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Homewords—Exporting a Victorian Ecotone Through the Textual Landscapes of Mary Russell Mitford’s *Our Village*

Mary Russell Mitford’s collected sketches are essentially a nostalgia object, presented as memories and written about a rural village chronotope that, in the 1840s, was already becoming a thing of the past. Mitford’s rural village is constructed through several cultural discourses, and her depiction of the social ecology of Three Mile Cross is especially significant. Mitford writes with what Beth Lau calls a “citational aesthetic” (1104) with which the landscape, the people, and the plants of Three Mile Cross evoke literature, from Shakespeare to Dickens to naturalist Gilbert White’s descriptions of Selborne. At the same time, the village is where one can cultivate unique forms of affect and relationships between different species and classes. By publishing her literary sketches in urban periodicals, and by tying these unique forms of society to a literary landscape, Mitford exports the forms of affect and relationship so unique to Three Mile Cross. By associating the village with enduring British literature and publishing them in a widely available form, Mitford attempts to give these forms of society a measure of permanency in the face of encroaching modernity.

**Social Ecology and the Ecotone of Three Mile Cross**

Mitford, extolling the virtues of the “confined locality,” writes, “nothing is so delightful as to sit down in a country village in one of Miss Austen’s delicious novels […] or to ramble with Mr. White over his own parish of Selborne, and form a friendship with the fields and coppices, as well as with the birds, mice and squirrels” (*OV* 51). She footnotes this remark, praising White’s work (not for the last time) and puzzling, “I wonder that no naturalist has adopted the same plan” (*OV* 51). She herself, though, evidently patterns her own work after White’s. Scholar Heidi Scott writes that Gilbert White’s “subject is not a taxonomic group, it is a location. . . Though Selborne is not an ‘ecosystem’ in the modern biological sense . . . Selborne is a parish, the socio-political analogue to ecosystem” (9). Mitford, too, is writing about an ecosystem, but perhaps in an even looser sense of the term than Scott cedes to White. Mitford’s is rather a social ecosystem than a scientific.

In 1852, after Mitford was an established author, she reviewed the work of John Clare, son of a farm laborer who gained popularity as a meticulous poetic observer of the natural world. Mitford praises Clare’s bird nest poetry in terms that show her appreciation to meticulous observation:

I question if the great bird-painter, Wilson, or our own Australian ornithologist, Mr. Gould […], or Audubon, or White of Selborne, or Mr. Waterton himself, — and all those careful inquirers into nature are more or less poets, seldom as they have used the conventional language of poetry, — I question if any of these eminent writers have ever exceeded the minuteness and accuracy of these birds' nests. (*Recollections*).

The “ecosystem” of *Our Village,* though, is social, and her own “minuteness and accuracy” focuses on the social interactions and cultural influences in her home of Three Mile Cross.

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I want to first address Mitford’s depiction of animals as social beings. Animals in romantic and Victorian literature are often used to comment on the subjectivity of human characters. Tess Cosslett traces this idea of animals back to Locke: “A passage in his *letters to Edward Clarke on Education* (1684-91) laments children’s cruelty to animals […] Lock uses what becomes a standard eighteenth-century argument against cruelty to animals: that it will lead on to cruelty to men” (Cosslett 10). Teaching children to be kind to animals, on the other hand, may teach benevolence to all, and we often see in the literature of the time that “[a]nimals provide a testing ground for benevolence and humanity” (Cosslett10).

We see this same idea of animals as a comment of human compassion in the way the the animal rights movement of the early nineteenth century was taken up by advocates of other human rights causes.. Indeed, much revolutionary/reformist thought, using the discourses of natural rights, embraced animal rights as a logical extension of human rights advocacy. Onno Oerlemans writes, “[T]he idea was that a truly reformed society would liberate not only unenfranchised people but also oppressed and exploited animals. There were several publications during this period [nineteenth cent.] which called attention to the plight of animals” (82), and Oerlemans cites Shelley, Wollstonecraft, and Thomas Paine, among others, as prominent reform thinkers who addressed, at one point or another, the question of animal rights.

