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Agreement, Dissonance, Dissent: The Many Conversations of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower’

Felicity James

IN THIS TALK I want to touch on some of the many conversations going on inside and around ‘This Lime-Tree Bower’; firstly, the conversations—and the conflicts—between friends which shape the poem. Much has been said about the rich biographical and literary interconnections of this poem, and, in particular, its position in the Wordsworth-Coleridge relationship—the way in which, for example, it subtly re-reads and, in Lucy Newlyn’s words, ‘strategically correct[s]’ Wordsworth’s ‘Lines left upon a seat in a Yew-tree’.¹ Lynda Pratt, too, has shown us how the poem ‘embarks on a literal and metaphorical rewriting’ of Southey poems such as the ‘Inscription III: For a Cavern that overlooks the River Avon’, the ‘Botany-Bay Eclogue’ ‘Elinor’, and the ‘Ode. Written on the First of January 1794’.² Today, though, I want to look again at the poem through the lens of an earlier Coleridgean relationship: with the ‘gentle-hearted’ Charles Lamb. Everyone here will know that famous remonstrance made by Lamb in letters of 1800, just after his reconciliation with Coleridge, when he tells him not to ‘make me ridiculous any more by terming me gentle-hearted in print’³—‘please to blot out *gentle hearted*, and substitute drunken dog, ragged-head, seld-shaven, odd-ey’d, stuttering, or any other epithet which truly and properly belongs to the Gentleman in question’.⁴ I want to restore Lamb’s sometimes dissonant voice to this conversation poem, and to suggest that, just as he occupies the central, turning point of the poem itself, so too, in that self-deprecating complaint, Lamb gets right to the heart of some central Coleridgean dilemmas in ‘This Lime Tree Bower’. Leading on from this, I also want us to consider the conversations within the poem itself, between the text and its footnotes; and between different versions of the poem, as Coleridge returns to it at different stages of his career.

The poem’s genesis is particularly appropriate for the Kilve conference: that of the sociable Somerset gathering, where poetry runs alongside the conversation of friends. As Coleridge tells Southey in the letter of 17 July 1797, where the poem first makes its appearance:

While Wordsworth, his Sister, & C. Lamb were out one evening; /
sitting in the arbour of T. Poole’s garden, which communicates with
mine, I wrote these lines, with which I am pleased—

The lime-tree bower functions as a sympathetic ideal, enclosing and embowering friendship. We are presented with a retreat which, like Coleridge’s own withdrawal from overt participation in political life to rural seclusion in

¹ Lucy Newlyn, *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 23.

² Lynda Pratt, ‘Interaction, Reorientation, and Discontent in the Coleridge-Southey Circle, 1797: Two New Letters by Robert Southey,’ *Notes and Queries* 47 (245) no. 3 (2000): 314-21; 316.

³ To Coleridge, August 6, 1800; *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marris, Jr., 3 vols. (Cornell University Press, 1975) I, 217-8.

⁴ To Coleridge, August 14, 1800; Marris, I, 224.

Somersetshire, might at first seem to be a limited or constraining one. However, through the power of friendly empathy and familial affection, themselves politically nuanced qualities, the retreat becomes illuminated, powerfully significant:

A Delight

Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
 As I myself were there! Nor in this bower
 Want I sweet sounds or pleasing shapes. I watch'd
 The sunshine of each broad transparent Leaf
 Broke by the shadows of the Leaf or Stem,
 Which hung above it: and that Wall-nut Tree
 Was richly ting'd: and a deep radiance lay
 Full on the ancient ivy which usurps
 Those fronting elms, and now with blackest mass
 Makes their dark foliage gleam a lighter hue
 Thro' the last twilight.—⁵

The poem is invested with all the ideals Coleridge, and friends such as Cottle, or Tom Poole, or the sometime tutee Charles Lloyd had brought to his residence in Nether Stowey. This lime-tree bower is also the 'Jasmine harbour' of Cottle's *Reminiscences*, supplied with bread and cheese and true Taunton ale, sociably occupied by 'a company of the happiest mortals, (T.Poole, C.Lloyd, S.T.Coleridge, and J.C.)'.⁶ And this spirited kind of companionship also appears, of course, in Hazlitt's 1823 'My First Acquaintance with Poets':

Thus I passed three weeks at Nether Stowey and in the neighbourhood, generally devoting the afternoons to a delightful chat in an arbour made of bark by the poet's friend Tom Poole, sitting under two fine elm-trees, and listening to the bees humming round us, while we quaffed our *flip*.⁷

A similar investment in this sympathetic ideal is evident in Lamb's letters. 'You two,' he wrote to Coleridge as he and Charles Lloyd prepared to move to Nether Stowey in December 1797, 'seem to be about *realizing* an Elysium upon earth'.⁸ His enthusiasm was palpable as he himself prepared to come to Nether Stowey in the summer of 1797 for an eagerly awaited visit:

I long, I yearn, with all the longings of a child do I desire to see you, to come among you—to see the young philosopher to thank Sara for her last year's invitation in person—to read your tragedy—to read over together our little book—to breathe fresh air—to revive in me

⁵ To Southey, 17 July 1797, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) I, 335-6.

⁶ Joseph Cottle, *Reminiscences of S. T. Coleridge and R. Southey* (1847; Highgate: Lime Tree Bower Press, 1970) 150-1.

⁷ William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London; Toronto: Dent, 1930-1934) XVII, 119.

⁸ To Coleridge, December 9, 1796; Marrs, I, 75.

vivid images of “Salutation scenery”.⁹

Like ‘the young philosopher,’ David Hartley Coleridge, now nine months old, Lamb humorously portrays himself as ready to have his mind moulded, his perceptions formed. That idea, too, of Lamb wanting ‘to come among’ the Coleridges carries a powerful charge, casting the family as a society: not merely to be visited but actually entered into, as into an enclosed community or religion. Somewhat more startling, perhaps, is that desire to ‘revive...vivid images of ‘Salutation scenery’ in the midst of Somersetshire. During the winter of 1794, Coleridge had stayed in London at the ‘Salutation and Cat’ inn, and the two had renewed their Christ’s Hospital acquaintance in its ‘nice little smoky room,’ as Lamb insistently remembers in letters of 1796 and 1797, ‘with all its associated train of pipes, tobacco, Egghot, welch Rabbits, metaphysics & *Poetry*—’.¹⁰ They had also, as Southey recalls, attended Unitarian chapel together—probably in Essex Street.¹¹ The ‘Salutation’ is an important image for Lamb: it is his urban version of a jasmine harbour, a enclosed place of mutual sympathy and sociable conversation. In evoking it Lamb reminds Coleridge of their earlier poetic collaborations—the ‘little book’ is the second edition of Coleridge’s *Poems on Various Subjects*, to which Lamb and Lloyd both contributed. He also, I think, is using it to evoke memories of their shared Unitarian faith, within which friendship may act as a mediator for divine love.

