southey, Correspondence, and Romantic Incompleteness*

‘[I]ncompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin’ have been described as central to ‘both the theory and the actuality of Romanticism’.¹ In contrast, accounts of Robert Southey, now acknowledged as one of the most high profile and controversial of Romantic period writers, often stress his completeness as key. It is an emphasis captured in the subtitle of W. A. Speck’s important 2006 study, which itself invokes a phrase originated by Byron: *Robert Southey: Entire Man of Letters*.² There is no doubt that Southey’s published works contribute to this sense of entirety. They span a wide range of genres and fill thousands of pages. Yet their range and vastness masks a complex situation, one in which incompleteness played an important part.³ For Southey, not being ‘entire’ was at best problematic and at worst unacceptable. He criticised those, like William Taylor, whose ‘information upon all subjects was very

incomplete’.\textsuperscript{4} Writings by others that were ‘unavoidably incomplete’ were, in turn, dismissed as substandard and unfit for purpose (\textit{CLRS}, 1727). Paradoxically, Southey was himself beset by the incompleteness he abhorred, and admitted that his own published oeuvre was anything but complete. This was, he explained, something for which he was not responsible. Rather his writings had been subjected to the depredations and mutilations of editors, printers and publishers, a process that Southey compared to castration (e.g. \textit{CLRS}, 2924, 2977). This essay will draw on the new edition of Southey’s \textit{Collected Letters} to explore this unfamiliar conjunction of Southey and incompleteness and its implications for understanding both of his writings and of the culture within which he worked.

Southey’s longest and loudest laments are to be found in his letters. Yet, ironically, at first sight, the very size of his correspondence both undermines his complaints and reinforces the familiar narrative of Southeyan completeness. Around 7500 letters by Southey have survived. A significantly larger total than is the case with the correspondence of his direct contemporaries Coleridge, 1819 letters, Dorothy and William Wordsworth, 2283 letters, and Jane Austen, 161 letters, respectively in the standard editions. Vast in numbers, Southey’s letters were sent to over 300 correspondents, covered a huge range of subjects and brought together the private man and the public polemicist, thus bridging his domestic and working lives. Correspondence, particularly after his move to Keswick in 1803, played a key role in developing and sustaining Southey’s familial, professional and social networks. At the same time, letters sent under his own name and pseudonymously to newspapers

and periodicals allowed him to intervene in local and national debates (e.g. *CLRS*, 152, 2616).

Yet, as this essay will demonstrate, Southey’s letters are an invaluable but complex resource. They subvert the image of the prolix, ‘entire’ author who always completed everything he started and reveal a career that was significantly more fractured and complicated than is often thought. Furthermore, their physical survival is an important reminder of the incomplete nature of all the Romantic period correspondence that has come down to us. Southey’s letters therefore raise important questions about our own use and understanding of letters. They make us think about how we reflect and respond to the fact that what is left to us is a fragment of something much larger and fundamentally irrecoverable.

Letter writing was an important part of Southey’s life. He was an indefatigable correspondent who produced letters on almost a daily basis. From 1803, the remoteness of his Keswick home from family, friends and contacts in the book trade and the public sphere meant that correspondence was an essential way of sustaining old and developing new personal and professional bonds. Southey’s letters provide important evidence of his writing life. Indeed they mirror it, their numbers peaking in the 1810s, 1820s and early 1830s, when his career was at its height. They tell us what he read and when he read it. They make it possible to track the development of individual works, from idea to printed page, and through subsequent editions. They reveal his negotiations with publishers and printers. They show his response to contemporary reviews and criticism of his work. They provide important evidence of his at times fraught relationships with contemporaries, of his connections with
international writers, and of his attempts to foster the careers of younger or less high profile authors, including Caroline Bowles, Henry Kirke White and Herbert Knowles.