Oerlemans traces, too, the place of animals in the works of prominent romantic poets, including Keats and Wordsworth. The presence of animals in their poems, and the poet’s contemplation of their animal subjects’ experience, “is itself part of the presence of nature, a sign that consciousness can be something other than human” (84). Although these poets often, in the end, turn the animal into a symbol rather than to explore it on its own terms, “the song of the bird [in Wordsworth’s “The Nightingale”] is the immediate evidence of other life that can take the poet beyond the confines of his life and his art […] Loving nature, or knowing it, has as a preliminary requirement the realization that there *is* life beyond human life that is worth considering” (85). Here, an encounter with animals can change one’s subjectivity—in literature and in reform movements of the nineteenth century, animals become the catalyst for a new way of thinking, both in one’s relationships with other humans *and* one’s relationship to oneself.

People’s conception of animal subjectivity changed in this period, especially regarding domestic animals. In the increasingly urban society of the nineteenth century, animals were brought in closer contact with a greater number of people, and Jennifer Mason sees in the nineteenth century the great acceptance of animals as having subjectivities of their own. She writes:

New methods of animal training […] rendered control invisible and produced animals that seemed to be not just self-regulation but even more malleable than humans to the force of civilization. […] it grew increasingly easy for people to believe that the animals they encountered through these practices possessed or had the capacity to develop some of the intellectual, emotional, and moral qualities previously held to be exclusively human. (Mason 19)

Hence in the nineteenth century we find the trope of the noble animal, especially the dog, loyal and more capable of forming a “pure relationship” with humankind than many other humans were. Mason explain that it is during the nineteenth century that we find that the “speculation that animals living among us could become or actually had become as mentally and morally developed as people gave way to the growing belief that they were not just as good as us but were in many ways a great deal better” (Mason 94). Animals came to serve as an example, not just in the way their treatment reflected on their human masters, but in what their behavior implied about their own capacities to feel and think.

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I want to look now at the way Mitford presents animals as part of the social relations of her village. Acquaintance with and attention to animals can enable the formation of pure relationships across social and species classification. In her sketch “The Widow’s Dog” Mitford tells the story of a widow and her grandson who have a pet spaniel. Their attachment to the dog, as Mitford describes, is quite intense. “The only extravagance in which Mrs. King indulged herself was keeping a pet spaniel. […] so great a favorite, that it ranked next to Tom in her affections, and next to his grandmother in Tom’s” (“Widow’s Dog” 7). The dog is not only the recipient of affection, however, but an important node in the social network of the village. Mitford goes on to say how the widow is charged extra by a malicious tax man for keeping a sporting dog. The widow is concerned, too, about owning a sporting dog so close to the landowner’s game reserves, and so the dog is given to neighbors. The spaniel continues to return to its home, and she is finally given to friends of Mitford’s in Bath. The dog escapes and arrives days later, dirty and starving, at its original home. The landowner, having learned of the story, comes upon the touching scene of the joyful dog and family and pledges to pay the extra tax.

The spaniel, named Chloe, touches Mitford and the landowner with her loyalty and love for her owners. The story’s final scene is of the newly returned Chloe being fed from her boy’s plate as she lies tired and dirty next to her masters. The final emphasis is not on the joy of the widow and her grandson, however, but on Chloe who says “with looks that spoke as plain as ever looks did speak, ‘Here I am come home again to those whom I love best” (“Widow’s Dog” 19). Mitford says that even those she ran away from “sympathised [sic] with her fidelity” (19). In this final scene all are brought together to observe the happiness, not only of the family who has their dog back, but the dog herself, who moves everyone with her evident emotion. Here we see several of the things discussed above. Chloe is forgiven because of her fidelity, an admirable virtue. Similarly, Chloe seems to be capable not simply of joy, but of communicating that joy quite clearly. Her own communication of that joy moves and unites landowner, tenants, and Mitford herself.