There has been a subtle shift in tone by the time of his subsequent letter, which marks his return from the cottage:

Is the Patriot come yet? Are Wordsworth and his sister gone yet? I was looking out for John Thelwall all the way from Bridgewater, and had I met him, I think it would have moved almost me to tears. You will oblige me too by sending me my great-coat, which I left behind in the oblivious state the mind is thrown into at parting—is it not ridiculous that I sometimes envy that great-coat lingering so cunningly behind?—at present I have none—so send it me by a Stowey waggon, if there be such a thing, directing for C.L., No.45, Chapel-Street, Pentonville, near London. But above all, *that Inscription!*—it will recall to me the tones of all your voices—and with them many a remembered kindness to one who could and can repay you all only by the silence of a grateful heart. I could not talk much, while I was with you, but my silence was not sullenness, nor I hope from any bad motive; but, in truth, disuse has made me awkward at it. I know I behaved myself, particularly at Tom Poole’s and at Cruikshank’s, most like a sulky child; but company and converse are strange to me. It was kind in you all to endure me as you did. ¹²

⁹ To Coleridge, June 29, 1797; Marrs, I, 114.

¹⁰ To Coleridge, December 1, 1796; Marrs, I, 65.

¹¹ See *New Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Kenneth Curry, 2 vols. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965) I, 91.

¹² To Coleridge, June 19 or 26, 1797; Marrs, I, 117-18.

This letter is a response to a friendship group in transition, offering an insight into the group which was gathering about Coleridge's cottage in the summer of 1797— the Patriot, John Thelwall, Wordsworth and his sister, not quite yet installed at Alfoxden, Charles Lloyd, whose plan of being tutored by Coleridge had already broken down, an unstable elusive presence off to the side of the scene. Thelwall himself was to offer a similar vision of 'the Enchanting retreat (the Academus of Stowey)' in a letter of a few days earlier to his wife Stella, describing how he, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, had been walking and philosophising together, 'a literary and political triumvirate'.¹³ It is not only a sociable gathering, of course, but a highly productive literary one. Works discussed must have included the 'little book' to which Lamb refers in the previous letter, the 1797 edition of *Poems*, and probably parts of *Osorio* and *The Borderers*. Reading the *Excursion* in 1814, Lamb commented to Wordsworth that he remembered some aspects of it, and had 'known the story of Margaret [...] even as long back as I saw you first at Stowey'.¹⁴ The 'Inscription' to which Lamb refers is Wordsworth's 'Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree', and his comment—'it will recall to me the tones of all your voices'—is a significant one: it gives us an image of the Nether Stowey household as a place of discussion and shared reading, a collaborative space of mutual creation.

This may not, however, have been an entirely harmonious reading community; Lamb was silent and awkward, not fully participating in the conversation:

I know I behaved myself, particularly at Tom Poole's and at Cruikshank's, most like a sulky child; but company and converse are strange to me.

Again that 'child' image recurs, but here it is in the context of the 'sulky child', whose eager expectations have perhaps been disappointed – perhaps by a final realisation that the 'Salutation' days were over, emphasised by Coleridge's growing closeness with Wordsworth. Certainly, the visit marked the culmination of his older friendship with Lamb: in the following months it became clear that Coleridge was distancing himself from his former relationships, as a letter from September 1797 shows:

You use Lloyd very ill—never writing to him. I tell you again that his is not a mind with which you should play tricks [...]

If you dont write to me now, —as I told Lloyd, I shall get angry, & call you hard names, Manchineel, & I dont know what else—. I wish you would send me my Great coat—the snow & the rain season is at hand & I have but a wretched old coat, once my fathers, to keep 'em off—and that is transitory—

¹³ Damian Walford Davies, *Presences that Disturb: Models of Romantic Identity in the Literature and Culture of the 1790s* (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1999) Appendix 3, 296.

¹⁴ To Wordsworth, August 9, 1814; Marrs, III, 95.

When time drives flocks from field to fold,
When ways grow foul and blood gets cold—

I shall remember where I left my coat—meek Emblem wilt thou be,
old Winter, of a friend's neglect—Cold, cold, cold,—¹⁵

Here, phrases from Coleridge's own works function as a subtly pointed reproach. Lamb complains most seriously on Lloyd's behalf; by September 1797 the tutoring plan had irretrievably broken down. Lloyd had, to Coleridge's annoyance, taken refuge in Southey's house, where he began to write the poems of *Blank Verse*, and conceived, perhaps at Southey's prompting, his novel *Edmund Oliver*. The contrast between the idea of the 'Elysium' which they had had in mind and this neglect is striking, although Lamb does not directly draw attention to it. His letter, however, is full of allusions to false friendship, beginning with that 'hard name': Manchineel, the tree which poisons those who sleep beneath it. It is borrowed from the dedication of the 1797 *Poems*, 'To the Rev George Coleridge', when it appears as an indictment of the 'false and fair-foliag'd' friends who have pretended to shelter Coleridge:

... then breathing subtlest damps,
Mix'd their own venom with the rain from Heaven
That I woke poison'd! (ll. 28-30)¹⁶

Lamb's use of the image alludes both to the ideals of the Nether Stowey community, and to the collaborative effort of the 1797 edition of *Poems*—shared spaces which Coleridge seems, in his abandonment of Lamb and Lloyd, to be betraying. It also presents another, darker, sort of bower, connected not with blessing but with neglect. The neglect has an actual physical consequence, too: we see that Coleridge has still not remembered to send the coat. The oversight is made doubly upsetting by the fact that Coleridge had himself received a coat from Thomas Poole a few months earlier, and had made it into a token of their mutually beneficial friendship:

You shall be my Elijah—& I will most reverentially catch the Mantle,
which you have cast off.—

Why should not a Bard go tight & have a few neat things on his
back? *Ey?—Eh!—Eh!*¹⁷

Through the mantle, Elijah conferred his spiritual powers upon Elisha, who was then able to divide the sea and establish himself as prophet and king; Poole's protective friendship fosters Coleridge's creativity. In contrast, Lamb's overlooked great-coat functions as 'meek Emblem of a friend's neglect', a

¹⁵ To Coleridge, September 20, 1797; Marrs, I, 123. The first line of the quotation is from Sir Walter Raleigh, 'The Nymph's reply to the Shepherd', and the second is an adaptation of Love's Labour's Lost, V, ii, 916.

¹⁶ Dedication. To the Reverend George Coleridge, of Ottery St. Mary, Devon, 'Poems on Various Subjects (1797) ix.

