Coleridge's Criticism of Life[1]

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MY PAPER IS ABOUT AN EXPERIENCE that Coleridge puts at the origin and at the heart of aesthetic response. This is a state for which Coleridge provides a phenomenological record of extraordinary precision and sensitivity; and Coleridge is as extraordinary—with Keats, perhaps, the best—phenomenologist of such experiences as we have. The experience features prominently in the poem "Dejection: an Ode," and Coleridge elaborates on it in his first sustained piece of aesthetic criticism, the periodical "Essays on the Principles of Genial Criticism" of 1814—citing "Dejection" in that same text. These two very different texts are I'll argue both primarily concerned with an experience of the beautiful, more particularly a manner of relation to the beautiful, that can be characterized as a state of "blank attachment." This is a form of interest without interest, attachment without (as Coleridge says) the "intervenience of charm or emotion"—a "blank" and vacant form of perception in which one is conscious of attachment to the beautiful object without taking any pleasure in it whatsoever. I call this state of attachment "blank" in the sense that it is without character, and in a corollary sense in which its character is still to be filled in. The speaker in such moments accepts this open-ended arrangement, remaining committed to the object for as long as is required to see some change (whether in or outside of himself). His commitment to the object is without pleasure and without prospect, beyond this prospect of change.

Like the longer verse-letter from which it derives, "Dejection" presents a man plaintively gazing in the direction of the western sky, fixed upon an undefined destination that holds forth no promise of happiness.

> All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
> Have I been gazing on the western sky
> And its peculiar tint of yellow-green—
> And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye! (27-30)

This gazing precedes the imagined composition of the poem, proceeds uninterrupted through the first three stanzas at least, and could in theory proceed, as the speaker says, "for ever." (He says of course that it would be pointless to gaze forever at "that green light that lingers in the west," but not that he would not do so if he could.) Under the sign of gazing on the western sky the speaker of the Ode contemplates his doomed love for Sara Hutchinson, a life attenuated by "abstruse research," and the waning of the creative energies that continued to serve Wordsworth throughout the "great decade" and beyond. He expects that something, if not pleasure, will follow from this "blank" gazing—will "startle this dull pain, and make it move and

[1] This is a slightly modified transcript of a talk delivered at the 2010 Coleridge Summer Conference.

live" (20). But whether something comes or nothing, he is nevertheless committed, attached to the beauty of the skyscape.

Readers regularly note the irony that in "Dejection" (as well as in Wordsworth's Intimations Ode, with which "Dejection" is in dialogue) Coleridge makes the waning of his creative imagination the subject of one of his greatest poems. My related concern here is how the poet makes the moods of mental vacancy, the suspension of the shaping spirit of Imagination, the catalyst to a new kind of thinking—one that we can call, with some qualification in our use of the term, "critical." Dejection is not so much a paralyzing as an enabling condition, if only by its power to suspend relations between the creative imagination and the workings of the philosophical mind. We note, for instance, how the speaker's westward gazing is marked by fine discriminations of response, both with regard to the impressions received in gazing—"I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!"—and with respect to the unique qualities, the "peculiar tint," of the objects being gazed at. These activities are such as Coleridge describes as central to the enterprise of criticism and of philosophy more generally. "The office of philosophical disquisition consists in just distinction," Coleridge writes in the *Biographia* (BL II 11); "we define things by their peculiar, not their common properties," he writes of the "genial" critic in 1814 (SWF I 378). Discriminating between moments that seem to the unpracticed eye alike, identifying the unique properties of an object (or the basis of its qualitative difference from other things); the speaker's gazing has in both respects a recognizably critical cast. Thus, while literary historians have often characterized "Dejection" as Coleridge's "last" poem, his last major poetic effusion and/or adieu to the vocation of a poet, I propose that the reverse corollary is equally true: namely, that "Dejection" is Coleridge's first major effusion of the critical imagination. I'll propose further that this practice of critical observation has as its experiential foundation a condition of blank attachment that simultaneously motivates Coleridge's "genial" criticism and provides it with a subject of investigation. Beginning with this vacant and rather unpromising germ of critical consciousness, Coleridge enacts the practice of criticism and reflects on the potential sources of its power.

