

Relics

Francis à Court

That man is little to be envied whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plains of *Marathon*, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of *Iona*!

Dr Johnson was no sentimentalist, but his feelings must have been stirred by simply knowing that he saw and heard the same sights and sounds as people who had performed wonderful or heroic acts. And in this way it may be rewarding for us to sit in Dorothy's alcove at Alfoxden, where she listened to the first recitation of the *The Ancient Mariner*, or to look out of the study window at Greta Hall upon the mountain scene which Coleridge describes in his Dejection Ode. And yet there is a sense of loss because, however well the stage is set, we cannot forget that the actors are long gone.

Coleridge himself made a distinction (CN II 2026) between the 'amusement' which can be obtained, on the one hand, from encountering something merely associated with a great man's daily existence, such as a mulberry tree said to have been planted by Shakespeare and, on the other hand, something which illuminates the imagination by recalling his achievements:

here on this Bank Milton used to lie in late May, as a young man, & familiar with all its primroses made them yet dearer than their dear selves by the sweetest tine in the Lycidas/And the rathe Primrose that forsaken dies/or from this Spot, the immortal Deer Stealer, on his escape from Warwickshire, had his first view of London, & asked himself—And what am I to do there?—at certain times, uncalled & sudden, subject to no bidding of my own or others, these Thoughts would come upon me, like a Storm, & fill the Place with something more than Nature—

But perhaps there is another category higher than 'amusement', where an artist's intense emotions were aroused, but were nevertheless not immediately involved in any memorable act of creation. Such a highly charged location must be the cliff on Scafell where Coleridge made his dangerous descent in August 1802. After his adventure he went down beside the steep waterfall that drops into upper Eskdale:

Just lying before as I write this there are 1, 2, 3, 4 objects, I cannot distinguish whether Hovels, or Hovel-shaped stones/I... reached them/they are all stones/the one nearest the Beck covered with weed and tree-bushes, looked so very like a Hovel at a distance, that I had

made up my mind that the others might be Stones, but that this would be a Peat Hovel—I am resting my book on one of its ledges, and it has really the shape of a Hovel— (CN I 1219)

You may follow his footsteps down past the waterfall and the huge black cliffs. It is easy to imagine him, shocked by his narrow escape, a black storm cloud treading close behind him, into a strange valley, and creating in his mind the hope of human contact. The massive stones, (needless to say), have not gone away, and even the 'Peat Hovel' is easy to distinguish, since it still has its thatch of bush and weeds. You may lay your hand on the same sloping shelf which he must have used to recount his adventures in his diary, far as he was from human sympathy, and surrounded by the boulders in their million-year indifference.

The high source of the river Esk is as fit a place as you could want to be the theatre of a literary pilgrimage. It is remote enough even today to offer solitude. There is the mountain, and there are the stones. The only sound is from the movement of waters. The trip is well worth making for any able-bodied Coleridgean. She or he may decide whether they are in search of 'amusement', or making a journey of poetic piety, worthy of Johnson on Iona.

From *The Coleridge Bulletin* New Series 21, Spring 2003 © Contributor