Dogs featured large in Mitford’s own social life, notably in her relationship with Elizabeth Barrett (later Browning). After Barrett’s brother died, Mitford brought her a cocker spaniel, Flush, the offspring of her own spaniel (also, incidentally, called Flush). Kevin Morrison explores the role Flush played in Barrett and Mitford’s intense friendship. Morrison says that their friendship, seen through their correspondence, was socially ambiguous, with intense levels of affection. “A large percentage of Barrett and Mitford’s correspondence […] is devoted to the cocker spaniel’s various exploits. […] They frequently displace their feelings onto Flush, who becomes the means by which to negotiate their bond, with Barrett repeatedly describing Flush as a stand-in for or constant reminder of Mitford” (Morrison 98 & 99). It is true that Flush features very often in letters between the two authors. It is also true, however, that Barrett came to love Flush in his own right, and not simply as a stand in. We see this in the letters, in passages where Flush is said to have strong feelings and social sensibilites. Barret writes to Mitford of a time that Flush is given a gift of sponge cake by a shop keeper:

Flush is too great a coward to eat even a cake in a shop, with a strange man staring at him, & far too gentlemanly to eat it out in the street—therefore the gift was wrapt up in paper and given to him to carry home ‘to miss Barrett’—all of which he perfectly understood and acted upon. He […] carried it with the gravest satisfaction […] up to this door. (Raymond 71)

Flush here is described in terms that evoke Mitford’s sketches and depictions of animal thinking, feeling animals. Flush is seen as both a social link between the two women, and also as possessing developed social sensibilities, even capable of shyness or embarrassment. Flush himself is seen to engage in social interactions. Mitford did not only depict human-animal relationships in her sketches, but apparently experienced them in her own life.

Returning to *Our Village*, Mitford’s own dog possesses undeniable agency. Mitford’s dog May, a “beautiful white greyhound” (*OV* 149), accompanies Mitford on many of her outings into the countryside and features large in many of her sketches. In “The Shaw,” Mitford describes how May “has taken a violent affection for a most hideous stray dog” (*OV* 149), a lame spaniel mongrel. This dog is known throughout the village, and survives by begging food, harried by schoolchildren and shopkeepers. Then May finds him and invites him, Mitford says, into the stable where May sleeps and “by the activity of her protection, and the pertinacity of her self-will [… establishes] him as one of the family as firmly as herself” (*Ov 150)*. Because of May’s “self-will,” the dog is accepted and given a name—Dash—and comes to be well-liked by all. Mitford says, “We are all rather ashamed of him […] and think it necessary to explain that he is May’s pet; but amongst ourselves, and those who are used to his appearance, he has reached the point of favouritism in his own person” (*Ov* 151). Many in the village come to find Dash a likeable dog, eager, Mitford says, to make up for his ugliness with “extra good conduct” (*OV* 151), and they even find that he is able to flush game. Here again we see an animal as a point of social connection, with May making a choice evidently against everyone else’s better judgment, exercising agency, and changing the humans’ minds as they come to like her “pet” despite their shared embarrassment of his shabby looks.

Mitford is remarkable for the way she extends similar capacities of subjectivity to other animals. Certainly pets were given a special place in the Victorian chain of being. Teresa Mangum discusses the phenomenon of pet memorialization in the nineteenth century. Like Mason she traces the growing perception of pets as creatures capable of feeling—“in order to accept grief as a legitimate response to an animals’ death, Victorians first needed to believe that animals themselves were capable of love—that should ‘we’ be the first to go that the animal would grieve the loss of ‘us.’” (Mangum 19). Yet she also says that this often had a negative side-effect. “Those who ‘loved’ animals doomed most (the non-pets) to misery when they demarcated and exalted a few species as ‘pets’” (Mangum 18).

Yet Mitford does extend capacities similar to those attributed to Chloe, Flush, and May to other animals. Even livestock such as barnyard fowl are capable of feeling and idiosynchratic personality characteristics. Mitford tells us that “all domestic animals [meaning non-pet livestock] dislike children, partly from an instinctive fear of their tricks […] partly, I suspect, from jealousy” (*OV* 112). She admits that “jealousy seems a strange tragic passion to attribute to the inmates of the basse-cour” (*OV* 112); yet she continues, “but only look at that struggling fellow of a bantam cock” (112), a rooster who, she continues to describe, refuses seed from the small daughter and goes up to Mrs. Allen and, receiving “a dole from her hand, […] how he swells out his feathers […] and struts and crows and pecks, proudest and happiest of bantams” (*OV* 112).