¹⁷ To Poole, July 26, 1797; Griggs, I, 338.

point nicely reinforced by the allusion at the end of the sentence: 'cold, cold, cold'.¹⁸ The quotation is taken from *Osorio*, on which Coleridge was still working, and which had probably been read aloud on the Nether Stowey visit. *Osorio*, who has been led by his pride to plot against his brother, is suffering a pang of remorse as he thinks of his 'murder':

Oh! cold, cold, cold—shot thro' with icy cold! (II:i:107)¹⁹

Osorio, like its contemporary *The Borderers*, is haunted by the theme of broken vows, brothers and friends betrayed or neglected. Cold becomes the physical emblem of the emotional suffering this causes; now, Lamb picks up the phrase familiar from their shared reading and gives it back to Coleridge as a humorous comment on his own behaviour.

What happened to the great-coat is unrecorded. But the friendship between the two had, certainly, lost its former warmth by late 1797, and in mid-1798, as Coleridge prepared to leave for Germany, the two became estranged—probably due to Charles Lloyd's interference. But even at the height of their early friendship, Lamb could be critical of Coleridge's assumptions or conjectures. As Reeve Parker has pointed out, 'This Lime-Tree Bower' has its roots deep in Coleridge's letters of mourning and solace immediately after Mrs. Lamb's death: the 'day of horrors' of September 22nd 1796.²⁰ It's worth, I think, going back to the conversations between the two at that difficult time and looking again at the surprising way in which Lamb responds to Coleridge's words of consolation—a response which perhaps goes some way toward explaining the silence of the Nether Stowey visit. Those letters—of which only one survives—seem in many ways to have anticipated not only the imagery, but also the dilemmas of the poem.

Bereaved and stunned, Lamb's immediate reaction was to relinquish his own poetry, and to turn towards Coleridge to confirm and strengthen his Unitarian faith. 'Write,—' he begged Coleridge on 27th September 1796, 'as religious a letter as possible'.²¹ Although Coleridge had already asked him to contribute to the second edition of *Poems*, to be published in 1797, he urged him to 'mention nothing of poetry. I have destroyed every vestige of past vanities of that kind'. That preoccupation with vanity is picked up by Coleridge in his consolatory response:

As to what regards yourself, I approve altogether of your abandoning what you justly call vanities. I look upon you as a man called by sorrow and anguish and a strange desolation of hopes into quietness, and a soul set apart and made peculiar to God! We cannot arrive at

¹⁸ Rev. Daniel Turner, *Sacred Friendship, Exemplified in the Case of Elijah and Elisha. Sermon Preached on the Death of Eliza Turner* (London: 1786) 3-4. See Gurion Taussig, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship, 1789 - 1804* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 91-2.

¹⁹ *Poetical Works III, Part I, Plays*, ed., J. C. C. Mays, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 16 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 85.

²⁰ Reeve Parker, *Coleridge's Meditative Art* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975) 30.

²¹ To Coleridge, September 27, 1796; Mays, I, 44-5.

any portion of heavenly bliss without in some measure imitating Christ; and they arrive at the largest inheritance who imitate the most difficult parts of his character, and, bowed down and crushed underfoot, cry in fulness of faith, 'Father, thy will be done.'²²

Coleridge's reply looks back to Unitarian discourse, not only in the emphasis upon Christ and his human suffering, but also in its Priestleian necessitarianism, the idea that good must come from suffering. Drawing, like Priestley's sermons, or like 'Religious Musings', upon the language of Revelation, the letter also recalls one of Lamb's favourite texts: Baxter's *The Saints Everlasting Rest*. The language of this letter, confident and rhythmic, and elegiac in its evocation of a theological position Coleridge had already begun to abandon, feeds into 'This Lime-Tree Bower'. Foreshadowing the expansive movement of the poem, Lamb is urged to imagine being roused 'from a frightful dream by the song of birds and the gladsome rays of the morning', and to imagine this as a precursor of the Resurrection, 'how infinitely more sweet to be awakened from the blackness and amazement of a sudden horror by the glories of God manifest and the hallelujahs of angels'.

We can see how the imagery of the letter, from the figure 'imitating Christ...bowed down and crushed underfoot', to the sudden awakening into 'the glories of God manifest', informs the structure of the poem, with its turn from the Christ-like suffering of Lamb:

winning thy way
With sad yet bowed soul, thro' evil & pain
And strange calamity. (ll. 13-15)²³

to the vision of the 'glorious Sun!' and its spiritual illumination. Reeve Parker has convincingly demonstrated the way in which Coleridge is drawing on Baxter's meditative prose, and borrowing, rhetorically and theologically, from *The Saint's Rest*.²⁴ Baxter's meditating subject is enabled to escape bodily and temporal imprisonment, projecting his spirits outward to access spiritual insight. Coleridge's letter is the literary equivalent of this meditative space, suggesting the ways in which Lamb's troubles may lead him to 'quietness', allowing him an apprehension of 'heavenly bliss'.

The letter proved, as Lamb told Coleridge in October 1796, 'an inestimable treasure'.²⁵ But this is not to say that he accepted it without qualification. Although he certainly responded to this idea of meditation on the nature of God and of necessitarianism he was more sceptical about Coleridge's personal interpretation of theological issues, in particular that

²² Coleridge to Lamb, September 28; Marrs, I, 46 and Griggs, I, 239.

²³ Griggs, I, 335.

²⁴ As Parker also points out, a pun may be at work here: 'there may have been a very verbal wit in the conception and writing of both poem and letter' (*Meditative Art*, 39). Cf. Coleridge's letter to Godwin, 3 Mar. 1800, 'The Agnus Dei & the Virgin Mary desire their kind respects to *you*, you sad Atheist!', Griggs, I, 580; and to John Rickman, 14 Mar. 1804, 'I will be with you by a quarter before 7 infallibly; and the Virgin Mary with the uncrucified Lamb will come with me', Griggs, II, 1090.

²⁵ To Coleridge, October 3, 1796; Marrs, I, 47.

closing sentiment:

[...] I charge you, my dearest friend, not to dare to encourage gloom or despair. You are a temporary sharer in human miseries that you may be a eternal partaker of the Divine nature.²⁶

Lamb's response to this reveals a gradual emergence of doubts about Coleridge's friendship, closely bound up with concerns over his writing style. It is a measure of his resilience and of the way in which he repeatedly turns to close reading as a source of consolation, that by the end of October he was able to return to Coleridge's letters and express his doubts over

a certain freedom of expression, a certain air of mysticism, more consonant to the conceits of pagan philosophy, than consistent with the humility of genuine piety.²⁷

Drawing attention to Coleridge's specific phrasing, in a way which recalls Coleridge's own attention to wording in the *Lectures on Revealed Religion*, Lamb suggests that he is not keeping this humility in mind:

...in your first fine consolatory epistle you say, 'you are a temporary sharer in human misery, that you may be an eternal partaker of the Divine Nature.' What more than this do those men say, who are for exalting the man Christ Jesus into the second person of an unknown Trinity,—men, whom you or I scruple not to call idolaters?²⁸

Central to the Unitarian creed is the idea that, since there is no Trinity, Christ cannot be of 'Divine Nature', despite being, in Priestley's words, 'honoured and distinguished by God above all men'.²⁹ As Lamb frequently urges Coleridge, it is important that men consider themselves the 'brethren' of Christ, remembering their common humanity. To worship Christ is idolatry; so too is the suggestion that men might become divine on their ascent to heaven. This is the substance of Lamb's next complaint, as he warns that

man, in the pride of speculation, forgetting his nature, and hailing in himself the future God, must make the angels laugh.³⁰

The mention of speculative pride is of crucial importance here, as Lamb begins to question Coleridge's religious certainties; Jane Aaron, rightly, asserts that 'this passage marks a crucial change in their relation'. As she points out, Lamb is beginning to feel anxiety about Coleridge's 'easy assumption of their spiritual

²⁶ Coleridge to Lamb, September 28; Marrs, I, 46 and Griggs, I, 239.