I

"I never once in my whole life turned back in fear of the weather." Coleridge wrote this to Thomas Wedgwood in a letter of January 1803, not long after the publication of "Dejection" in the *Morning Post* (on 4 October 1802). Wedgwood had chided Coleridge for his decision to press on over the mountains—to Grasmere and the company of the Wordsworths, as it happens—in a violent winter storm (one of many Coleridgean feats of derring-do, or freakish irresponsibility, in all manner of weather). "You ask," he writes, "in God's name, why I did not return when I saw the state of the weather? The true reason is simple, tho' it may be somewhat strange—the thought never

once entered my head." As if sensing that this explanation may fail fully to satisfy his friend, Coleridge goes further; it is an extraordinary passage, from which I want to quote at some length:

> In simple earnest, I never find myself alone within the embracement of rocks & hills, a traveller up an alpine road, but my spirit courses, drives, and eddies, like a Leaf in Autumn: a wild activity of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion, rises up from within me—a sort of *bottom-wind*, that blows to no point of the compass, & comes from I know not whence, but agitates the whole of me; my whole Being is filled with waves, as it were, that roll & stumble, one this way, & one that way, like things that have no common master. The farther I ascend from animated Nature, from men, and cattle, & the common birds of the woods, & fields, the greater becomes in me the Intensity of the feeling of Life. (916)

We will not be much surprised by Coleridge's insistence that he is not turned away so much as courted by the rain cloud, storm cloud, or (let us say) ash cloud overhead. Coleridge makes no secret of his relish for the sublime in nature, the grandeur of those natural forms in the midst of which the mind finds an emblem of its own might. John Beer remarks, I think rightly, that "In this passage Coleridge comes closest, perhaps, to expressing the philosophy of life that he had recently been exploring." The best evidence that such concerns were indeed on Coleridge's mind is how this paragraph resonates with passages from "Dejection," his latest (or "last") great achievement in verse. In the letter, Coleridge describes his spirit driving and eddying like a leaf in Autumn, putting in mind the great benediction that concludes this poem: "To her may all things live, from Pole to Pole, / Their life the eddying of her living soul!" (135-6). These lines are both blessing and a provisional affirmation of a life and joy that remain to Sara (or William, or Edmund, or [the unspecified] Lady), though perhaps lost to the speaker himself. Likewise, the poet's account of the "feeling of Life" gaining intensity independent of "animated Nature" may remind us of the famous assertion from the same poem, that "in our life alone does nature live" (48). I do not find in this famous line any whole-hearted embrace of an idealist philosophy (no matter of the Platonic, Berkleian, Kantian, or Schellingian varieties), but rather an expression of Coleridge's faith in the reciprocal and mutually vitalizing relationship of mind and nature, the world within and the world without. At the moment that Coleridge describes himself being lifted out of the "common" scenes and objects of nature he is also most <u>in</u> nature: my spirit "drives, and eddies, like a Leaf in Autumn"; "my whole Being is filled with waves"; and so on.

Coleridge does not say in this letter whether he enjoyed such an elevated experience in fact—only that such experiences have been known to happen in similar circumstances. We do know that STC returned home from this trip

miserably ill, and with a host of aches and pains focused, as often, in his bowels: "an attack in my stomach, & right side, which in pain & the length of its continuance appeared to me by the far the severest, I ever had" (STCL II 916; also 914). The point is that neither of these are outcomes that Coleridge saw fit to foresee; as he says, the thought of doing the prudent thing and turning back against the storm never entered his head.

