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Hell and Resurrection

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ON 13TH AUGUST 1814 Lamb starts a letter to Coleridge ‘Dear Resuscitate’.¹ He had evidently received a communication similar to that of 14th May in which Coleridge wrote to Morgan: ‘If it could be said with as little *appearance* of profaneness, as there is feeling or intention in my mind, I might affirm; that I had been crucified, dead and buried, descended into *Hell*, and am now, I humbly trust, rising again, tho’ slowly and gradually.’² On October 21st, 1811, John Payne Collier notes in his Diary that Coleridge referred to “Virgil, who represents certain spirits, which after having been steeped for some time in the oblivious waters of Lethe, rise again to life and activity”.³ A month later Collier was busy writing up Coleridge’s first Shakespeare lecture, a sign of his activity, but perhaps for him at that time oblivion would have been preferable. Descent into Hell was a more apposite phrase.

In March 1810 Sara Hutchinson left Allan Bank and went to live with her brother in Wales, which incidentally meant the cessation of *The Friend*. Coleridge was shattered. He spent the summer at Greta Hall seemingly in a calm and kindly state but, as Holmes puts it, ‘inwardly his turmoil was as great as ever’.⁴ Then came his projected visit to Montagu and what Coleridge thought of as Wordsworth’s betrayal. And, of course, there was his acute physical suffering. One of his objects in going to London was to consult the doctor Anthony Carlisle. All these causes for despair are reflected in his poems. In 1810 he wrote of Sara,

I have experienc’d
The worst the world can wreak on me—...
That hope of Her, say rather that pure Faith
In her fix’d Love, which held me to keep truce
With the tyranny of Life—is gone...⁵

He asks ‘Why then live on?’ The temptation to suicide in these years was a recurring one.

But just as the Christian imagery of suffering, death and resurrection, and of betrayal, come naturally to him, so too when he is *in extremis* his first thought is to pray, as in the poem ‘The Visionary Hope’. The word ‘Visionary’ in the title is double-edged, suggesting both as seen in an inspired vision and as totally illusory, and this ambivalence runs through the poem in the relationship of Hope and Despair, to which he gives capital letters, personifying them as parallel giants.

¹ *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marris, Jr. vol III, p. 101

² CL III 489

³ *Coleridge on Shakespeare*. The text of the lectures of 1811-12, ed R A Foakes, p. 44 (Collier)

⁴ *Darker Reflections*, Richard Holmes, p.200

⁵ PW 468

Sad lot, to have no Hope! Though lowly kneeling
 He fain would frame a prayer within his breast,
 Would fain entreat for some sweet breath of healing,
 That his sick body might have ease and rest;
 He strove in vain!

The culmination of Coleridge's griefs in 1810 was what he saw as the cruel rejection of him by the man, as he wrote in his Notebook, for whom 'I am conscious to myself of having felt the most consummate Friendship, in deed, word and thought inviolate, for a man whose welfare never ceased to be far dearer to me than my own, and for whose Fame I have been enthusiastically watchful...'.⁶ Yet in this Notebook, between an idealized picture of the lost Asra and the full expression of his sense of outrage and humiliation in relation to Wordsworth, Coleridge used the solitary time in Hudson's Hotel, Covent Garden on November 3rd 1810 to write his *Confessio Fidei*.⁷

It is a curious document. In a numbered list of beliefs basic elements of the Athanasian and Nicene Creeds, as purveyed in *The Book of Common Prayer*, are there but, needless to say, expressed in uniquely Coleridgean manner. For example, he does not start with 'I believe in God'. Before he can say this he has to assure himself that he is qualified to do so. So he begins: '1. I believe that I am a Free Agent'. Then he argues that he has 'a will which renders me justly responsible for my actions, omissive as well as commissive. Likewise that I possess Reason, or a Law of Right and Wrong, which uniting with my sense of moral responsibility constitutes the voice of Conscience.'

Only then can he affirm that '2. Hence it becomes my absolute Duty to believe, and I do believe, that there is a God...'