²⁷ To Coleridge, October 24, 1796; Marrs, I, 53.

²⁸ To Coleridge, October 24, 1796; Marrs, I, 53-4.

²⁹ Joseph Priestley, *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity* (London: J. Johnson, 1777) vii.

³⁰ To Coleridge, October 24, 1796; Marrs, I, 54.

exaltation'.³¹ Simultaneously, he begins to feel concerned about the way in which Coleridge projects these assumptions onto his friends. The two concerns run closely alongside one another: because so much emphasis has been placed upon the spiritual aspect of their friendship, a breach of it is not merely a personal but also a religious matter. As Coleridge moves away from the closeness of his earlier friendship with Lamb, he also, in Lamb's view, loses the strength of his earlier religious convictions and becomes guilty of 'the pride of speculation'. These interconnected complaints finally come together, I think, in Lamb's satirical attack, the *Theses*, on Coleridge's spiritual pride.³²

The letter Coleridge sent to Thelwall on 17 December 1796 continued this debate about what it constituted to be a 'partaker of the divine nature'; this conversation, too, feeds into 'This Lime Tree Bower'. As he was being criticised for moving away from Unitarian humility by Lamb, he defended himself all the more strongly to the non-believer Thelwall. Whereas he was trying to console Lamb, he is actively trying to convert Thelwall, yet the two letters use many of the same Biblical phrases and analogies, revealing Coleridge's underlying preoccupations, and the connections he was making between friendship and religious insight. It begins with a defence of Coleridge's retirement to the country:

I am not *fit* for *public* Life; yet the Light shall stream to a far distance from the taper in my cottage window.³³

The 'light' of this particular letter is the religious illumination he feels he can impart to Thelwall, as well as his particular friendship. This coupling of friendship and religion leads him into a defence of 'Brotherly-kindness':

I need not tell you, that Godliness is *Godlike*-ness, and is paraphrased by Peter—'that ye may be partakers of the divine nature.'—i.e. act from a love of order, & happiness, & not from any self-respecting motive—from the *excellency*, into which you have exalted your *nature*, not from the *keenness* of *mere prudence*—'add to your faith fortitude, and to fortitude knowlege, and to knowlege purity, and to purity patience, and to patience Godliness, and to Godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness universal Love.'³⁴

To this description of Godliness he appends a description, translated from the epic poem by Voss, 'Luise', in which a country clergyman describes how his affectionate feelings for his daughter are echoed by those of God, whose love '*swells with active impulse towards all his Children*'. The clergyman not only rejoices in this fellow-feeling, but sees it, in Baxterian terms, as a prefiguration of the day when all will '*fall asleep, and...wake in the common Morning of the Resurrection*'.

³¹ Jane Aaron, *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writing of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 136.

³² To Coleridge, May 23-June 6, 1798; Marrs, I, 128-9.

³³ To John Thelwall, December 17, 1796; Griggs, I, 277.

³⁴ Griggs, I, 284.

This leads Coleridge into suggesting that Thelwall, though unconverted, might yet experience 'a progression in [his] *moral* character'. He ends with a vision of the two of them in the Kingdom of Heaven together—'and I with transport in my eye shall say—"I *told* you so, my *dear* fellow"'. Sara and Stella, meanwhile, are transformed into 'sister-seraphs in the heavenly Jerusalem'.³⁵

Yet with those rather lovely 'sister-seraphs', we return to the kind of speculative vision which Lamb considered spiritually endangering. The letters of late 1796 to Lamb and Thelwall show that Coleridge, at this point, was placing a great deal of importance on the moral attributes of others, their ability to practise 'brotherly kindness': simultaneously, Lamb was suggesting that this might be undermined by Coleridge's own 'pride of speculation'. While 'Brotherly kindness' is a central idea of Unitarian belief, taken too far, over-reliance on human judgement can approach idolatry. Similarly, he takes issue with a statement of Coleridge that 'it is by the press, that God hath given finite spirits both evil and good (I suppose you mean simply bad men and good men) a portion as it were of His Omnipresence!'.³⁶ With phrases such as 'portion of Omnipresence', suggests Lamb:

You seem to me to have been straining your comparing faculties to bring together things infinitely distinct and unlike; the feeble narrow-sphered operations of the human intellect and the everywhere diffused mind of Deity, the peerless wisdom of Jehovah.³⁷

Lamb is warning Coleridge about a general tendency not only in his religious philosophy, as Lamb saw it, but also in his friendship: the danger of placing too much emphasis on his own 'narrow-sphered' insight, and according his own views a 'Godlike-ness'. Coleridge, in the mid-1790s, is attracted by the speculative possibilities afforded by Unitarianism: for example Priestley's conception of matter as an energy or force. Indeed, looking at Coleridge's 'lifetime of experimental observation', Jane Stabler has identified 'a Priestleyan scientific pulse at the heart of Coleridgean poetics'.³⁸ But speculation is not, as she points out, given a free rein by Priestley, nor yet by Barbauld, and in some ways I think Lamb's letters run parallel to the attempt made by Barbauld in her September 1797 poem 'To Mr. S. T. Coleridge' to warn Coleridge away from, in her words, 'the maze of metaphysic lore'.³⁹ Instead, Lamb emphasises the practical aspects of Unitarianism, such as its emphasis on familial and friendly affection.

This runs alongside his attempt to coax Coleridge toward simplicity. That phrase 'I suppose you mean *simply* bad men and good men' contains the seeds

³⁵ Griggs, I, 285.

³⁶ To Coleridge, October 24, 1796; Marrs, I, 53.

³⁷ To Coleridge, October 28, 1796; Marrs, I, 56.

³⁸ Jane Stabler, 'Space for Speculation: Coleridge, Barbauld, and the Poetics of Priestley', *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 175-206; 175, 184.