What happens exactly in the experience preceding and in ideal moments preparatory to that "wild activity of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion" that make up the intensity of the feeling of life? I am most interested in that disposition in Coleridge that says, "I have no choice; I must climb that hill against the storm"—more accurately, the disposition that never bothers to consider an alternative to this course of action. As Coleridge's letter to Wedgwood describes his spasm of life and joy in terms borrowed from the Dejection Ode, this blank state too is fundamentally akin to the position assumed by the speaker at the outset of "Dejection," whose gazing at the night sky occurs under unstated though equally sure conditions of compulsion. In both cases there is a submission to *something*—an object, an experience; in all cases an attachment—that gives no distinct pleasure, promises no satisfaction, and yet compels him all the same. "Dejection" puts the weather, and the "weather-wise" poet, front and center. There is an expectation of what the weather might bring (a storm is brewing), and a readiness to face it no matter what it does bring. "I never once in my whole life turned back in fear of the weather." I happen to think that this claim of Coleridge's is a fairly effective gloss on the poem.

II

I have been referring to the disposition of attachment without pleasure or prospect as a "critical" orientation on Coleridge's part, and want to clarify what I mean by that. The first point (I think it will already be obvious) is that this is decisively *not* an effusion of the creative imagination. The experience does not, in other words, and in a well-known phrase of STC's, "bring the whole soul of man into activity." Its signature, on the contrary, is incompletion of psychic activity—a "wan and heartless mood" in which certain faculties and urgings of the soul are conspicuously inoperative: "I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!" The second point is that this state of blank attachment is an experience dependent upon though functionally autonomous from the first-order, effusive experience to which it has reference. "Life," that is to say, "the intensity of the feeling of Life," is the "text"; the critic's discourse is the commentary on, or invocation of, that text.

Such abstractions are best fleshed out with an example—so here is one. The critic Coleridge frequently cites lines from Robert Burns's poem "Tam O'Shanter," where Burns rhymes on the transience of sensual pleasure, comparing it

To snow that falls upon a river
A moment white—then gone for ever!

Coleridge quotes this couplet in *The Friend* (and again in the *Biographia*) as illustrative of how genius operates on our minds (F II 74; BL I 81). The genius, Coleridge writes, awakes in us a freshness of sensation; he purges the film of familiarity from our eyes. Burns's couplet offers a splendid illustration of this principle in an unexpected and yet entirely homely metaphor. It is an instantiation of poetic genius that at the same time conveys a lesson about the prime merit of genius. I think it no accident that to illustrate the defamiliarizing, revelatory character of genius Coleridge chooses an image of something springing into visibility in a moment, and just as quickly lost. The manifestation of genius is the fleeting moment of appearance; criticism is the longing, lingering look afterward. Genius makes the snowflake appear, and like that snowflake is heedless of its own transitory splendor. The critic perceives its splendor, and remains fixed on the place of its absence. He is witness to the dawning of beauty, and subsequently tracks its disappearance, "for ever."

These are not, it must be said, the most cheering terms in which to describe the work of the literary critic. But Coleridge's resolve to become a literary critic does not take hold in a very cheering portion of his life. Its origin instead, as biographers and literary historians have long recognized, falls in the period of the so-called "dejection crisis" of 1801-2, of which the composition of the "Letter" and "Dejection" are the most memorable creative productions. "[T]he Poet is dead in me," Coleridge wrote to Godwin in a well-known letter; "my Imagination (or rather the Somewhat that had been imaginative) lies, like a Cold Snuff on the circular Rim of a Brass Candle-stick, without even a stink of Tallow to remind you that it was once cloathed & mitred with Flame" (CL II 714). Poetic "genius" is that ephemeral manifestation—a snowflake or a candle extinguished. In training his eye on that "Somewhat" that is most imaginative in the work of others, the critic Coleridge is always and at the same time also gazing at the "Somewhat" latent in himself. Coleridge's discussions of the beautiful in the public lectures and critical works in prose return again and again to the "wan and heartless mood" that he sketches for the first time at length in "Dejection." Moreover, Coleridge establishes this condition of blank receptivity as a productive disposition in its own right.