The way in which Mitford backs up her admittedly strange assertion of tragic passion in among domestic fowl is significant. Mitford acts throughout her sketches as a trustworthy guide, asking, “Will you walk with me through our village, courteous reader” (*OV* 51)? So, making an assertion that, even in sentimental fiction might cause skepticism, she justifies it by telling us, “but only look at that strutting fellow,” and “See, she is calling to him and feeding him, and now how he swells out his feathers” (*OV* 112). She backs up her claims by appealing to experience. Much like the way Gilbert White’s knowledge of Selborne comes from long experience, from his observations made over literally decades, so are Mitford’s observations about the world are backed up by appealing to her own careful observation. It is not only observation, however, but a form of social relationship with the owners of the rooster and even the rooster himself that enabled Mitford’s conclusions. The space of the village is the place where such relationships are possible, and where such conclusions can be formed regarding other creatures.

It isn’t simply emotion that animals can feel, either. Mitford seems to imply that they are able to appreciate standards of natural beauty. At one point she is dealing with a horse who is reluctant to obey. Slowing down yet again, the horse refuses to listen. Mitford resigns herself to the slow pace, saying, “Perhaps he feels the beauty of the road just here, and goes slowly to enjoy it. Very beautiful it certainly is” (*OV* 175). She then reflects on the aesthetics of the landscape around her, describing the turns and the rising hill and its beauties. She is drawn into this reverie by empathizing with the horse. Imagining why he might be going slowly led Mitford into the beauty of the scenery. Here, Mitford enters into the appreciation of the scenery by allow her horse that same appreciation, much like the romantic poets enter a new form of subjectivity because of their observations of animals.

Mitford does not simply make animals in her image, presenting them as purely loving and well behaved creatures. This is important, for it addresses a troubling oppositional binary in romantic thought. Real, wild animals are often missing from romantic literature because they rather complicate the romantic idea of Nature. Christine Kenyon-Jones writes that often, “‘Nature’ is presented as being in opposition to the town, to the factory, to the crowd and to the dark satanic mill” (Kenyon Jones 137). Nature is seen as essentially good, almost holy, she says. “[T]here is a strong tendency – in the Romantic period and now, still – to conceptualise Nature as ‘good’: […] Animals, however, inevitably complicate that paradigm, by forcing us to take account of brown, furry or feathery Nature” (137). And Mitford, as pleasant as her village often is, does not shy away from the truth of animal interaction. At one point she off-handedly mentions that she and May have a favorite spot. Mitford enjoys it for the flowers, but May is fond of it because she once caught and killed a hare there. Mitford offhandedly mentions the incident, without expressing any sort of apology or pity. It has simply happened, a part of the interactions that occur in the country.

Mitford at times came under criticism for being too “vulgar.” An article in The Quarterly Review of one of her earlier volumes of *Our Village* sketches, published in 1825, comments on her description of greyhounds coursing hares: “The worrying of the poor timid hare should excite any emotion but pleasure in a female breast” (Murray 168). Yet that Mitford does discuss such scenes is, I think, important. Mitford does not deny events that might complicate the “goodness” of nature or her depiction of civilized animals. May is still a dog, with a dog’s instincts and desires, something Mitford understands and appreciates and which nevertheless does not hinder the affective relationship capable between dogs and people.

Yet even though Mitford spends no time mourning the hare, she seems to appreciate wild creatures as animals apart from human control and does not dismiss them as feeling creatures simply because they do not live with human beings. Seeing a kingfisher, Mitford writes, “It is rarely that one sees the shy beauty so close or so long; and it is pleasant to see him in the grace and beauty of his natural liberty, *the only way to look at a bird*” (*OV* 69; emphasis added). Later she compares rooks and domesticated fowl. “There is something very intelligent in the ways of that black people the rooks, […] a sort of collective and corporate wisdom. Yet geese congregate also; and geese never by any chance look wise” (*OV* 173). We’ve spoiled the geese with domestications, she says, but the “rooks are free commoners of nature, who use the habitations we provide for them, tenant our groves […] but never dream of becoming our subjects” (173). Here again, and more literally, Mitford reflects on the concept of ecotone—the mingling of ecosystems enacted by the crows, free commoners who use the human-shaped landscape, are not tame, but are still wise, are still a “people.”