³⁹ 'To Mr. S. T. Coleridge', l. 34; first published in the *Monthly Magazine*, 7 (April, 1799): 231-2. *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, eds. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens; London: University of Georgia Press, 1994) 132-3.

of his famous criticism in the subsequent letter:

Cultivate simplicity, Coleridge, or rather, I should say, banish elaborateness; for simplicity springs spontaneous from the heart, and carries into daylight its own modest buds and genuine, sweet, and clear flowers of expression.⁴⁰

The advice is intimately connected to the warning that Coleridge is moving away from Unitarian humility in straining his 'comparing faculties to bring together things infinitely distinct and unlike'. Lamb is struggling with the central Coleridgean desire to tap into the idea of Omnipresence: to, as he tells Thelwall, perceive 'something *one & indivisible*'.⁴¹ This not only leads him away from simplicity, it also prevents him from appreciating the very distinction or unlikeness of things—or people. This reproach, which functions on several levels, poetic, religious, and personal, seems to me to point to Lamb's actual experience of the Coleridgean dilemma noticed and explored by Thomas McFarland and Seamus Perry: his difficulty in negotiating between the external world and the poetic ego; his essential double-mindedness, which wants constantly to bring things together, even when—or perhaps especially when—those things are, in Lamb's words, 'distinct and unlike'.

This brings us back to that reproach with which we began:

please to blot out *gentle hearted*, and substitute drunken dog, ragged-head, seld-shaven, odd-ey'd, stuttering, or any other epithet which truly and properly belongs to the Gentleman in question.⁴²

The letter which contains that reproach is a wonderful refutation of Charles's gentle heartedness, in the sense of pallid or self-conscious virtue:

My head is playing all the tunes in the world, ringing such peals! it has just finished the "merry Xt. Church Bells" and absolutely is beginning "Turn again Whittington." Buz, buz, buz, bum, bum, bum, wheeze, wheeze, wheeze, feu, feu, feu, tinky, tinky tinky, *craunch*. I shall certainly come to be damned at last. I have been getting drunk two days running. I find my moral sense in the last stage of a consumption... In the midst of this infernal larum, Conscience (and be damn'd to her) barking & yelping as loud as any of them, I have sat down to read over again your *Satire upon me* in the Anthology—

Now, we might seem to be a long way from the fears about proper religious humility Lamb had been advancing a few years previously. But underneath Lamb's slippery, very knowing humour, he makes a very similar point. The 'gentle-hearted', Christ-like Charles of the poem, he suggests, might be nothing

⁴⁰ To Coleridge, November 8, 1796; Marrs, I, 60-61.

⁴¹ To Thelwall, October 14, 1797; Griggs, I, 349.

⁴² To Coleridge, August 14, 1800; Marrs, I, 224.

more than a projection of Coleridge's own poetic ego: in its urge to idealise, it refuses to recognise Lamb's true, proper, odd and stuttering reality, which he now forcibly brings home to Coleridge. His complaint specifically refers to the published version of 'This Lime-Tree Bower' in the second volume of the *Annual Anthology* in 1800, just after his reconciliation with Coleridge following their two-year estrangement. During this time, Lamb had become a far more confident and self-sufficient writer, completing his novel and the play *John Woodvil*, and beginning to write some of his best letters about London life. But this complaint isn't just about the former disciple wanting to establish his independence, but rather, as I hope I have shown through the discussion of their earlier exchange of letters, a reflection of his ongoing anxieties about Coleridge. Just as he was perturbed by the speculative pride of that phrase 'partaker of the divine nature' in the consolatory letter, here he similarly objects to Coleridge's presumption in casting him as an ideal, even while he specifically refers to real details of Lamb's life:

Damn you, I was beginning to forgive you, & believe in earnest that the lugging in of my Proper name was purely unintentional on your part, when looking back for further conviction, stares me in the face Charles Lamb *of the India House*. Now I am convinced it was all done in *Malice*, heaped, sack-upon-sack, congregated, studied Malice. *You Dog!*—you[r] 141st Page shall not save you. I own I was just ready to acknowledge that there is a something *not* unlike good poetry in that Page, if you had not run into the unintelligible abstraction-fit about the manner of the Deity's making Spirits perceive his presence. God, nor created thing alive, can receive any honor from such thin, shew-box, attributes.⁴³

As so often, under cover of a self-deprecating humour, Lamb advances some serious criticism here. The casting of him as gentle-hearted goes along with Coleridge's 'unintelligible abstraction-fit': twin symptoms, for Lamb, of Coleridge's move towards a dangerous self-absorption, as he ceases to engage with the realities of the world, or the people, around him.

Lamb's anxiety about Coleridge's "abstraction-fits", about his tendency toward a kind of idealist egotism is, I think, right: right on a personal level, but not on a creative one. For—and this is the crucial point in the context of Lamb's complaints—the very factors which disturb Lamb, and make Coleridge's personal life so difficult, turn the poem itself into a success. His desire to bring the particular details of the scene into harmony with the 'wide landscape' might be seen as another movement in that attempt to bring together, as Lamb notes, the 'feeble narrow-sphered operations of the human intellect and the everywhere diffused mind of Deity': but, crucially, in terms of the poem itself, it is, this time, a successful move. The carefully detailed specifics of 'springy heath' and 'yellow light' find a place within an overarching idea of divine unity, an beautifully implicit statement of the 'One Life'. The

⁴³ Marrs, I, 224.

rook, for example, with its carefully footnoted creaking, is at once real and, as it slowly wings homeward, 'vanishing in light', part of a larger, illuminating vision. Moreover, in the revisions between its 1797 and 1800 versions, we can see how the poem is sharpened and improved by Coleridge's persistent return to these interconnected questions concerning the poet and his relationship to the external world, the real and the abstract, the particular and the speculative.

The 1797 version already demonstrates Coleridge's close thinking about how to express the actual qualities of things in words: the 'springy heath', for instance, of the fifth line, which comes with a footnote to Southey explaining the precision of the adjective, '*elastic*, I mean', so that an actual physical sensation is compressed into the verse. This is followed up in the 1800 *Annual Anthology* version by the description of the descent into the dell, which has become much more clearly and distinctly realised: instead of being looked down on, it is entered into and closely observed by the friends.⁴⁴ Similarly, the more vague poetic evocation of 'that same rifted Dell' has become, by 1800, 'That still roaring dell,' which nicely brings the sense of hearing into play, as well as conveying a subtle ambiguity through the use of the word 'still'. As Kelvin Everest has pointed out, 'the opposite connotations of the word, "fixed, unmoving", but also "ever, continually" underpin the development in Coleridge's mood' here, allowing him to hold two meanings in suspension, just as the lime-tree bower is at once a fixed prison and a place of growth, movement, and creativity.⁴⁵ The introduction of the word, used three times in the opening section of the 1800 poem, works to connect and unify the poem, looking forward to its prominence in the closing lines: 'when all was still'. This sense of connection is reinforced, in the 1800 version, through the repetitions of 'roaring dell' in lines nine and ten, or the image of the weeds, 'which still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge' in line nineteen. This is Coleridge striving to create a unified vision and bring the real, the particular, the experienced, into harmony with his larger ideals.