III

I turn briefly now to the critical writing proper. The "Fragment of an Essay on Taste" is one of the earliest texts in which Coleridge advances a theory of the beautiful. In these notes, which Reg Foakes describes as preparatory writing for the first of his 1808 lectures on literature at the Royal Institution, Coleridge seeks above all to desynonymize two terms, "the beautiful" (as the primary object of the aesthetic sense) and "the agreeable" (or that which pleases in physical sensation). His aim, in other words, is to establish the "peculiar

properties" of the aesthetic judgment. The exercise of taste, writes Coleridge, consists of two distinct and separate operations of mind: first, the "intellectual perception" of the object as either beautiful or ugly, and second, one's consciousness of feeling either pain or pleasure, accordingly. These impulses occur in tandem; they are, in Coleridge's words, "co-instantaneously combined" in the subject's experience. In point of fact, though, and this will be evident to a close observer of the mental phenomenon, the feelings of pain or pleasure "appear to proceed from" the intellectual perception. As Coleridge renders the point in somewhat ungainly prose, our "degree of Dislike or Complacency [is] conceived as resulting from the arrangement"—whether that arrangement be harmonious and therefore beautiful, or disjointed and chaotic and therefore ugly (LL I 30, 37).

In his endeavor to extricate the beautiful from the agreeable, and more particularly in his claim that the feeling of pain or pleasure proceeds from the intellectual perception and not vice-versa, Coleridge's essay owes a clear debt to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, which Coleridge is thought to have read intensively for the first time in 1801. The distinction between the beautiful and the agreeable and the priority of the intellectual perception in matters of taste are both core principles in Kant's account of aesthetic disinterest. What this "disinterest" means in brief is that no sensual or rational interest extorts our approval in the beautiful object: this object gratifies no need, we do not want it or think of it as a good to be pursued, and yet we approve of it. For Kant, the most compelling indication of disinterest in aesthetic judgment is that one affirms the beauty of an object before being conscious of receiving pleasure from its representation. Kant writes: the "merely subjective judging of the object…precedes the pleasure in it, and is the ground of this pleasure in the harmony of the faculties of cognition." There is in other words always a point, if only a vanishingly small one, at which one can say "I see not feel how beautiful" an object is. What pleases in the beautiful is grounded upon the intellectual perception; our feelings of complacency spring from the mind's pleasure at finding the dictates of the understanding gratified by the free, reflective play of the cognitive faculties. This free conformity of the imagination with the laws of understanding is therefore the ground and cause of our pleasure.

Here is how Coleridge formulates a modified version of this point in the 1817 "Dejection":

> Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—
> We in ourselves rejoice!
> And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,
> All melodies the echoes of that voice,
> All colours a suffusion from that light. (71-75)

What pleases us in the beautiful, what "charms or ear or sight," owes to an exertion of the soul within that illuminates all "outward forms." To translate

these lines into starkly Kantian terms, the pleasure that we feel is pleasure in the harmonious workings of our own cognitive faculties—"We in *ourselves* rejoice." (The many versions of this line before 1817 indicate that it took Coleridge a great many tries to arrive at the self-reflexivity of this formulation.) Coleridge makes a similar, also fundamentally Kantian point in the essays on genial criticism, remarking on what it is exactly that pleases us in the beautiful object: "the effulgence from the whole coincides with, and seems to represent, the effluence of delight from my own mind in the intuition of it" (372). (The language of effulgence or effluence here finds its way into a line of the 1817 "Dejection" as well [66].)