Elsewhere it is Mitford who crosses the boundary into the world of wild animals, participating in the interaction in a special way. She writes, “We used, before we lived in a street, to fix a little board outside the parlour window, and cover it with bread crumbs in the hard weather” (*OV* 69). Mitford is describing a crude form of a bird feeder. While a history of the bird feeder is difficult to come by, it seems that the earliest “commercially made” bird feeder wasn’t sold until the mid 1920s (Wilcox et al. 1). It doesn’t seem even to have been an especially common practice before the twentieth century, at least not like the prevalence of bird feeding/bird watching today. Yet here Mitford describes the species of birds that the bread crumbs attracted, and even tells us of one individual bird, a “saucy fellow of a blackbird [… who] used to tap his yellow bill against the window for more. How we loved the fearless confidence of that fine, frank-hearted creature! And surely he loved us. I wonder the practice is not more general” (*OV* 69 & 70). Mitford explicitly ascribes a loving relationship between the blackbird and her family. Mitford cultivates an awareness of the wild world, drawing our attention to the rooks who are present all over Britain, and make use of human’s more artificial constructions. This kind of awareness and participation is, Mitford tells us, a way to form relationships with the world around us, to enlarge our affective capacity. Yet it happened before she lived “in a street.” Such connections may be most easily formed when one is living in a more rural environment where there is still room for the blackbirds. The rural, a place like Three Mile Corss, is the ideal space for these types of interactions.

Mitford more firmly embeds herself and her fellow villagers into the village landscape by performing a blurring of the animal-human divide. This functions in part to justify her descriptions of animal subjectivity by lessening the gap between animals and humans. For example, prefacing the anecdote about May finding and “rescuing” the stray dog, Dash, she writes, “Dogs, when they are sure of having their own way, have sometimes ways as odd as those of the *unfurred, unfeathered animals*, who walk on two legs, and are called rational” (*OV* 149; emphasis added). By describing humans as “unfurred, unfeathered animals,” she enhances her comparison and dogs and people, lessening the divide to be bridged. Yet elsewhere it seems that there is no “ulterior motive,” no immediate gap to be bridged, as when she describes a solitary, bird-loving old lady’s distrust of “unfeathered bipeds who wear doublet and hose” (*OV* 92). Similarly, she describes footmen as a “species,” saying, “half the handsome spaniels in England are called Dash, just as half the tall footmen are called Thomas. The name belongs to the species” (*OV* 156).

Morrison says that “foregrounding similarities between human and nonhuman animals undermines the primacy accorded to the former and suggests that the latter can, by embodying idealized qualities and characteristics, be more human than humans themselves” (104, 105). They also “question the delimited and supposedly self-evident category of human,” (Morrison 105), perhaps asking humans to earn their humanity through their compassion to all, through their ability to form relationships with the non-human. Morrison is writing about Barrett’s poems dedicated to Flush when she writes that they “stress snot just the similarity but also difference before finally gesturing toward relationality and reciprocity” (105). I think we could say the same for Mitford’s observations. In drawing our attention to the animality of the human species as naked bipeds, as well as the categorizing professions as akin to species, Mitford brings animals and humans closer together, both justifying her relationships with and depictions of dogs and blackbirds, as well as exhibiting a kind of subjectivity that is more attune to the possible relationships available in a village like Mitford’s. Her exploration of the similarities and differences between humans and animals enables her to form the relationships with animals, much like her familiarity with her fellow villagers enables her to describe them so intimately. Finally, she invites us to see the same possibilities, telling us to “look,” to “see” as she does, to cultivate the same capacity for relationships wherever we are.