But this movement between the real and the imagined, the poet and the world around him, is underpinned by a certain anxiety on Coleridge's part. We can see it signalled in the poem by the slippage between indicative and imperative modes in the description of the dell:

And there my friends,
Behold the dark-green file of long lank weeds. (ll. 16-17)

The reader is left uncertain whether Coleridge is sharing the viewing experience of the friends, or whether the verb is acting imperatively, as he actively directs their gaze, and instructs them to observe the weeds.⁴⁶ This idea of instructing is reinforced by the comma at the end of line sixteen in the

⁴⁴ "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison. – A Poem addressed to CHARLES LAMB, of the India-House", *Annual Anthology*, vol. 2, ed. Robert Southey (Bristol: 1800) 140-5.

⁴⁵ Kelvin Everest, *Coleridge's Secret Ministry* (Brighton: Harvester; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979) 250.

⁴⁶ As noted by Michael Simpson, 'Coleridge's Swinging Moods and the Revision of "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison"', *Style* 33. 1 (1999): 21-42; 27. Thanks to Dr. Simpson for discussing this with me.

Annual Anthology edition, removed in the 1817 *Sibylline Leaves*. It is confirmed by the particularity of the footnote, which fussily directs the reader toward the correct type of fern, the 'Asplenium scolopendrium, called in some countries the Adder's Tongue', and points toward the further confirmation of Withering's *An Arrangement of British Plants*.

A similar confusion comes in the lines concerning Lamb's visionary moment on the hill-top, which in the 1797 version runs:

So my friend
Struck with joy's deepest calm, and gazing round
On the wide view, may gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily, a living Thing
That acts upon the mind. (ll.20-24)

By 1800, a direct identification with Coleridge's own experience is being made, and Lamb is being cast in the role of a disciple.

—So my Friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily, a living thing
Which acts upon the mind. (ll. 38-43)

Again, the standing trope serves to unify the 1800 poem, since, as Paul Magnuson has pointed out, it connects with the signature at the end of the *Annual Anthology* version—ESTEESI.⁴⁷ As we are told in an 1802 letter, this, in Coleridge's 'Punic Greek', 'signifies—*He hath stood*—which in these times of apostacy (*sic*) from the principles of Freedom, or of Religion in this country, & from both by the same persons in France, is no unmeaning Signature, if subscribed with humility, & in the remembrance of, Let him that stands take heed lest he fall—'.⁴⁸ But alongside this certainty of standing up, with friends, for principles of freedom and religion, comes another ambiguity. Just as, in the lines concerning the weeds, we are left unsure whether the verb is acting indicatively or imperatively, here again the mood of 'gaze' is unclear, as is the subject.⁴⁹ Is it Lamb, or Coleridge? The uncertainty is emphasised by the footnote he adds for Southey: 'You remember, I am a *Berkeleyan*'. But in many ways, as Seamus Perry puts it, 'the use to which Berkeley is being put is actually rather tentative', since the poem continues to assert the material presence of the landscape.⁵⁰ The phrase 'a living thing/ Which *acts* upon the mind' disappears from the editions of 1828 onwards, suggesting Coleridge's own

⁴⁷ Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) 59.

⁴⁸ To William Sotheby, Sept. 10, 1802; Griggs, II, 867.

⁴⁹ Also pointed out by Kelvin Everest, *Coleridge's Secret Ministry*, 254.

⁵⁰ Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 151.

doubts, not only about Berkeley, but also about its place in the poem.

The poem and its footnotes seem to act out Coleridge's own oscillation between the poles of the imagined and the real. Here he relies on the footnote to Southey to clarify an idealist position the poem itself does not seem to urge quite so strongly. On the other hand, the footnotes about the weeds, and about the rook, seem to want to tether the poetry to the external world. He constantly strives to put the two together, to make these external details part of a much larger unified vision, but worries that this may only be his own projection. The note he adds to the version he sent to Thelwall reinforces this idea:

My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something *great*—something *one & indivisible*—and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty!—But in this faith *all things* counterfeit infinity!—⁵¹

This attempt to achieve something '*one & indivisible*' may be seen as running alongside Coleridge's desire, in poetry and in life, to bring the self into harmonious dialogue with others. Ideal friendship, or marriage, seems to hold out this promise of unity, and the idea of union out of multiple separate objects appears again and again in the notebooks, as he struggles with the idea of the one and the many:

The flames of two Candles joined give a much stronger Light than both of them separate—evid. by a person holding the two Candles near his Face, first separate, & then joined in one.
Picture of Hymen.⁵²

Or:

As difficult as to separate two dew-drops blended together on a bosom of a new-blown Rose.⁵³

However, as he tells Thelwall, his yearning towards something '*indivisible*' is constantly undercut by the fear that '*all things* counterfeit infinity!—'. Thus he is also tormented by the dilemmas and uncertainties of friendship, and the ways it may be 'counterfeit'. On the one hand, the escape from the self-absorbed imprisonment of the early lines of 'This Lime-Tree Bower' into the affirmative joy caused by identification with the imagined Charles, is a powerful and absorbing transition. Friendship, that movement of empathetic connection, becomes a necessary confirmation and strengthening of the poet's sense of self, so that he is able to refocus on the bower and see its own 'deep radiance'. This has been nicely shown by Gurion Taussig, who draws attention

⁵¹ To Thelwall, October 14, 1797; Griggs, I, 349.

⁵² *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 6 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957-1973) I, 13.

⁵³ *Notebooks*, I, 142.

to the dynamic images of the poem, the way in which the lower leaf of the lime tree mirrors the movement of the upper:

...and I watch'd
Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine! (ll. 51-54)⁵⁴

But, on the other hand, it is true that the changed status of the bower depends entirely upon Coleridge's perceptions: so too do the experiences of his friends. Lamb, on whom the empathetic movement of the poem depends, is of course defined mainly in relation to the poet himself:

—So my Friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily... (ll. 38-42)

The friend with whom the poet identifies may in fact be only another, ventriloquist, self—just as Lamb suggests when he answers back and disputes not only his depiction as 'gentle-hearted' but also the substance of the vision he has been granted in the poem, the 'unintelligible abstraction-fit about the manner of the Deity's making Spirits perceive his presence'.⁵⁵ Ironically enough, Coleridge, aware of the problem, was perhaps attempting to get around it in the 1800 version through the increased specificity of his references to 'Charles Lamb, of the India House, London', which seek, like the footnotes about the weeds or the rook, to reinforce the external reality of Lamb.