Coleridge's lifelong aspiration was to ground the practice of criticism on fixed principles, and there can be no denying that some of those principles were solidly Kantian. With respect to Coleridge's thoughts on beauty, however, I think the resemblance does not extend much further than this insight that the intellectual perception precedes the feeling of pleasure. For Coleridge's account of beauty extends Kant's conception in two distinct and seemingly antithetical directions. On the one hand, Coleridge considerably widens the temporal gap between the intellectual perception of beauty and the pleasure received thereby. In "Dejection," Coleridge describes a perception of beauty entirely unaccompanied by the pleasures that would normally and naturally attend it. And in contrast to Kant, he makes this intermediary moment a significant episode of aesthetic perception in its own right. On the other hand (and this explains the speaker's own inability to feel pleasure in the beauty of the skyscape), he conceives even the slightest and most transitory experiences of aesthetic pleasure as springing from, and retaining continued reference to, the primordial experience of "joy." My sense is that these polar opposites on a continuum of aesthetic response were alike experiences that Coleridge knew intuitively, intimately, and for which he found both theoretical justification and a partial explanation in Kant. Kant's principles are so thoroughly absorbed into a personal idiom as to be uniquely Coleridge's own. René Wellek's notorious charge, that Coleridge says nothing about beauty that did not come originally from Kant, seems in this sense rather beside the point, even were it true.

Both in "Dejection" and in the critical writings that follow in its stead, Coleridge dilates on that intermediate condition of blank attachment where one affirms and as it were commits to the beautiful object without as yet feeling anything. When we make an aesthetic judgment, Coleridge insists in the 1808 lectures, we do so as if in advance of the pleasure or pain that the object gives us, and "without any prospect of consequences" (LL I 30). We do not in other words anticipate the pleasure or pain that we might receive, or consider whether it is "right" for us to judge the object as we do. Coleridge thereby releases the beautiful from a strict dependence on (or even necessary association with) pleasure. The judgment of beauty is made utterly without conditions; we commit to regarding an object as beautiful without knowing or

even taking into consideration what the consequences of our doing so will be.

That taste involves pleasure is a commonsensical notion so apparently self-evident, one imagines that only a German philosopher could have called it into question. What could be more blindingly obvious than the notion that beautiful objects please us? But Kant is surely not Coleridge's sole source for the idea that one affirms the beauty of an object before taking any pleasure from it. Consider for instance the following stanza from Wordsworth's "The Poet's Epitaph" (from the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*):

> He [the poet] is as retired as noontide dew,
> Or fountain in a noonday grove;
> And you must love him, ere to you
> He will seem worthy of your love. (41-4)

On the face of things, this may seem like the height of authorial narcissism—the "egotistical sublime" run amok. And for the reader, the bargain that Wordsworth strikes may seem like a very bad deal. The reader has to commit up front to entering into a relationship with this retiring poet. I face the risk of offering my love without the prospect of getting anything in return, and certainly no assurance that the bequest of my love will be "worth it." I do not offer it attention because it solicits my attention, however, but rather because its very existence impels me to recognize its beauty. I feel a manner of responsiveness, obligation, indeed even love, to something (or someone) that does not covet or ask for my care.

This arrangement reflects, I think Coleridge would say accurately, the non-coercive command of the beautiful object. As Anne-Lise François has put it, the object of aesthetic experience operates by means of "weightless claims to attention"; we are impelled to recognize beautiful things though they make no "conscious formal demands for recognition." Recall what Keats says about the "great & unobtrusive" character of beauty. How much weaker would be the effect of beauty, Keats writes, if beautiful things actively courted our admiration. He imagines the roadside flowers crying out: "admire me I am a violet! dote upon me I am a primrose!" Wordsworth pointedly refuses this kind of self-promotion, and thus resembles the beautiful and "retired" objects of which he writes. This beautiful poet does not promise anything to us in return for the attention and love that we bestow upon him. He does not even request so much as he silently commands love; the authority of his appeal, as Coleridge says of all beautiful objects, is "*immediate and absolute*" (SWF I 378). The sense of beauty recognizes the force of that command; the task of the critic is to establish the principles that govern this relationship and that obtain, at least conditionally, for all.

