**Taylor’s Sweet Escapes**

Katherine Ebury and J.T. Welsch

Near the end of *folklore: the long pond sessions*, released on Disney+ in late November 2020, Taylor Swift describes escape as the “overarching theme” of *folklore*, her album from late July. Introducing “the lakes,” she answers co-writer Jack Antonoff’s question, “what is the Lake District?,” with a bit of literary history:

In the Nineteenth-Century, you had a lot of poets, like William Wordsworth and John Keats would spend a lot of time there and there was a poet district, these artists that moved there, and they were kind of heckled for it and made fun of for it for being these eccentrics and these kind of odd artists who decided that they just wanted to live there, and I remembered when we went, I thought, “Man, I could see this.” You know, you live in a cottage and you’ve got wisteria growing up the outside of it. Of course they escaped like that! Of course they would do that, and they had their own community with other artists who had done the same thing.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Swift’s mini-lecture caps off a narrative of artistic community throughout the film, projecting collaborations with Antonoff, Aaron Dessner, and others onto this vision of the Lake Poets. Never mind that Keats, like Byron and Shelley, was fairly unimpressed by Wordsworth’s cosy seclusion. Shots of Dessner’s cabin-like studio in its rural setting and the three writers chatting around an outdoor fire let us see Long Pond as a twenty-first century Dove Cottage.

Unveiling *folklore*’s “sister record” three weeks later, Swift underlined this sense of communal escape. “To put it plainly,” her announcement began, “we just couldn’t stop writing songs. To try and put it more poetically, it feels like we were standing on the edge of the folklorian woods and had a choice: to turn and go back or to travel further into the forest of this music.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Album covers and promotional images for *folklore* and *evermore* draw heavily on what Wordsworth calls the “humble and rustic life” in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, a book co-written with Samuel Taylor Coleridge during their own *annus mirabilis*.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Any other year, this might look like mere cabin (or cottage) porn, tantalising fans with a millionaire’s fantasy of simple living. But a global pandemic makes such pleasures feel a bit less guilty. As Freud writes in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1907), artists also permit us “to enjoy our own day-dreams without self-reproach or shame.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Swift recognizes this connection in her *evermore* announcement: “I loved the escapism I found in these imaginary/not imaginary tales,” and “loved the ways you welcomed the dreamscapes and tragedies and epic tales of love lost and found.” Her “imaginary/not imaginary” escapes are also more accessible and acceptable in a year when other celebrities were taken to task for privileged lockdown lifestyles or getaways to private islands, like her sometime-adversary Kim Kardashian. Both albums avoid any reference to Covid, but she links quarantine to her half-dreamt Lake District in the *long pond* film: “I may not be able to go to the Lakes right now–or go anywhere–but I’m going there in my head.” Videos for the two lead singles, “cardigan” and “willow,” also directed by Swift, are connected by the same fluid line between “homeland” and “dreamland,” as she strays between a secluded cabin and “folklorian wood,” literally climbing in and out of a piano in order “to travel further into the forest of music.”

Like the storytellers in Boccacio’s *Decameron*, fleeing plague-ridden Florence for a rural villa, Swift & Co. might be spinning ideological yarns for listeners desperate for distraction. Plenty of songs fit Freud’s interpretation of daydreams as simple wish fulfilment or nostalgia for “the road not taken” – a literary cliché recycled from “The Outside” (written by Swift at age 12) in lyrics on both *folklore* and *evermore*. Her trip “down the rabbit hole” (in “long story short”) winks similarly at the *1989* bonus track, “Wonderland.”[[5]](#endnote-5) But her reclaiming of “escapism” from its self-indulgent or childish connotations points to a more radical potential. As Ernst Bloch sees it, popular culture’s flights of fancy also anticipate a “not-yet-conscious” drive towards genuine social change. Is it ridiculous to suggest this is what Swift’s utopian praxis is grasping toward? Her speakers teeter forever on the cusp of real escape; and the material form of *folklore/evermore* – spilling over two long albums with deluxe edition bonus tracks into endless media supplements, films, merchandise, reorganised EP “chapters,” even the little Instagrammy loops accompanying the songs on Spotify – all teems with what Bloch calls “utopian surplus” or what Gilles Deleuze might call “lines of flight.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