How significant are the points that he emphasizes here! We may ask, can any drug-addict be regarded as a Free Agent? Molly Lefebure says, 'By 1803 S.T.C. had become fully morphine-reliant. No control of thought, no force of will-power could reverse that physical fact.'⁸ If Coleridge was, as he claims here, responsible for his actions, 'omissive' in not providing for his wife and children and in failing to keep in touch with faithful friends, and 'commissive' in making life intolerable for such as the Wordsworths and Sara Hutchinson who took him in and cared for him, 'the voice of Conscience' must have proved ineffective. The way he expresses himself here makes it apparent that he was grievously aware of these things.

He admits that it is 'evident to my Reason, that the existence of God is absolutely and necessarily insusceptible of a scientific Demonstration'. So far he is in agreement with to-day's sceptics. *But*, '3. My Conscience forbids me to propose to myself the Pains and Pleasures of this Life, as the primary motive or ultimate end of my actions... Its Hopes and Fears therefore refer me to a

⁶ CN III 4006

⁷ CN III 4005

⁸ *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium*, Molly Lefebure, p.370.

different, and Spiritual state of Being; and I believe in the Life to come...'

This Creed, he says, 'may... be called Natural Religion, i. e. the Religion of all finite rational Beings. The second Tables contain the Creed of Revealed Religion, my Belief as a Christian'. (I summarize.)

These begin with '4.' a belief in Original Sin and continue with '5.' the Incarnation and Redemption by '6.' Jesus's life and death and Resurrection and Ascension, and '7.' the 'sending of the Holy Spirit, by whose free grace alone obtained for me by the merits of my Redeemer I can alone be sanctified, and restored from my natural Inheritance of Sin & Condemnation be a Child of God, and an Inheritor of the Kingdom of God'.

This Creed is bristling with unanswered questions, which shadow the poem 'Human Life'. Firstly, did the omniscient and omnipotent God create man with both free-will and original sin? In other words, did he construct a flawed product, even if it was only poor old Eve who has since taken the blame? Was the grievous suffering of Jesus really necessary when God could have created man differently, if at all? Is it implied that the 'natural inheritance' of original sin absolves man from responsibility? Then, in the Corollary, we come to that vexed question and perpetual concern for Coleridge, the doctrine of the Trinity. Was Jesus God or merely Man? Now, in this statement, the Unitarians are displaced and the Trinity is affirmed. For Coleridge the image 'represents God incarnate taking upon himself the Sins of the World, and himself thereby redeeming us & giving us Life everlasting...'. This was of first importance to Coleridge, painfully conscious of his failures, whose only hope was in a future life when everything would be forgiven.

We notice that there is no mention of 'the Apostolick Church', 'the Communion of Saints' or 'one Baptism for the remission of sins' in Coleridge's Creed as here propounded, despite the clerical example of his 'dear father whose revered image', Coleridge said, 'has ever survived in my mind'.⁹ These were elements of belief very much in his mind years later when he wrote 'My Baptismal Birthday'. Instead, here, after his discussion of the Trinity, he breaks off abruptly. Kathleen Coburn comments:

An entry of this date, 3 Nov 1810, could understandably be one in which Coleridge at a time of deep crisis should feel the need of defining his creed himself to himself; cf 4006 of the sama date, written on the first leaf of the last half of the book, with a deliberate contrast in heading—*Ego-ana*— a polar opposite to this *Confessio Fidei*.

It is as though this framework of Christian belief is essential to underpin his consideration of his present tragic predicament. Having laid out the security, though acknowledged unprovability, of his theology, including original sin and subsequent redemption, he then allowed himself to express the chaos of his human situation and feelings in his '*Ego-ana*'. He begins by

⁹ *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, James Gillman, p.12

recognizing that ‘There are two things essentially different, which yet it has been my Lot thro’ all my life... to confound. The first is, to be beloved by a person: the second, a person’s being highly pleased with being loved and admired by me’. He concludes that ‘No one on earth has ever LOVED me’. A little later, at the end of November when he was at Morgan’s house, Coleridge wrote in his Notebook of ‘the *thinking* disease, in which feelings instead of embodying themselves in *acts* ascend & become materials of general reasoning and intellectual pride’.¹⁰ Did he fully understand how much this was part of his own sickness? Perhaps in this moment of reappraisal he did.