The most extensive of Coleridge's attempts to give formal definition to these principles is the series of essays on genial criticism, published in 1814 from 13 August to 24 September in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*. Here again Coleridge affirms of the beautiful that "the contemplation or intuition of its

beauty precedes the *feeling* of complacency, in order of nature at least" (SWF I 380). This argument is largely couched in a polemical attack on associationist critics who ground the aesthetic judgment upon mere sensuality. Only the grossest of sensualists could confuse "a taste *for* Milton" with "the taste *of* mutton," Coleridge says (SWF I 363). In what recent critics have described as a savagely reductive critique, Coleridge assails Richard Payne Knight, author of the *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, as one such benighted figure.

So little is the beautiful dependent on empirical feeling, Coleridge insists, that "in great depression of spirits [the perception of beauty] may even exist without sensibly producing" pleasure at all. In illustration, Coleridge quotes lines from his own Dejection Ode, which he calls, not with complete accuracy, his "MS. POEM":

> And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!
> And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
> That give away their motion to the stars;
> Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
> Now sparkling, now bedimm'd, but always seen;
> Yon crescent moon, that seems as if it grew
> In its own starless, cloudless lake of blue—
> I see them all, so excellently fair!
> *I see, not feel, how beautiful they are.* (SWF I 380)

I find it extraordinary how Coleridge's refashions this stanza of "Dejection" into a commentary on Kant's Third *Critique*. Those few scholars who have remarked on this act of self-citation have generally perceived it as a tribute to the philosopher who "took possession of [him] as with a giant's hand" (BL I 153). The poem of course associates this condition with a failure of the "genial spirits" (39), a deficit of life. Lacking the impulse from within to urge these perceptions into motion and meaningful emotion, the mere perception of beauty is insufficient to relieve the speaker's emotional nullity. As Graham Davidson writes of these lines from the verse-letter, "We sense that there ought to be pleasure where there is only indifference or a numbing melancholy."

What in the poem is associated with a failure of the "genial spirits," however, becomes in this alien context a principle of genial criticism. Thus too, lines that in the poem evoke a symptomatic form of aesthetic perception are in the context of Coleridge's critical essays suggestive of aesthetic disinterest as such, and more particularly how we pronounce the object to be beautiful before we are conscious of pleasure that it gives us. It follows from this principle that at the moment of the intellectual perception of beauty the feeling is so far undetermined; the mind is, in a word, "blank," devoid of both sensation and emotional content. Coleridge's "emotionalism" has long and for good reason suggested a point of distinction between his aesthetics and those of Kant. By indicating the barrenness of this form of aesthetic perception,

Coleridge does seem to expose a point on which the Kantian formula of disinterest is vulnerable to critique. Read in the Kantian spirit in which the lines are offered, however, this condition of blank attachment, as symptomatic as it obviously is, appears at the same time to be an early and essential stage in the perception of the beautiful—a "pure" aesthetic experience so disinterested as to be scarcely recognizable to the Sage of Königsberg himself.

A very long tradition of writing on aesthetics, one with which Coleridge has clear sympathies, associates the experience of the beautiful with a heightened condition of aliveness. In the presence of the beautiful object, we are told, the pulse races, the eyes feast, desires are stirred. Beauty, as Coleridge wrote in a notebook entry, is "Mind in the form of Life" (SWF I 348). It is, or *should* be, the site in which is reconciled what Coleridge calls the "two conflicting principles of the FREE LIFE, and of the confining FORM" (SWF I 374). Coleridge introduces this distinction in the essays on genial criticism, and in the same essays he describes how in ideal circumstances "the confining form" is not subject to conscious apprehension at all: "when the Beautiful arising from regular form is so modified by the perception of life and spontaneous action, … the latter only shall be the object of our conscious *perception*, while the former merely acts, and yet does effectively act, on our *feelings*" (SWF I 373). Where there is "life and spontaneous action," in other words, the formal properties of the beautiful lapse into the background and act on our unconscious feelings. (Meter, for instance, the signature element of poetic form, acts in this way.) Where no life and spontaneous action is to be detected, however, the purely formal properties of the beautiful rise to the fore of consciousness. At that level of dejection or emotional blockage, aesthetic perception becomes formal, "confining" even, the subject of self-conscious reflection. In a word, critical.

