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Kurt Schwitters and the Lake District
Dr Lizzie Fisher

The German artist Kurt Schwitters spent the last two and a half years of his life living in Ambleside, in the English Lake District. This locus of English Romanticism was not such an unlikely place for a pioneer of Modernism to end up as first seems; Schwitters began his artistic training in Dresden in 1919 under the prominent Romantic scholar Oskar Walzel and the influence of German Romanticism continued to linger in the intellectual and artistic circles in which Schwitters moved during the interwar period. The Dadaists' critique of the political and social order and celebration of natural and unreasonable order over 'the logical nonsense of the men of today' echoed with the Romantics' rejection of enlightenment reason and their nostalgia for oneness with nature.¹ A neo-Vitalist aesthetic emerged featuring chance, natural processes and the unconscious and Schwitters himself devoted the eighth issue of his self-published periodical *Merz* (produced in collaboration with Russian artist El Lissitzky) to 'Nasci' (nature), drawing clear parallels between the creative processes of art and nature.² His early peers mockingly called him 'the Kaspar David Friedrich of Dadaist Revolution' but the art historian and close supporter Carola Giedon-Wieckler asserted the importance of the German Romantic tradition in relation to the formation of Schwitters' aesthetic aims.

Schwitters first visited the Lake District on holiday with Edith Thomas in 1942. They returned in 1944, and again in June 1945, intending to stay for a few weeks before moving on to Edinburgh. But according to Thomas, Schwitters 'fell in love with the Lake District immediately and noted that his arrival in the Lake District gave Schwitters 'a new found freedom' and that 'from this view, I think he was the happiest person for a long time.'³ Schwitters soon reported to Ernst that his health had improved, he was able to paint almost all day and to climb mountains again.⁴ Apparently eager to explore, they made excursions in all directions from Ambleside; there are photos of Schwitters visiting Tarn Hows and picnicking with friends beside Wastwater and Windermere. Letters between Schwitters and his son Ernst recount treks up to Grizedale Tarn and over the fells from Keswick to Dungeon Ghyll, trips to Patterdale, Keswick and Grange-over-Sands; while with clear enthusiasm for the landscape and its similarities to their beloved Norway, Ernst recommends other sights and mountains to be climbed, sharing his honeymoon adventures on Skiddaw in a blizzard and memories of climbing Conistone Old Man together.⁵

Schwitters made at least 25 sketches and 39 paintings of Lake District landscapes, depicting locations as far afield as Morecambe Bay and Ullswater, from Torver to Derwent Water, although the majority are scenes within walking distance of Ambleside and Grasmere: Helm Crag, Fairfield, the Brathay and Rothay valleys, Elterwater and the Langdales, Hawkshead. His first painting of Helm Crag was done in 1942, and his last work, a sketch of Kirkstone Pass, is dated 1948; he died Jan 8. Once settled in Ambleside, he also painted portrait commissions to earn a living and flower paintings that won him prizes at local art society exhibitions while working away on abstract paintings, painted reliefs, a vast number of paper collages and a new series of small sculptures – on top of which, in the summer of 1947, he embarked on the unfinished *Merz Barn*. Poverty and illness notwithstanding, Schwitters' time in the Lake District was intensely productive; his catalogue raisonné lists at least 540 works made between 1945-48.

In her account of Schwitters' time in Ambleside, Barbara Crossley writes that 'every day possible the pair went off into the hills' and cites Thomas describing them both as 'two little trolls going out everyday into the mountains.'⁶ They spent a lot of time on Wansfell, the unassuming fell on which half of Ambleside sits. In summer 1944, they had stayed for a month at Seathwaite Cottage, which backed onto the open fell, and on their return in June 1945, they rented a room in a house on the sharp slopes at the foot of the fell. Schwitters painted several views from its slopes, including one of Loughrigg seen through the spiny, blossom-covered branches of one of the hawthorns that persist on the in-take land on Wansfell's west flank.

Eschewing the tops, Schwitters tended to find a more intimate position from which to paint the fells; fields and buildings signalling human activity (and a longstanding relationship with the land) are often visible. An intimacy and proximity to materials and to place runs through the work of Schwitters' final years, from the 'pocket size' scale of the new sculptures, often crafted around a stone or bone picked up from the fell, to the way his sitters observed him painting their portraits, with his face so close to the surface that he couldn't have been able to see the whole image at once – although what he would have seen at such close range were the

material qualities of paint itself: the contours created by his brush, the mixing of colours on the canvas, the way its soft liquid substance moves and spreads. He conceived the Merz Barn as ‘a sculpture to walk into’ with a single source of natural light drawing the viewer into the organic folds and forms that he had begun to model on one of its dry stone walls in plaster, wood and other materials found near the site, and noted its alignment with the work of his friend Arp, who had made a series of ‘Sculptures to be Lost in the Forest’ and placed in a forest near his studio at Meudon in the 1930s.⁷