The letters also do something else. They offer a major corrective to the idea of Southey completing everything he started and show that incompletion and incompleteness played an important role in his literary career. The Southey that emerges from his correspondence is fizzing with ideas for new works. In 1796, for example, he produced a list of all the things he wanted to write. It included a romance, a ‘Norwegian’ poem, a novel, and four tragedies (CLRS, 168). His energy and enthusiasm did not diminish with age or increasing commitments. In 1820, he admitted that, whilst working hard on a number of other projects, he was simultaneously ‘proceeding at fits & starts with my American poem,—reading East Indian History to fit myself for writing the life of Warren Hastings, —& preparing for a Life of George Fox, upon the scale of that of Wesley’ (CLRS, 3521). Southey was, then, an inveterate planner and projector, though, inevitably, many of his proposed writings, including all of those listed in 1796 and 1820 above, were not finished.

These incomplete writings cover all aspects of Southey’s writing life. Some ideas collapsed quickly. A proposed selection of the poems of James Dusautoy, who had died whilst an undergraduate at Cambridge, was halted when Southey decided that it would not suit ‘common readers’ who ‘read only to be amused’ and to whom ‘these pieces would appear crude and extravagant, because they would only see what is, without any reference to what might have been’.

An edition of the voluminous writings of Elton Hamond was also rapidly abandoned, this time on the grounds that

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their ‘morbid matter’ would be positively injurious to a susceptible reading public (CLRS, 3443). Other works did not progress beyond plans in Southey’s notebooks. These included an ode for the coronation of George IV, to be composed, or, as it turned out, not composed, in Southey’s official capacity as Poet Laureate, and a play on ‘The Days of Queen Mary [Tudor]’. However, others came much closer to completion. These included prose works such as a multi-volume ‘History of Portugal’, a ‘moral & literary history of England’, a travel book based on the journal kept during his 1817 European tour, biographies of George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, and of the educationalist Andrew Bell, and a novel ‘The Doctor’. They also encompassed poetical works such as ‘Oliver Newman’, ‘Robin Hood’, a sequence of thirty inscriptions on the Peninsular War and a long poem in blank verse.

Southey titled the latter ‘Consolation’. As his correspondence reveals, it emerged out of a traumatic event, the death of his nine-year-old son Herbert on 17 April 1816. As Southey explained, ‘no equal affliction can ever again befall me for here was the very heart & life of xxx my happiness & xxxx my hopes’ (CLRS, 2756). ‘Consolation’ was conceived by 1 May 1816 as ‘a monument in verse for him [Herbert] & for myself which may make our memories inseparable’ (CLRS, 2776, 2761). It was to be … in blank verse, as desultory in its subject as the Night Thoughts or the Task, but in a more elevated strain than the latter, & in a happier one than the former; – describing my own habits, views & feelings, – what they have been, & what they are.

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The poem opened up a possible new direction for Southey, indicating a move inward to his ‘own’ self rather than outward to what he regarded as the ills of contemporary society. As such it was a marked departure from the public voice he had adopted since taking up the Poet Laureateship in late 1813. The surviving fragments of ‘Consolation’ reveal the ways in the plan was developed. An opening invocation conjures up both the ‘Daughters of Jove and of Mnemosyne’, the nine muses of classical myth, and Southey’s personal poetic heroes, explicitly invoking Homer, Milton, Dante and Spenser. (It also echoes, but does not name, Milton and Wordsworth.) Their assistance is required to prepare Southey for the task to come:

… For no strain
Of querulous regret I ask your aid,
Impatient of the chastening hand of Heaven;
But rather that your power may discipline
Thoughts that will rise—may teach me to control
The course of grief and in discursive flight
Leading my spirit, sometimes through the past,
Sometimes with bold yet not irreverent reach
Into the region of futurity,
Abstract her from the present sense of woe.