**Flowers as an Aspect of the Social Network**

Much like the dog Flush, flowers also played a prominent part in the relationship of Elizabeth Barret and Mary Russell Mitford. After Barret’s brother died, she spent a period of time in secluded mourning. Morrison describes how Barrett refused all flowers but those from Mitford, not because Mitford’s gift is prettier than any other, but because of they came from Mitford. Morrison quotes Barrett as writing, “’I have looked at them [the flowers] and see you in them’ […] The flowers serve here as metonyms for Mitford herself Barrett declares ‘[…] I denied nature, but could not deny *you!’*” (96 & 97)

Considering the role flowers played in Mitford’s personal relationships, it is not surprising that many of Mitford’s most significant or vivid social interactions in her sketches involve going hunting for flowers. In “The Wood,” Mitford leads her friend Ellen G. out to find wood-sorrel. “She never saw that most elegant plant,” Mitford says (*OV* 98). Ellen plans to draw the plant, and Mitford says “that the introduction will be a mutual benefit; Ellen will gain a subject […] and the pretty weed will live […] duration is the only charm which it wants, and that Ellen will give it” (98). Although the wood sorrel does not have the agency or the subjectivity Mitford sees in animals, there is still a social element to the way Mitford describes the outing. Mitford is, of course, the guide, the one who knows what to look for, the one already acquainted, you could say, with the plant. Mitford even describes it as a social introduction. The flower is social, too, in that this outing to find the plant frames Mitford’s relationship with Ellen G.

Some of the only dialog between Mitford and her friend, too, is heavily centered on the flowers. Ellen spots it first, and says:

‘I am sure this is the wood-sorrel! Look at the pendent white flower, shaped like a snowdrop and veined with purple streaks, and the beautiful trefoil leaves folded like a heart,—some, the young ones, so vividly yet tenderly green that the foliage of the elm and the hawthorn would show dully at their side,—others of a deeper tint, and lined, as it were, with a rich and changeful purple! Don’t you see them?’(*OV* 100)

I quote the passage of Ellen’s description in full because, in the story, it is presented as dialog. I think perhaps that this is somewhat artificial. But more than stylistic judgments, I think it is important that Mitford evidently cares so much about the details of the flowers, and that these details carry, in some sense, a social weight.

The details may carry weight because Mitford sees in plants, perhaps not the ability to feel, but the ability to evoke feeling in herself. At the end of this same sketch, the two women are heading home with the wood-sorrel they’ve gathered, and they come across a group of men cutting down a large tree. Branches litter the grove, “a field of battle” (*OV* 102), and the nightingales sing “faintly and interruptedly […] like a requiem” (102, 103). It is, she says, “the very scene of murder” (103) and as the tree is cut it “quivers, as with a mortal agony […] How like to death, to human death in its grandest form! Caesar in the Capitol […] could not fall more sublimely than that oak” (103). The scene becomes almost apocalyptic as the sky mirrors the sadness Mitford feels, with the clouds “gathered into one thick low canopy, dark and vapoury as the smoke which overhangs London; the setting sun is just gleaming underneath with a dim and bloody glare […], a subdued and dusky glow, like the light reflected on the sky from some vast conflagration” (103, 104). It begins to rain, and the two walk home “thinking and talking only of the fallen tree” (104).

This textbook example of the pathetic fallacy may seem, perhaps, overwrought; but it fits in well with Mitford’s drive to make connections between the human and the non-human. She and her friend see the “noble” tree, and they and all of nature seem to mourn its loss. There is no tirade against the woodsmen—indeed, she admires his strength as he chops through the large roots—but still, Mitford, who can see the fairly common weed wood-sorrel as a link in her friendship with Ellen, who is acquainted with perhaps all the plants of Selborne, sees the felling of the tree as tragic, akin to the high drama of Julius Caesar. And perhaps her pathetic fallacy is justified. Gerry Canavan argues that at least such devices make a connection between human action and its effect on the environment, depicting the human not as a separate category from Nature, but as part of it. Social and affective connection is at the heart of Mitford’s project. Here it is an affective connection—a friendship showed through a hunt for wood sorrel and sympathy for even an inanimate tree.