But for the present he was in Limbo. He describes in ‘The Visionary Hope’ how he tried to pray but ‘He strove in vain!’ He could not achieve that degree of calm and receptiveness which made prayer possible but was distracted against his will by the laboured breathing that betrayed the weight of his despair, while Nature forced him to go on taking in the breath that kept him alive.

Sad lot, to have no Hope! Though lowly kneeling
 He fain would frame a prayer within his breast,
 Would fain entreat for some sweet breath of healing,
 That his sick body might have ease and rest;
 He strove in vain! the dull sighs from his chest
 Against his will the stifling load revealing,
 Though Nature forced; though like some captive guest,
 Some royal prisoner at his conqueror’s feast,
 An alien’s restless mood but half concealing,
 Sickness within and miserable feeling: ...

His life was like an imprisonment, though note of a ‘royal prisoner’ being shown off ‘at his conqueror’s feast’. Despite the privilege of his special gifts, he knew himself to be ‘An alien’ who could not hide ‘Sickness within and miserable feeling’. He goes on to describe ‘the pains of sleep’:

Though obscure pangs made curses of his dreams,
 And dreaded sleep, each night repelled in vain,
 Each night was scattered by its own loud screams:
 Yet never could his heart command, though fain,
 One deep full wish to be no more in pain.

There *had* been ‘That Hope, which was his inward bliss and boast,’ Asra’s love ‘Which waned and died, yet ever near him stood,/ Though changed in nature, wander where he would—’

Those Siamese twins Despair and Hope haunted him. ‘For Love’s Despair is but Hope’s pining Ghost’

¹⁰ CN III 4012

For this one hope he makes his hourly moan,
He wishes and can wish for this alone!

That hope almost makes him believe that it could banish his physical distress.

Disease would vanish, like a summer shower
Whose dews fling sunshine from the noon-tide bower!

But if that is an illusion let the disease stay

yet this one Hope should give
Such strength that he would bless his pains and live.

In 1810, even in his acute distress, Coleridge's religious faith was still assured as a 'given', as is illustrated by his Notebook entries at that time. After that, despite his successes with his lectures and his play, the wonderful support of the Morgans and his success in organizing their financial rescue, by December 1813 he suffered his worst crisis yet. Alone in a hotel in Bath he endured truly terrible opium-induced agonies before being rescued by Dr. Parry and then by Josiah Wade and Dr. Daniel.

Surely his most desperate moment must have been at the time when he wrote the poem 'Human Life', for in that he faced the possibility that his religious belief itself might be entirely mistaken. What if there was, after all, no spiritual life? What if our 'future fate', as he says in 'Limbo' is '*Positive Negation*'? Reading 'Human Life' today one cannot help being struck by the fact that it describes what is probably the prevailing opinion in Britain now, held by many with a lofty sense of superiority. A public disclaimer, 'I'm not religious' seems to be obligatory before any radio or t.v. speech on whatever subject. It is as much as to say, 'I'm not such a fool as to believe in *that*.' Well, Coleridge did. It provided the framework for his thinking and the criterion against which he judged human behaviour, including his own.

So one can only imagine the sense he must have had of the destruction of the whole edifice on which he had built his life and thought, the one security that the world had meaning and that his redemption from sin and his being born again into a new life after death were unquestioned certainties. Doubts and questionings there had always been indeed and he had spent much time in applying that 'thinking disease' and its 'intellectual pride' to theological conundrums, but it is striking how his basic faith was a 'given' through them all.

After his account of the utter depths of Coleridge's condition at the hotel in Bath, Holmes writes, 'It was this experience of December 1813 that inspired perhaps the darkest of all Coleridge's poems, "Human Life, On the Denial of Immortality":'¹¹

¹¹ *Darker Reflections*, p.351-3

If dead, we cease to be; if total gloom
 Swallow up life's brief flash for aye, we fare
 As summer-gusts, of sudden birth and doom,
 Whose sound and motion not alone declare,
 But are their whole of being!

One is inevitably reminded of Macbeth's speech of 'a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/ Signifying nothing'. After a 'brief flash'—what an inspired phrase that is!—there is eternal darkness. The voice and activity of short-lived summer gusts do not merely announce them but also demonstrate that that is all they amount to. If we have no future life we are like them.