The lines that follow reinforce the focus on the self, as Southey begins to confront his own ‘past’ and own ‘futurity’. They describe recent events: his joyous return home after a visit to the battlefield of Waterloo, the death of Herbert, and Southey’s grief for his lost son (LPW, I, 389-90). The largest surviving part of ‘Consolation’ breaks
off here, but a series of smaller verse fragments and prose notes consolidate the exploration of Southey’s life, particularly his youthful responsiveness to the

Beauties of Nature,—the passion of my youth,

Nurs’d up and ripen’d to a settled love,

Whereto my heart is wedded …

Feeling at Westminster, when summer evening sent a sadness to my heart, and I sate pining for green fields, and banks of flowers, and running streams,—or dreaming of Avon and her rocks and woods.

(LPW, I, 365).

Southey here invokes the sites of his childhood, both Westminster School, where he had been a pupil from 1788-91, and the river Avon and its environs, close to his family home in Bristol. This turn to blank verse autobiography, to personal retrospect and to the natural world draws tantalizing links between the use of the same verse form and of strikingly similar themes in another poem intended to be published after its author’s death—Wordsworth’s The Prelude, with which Southey was acquainted.

Yet whilst Wordsworth builds to an epiphany of the imagination (the subject of his poem is the ‘growth of my own mind’), Southey works towards something else. He had found ‘Consolation’ in religion. The correspondence he produced whilst working on the poem uses ‘consolation’ almost exclusively in this sense, thus making the connection clear: ‘the only consolation is to be found, in a deep & habitual feeling of devotion’; and ‘consolation can be found only in religion, — & there I find it’ (CLRS, 2749, 2801). In a confessional letter of 1820, sent to Robert Gooch, whose five-year-old son had recently died, Southey claimed that the loss of Herbert and, earlier, of two infant daughters, had taught him to see the error of ‘loose belief’, something he would
never had done if ‘God had not chastened me’. He went on to explain that as a result of these bereavements

I sought for consolation in religion,—& more than consolation was given me: —strength & hope & assurance,—the peace which passeth all understanding, & that calm abiding happiness which nothing in this world can give or can take away.

(CLRS, 3485)

Southey’s own view of religion was deeply personal, he admitted that he was uncomfortable with any specific label: ‘when dissenters talk of the Establishment, they make me feel like a high Churchman, —& when I get among high churchmen, I am ready to take shelter in dissent’ (CLRS, 2749). His poem ‘Consolation’ would have made that connection between himself and his faith even more clear.

Although its subject was deeply personal, Southey aimed to finish and publish ‘Consolation’, probably as a ‘post-obit’ (CLRS, 2909, 2938, 2919). Murray offered 1000 guineas for the completed poem, though Southey thought it worth twice as much (CLRS, 3201, 2919). Yet nothing came of this. His letters suggest why. In June 1816 Southey explained his work on ‘Consolation’ was impossibly painful and had therefore been held back: ‘my eyes & my head suffer too much in the occupation for me to pursue it as yet’ (CLRS, 2810). In October of the same year he felt no better, needing to ‘refrain from it a while longer’ (CLRS, 2853). By March 1817 he had still ‘not recovered heart enough to proceed with it’ (CLRS, 2938). The poem was abandoned unfinished, probably by 1818. Fragments of it were published after Southey’s death, in 1845 and 1850, respectively. Southey’s poem on his own life was then contemplated, begun and not completed. The longest surviving section
concludes with Herbert’s death, suggesting that Southey was frozen in his grief, unable in 1816-7 to move beyond that and to explore his own life and faith. Within 2-3 years, his autobiographical impulses found a new direction. They were diverted away from blank verse and into a series of eighteen letters. Seventeen of these were sent to John May, one of his closest friends, between July 1820 and January 1826. An eighteenth letter-fragment was never sent. They were probably intended as a memoir or record to be used by an official biographer and Southey made copies, suggesting their significance to him. The letters are important records of Southey’s early life and of his early passion for books and writing, and have been heavily relied upon by biographers and critics. Whereas ‘Consolation’ would have dealt with Southey’s religious beliefs, the letters provide information of a different kind. They are packed with details about his family history, his early years and everyday life in Bath and Bristol in the late eighteenth century. Yet they too are incomplete: they break off abruptly in 1788 whilst recounting his time at Westminster School.