The landscape seeped into Schwitters’ collages and sculptures too, in the form of pieces of bone, twigs, pebbles and feathers foraged on their walks. It was a source of titles given to a handful of abstract works including *Ullswater* (cat.3649) and *Ambleside* (cat.3276); a ‘merzing’ kind of gesture that simultaneously tethers and untethers assumptions about the relationship between image and word, place and idea. Other abstract paintings with titles such as *Old Cave* (cat.3269) or *The Pool* (cat.3159) allude to specific unnamed landscape features and a collage like *Pine Trees* (cat.3315) is unmistakably reminiscent of the vertical rhythms of coniferous plantations on the banks of Thirlmere; others such as *Windswept* (cat.3349) or *Winter Morning* (cat.3319) evoke the physical sensations of weather and the seasons. Schwitters found an easy equivalence – a notion fundamental to his theory of Merz – between art and nature in these surroundings, conjured with stippled paint surfaces evocative of the wind-ruffled surface of a lake or the texture of bark (used frequently in assemblages to stage tensions between the surface and what’s underneath) or in the elegant simplicity of a painted stone.

This convergence of art and nature anchored a kind of Romantic expressionism in the irreducible materiality of the physical world, recalling Schwitters’ early engagement with Romantic *naturphilosophie* and a sense of interconnectedness with nature. Elizabeth Gamard claims that Schwitters saw art ‘not in terms of the efficacy of objects but as a vital, open process of engagement’ and this might also be said of the way Schwitters interacted with, and saw himself as part of, the world at large.⁸ During these final years Schwitters spent a great deal of time on the fells as part of a daily routine that (according to Crossley) involved working from 8 until 1 then heading out onto the fells for the rest of the day with a packed lunch and his paints. For this to occupy so much of Schwitters’ time and physical energy suggests it had significant value as part of a holistic creative practice that generated prolific yet heterogeneous productivity across multiple genres in a variety of seemingly irreconcilable abstract and figurative styles.

Furthermore if we consider, as Gamard puts it, that the art object was for Schwitters ‘not the endgame but the means itself,’ this repositioning allows us to see his diverse output as the result of an intuitive, openly experimental process rooted in an engagement with the material world, akin to what anthropologist Tim Ingold calls ‘thinking through’ or ‘following the forces and flows of materials.’⁹ This both chimes with Schwitters’ interest in materials such as plaster or the aesthetic effects of nature, from sun-bleached colours and pieces of wood ‘already greatly worked over’ by the sea, to decomposing starfish, algae or flowers, and is not so far away from Schwitters’ own emphasis on intuition and the role of nature in the creative process: ‘the only artistic forming that comes in is the recognition of rhythm and expression in some parts of nature.’¹⁰

The sustained, physical and sensuous quality of Schwitters’ engagement with the natural environment foreshadows contemporary notions of new materialism and an ecological way of thinking about nature, place and otherness. As we scramble to transform our relationship with the sensible world in the face of global environmental and humanitarian crises and speak of ‘mattering’ new aesthetics and subjectivities’ its worth bearing in mind that the landscape of the Lake District – overburdened as it is with historical and political narratives around cultural values and identity and, for Schwitters, a place of exile in which he was struggling to come to terms with personal trauma, loss and displacement – should have provided Schwitters with a fertile context in which to consolidate and continue his utopian *Merz* project, in which identity and meaning are contextually determined, all matter equivalent and the task at hand one of demonstrating the interconnectedness of all things.¹¹

¹ Jean Arp, *Arp on Arp* ed. Marcel Jean, New York: Viking, 1972, p.238.

² *Merz 8-9* Hannover Merz-Verlag, April-July 1924.

³ Edith Thomas in Tristram Powell, *I Build My Time*, 1975 & Mary Burkett, *Kurt Schwitters: Creator of Merz* Kendal: Abbot Hall, 1979, p.8.

⁴ KS to ES, 18 Aug 1945, KESS que 06838723.

⁵ KS to ES, 5 & 28 Sept 1945, KESS que 06838721,T & que 06838724; ES to KS 19 Dec 1947, KESS que 06839176.

⁶ Barbara Crossley, *The Triumph of Kurt Schwitters* Ambleside: Armit Trust 2005, p.57.

⁷ KS to Giedion-Welcker 19 Aug 1947. Reproduced in Giedion-Weckler *Gesammelte Schriften 1926-71* Cologne: Dumont Verlag, 1973, p.506-7.

⁸ Elizabeth Burns Gamard, *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Cathedral of Exotic Misery* New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010, p.21.

⁹ Gamard p.21; Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art & Architecture* London: Routledge, 2013, p.6.

¹⁰ Kurt Schwitters, 'i (Ein Manifest)' in *Der Sturm* vol.13, no.5 Berlin, May 1922 p.80.

¹¹ 'Merz is establishing a relation between everything that exists in the world...all values exist in relationship to each another' Kurt Schwitters, "Kurt Schwitters: Herkunft, Werden und Entfaltung" (1920/21) in *Das literarische Werk*, ed. Friedhelm Lach, Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag 2005, vol. p.84. For a discussion of the use of the term 'mattering' see Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Milla Tiainen and Adrian Mróz, eds. *The Journal of Polish Aesthetics* no.57 (Feb 2020): New Materialism: The Mattering of the Arts, Crafts, and Aesthetics; Ali Lara et al.