There is an austerity to this position. It is an aesthetic stance that prefigures what Wallace Stevens, in "The Snow Man," calls the "mind of winter," the state of blank and vacant receptivity which "beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." But there is something not only hard-headed but also, I think, generous in Coleridge's stance of being captivated by an object that so far gives nothing and promises no particular satisfaction to the speaker. The sense of beauty is for Coleridge an experience that begins with an intuition that life is not alive enough—that the beautiful object has not yet awakened the feeling of aliveness that it betokens. For Kant, the great philosopher of enlightenment, aesthetic perception is an emblem, *the* emblem, of the mind's freedom. This freedom—the free play of the cognitive powers, the unforced harmonious working of the understanding and imagination—is the source of the pleasure that we feel in the presence of the beautiful object. For Coleridge, by contrast, the beautiful is a far more equivocal emblem of attachment, even obligation, to something that has not yet delivered anything of the life and joy that it promises. The blank formal perception of the beautiful suggests through its absence the Joy and Life to which the beautiful

should have reference.

But this principle of the beautiful as the "promise of happiness"—I'm purposefully invoking the most familiar phrase, Stendahl's, to describe the idea here—has, in Coleridge's critical writing most broadly considered, an addendum. Joy and life do not belong to the speaker, and could indeed belong to anyone (or everyone). "In our life alone does nature live," Coleridge says—not, significantly, in "our selves" or "our minds," nor even in "our lives." "Life" is a singular, still "the One Life." It is a quality that migrates between subjects, between subjects and objects, traversing and exceeding the beings in which "Life" finds its provisional organization. From this condition it follows that pleasure is not solely our pleasure, life not only our life, but the life of the whole.

This deep-seated, natively ethical disposition may explain as either cause or effect Coleridge's attraction to those instances in the perception of the beautiful when the "free life" is held momentarily in suspension, belonging neither to the beautiful object nor to the subject perceiving it. In such moments, the Life and Joy in which we have a presentiment is not bound to one person or thing in particular. Consider the lines of "Dejection" that Coleridge quotes in his essay on genial criticism. The shapes that hold the speaker's attention are not lifeless, not even to his perception: clouds give away their motion to the stars; stars glide behind and between the clouds; the moon seems endowed with a principle of growth that belies its own fixity in the "starless lake of blue." Coleridge's images attest at once to life in the sky in the mind, "a shaping *spiritus* that composes the landscape" as Paul Fry puts it. But they are, and he is, only ambivalently alive; their life has in a sense yet to be affirmed. Life, our life, is not (yet) what it should be. But it is beautiful, and I remain committed all the same.

I have been arguing that the condition of blank attachment is at once the object of Coleridge's critical reflection and the stance that makes possible the enterprise of criticism. In "Dejection," the sight of a beautiful object in which, incredibly, he can take no pleasure incites the speaker to a meditation on "This beautiful, and beauty-making power" of the human soul (63). I am aware that to describe the poem in these terms may more than ever make "Dejection" sound like the sublimated, sanitized version of Coleridge's lovelorn complaint in the "Letter to [Sara Hutchinson]"—and especially so to those who prefer, if only on biographical grounds, the emotional heat of the "Letter" to the more composed (in both senses of that word) form of the Ode. Coleridge's excision of the most openly confessional passages from "Dejection"—the complaints about his loveless marriage, the admission to wishing at times that his children were never born, the erotic memories of Sara and Mary Hutchinson, and so on—has led many to read the latter poem as an abstraction and masking over of the more intimate concerns, the rhetorical and emotional messiness, of the "Letter."