In the refusal of “closure” and emphasis on becoming over being, *folklore*’s historiographyand *evermore*’s utopianismturns pop escapism toward desire for a better life. The shift from the “cardigan” video’s solitude to the “willow” video’s togetherness is more than a change in Covid filming restrictions. Antonoff nods at Swift’s “cottage backup plan”: “Yeah, you’ve been writing about getting out forever.” They frame this in *long pond* as romantic with a small R, but the search for “a person worth escaping with” also exposes a transhistorical affinity: “the lakes,” Swift insists, is “saying ‘look, they did this hundreds of years ago. I’m not the first person who’s felt this way. They did this!’” With these sympathies, Swift draws out “the ineradicable drive towards collectivity” that Frederic Jameson finds latent in all mass culture.[[7]](#endnote-7)

At the heart of this sprawling project, “the lakes” is a song with a phantom chorus. Harmonically, the “take me to the lakes” section is undeniably a pre-chorus, “setting off” without ever reaching the C-major tonic. Into that absent centre, we can project our own not-yet-conscious epiphany, recovering the political foundations beneath the wisteria or ivy that left Wordsworth and Coleridge so disillusioned by the collapse of their own communal projects.[[8]](#endnote-8) If we accept the “huge, sincere statement of hope” that Antonoff sees in these albums’ shared escapes, then–like the singer in Coleridge’s famous excessive fragment–Swift might help us “build that dome in air.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

**Katherine Ebury** (@Katherine\_Ebury)is Senior Lecturer in Modern Literature at the University of Sheffield. Her reviews and articles have appeared in *Modernism/modernity*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, and *The Conversation*.

**J.T. Welsch** (@jtwelsch)is Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Industries at the University of York. *The Selling and Self-Regulation of Contemporary Poetry* was published in April 2020.

1. The title of this essay refers to Swift’s cover performances of Gwen Stefani’s 2006 hit “The Sweet Escape” on her 2011 Speak Now World Tour.

   *folklore: the long pond sessions.* Directed by Taylor Swift. Disney+, November 25, 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Taylor Swift, [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/p/CInkR4Ajyi1/), December 10, 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. William Wordsworth, [Preface](https://www.bartleby.com/39/36.html) to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800 edition). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming (1908 [1907])”, *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 9, translated by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “The Road Not Taken” is a poem in Robert Frost’s 1916 collection, *Mountain Interval.* In “The Outside” Swift sings, “I tried to take the road less traveled by / But nothing seems to work the first few times…”On *folklore,* “illicit affairs” includes “you take the road less traveled by”. The chorus for *evermore*’s“’tis the damn season” repeats “the road not taken looks real good now”. The song also makes this Freudian corrective explicit in another childhood literary reference: “tried to change the ending / Peter losing Wendy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The first of these EPs, “the escapism chapter,” was released digitally on August 20, 2020 and begins with “the lakes.” Bloch’s most expansive discussion of the utopian surplus is his own big messy study, *The Principle of Hope*, originally published in three volumes between 1938 and 194, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (MIT Press, 1986). Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduce the concept of a line of flight (or line of escape) in the first chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Frederic Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text*, No. 1 (1979), 148. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Wordsworth’s reflections in [*The Prelude*, Book XI](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45518/the-french-revolution-as-it-appeared-to-enthusiasts-at-its-commencement) (1805) give a clear sense of this frustrated hope. Coleridge’s dreams of the “pantisocracy” of common ownership, which he and Robert Southey planned to establish in rural America, are summed up in a [sonnet of that name](https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/pantisocracy) from 1794. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “[Kubla Khan: or A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43991/kubla-khan)” (written 1797, first published 1816). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)