Personal decisions not to complete an individual work, poetic or epistolary, were one matter. However, on occasion, a work being either incomplete or not as ‘entire’ as Southey wished it to be was the result of factors beyond his control, in particular the actions of his publishers. Southey’s publishing career had its roots in the south west of England. Richard Cruttwell of Bath issued his first collection, Poems, a co-production with Robert Lovell, in late 1794. In 1795 Southey moved to a new publisher, the Bristol-based Joseph Cottle. The latter was ambitious to build a portfolio of regional talent and thus to raise the profile of regional publishing. He offered Southey very generous terms for his next work, Joan of Arc, and aimed to make it ‘the handsomest

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7 Although Southey had written two Acts of the topical The Fall of Robespierre, published by Benjamin Flower in 1794, it appeared under Coleridge’s name only.
book that Bristol had ever yet sent forth’ (*RSPW*, I, 201).\(^8\) Cottle determined on issuing it in quarto, and ordered in special paper and a new font of type for the purpose. His beneficence did not stop here. Whilst he remained Southey’s publisher, Cottle printed special presentation copies of all the latter’s new works for Southey to present to family and friends. He also underwrote Southey’s 1795-6 trip to Portugal by engaging to publish a book of his travels, which duly appeared in 1797. Southey was not always grateful. He was frequently cutting about Cottle’s own poetic ambitions and circulated unflattering anecdotes about his behaviour. In 1796 he described how Cottle had ‘begged with most friendly devotion’ to have one of the early manuscript versions of *Joan of Arc* for himself, and joked how the publisher probably valued it ‘as much as a Monk does the parings of his tutelary Saints great toe nail’ (*CLRS*, 149; *RSPW*, I, l). Whilst Cottle’s generosity and willingness to accommodate his demands were of immense value during Southey’s early career, they also had a downside. They gave Southey a distorted impression of the relationship between writers and the booktrade, particularly when it came to an author’s ability to dictate terms for his publications. Cottle thus spoiled him for working with any other publisher.

After Cottle gave up his publishing business in the late 1790s, Southey had two main publishers: Thomas Norton Longman and his partners, and John Murray. As his letters reveal, with both firms Southey found himself less in control of the relationship and of his writings, both finished and projected, than he would have liked. Whilst his publishers often proposed new works to him and in return accepted some of his ideas, they did not, to his frustration, take up all of them. In January 1820 Southey suggested

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‘an experiment’ to Longman, this was ‘to print one of my poems with or without the notes, in a small cheap form’, thus making them available to ‘a whole [new] class of customers, who never buy books till they are lowered in price to their means’ (CLRS, 3426). For Southey, the revenue generated by such new editions was crucial at a point when the declining sales of older works were impacting on his income. Longman and his partners, however, did not follow up on the idea. Nor, indeed, did they approve a suggestion for a new edition of Blaise de Monluc’s Commentaires, to be edited by Southey. Such an edition would, they explained, ‘not answer at these times’.9 The project was therefore abandoned.

Things were no easier with Murray, particularly in his role as proprietor of the Quarterly Review. In 1816 Murray asked Southey to write an article on the West Indies. Southey accepted, and made clear his intention of concluding ‘with reference to the Registry Bill’, the 1815 Parliamentary Bill that proposed the registration of all slaves in British colonies and was violently opposed by plantation owners and other supporters of slavery. Murray, ‘well pleased’ with Southey’s response, collected ‘abundant pamphletts’ for his use. However, he made the mistake of assuming that Southey would take the part of ‘the Planters & Slave Smugglers’. As soon as he realised that Southey was on the side of the abolitionists, even though these included two of the Laureate’s personal bêtes noires Francis Jeffrey and Henry Brougham, Murray withdrew his offer (CLRS, 2833). Southey, angry at losing the chance to write on a subject of importance both to himself and to the country, privately accused the publisher of self interest, of either having ‘West Indian property or connections’ or having ‘submitted his journal to some undue influence—I pretend not to say what’