These are ultimately matters of taste, and I do not wish to re-open debate as

to which is the preferable poem and why. But I maintain that these most abstract and formal concerns of Coleridge's criticism are at the same time personal to the core. Both poems are centrally concerned with the complexities of attachment, romantic or aesthetic or both. The predicament shared by the speaker of both the "Letter" and the Ode is that of being rapt by a vision of the beautiful person, or beautiful object, that has little pleasure to give the poet, and fewer prospects to offer him—and remains binding nevertheless. The question to be worked out in both cases is not how to care for things that do not ask for our care—for not to care for them is out of the question—but how and why such attachments may matter.

IV

Coleridge wrote in the essays on genial criticism that his mission as a critic was to make the "facts of feeling and inner sense" the "objects of a full and distinct consciousness" (SWF I 363). Standing at the origin of this critical practice, and furnishing a template for it, "Dejection" tracks what an eighteenth-century critic would call the "progress" of aesthetic perception. The Dejection Ode is as compelling an account as exists of what it might mean not to create things of beauty, nor to elicit powerful sensations, but merely to be aware, to be responsive to a power that makes itself felt in aesthetic experience. Though that experience begins, predictably enough, with beauty, it does not end there. On the contrary, the blank perception of beauty makes palpable modes of experience that appear in terms far from aesthetically organized, bringing into view moments marked as much by violence and terror, disorientation and boredom, as by beauty. What in "Dejection" begins in beauty reaches a climax in the sublime of Stanza VII, in the storm that shatters the blank spell of dejection; by stirring the speaker to tempestuous imaginative heights, the storm affords the speaker more obvious signs of life to which to cling. Beauty is "but the beginning of terror," Rilke says in the first of his *Duino Elegies*, and perhaps Coleridge, with his love of the sublime in nature and in the mind, would not disagree. But beauty is also for Coleridge the beginning of love, the shudder of pain and cold, "bitter grief and fear" (124), tenderness, loss, remembrance, benediction. The event of beauty acts as a condition of maximal availability to the present—a surrender to time as it is lived and (importantly for Coleridge) shared. To extend this logic, the act of critical reading might be understood as just such a feeling-out of tendency—at once the expression and provisional fulfillment of a commitment to working it out, without knowing precisely what is being worked out, or why. Beauty is, as Rilke says, "but the beginning"—but of what the beginning we do not know.

A "criticism of life" is how Matthew Arnold famously defines poetry—first in the essay on Joseph Joubert, the "French Coleridge" as Arnold calls him, and later in well-known essays on Wordsworth and "The Study of Poetry." It is a phrase that I wish to appropriate for Coleridge's critical practice, although I also want to distinguish between Coleridge's genial criticism and the salutary

and morally edifying purposes of the aesthetic to which Arnold applies the phrase. When Arnold refers to poetry as a criticism of life, his emphasis is on poetry's role as a guide to life, a solace and a support, a philosophy by which to live. Coleridge's criticism of life is I think less prescriptive and more open-ended than Arnold's, and proceeds, in a sense, in reverse: its aim is not "the application of ideas to life," as Arnold put it, but the urging of ideas into life and motion. "Ideas passing forth into action re-instate themselves again in the world of Life," Coleridge wrote in the letter to Wedgwood (STCL II 916). I have wanted to suggest that such moments of achieved vitality are for Coleridge both the object of his critical observation and the end of the critic's "genial" work. As one etymology of the word suggests, a genial criticism is intended to be a life-giving and a life-supporting practice; it is simultaneously a criticism of life and a criticism dedicated *to* life. The "principles" that underwrite reading in this vein, and that subtend the necessity of reading as such, may be summarized as follows: "Life" is not alive enough; it needs to become more so; and the practice of criticism might (of all things) suggest a path toward the realization of this end. One keeps up the "still and patient" work of reading, writing about, and teaching these texts with hope that it might (89).