If the breath
 Be Life itself, and not its task and tent,

if breathing is merely a sign of physical life and that is all, if it is not given to us to be used for a common purpose, what is the point?

If even a soul like Milton's can know death;
 O Man! thou vessel purposeless, unmeant,
 Yet drone-hive strange of phantom purposes!

We think we have urgent, important, crowding purposes but they are illusions, as unproductive as drones in a hive, if all we can do is travel 'the road to dusty death', with no hope of immortality. Equally, we like to think that we were created carefully for a reason—but maybe not. Maybe we are

Surplus of Nature's dread activity,
 Which, as she gazed on some nigh-finished vase,
 Retreating slow, with meditative pause,
 She formed with restless hands unconsciously.
 Blank accident! nothing's anomaly!

What a vivid picture of man being originated by an absent-minded fidget!

This gives a fairly accurate impression of the picture science provides to-day of the way the universe works. It is all very logical in its own terms and we are proud of the brilliant work of those who observe and codify the gradually unfolding laws of Nature, but we can't help sometimes asking 'Why?' To Coleridge with his lifelong religious belief this concept of a random universe was a nightmare.

If rootless thus, thus substanceless thy state,
 Go, weigh thy dreams, and be thy hopes, thy fears,
 The counter-weights!—Thy laughter and thy tears
 Mean but themselves, each fittest to create

And to repay the other! Why rejoices
Thy heart with hollow joy for hollow good?

So life's object is to rejoice in making more and 'more money, is it? 'Thou fool. This night thy soul shall be required of thee, then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?' Only you have no soul. You just go out. Or if misfortunes strike, so what?

Why cowl thy face beneath the mourner's hood?
Why waste thy sighs, and thy lamenting voices,
Image of Image, Ghost of Ghostly Elf,
That such a thing as thou feel'st warm or cold?

If we are but meaningless artifacts made by accident what does anything concerning us matter? But even if we decide to opt out where's the advantage in that?

Yet what and whence thy gain if thou withhold
These costless shadows of thy shadowy self?
Be sad! be glad! be neither! seek or shun!
Thou hast no reason why! Thou canst have none.
Thy being's being is contradiction.

The repetition of 'being', first as a noun, then as a verb, leading up to the final fatal word 'contradiction' seems to me to be shatteringly effective. If man has no spiritual existence, no purpose, then in no real sense can he be, and when he dies he just ends. What a brilliant technical achievement we see in those last three lines! The abrupt, manic list, 'Be sad! Be glad! Be neither! Seek or shun!' all accompanied by exclamation marks, conveys the false excitement of believing our activities matter. But this is only to be followed by 'Thou hast no reason why!' with another exclamation mark, followed by the clincher, 'Thou canst have none;/ Thy being's being is contradiction'. All our excited changes of mood are pointless. In any real sense we do not exist. 'Our being's being is contradiction.'

Reading this poem one is so carried away by the desperation of its message that one does not think at first of how it is conveyed. Nevertheless, on consideration, how striking it is that Coleridge *in extremis* uses all his intellectual skills to create a controlled work of art. Somehow this seems characteristic of Coleridge, demonstrating perhaps the two sides of his personality. Holmes points out that this poem 'takes the form of a double sonnet', though, if my sums are right, with an extra line.¹² One is irresistibly reminded of a later poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and his 'terrible sonnets', particularly perhaps 'No worst, there is none...', where his exceptional poetic expertise is used to its full to express desolation. Coleridge's two sonnets,

¹² *Darker Reflections*, p.352

combined to make one poem, are carefully though not conventionally rhymed and the metre of the lines is basically iambic pentameter. Within the discipline of this form how brilliantly he breaks the lines or makes them run on to convey the urgency and grief of the message.

Alliteration is used effectively as in ‘task and tent’ where it helps to emphasize the later ominous rhyming word ‘unmeant’, or in ‘phantom purposes’ where the adjective contradicts the noun. We have already seen him harnessing personification in ‘The Visionary Hope’ and Morton D. Paley comments on ‘the trope of personification’ being ‘typical of Coleridge’s later poetry’.¹³ Here it is Nature who is vividly described as a female whose hands are engaged in an unconscious and pointless activity. What a contrast this is to the view of Nature he had when

gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when he makes
Spirits perceive his presence.