Finally, Mitford remarks on the (dis)connection between rural England and urban England in a succinct, insightful remark. She tells us about her friend Hannah Bint who, to support her crippled father and family, sets up as a dairy woman. As Mitford says, one of most irritating difficulties of country life is “the impossibility, of procuring the pastoral luxuries of milk, eggs, and butter” (*OV* 187). She informs readers that while a “Londoner, who, whilst grumbling over his own breakfast, is apt to fancy that thick cream, and fresh butter, and new-laid eggs, grow, so to say, in the country […] in this great grazing district […] we unlucky villagers sit down often to our first meal in a state of destitution” (*OV* 187). Here she explicitly points out the sense of disconnection between the urban lifestyle and its own idea of the source of its sustenance, pointing to the importance of the rural for the culture and sustenance of urban England, and highlighting its nature not as a bucolic paradise but as a place of difficulty.

Yet even in depicting the difficulties—or at least, the more realistic details—of rural life, there is still a sense of connection within the village. Hannah Bint supports her family and overcomes her financial challenges because of local customers patronizing her dairy business, and because the landowner grants her access to the common so she can graze her cow and her chickens. As Killick writes, Three Mile Cross is “a location for an exposition of the conservative ideal of the moral individual […] The social mode demands responsibility, as well as collective values and agendas. […] Without the willingness to place community above self, Mitford’s village way of life could not survive and the stifling impersonality of modernity would be unopposed” (7). This view of Mitford as reminding the world of the values to be found in the rural, of the potential for social connection as well as connection with nature, would make sense in light of the episodes discussed above. While I wouldn’t go so far as to say Mitford is opposing a stifling modernity, I do think that she offers elements or values she wants to preserve, and in her brief aside about the export/import of produce I think she takes urban dwellers to task for being ignorant of the details of rural life, for failing to take notice of something so important, and for forgetting the significance and values of a chronotope that is already largely a part of the past.

**Poetry in the Soil—Literature and Mitford’s Citational Aesthetic**

Although it may seem a digression at first, I want to address the way Mitford interacts with literature in her sketches, presenting it as a way to interact with the past and preserve its values as well as connecting it to the natural world. I think we can apply to Mitford’s work some concepts about romantic and nineteenth century literary tourism, starting with William Godwin’s essay “Essay on Sepulchres,” written in 1809. Literary tourism was an attempt to commune with, or at least better appreciate, well known authors. Paul Westover says in an article that “literary tourism inherits and transforms codes from the cult of the Picturesque. Reveling in locations where landscape overlaps with history and poetry, it requires the traveler to ‘see’ literature in the material world” (“Literary Tourism” 303). Like the aesthetic standards of the picturesque, in which travelers would frequently evaluate real-life scenery to see if it measured up to artistic standards, the standards of the literary tourist required the viewer to know what the appropriate affective and intellectual responses were to a grave or a historical site, and to evaluate the effect of such a site by those standards.

William Godwin’s “Sepulchres” proposed a “scheme for Great Britain” (Godwin), the marking of grave sites of authors with simple wooden crosses, maintained by both locals and a national collection and organization dedicated to visiting such sites for inspection once a year. Westover describes a major aspect of Godwin’s “scheme” when he says that “Necro-tourism [visiting gravesites], apparently, will help spread the leaven of canonical literature throughout the nation, even to those who do not read. [… Godwin’s] model imagines the whole country as a network of literary centers or nodes of cultural exchange” (“Literary Tourism” 314). Dispersed throughout the country, rather than gathered in one place like Westminster Abbey, the graves of authors will serve as a unifying cultural element, diffusing the values of British culture throughout the country. Visitors to such sites would participate in a shared cultural act, a form of pilgrimage as Westover writes in his book on necromanticism. “The pilgrim, even in solitary, becomes part of a society of believers” (*Necromanticism* 65), as he puts it. I think we could call this an imagined community, a group of people united in a similar interest/experience/mindset, even though they may never meet in reality.