His publishers’ handling of completed works also tested Southey, particularly when these were not put into the public domain in precisely the form that he wanted. Especially contentious was the treatment by Murray and his associates of the articles Southey produced for the *Quarterly Review*. These were routinely censored and rewritten without consultation or consent, something Southey bitterly resented. As he explained in 1816, William Gifford, the *Quarterly’s* editor from 1809-24, ‘is at his old work of castrating my reviews, against which I must resolutely & decidedly remonstrate’ (*CLRS*, 3833). The difficulty was that remonstrating had little effect. Gifford insisted that he simply ‘could not always print what … [Southey] could write’, even if it were true. Moreover, he cited ‘the growing success’ of the *Quarterly* as proof of his ‘good management’ and the rightness of his practice (*CLRS*, 3703).

Material rejected by Gifford included Southey’s appeal to the followers of Thomas Spence to ‘attempt to demonstrate the utility of their schemes in a manner that will bring no injuries to others’. 10 This should have appeared in an 1816 essay on ‘Parliamentary Reform’ written at a time when the *Quarterly* did not want to be seen even partially to tolerate the views of a revolutionary group. 11 It did not. Instead it remained unpublished until Southey reinstated the passage in the version he published in 1832 as ‘On the state of Public Opinion, and the Political Reformers’. 12 Gifford’s revisions cut both ways. They also moderated the more extreme manifestations of

Southey’s conservatism. The original text for ‘Parliamentary Reform’ insisted that ‘Two measures’ were ‘imperatively required’ to safeguard society:

… first, that Lord Grenville’s bill against seditious assemblies be revived;
secondly, that the punishment for seditious libel be made such as shall prevent a repetition of the offence, .. that punishment should be exile from the country which the offender has endeavoured to disturb.13

This remained unpublished until 1832. In the version issued by the Quarterly in 1816, Southey’s paragraph was substituted with two less inflammatory pages written by Gifford. This substantial insertion concluded that the duty of the government was to ‘save both the poor and rich from the common curse and misery of a Revolution’ (Southey, 1816, 276-8 [278]).14 In effect, Southey had become the unwilling co-author of his own article.

Southey fumed at the ‘mutilation’ of his work and pointed out that such editorial changes were ‘stupid’, reducing what he had written to ‘nonsense’ (CLRS, 3735). There was, however, a bigger point at stake. Southey did not just detest Gifford’s exercise of his ‘editorial authority’ (CLRS, 3537). He felt that the reshaping of his work to fit the format of the review had much larger consequences:

I cannot speak out, as I would do, tho by so doing I should serve the Government with far greater effect. This passage must be softened, & that must be expunged,—till sometimes a paragraph appears so mutilated in argument & so emasculated in style, that I scarcely recognize my own writing …

(CLRS, 3386)

13 Southey, Essays, Moral and Political, I. p. 422.
14 Southey, Essays, Moral and Political, I. pp. 276-8 [p. 278]).
The result was that he found himself ‘in the situation of a man brought into the lists … as a Champion’ but then deprived of effectiveness by those ‘for whom he fights’ (*CLRS*, 3386). For Southey, who believed firmly in the power of the press to influence for good or for evil, this was both invidious and unnecessary particularly, as in the late 1810s, at what he saw as a time of unprecedented political crisis. He felt strongly that the ‘castration’ of his articles worked against the public good. Gifford, who believed that ‘Southey … [required] to be watched’ and took an ‘infinity of pains’ editing and removing things ‘of a dangerous or doubtful tendency’, disagreed.\(^\text{15}\)

It was Gifford who won the day.