Fortunately he was to rediscover Nature as the expression of God, though that poem ‘To Nature’, probably of 1820, begins ‘It may indeed be phantasy’. But in ‘Human Life’ the creation of man is ‘Surplus of Nature’s dread activity’. Nowadays, if climate change with its eruptions, floods and hurricanes is to destroy the world it could certainly be described as ‘dread activity’ and the creation of man as an irrelevance.

As for ‘The Denial of Immortality’, which is the sub-title of the poem, perhaps we in our very different ethos may feel that we don’t mind if at death we just stop. It sounds very restful and the thought of reincarnation, for example, unendurably wearisome! But to Coleridge the alternative to ‘If dead we cease to be’ was not a chance for us to come back and do it better next time. It was a new, everlasting life in which we are relieved of responsibility and, as his Epitaph said, we could hope for ‘mercy’ and, for those failings of which he was so well aware, ‘to be forgiven’.

We have seen how essential this belief was to Coleridge, how it had been taken for granted in his life. Imagine then the emptiness, the despair when he had to envisage a world without it. How could he go on? The combination of what Holmes calls ‘the opium collapse of 1813-14’ and this accompanying spiritual horror make his letter to Lamb no exaggeration.¹⁴ In his diary entry for October 21st, 1811, John Payne Collier quotes Coleridge as saying ‘...if he acknowledged a Creator, every feeling of his heart, every being in his works, were in harmony and vibrated with the notion: if he did not acknowledge a God, all was confusion and disorder’.¹⁵ As Paley points out, Coleridge would

¹³ *Coleridge's Later Poetry*, p.7

¹⁴ *Darker Reflections*, p.378

¹⁵ *Collier*, p.39

have known ‘the statement in Donne’s third Sermon that “Privation of the presence of God is Hell”’.¹⁶ As Kathleen Coburn notes, one of Donne’s poems, ‘To Mr. T-W.’, contains the line ‘And ’tis decreed our hell is but privation’.¹⁷ Coleridge was fascinated by Donne and indeed it was in 1811 that he borrowed Lamb’s copy of Donne’s poems, in order to prepare for a lecture in which he meant to include them, as he eventually did in 1818. We are all familiar with Lamb’s essay of 1820, ‘The Two Races of Men’, and of his complaint about the gap in his bookcase ‘like a great eye-tooth knocked out’ from a volume ‘that Comberbatch abstracted’ but he ends by recommending lending books to S.T.C. for ‘he will return them... enriched with annotations, tripling their value’. It is not recorded, I think, that he ever returned Lamb’s Donne, which now rests, needless to say, in an American university library, duly annotated by Coleridge who, on borrowing it, wrote, ‘I shall die soon, my dear Charles Lamb, and then you will not be vexed that I have scribbled your book. S.T.C. 2nd May 1811’.¹⁸

So, approaching death as he thought, he was increasingly haunted by ‘Privation of the presence of God’ in the years between 1810 and 1813-14 when he reached his nadir. The poem ‘Human Life’—On the Denial of Immortality’ devastatingly summed up his state of mind at that time as regards his Religious Imagination.

Though he says in his Notebook, ‘One human Being entirely loving me (this must of course be a Woman) would... have satisfied all my hopes...’. and this was not to be, yet fortunately Coleridge was repeatedly rescued by his good friends.¹⁹ How could he say ‘No one on earth has ever loved me?’ Where would he have been without their love? Finally, when under the care of the Gillmans, his illness became manageable and though he was still to express his grief in such poems as ‘Work without Hope’ and ‘Youth and Age’, including mourning for ‘an alienated friend’ in ‘Forbearance’ and lost love in ‘Love’s Apparition and Evanishment’, yet he was able once more to have confidence in his faith and, the year before he died, wrote ‘My Baptismal Birthday’. He had long known that ‘if he acknowledged a Creator, every feeling of his heart, every being in his works, were in harmony and vibrated with the notion’²⁰ but now, on the anniversary of his Christening, he acknowledged those elements of the Creed which he had omitted from his ‘Confessio Fidei’ in 1810, including the importance of the Church and his reception into it. Indeed in a letter of 5 July 1834, only weeks before he died, he wrote, ‘I knew myself an undischarged Debtor, a hitherto unfaithful Trustee with the intrusted talents still on my person; and in earnest *resolve* indeed, on the road towards the due dispensing of the same to their rightful claimant, Christ’s Church militant on earth!’ Here he is echoing the Communion