And that footnote reference to the weeds, with its ungainly precision, provides us with another example of the ways in which Coleridge seeks the reassurance and confirmation of others. In its published version, it is also a reference to Dorothy Wordsworth's journal, which would have been understood only by particular, intimate readers, binding them more closely to the text. She makes reference in her Alfoxden notebook for 10th February 1798 to 'the adder's tongue and the ferns green in the low damp dell', and the three subsequent entries, for February 11th, 12th, and 13th, all mention walks with Coleridge 'near to Stowey'.⁵⁶ As Mays suggests, the fern may have been 'among the first near-private emblems shared by Coleridge and the Wordsworths'.⁵⁷ Similarly, the closing footnote, added 'some months after I had written this line', where William Bartram is enlisted to clarify and support Coleridge's own observations, may also be a reference to shared friendly

⁵⁴ Gurion Taussig, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship, 1789 – 1804* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002) 103.

⁵⁵ Marrs, I, 224.

⁵⁶ *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2 vols. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1941) I, 8.

⁵⁷ *Poetical Works I, Part I*, ed., J. C. C. Mays, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 16 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 351.

reading. Duncan Wu and Mary Jacobus have both noted the influence of Bartram on 'Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman', and 'Ruth', and Duncan Wu has suggested that Wordsworth was reading the book alongside Coleridge in the summer of 1797.⁵⁸ Those footnotes thus point to the desire to have his own observations witnessed and confirmed, not only by other texts, Withering and Bartram, but also by friends: a movement echoed by the way in which he sent out the poem to Southey and to Thelwall, so that they too might witness the Nether Stowey ideal.

For various reasons, this seems a singularly tactless move. Sending the poem to Southey, Coleridge framed it with a passionate declaration of affection for the Wordsworths: 'I brought him & his Sister back with me & here I have settled them'.⁵⁹ The praise which follows demonstrates how Wordsworth has become a new mentor for Coleridge in the same way that he once looked up to Southey:

Wordsworth is a very great man—the only man, to whom *at all times* & in *all modes of excellence* I feel myself inferior—the only one, I mean, whom I *have yet met with*—

Unmistakably, the letter and its poem, bound up with that triumphant expression of possession, 'here I have *settled them*', look back to a previous ideal of friendly community and mutual creativity: the Pantisocratic community Coleridge had, only a few years beforehand, planned with Southey. Similarly, when Coleridge sent Thelwall an extract from 'This Lime-Tree Bower', alongside those comments on his desire to find something '*one & indivisible*', it was in the context of his not having been able to find a cottage for Thelwall at Nether Stowey, 'alas! I have neither money or influence'.⁶⁰ This was in sharp contrast to the enthusiasm of earlier letters, with their plans of retirement along Stowey lines, 'a little garden labor, & a pig stie': the idea of Coleridgean division and contradiction might have thus seemed peculiarly painful to Thelwall at that moment.⁶¹ This disappointment stems, I think, from the same kind of Coleridgean behaviour which Lamb was to note in his complaint about having his drunken, odd-eyed identity subsumed into a poetic idea. Coleridge has a desperate, often lovable, need for others to be connected to his hopes and ideals, without, perhaps, fully realising the real needs or characters of those others—or of himself. Another example connected to the Conversation poems might be his prediction for Hartley in 'Frost at Midnight', when, in a movement of visionary blessing which looks back to 'This Lime Tree Bower', he bestows on him all the gifts of natural inspiration denied his pent-up father:

⁵⁸ William Bartram, *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscolgules or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws* (2nd edn. 1794); see Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1790-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 9, and Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's 'Lyrical Ballads' (1798)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 199.

⁵⁹ To Southey, July 17, 1797; Griggs, I, 334.

⁶⁰ To Thelwall, October 14, 1797; Griggs, I, 349.

⁶¹ To Thelwall, February 6, 1797; Griggs, I, 305.

But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores... (ll.53-54)⁶²

This is poignantly answered by Hartley, self-exiled and alone, wandering in increasing despair around Ambleside, in his 1833 volume of poems:

The prayer was heard: I "wander'd like a breeze",
By mountain brooks and solitary meres,
And gathered there the shapes and phantasies
Which, mixt with passions of my sadder years,
Compose this book.⁶³

And now I want to return to my assertion that Lamb was right, on a personal level, to feel anxiety about those absorbing visions of Coleridge's: the 'abstraction-fits' which, in Lamb's view, hinder his engagement with reality and leave him, as Lamb suggests in a letter of late 1796, 'veering about from this hope to the other, & settling no where'.⁶⁴ And yet this constant oscillation, this veering about, while it's fair to say that it probably fatally undermined Coleridge's chances of a 'settled' life, is integral to his creative imagination. Although, as his daughter Sara sympathetically comments, 'he could not bear to complete incompletely, which everybody else does', he nevertheless constantly moves toward the idea of completion, of connection.⁶⁵ He never gives up this need to connect, which, although it makes his life more restless, ends by giving his work and thought a unity and integrity.

One example of this might be his return to and re-publication of the early poems in the 1817 collection *Sibylline Leaves*, published alongside *Biographia Literaria*, which was, of course, originally conceived as a short preface to the collection of poems. The two volumes show Coleridge returning to the scenes of his youth, the time when 'I had the happiness of knowing Mr. Wordsworth personally, and while memory lasts,' he goes on, 'I shall hardly forget the sudden effect produced on my mind, by his recitation of a manuscript poem'.⁶⁶ *Biographia Literaria* is the eventual response to the sudden effect of Wordsworth's poetry on Coleridge, and in some ways functions as a belated assertion of individuality and independence in the face of the Wordsworthian poetic ego. Similarly, even though the presentation of the poems in *Sibylline Leaves* reveals the shaping influence of Wordsworth, it also shows Coleridge making a claim for his own poetic achievement, separating out his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* and placing 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

⁶² 'Frost at Midnight', *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) 212.

⁶³ Hartley Coleridge, 'Dedication to his Father', *Poems* (1833).

⁶⁴ Marrs, I, 51.

⁶⁵ Sara Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, ed. Edith Coleridge (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1874), 148; quoted by Bradford Keyes Mudge, *Sara Coleridge: A Victorian Daughter* (1989) 99.