Although Southey was relatively powerless over what the *Quarterly* actually printed, he could and did take steps to ensure that the complete versions of his ‘mutilated’ writings were not lost. As early as 1809, he amused himself by writing material back ‘into my own copy as carefully as Gifford’, the *Quarterly’s* editor, ‘had cut it out’ (*CLRS*, 1600). As his association with the journal developed, he insisted on having ‘a duplicate set of proofs of my articles, that I may not *lose* the passages’ removed by Gifford (*CLRS*, 3546). His demand was a clear indication that at least some of the latter’s editorial interventions were happening after the proof stage, thus explaining Southey’s annoyance at only finding out about them when he read the final printed issue of the *Quarterly*. On other occasions, Southey attempted to get his original manuscript text of an article returned to him (*CLRS*, 3405). He claimed that having these complete, unedited texts rendered Gifford’s excesses less wounding: ‘provided I have the whole as it is written, he may cut away to his hearts content’ (*CLRS*, 3692).

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It also meant that when Southey decided to republish a selection of his articles in *Essays, Moral and Political* (1832), he could use these as the basis for his copy text and thus provide his readers with unexpurgated versions that gave vent to his own voice. Unlike the ‘castrated’, anonymous articles that had appeared in the *Quarterly*, these were published under his name and therefore additionally sanctioned. The irony was that these authorized versions appeared long after the debates they had been written to intervene in had been settled.

At other times, Southey’s letters reveal that the disconnection between what he wrote and what his publishers wished to print took an even more extreme form. In early 1816 Southey dispatched an article on Andre Delagrave’s *Campagne de l’Armée Francaise en Portugal, dans les années 1810–11* (1815). It was a subject close to his heart. He had closely followed the course of events in Spain and Portugal, written polemical pieces in support of the campaign against Bonaparte’s forces, and was at work on what eventually became a three-volume *History of the Peninsular War* (1823-32). He fully expected his review to appear in the next issue of the *Quarterly* (*CLRS*, 2693). He was to be disappointed. The review was not published, but ‘supprest’ by Gifford for reasons that are not quite clear (*CLRS*, 2833). Southey, who had not been informed, was furious and considered this ‘rejection as a great piece of incivility & disrespect’ (*CLRS*, 2836). This was not a unique example. In 1831-2, Murray pulled a second series of *Colloquies* at a late stage in the publication process, in part because Southey’s proposals for electoral reform had been rendered redundant by the passing of the Great Reform Act.16 The non-appearance of these works meant

that Southey earned nothing for them, a situation of considerable concern for a professional writer.

Southey’s letters thus show that he was less autonomous than he seemed to be. His publishers and their associates could cut or reshape his writings at will, rendering them less complete than he had envisaged or wished. They could also ensure that a completed work did not appear. His correspondence is, then, evidence that Southey was part of a wider culture of print that was shaped by commercial, political and social pressures. It exposes the tension between what writers like Southey wanted to do and the exigencies, accommodations and incompletenesses enforced on him, and his contemporaries, by the Romantic period booktrade.

Southey’s letters reflect on Romantic incompleteness in other key ways. Textually they are significantly more diverse and fractured than the simple phrase ‘a Southey letter’ suggests. They exist in a variety of states, including: complete manuscripts written in Southey’s own hand (e.g. CLRS, vi. 3228); fragmentary texts, with sections missing because of wear and tear or deliberate cutting away of the manuscript page at some point in its history (e.g. CLRS, 3345); transcripts, both complete and partial, in another hand of a ‘lost’ original (e.g. CLRS, 3517, 150); printed texts published either in newspapers and periodicals in Southey’s lifetime or by later editors after his death (e.g. CLRS, 289, 3233); and quotations in letters or other writings by members of Southey’s circle. A notable example of the latter is a controversial letter announcing his decision to abandon Pantisocracy sent by Southey to Coleridge in November 1795, which survives in part only in Coleridge’s reply of [13] November 1795. The latter quotes from and paraphrases both Southey’s letter of November 1795 and others
sent by him to Coleridge.\textsuperscript{17} It also cites a letter written by Southey to Robert Lovell, another key associate. The complexoverlaying of correspondence that results can be seen at work in the following. Here, Coleridge is speaking:

In one of your [Southey’s] Letters alluding to your Mother’s low Spirits and situation—you tell me that I ‘cannot suppose any \emph{individual} feelings will have an undue weight with you[’]—and in the same letter observe (alas! Your recent conduct has made it a prophecy!) ‘God forbid! that the \textit{Ebullience of Schematism} should be over. It is the Promethean Fire that animates my soul—and when that is gone, all will be \textit{Darkness!’ }—‘I have DEVOTED myself!’

…

Your Letter to Lovell … was the first Thing that alarmed me. Instead of ‘It is our duty’ ‘such and such are the reasons’ —it was ‘I and I’ and ‘will and will’ —sentences of gloomy and self-centering Resolve. I wrote you a friendly Reproof …

(Griggs, I, p. 164)

Coleridge’s critique of Southey is thus deeply embedded in a culture in which letter writing and letter exchange play key roles in creating, sustaining and eventually fragmenting a network. The difficulty for modern editors and critics is that none of the letters by Southey mentioned here have survived, making it impossible to know how complete and accurate Coleridge’s quotations and summaries are.

The situation is further complicated by Coleridge’s habit of copying out and, in the process of so doing, reworking others’ writings. In December 1794, for example, he sent Southey a revised version of a sonnet recently published by the latter. Coleridge

prefaced it with the explanation, that ‘I transcribe not so much to give you my corrections as for the pleasure it gives me’ (Griggs, I. 146). Whether Southey gained as much ‘pleasure’ from receiving Coleridge’s corrections is open to debate. Coleridge’s rewriting of Southey’s poetry of the mid 1790s thus provides important context for his treatment of the latter’s correspondence. When key words attributed to Southey by Coleridge in the latter’s angry letter of [13] November 1795 are compared to the former’s surviving letters the results are mixed. Southey did, indeed, use the word ‘duty’ fairly frequently in the mid 1790s. For example, he described how he had ‘done my duty’ by marrying Edith Fricker in November 1795, the same month as Coleridge sent his accusatory letter (CLRS, 143). However, other words put into Southey’s mouth by Coleridge, including ‘ebullience’, ‘Schematism’ or ‘Promethean’, are found in none of the former’s surviving letters from this or, indeed, any other period. It is, of course, possible that Southey had been responding to Coleridge’s use of these in his own correspondence (see, for example, Griggs, I, 132), or, indeed, that his and Coleridge’s letters had developed their own particular language. More likely, the lack of verbal similarity between Southey writing in his own letters and Southey as quoted by Coleridge in his letters shows how the latter reshaped Southey’s correspondence freely and for his own purposes. (In November 1795 Coleridge’s aim was to critique what he regarded as Southey’s selfish and self-interested withdrawal from the radical community promised by Pantisocracy.) This, in turn, raises wider and important questions about both the reliability of Coleridge’s versions of what Southey had written, the weight critics and literary historians place upon that evidence and its impact upon their understanding and interpretation.