Perhaps this is a useful way to approach Mary Russell Mitford’s frequent references to (often British) literature. Dierdre Lynch picks up on the topic of Mitford’s “citational aesthetic,” the name she gives to the use of literature in the manner of Mitford and Jane Austen, a writer to whom Mitford was compared and who Mitford was, in some respects, emulating. Because the references to Shakespeare, Cowper, are so casual, Lynch says that Mitford poses the act of knowing and “loving literature […] as an activity akin got the chronicling of everyday routines and local attachments” (1104). Mitford is asserting a “literary landscape as home ground” (Lynch 1104), for in “Mitford's peripatetic local-colorism may at any moment come to a halt, because the nightingale's song reminds the author of poems she loves or because certain roses are for her associated with Shakespeare, in whose day they were planted” (Lynch 1105). Because loving nature is presented as a parallel to the citational style—flowers lead to a Cowper—it acts in the same way as Godwin’s diffused monuments. Brief reveries of subjectivity-altering poetry are to be had wherever the appropriate flowers are grown, provided the subject is observant and well-read enough to make the connection.

This has the potential effect of essentially giving travelers a sort of constant orientation to their land. Lynch points to the increasingly ubiquitous process of enclosures that were changing the landscape during the nineteenth century. Anne Wallace goes so far as to suggest that “everyone lived as if they were traveling” (72), and Lynch adds that “the rights of way taken for granted in local communities’ rounds of laboring, marketing and visiting were the first casualties of the rage for enclosure” (1106). Perhaps, however, if the travelers were able to link their changing landscape to unchanging, culturally shared literature, the sort of “literary picturesque” could serve as a way to maintain a link to a more stable past. Literature might in this sense provide a stabilizing force in the face of an uncertainly developing modernity, providing elements of the familiar even in a physical changing space. Here the chrontope of the village may undergo physical alteration, but will have a timeless elements. The horrid, shudder-inducing workhouse may stand between Mitford and her favorite meadow, but there are violets on the other side.

The timeless preservation of literature is best scene in a passage at the beginning of “The Widow’s Dog.” Mitford is describing in pastoral detail a neighboring village of Ashely End. At one point she is listing off flowers, and when she mentions “the delicate harebell” (“Widow’s Dog” 3) there is a long footnote in which Mitford describes two separate visits from Americans who have never encounter certain iconic British flowers. The first is the harebell, which prompts the American to recite some lines of Scott’s “Lady of the Lake.” The second is more significant. An American finds a cluster of primroses—“blossom of a thousand associations—the flower sacred to Milton and Shakspeare [sic]” (“Widow’s Dog” 4). She describes how the America actually kneels down to gather a bunch of the flowers “with a reverential expression which I shall not easily forget, as if the flower were to him an embodiment of the great poets by whom it has been consecrated to fame” (4).

This idea of embodiment is important, for it ties into the very emotions that Godwin desired to evoke with his white crosses. The flowers have become not simply a reminder of great literature, not even a simple symbol, but a tangible piece of major British culture, recognizable and even venerated by foreigners and, if one has the same capacity for appreciation and observation as Mitford, valued and visited often by Britons. The flowers preserve and allow access the affective connection to literature that will best enable one to remember and emulate the values such literature contains. Literature points us to the flowers, which point right back to Shakespeare and Milton. Even if Three Mile Cross is enclosed and unrecognizably altered, a Mitfordian subjectivity will still be possible. Mitford preserves the values of the village in literature, which can itself be kept fresh by the very flowers Mitford which Mitford loves.

**Conclusion**

Mitford portrays the space of rural Britain as, in one sense, a place that is already lost, a chronotope of nostalgia. But in her careful depictions of Three Mile Cross, however, Mitford may be advocating for some measure of preservation. Her village is a place of connection and coexistence, between classes and species, a place made up of interactions. Additionally, it is a place where one can develop the subjectivity that can empathize with a tree or form an honest friendship, a “pure relationship,” with a dog, a relationship that will in turn connect one to other human beings.

Mitford can be seen, I think, as reminding Britons of what they may want to preserve. By frequently evoking culturally valued pieces of literature and their authors, she makes the affect of the village an interaction in which even urban dwellers can participate. By publishing in London periodicals, she makes the values and relationships something that can be taken out of the village and appreciated in an urban setting, preserving not only the memory of a location but also a mindset or form of subjectivity. She invites her readers to participate, entering into a social ecotone, a place of mingling between categories where one can exercise empathy that leads to unity.

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