⁶⁶ *Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate. 2 vols. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 16 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 78-9.

at the opening of the volume. The addition of the gloss or commentary to the 'Ancient Mariner' provides us with a different sort of conversation poem, as the older Coleridge, in the guise of an antiquary, comments on the creation of his younger self. His preface, too, seeks to justify the urge of the collection toward recollection and reminiscence:

At the request of the friends of my youth, who still remain my friends, and who were pleased with the wildness of the compositions, I have added two school-boy poems [...] Surely, malice itself will scarcely attribute their insertion to any other motive, than the wish to keep alive the recollections from early life.⁶⁷

The grouping of the poems shows how he is striving to keep those recollections and friendships alive: in particular, the section he heads: 'Meditative Poems in Blank Verse'. This includes 'The Nightingale', which for the first time is given the subtitle 'A Conversation Poem'. Coleridge places alongside it other poems which, themselves conversational in tone, give the impression of his own ongoing conversation with the friends of those early years: 'The Eolian Harp,' for example, or 'To the Rev. George Coleridge', and, of course, 'Frost at Midnight' and 'This Lime-Tree Bower'. And in the midst of these poems is another, later, address to a friend: his 1807 poem to Wordsworth on hearing *The Prelude*:

O great Bard!
Ere yet that last strain dying awed the air,
With stedfast eye I view'd thee in the choir
Of ever-enduring men. (ll. 49-52)⁶⁸

As Morton Paley has explained,⁶⁹ this is just one of the numerous New Testament analogies of the poem, which seems to hail Wordsworth, significantly addressed as Coleridge's 'comforter', as 'the Christ of Palm Sunday, with "triumphal wreaths/ Strew'd before *thy* advancing!" (ll. 81-2)'. And, like Lamb objecting to being cast as a 'partaker of the Divine nature'⁷⁰, or the gentle Christ-like figure of 'This Lime-Tree Bower', Wordsworth too objects to Coleridge's enthusiasm:

Let me beg out of kindness to me that you would relinquish the intention of publishing the Poem addressed to me after hearing *mine* to you. The commendation would be injurious to us both, and my work when it appears, would labour under a great disadvantage in

⁶⁷ 'Preface', *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) iii.

⁶⁸ 'To a Gentleman. Composed on the night after his recitation of a Poem on the Growth of an Individual Mind', *Sibylline Leaves*, 199.

⁶⁹ Morton D. Paley, *Coleridge's Later Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 23. The allusion is to Matthew 21.8: 'Others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way'.

⁷⁰ Coleridge to Lamb, September 28; Marrs, I, 46 and Griggs, I, 239.

consequence of such a precursorship of Praise.⁷¹

What's at stake here is not concern over Coleridge's religious presumption, but a fear that Wordsworth simply cannot fulfil Coleridge's ideal: his expectations for *The Recluse*.

Again, Coleridge ignores the objection, and publishes the conversation poem without taking note of the response; again, we might say that, in poetic terms, he is justified. This is an important move for Coleridge's conception of himself as a poet: in the closing section of the poem to Wordsworth, as Morton Paley has demonstrated, a specific role for Coleridge is put forward, 'as a poet of personal sentiment, intimate friendship, and meditative reflection'.⁷² His placing of the poems together in *Sibylline Leaves* shows how he is creating a unified body of work, trying to bring together different aspects of his life and thought and to put them in conversation. It throws up important continuities, not least, as Jonathan Wordsworth has, rightly, I think, suggested, his persistent investment in Unitarian thought.⁷³ It is in the Errata to *Sibylline Leaves*, after all, that 'The Eolian Harp' acquires those famous lines which might seem one of the best statements of Coleridge's youthful attempts to interfuse pantheism and Unitarianism:

O! the one Life, within us and abroad,
Which meets all Motion, and becomes its soul,
A Light in Sound, a sound-like power in Light,
Rhythm in all Thought, and Joyance every where—
Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so fill'd,
Where the breeze warbles and the mute still Air
Is Music slumbering on its instrument!

The 'one Life' of 'The Eolian Harp' is not a straightforwardly Unitarian sentiment, but within *Sibylline Leaves*, it connects with 'This Lime-Tree Bower' and its image of the landscape which 'acts upon the mind', creating, within the volume, a unity of its own.

Lamb's response to *Sibylline Leaves* was directed toward his dislike of the line 'Od blast you for an *impious* son/ Of a Presbyterian whore' in the poem 'Recantation: Illustrated in the Story of a Mad Ox', which might seem understandable enough.⁷⁴ He also had doubts about 'Fire, Famine, and Slaughter: A War Eclogue', which seem to have been shared by Coleridge himself, since he chose to introduce the poem with a twenty page 'apologetic preface'.⁷⁵ But he never renewed his complaint about 'This Lime-Tree Bower'. Indeed, when his collected works were published in 1818, the dedication

⁷¹ To Coleridge, May 22, 1815; *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: III, The Middle Years. Part 2: 1812-1820*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) II, 238.

⁷² Morton Paley, *Coleridge's Later Poetry*, 25.

⁷³ Jonathan Wordsworth, 'Introduction', *Sibylline Leaves* (1817; Oxford and New York: Woodstock Books, 1990) iv.

⁷⁴ To the Morgans, and Coleridge, August 17-21, 1815; Marrs, III, 187-88.

⁷⁵ *Sibylline Leaves*, 87.

contained a delicate allusion to the poem, as Lamb described the way in which, since the early days of collaboration with Coleridge, he has given up writing poetry:

...wanting the support of your friendly elm, (I speak for myself,) my vine has, since that time, put forth few or no fruits; the sap (if ever it had any) has become, in a manner, dried up and extinct...⁷⁶

This seems, subtly, to recall Coleridge's image of the ivy on the elms, transformed into something fruitful and radiant through his imaginative connection with Lamb:

And that Walnut-tree
Was richly ting'd: and a deep radiance lay
Full on the ancient Ivy, which usurps
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
Thro' the late twilight. (ll.52-57)⁷⁷

Lamb seems to pay retrospective tribute, in the 'Dedication', to the illuminating power of Coleridge's vision of him. Whereas Hazlitt, in that passage from *My First Acquaintance with Poets* with which I began, recalls the Nether Stowey ideal in a tone freighted with later disillusionment, Lamb, having worked through different phases of frustration and disappointment with Coleridge, returns to it with nostalgia, affection, and acceptance.

And, bearing that in mind, we might set it alongside some fiercely loyal later criticism from George McLean Harper. The first to borrow the subtitle of 'The Nightingale', and to discuss these specifically as a group of 'Conversation poems', McLean Harper emphasised the importance of their being read as poems of friendship, taking their part in specific Coleridgean conversations. These poems, he tells us, 'require and reward considerable knowledge of his life, and especially the life of his heart'.⁷⁸ Coleridge makes constant demands of his friends, and his readers: demands which sometimes end in disagreement and disillusionment. But, in the words of Harper's essay:

There is not so much kindness, humor, wisdom, and frankness offered to most of us in the ordinary intercourse of life that we can afford to decline the outstretched hand of Coleridge.⁷⁹

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⁷⁶ 'Dedication', Works (London: Ollier, 1818) v-vi; repr. in *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb: Poems and Plays*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 7 vols. (London: Methuen, 1912) IV, 1.

⁷⁷ *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) 191.

⁷⁸ George McLean Harper, "Coleridge's Conversation Poems", *Spirit of Delight* (New York: Holt, 1928); repr. in *English Romantic Poets*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) 188-201; 189.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 190.