Southey’s correspondence offers, then, a complex patchwork, where complete, ‘authorised’ texts exist alongside other fragmentary, ambiguously derived ones. The c. 7500 letters that survive also reflect on incompleteness in another way because they are a mere fraction of what Southey actually wrote. Significant gaps in the record include his letters to the radical surgeon Anthony Carlisle, to the writers William Hayley, Charles Lamb, Charles Lloyd, Germaine de Staël and Charlotte Smith, and to the engineer Thomas Telford. The presence, in some of these cases, of letters sent by these and other individuals to Southey gives an indication of what has been lost but does not replace it. For another group of correspondents, only the slight remains of a much larger exchange now exist. Just two letters, for example, one complete and one fragmentary, survive to Robert Lovell, his brother-in-law and an important early collaborator (CLRS, 85, 147). There are also significant lacunae in the letters sent to a third group, including Coleridge, the classicist Peter Elmsley, the poet-publisher Joseph Cottle, and the writer Caroline Bowles. Even in cases where large runs of letters are still extant there are gaps, for example, in correspondence with the politician Charles Wynn, the civil servant Grosvenor Bedford and the census-taker John Rickman. Taken individually and cumulatively, these and other absences make evaluation either impossible or fraught with difficulty. It is possible to overstate the importance of a relationship with a correspondent where most of the correspondence has survived, and to downplay or misunderstand one where the manuscripts are entirely, or at best largely, missing. It is now hard, for example, to judge the significance of Southey’s interactions with Edmund Seward, a major influence during his time at Oxford University and the subject of his 1799 ode ‘Not to the grave, not to the grave my soul’. Instead, Seward’s impact on Southey has to be extrapolated

from: comments about him in letters sent by Southey to others; the one surviving letter sent by Seward to Southey; and Seward’s correspondence with other members of their social network. These sources reveal Seward’s frequent reluctance to engage Southey in discussion of subjects that had ‘a very close connexion with politics’. They also provide tantalizing traces of what has been lost, including a letter sent to Seward by Southey in late 1794. All that survives of this is Seward’s summary, describing how Southey’s ‘disappointment at my declaring off [i.e. refusing to join Pantisocracy] has not amounted to anger, but contrariwise … [Southey] supposes me to act upon laudable motives’. At the other end of Southey’s life, the loss of the letters he wrote to Caroline Bowles during their courtship make it hard to reconstruct a series of events that were to have major consequences both during his lifetime and beyond. These and other absences have important implications for how letters are perceived and used, and about how such gaps are acknowledged by textual editors and by literary critics and historians.

As he reached the end of his long working life, Southey was aware that his own letters were simultaneously valuable resources for future biographers and vehicles by which his legacy could be distorted. In 1838, he expressed concern about the way [his] correspondence had been mishandled by the biographers of an old associate, William Wilberforce: ‘So little consideration is shewn in publications of this kind, that no one knows what mischief may arise from trusting any letters out of his own keeping’. In an attempt to safeguard the future treatment of his own letters, Southey appointed

Chatto, 2004), pp. 271-73. Hereafter abbreviated in essay as RSPW, V.
Henry Taylor as his literary executor and official biographer. Taylor was charged, after Southey’s death, with calling in the latter’s correspondence for the projected tombstone life. In the event, the plan came to naught. By 1843, Southey’s family and friends were at war over his marriage to Caroline Bowles and Taylor’s job was made impossible because of their refusal to ‘bury all their enmity in … [his] grave’. He abandoned it due to the insurmountable ‘difficulty’ involved. Instead Southey’s son, Cuthbert, and son-in-law, John Warter, made use of the letters in competing accounts. They thus fragmented both Southey’s correspondence and his claims upon posterity.

Romantic period letters did not just present difficulties for their authors. They were troublesome for the family and friends entrusted with editing them and are also potentially problematic for twenty-first century readers and critics. They shed light on the intricacies, complexities, ambiguities and compromises both of the individual writing life and of Romantic period writers’ engagement with the booktrade.

Fragmentary relics of a once much greater whole, they bear textual witness to a wider culture of incompleteness. Many, even the majority, of their peers fell victim to series of deliberate, casual and unthinking acts of destruction, both in the early nineteenth century and later on. The letters that survive thus possess the inherent capacity to inform but also to mislead, to exaggerate a relationship or a belief that would have been subverted or recontextualised in other letters that are now lost and irrecoverable.

Engagement with all Romantic period correspondence, even one as vast and

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seemingly all-encompassing as Robert Southey’s, should be shaped by this knowledge.
Works Cited


[Abbreviated in text as CLRS, followed by letter number]