¹⁶ *Coleridge’s Later Poetry*, p.54

¹⁷ CN III 4073n.

¹⁸ *Essays of Elia*, Charles Lamb, ed. E. V. Lucas, p.358, note.

¹⁹ CN III 4006

²⁰ *Collier*, p.39

Service. In fact, he picks up the Creed where he left it off, as it states, ‘And I believe one Catholick and Apostolick Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.’ The passage ends by reaffirming what Coleridge had considered denying in ‘Human Life’ when he gave that poem the sub-title ‘The Denial of Immortality’. ‘And I look for the Resurrection of the dead, And the life of the world to come.’

It may be difficult for us in our secular society to accept the overriding importance of the Christian faith and Church to such as Coleridge, but so it was. We all celebrate our birthdays but it is rare for a Christening to be so remembered. To him it was the gateway to his right to pray ‘Our Father’, as Jesus taught.

The poem, written in 1833, when first published in *Friendship’s Offering* for 1834 was entitled ‘My Baptismal Birthday—Lines composed on a sick-bed, under severe bodily suffering, on my spiritual birthday, October 28th,’ and the first line was ‘Born unto God in Christ—in Christ, my All’. This was altered to ‘God’s child in Christ adopted,—Christ my all—’ and was so included in the *Poetic Works* later that year. As in ‘Human Life’ Coleridge makes use of an unconventionally rhymed sonnet form, but for how different a message! Instead of ‘O Man! thou vessel purposeless, unmeant’, he proclaims himself ‘The heir of heaven’. When the priest—in his case presumably his earthly father—makes the sign of the cross on him with water at his baptism, he marks him out as one of the ‘servants of God’, described in *Revelation* chapter 7, who were ‘sealed... in their foreheads’. He is one of those ‘which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’. His rescue by Jesus meant that he *must* say ‘Christ my all’ and put behind him as ‘lost cheaply’ his earthly concerns. For in the Lord’s Prayer Jesus had taught us to call God ‘Our Father’.

God’s child in Christ adopted,—Christ my all,
 What that earth boasts were not lost cheaply, rather
 Than forfeit that blest name, by which I call
 The Holy One, the Almighty God, my Father?—
 Father! in Christ we live and Christ in Thee—
 Eternal Thou, and everlasting we.

That seal on the forehead signifies everlasting life.

The heir of heaven, henceforth I fear not death:
 In Christ I live! in Christ I draw the breath
 Of the true life!

Opposed to the true life of the spirit is the material world in which he had suffered ‘great tribulation’.

... Let then earth, sea and sky

Make war against me!

Nature's role is again a hostile one but in a different sense, being here identified with the physical forces which menace human life. They may bring about his death but that will be a release. 'In vain they try/ To end my life, that can but end its woe.'

Coleridge asks, 'Is that a death-bed where a Christian lies?, Yes! but not his...' Then we are pulled up short by the shock of recognition. In Lamb's copy of Donne's poems Coleridge would have read the 'Holy Sonnet' 'Death be not proud...' which ends 'One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,/ And death shall be no more; death,thou shalt die'. Coleridge writes 'tis Death itself there dies'. Paley calls it a clumsy borrowing' and certainly it does give us a jolt because Donne's poem is so remarkable and so familiar.²¹ But perhaps a man on his death-bed summarizing the conclusion of his long struggle, both physical and metaphysical, may be allowed to draw on the riches stored in his mind in this way.

Coleridge would surely be comforted in his later years by the last verse of that chapter from *Revelation* concerning those who are 'sealed... in their foreheads.' 'For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.'²²

²¹ Coleridge's *Later Poetry*, p.123

²² VII 17