How to See and Feel: Connecting through Coleridge's Dejection

Joanna Taylor

THE BATTERED COPY OF COLERIDGE'S COMPLETE POEMS I bought for my undergraduate dissertation — the Penguin version edited .by William Keach — is now so creased that the cover art is getting difficult to make out. It's easily distinguishable on the bookshelf by its illegible, peeling spine. If allowed to fall open, it does so just under the volume's halfway point: at 'Dejection: An Ode'.

A couple of other pages are nearly as well-worn: a section from the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', comprising the five stanzas my GCSE English teacher got me to memorise — the first poetry I'd ever been able to recite from memory, and still one of the (now embarrassingly) few passages I can recall without aids; 'Christabel' — the poem that Hartley Coleridge, not a little sadly, called his 'father's favourite child' — a touchstone for my PhD on the Coleridge family's spatial poetics (and the subject of my first published article, in the 2012 volume of the *Coleridge Bulletin*),[1] and, to my surprise, 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement', which perhaps explains some of the raptures I've been in this summer over the 'thick jasmines twined' near my front porch. But it's the book's memory of the 'Dejection' ode which means I will never quite be able to bring myself to replace it, however battered it becomes.

The American poet and essayist James Seay remarks that where our books fall open reveals 'the canon ever changing, each register[ing] inevitably of the reader's time and place'.[2] But it also collapses the reader's time and place, creating moments that bind together different versions of ourselves, points of cohesion around which we grow. In re-reading Coleridge, I've left isolated versions of myself 'alone, alone, / All all alone' in the pages, intangible records of past griefs left lying like bookmarks in the creases. But over time, too, the book has become an example for how dejection might hold open the possibilities for new forms of connection with other lives. Private griefs have, partly in these pages, [been?] transmuted into strategies for understanding and responding to more wide-reaching crises — not least climate breakdown driven, in large part, by a shared and self-defeating sense of disconnectedness that has seen humanity act as if we are isolated on an interconnected planet.

Coleridge, that self-confessed 'library cormorant', knew as well as anyone that certain reading moments could crystallise things or people. It was in this way, for example, that Friedrich de la Motte Fouque's adaptation of the 'Undine' myth (1811) was important to him; he could not read it, he observed

---

[1] Joanna E. Taylor, "'More of the same sort": vamping *Christabel* in Hartley Coleridge's "Ada of Grasmere" and Mary Coleridge's "The Witch"', *Coleridge Bulletin* NS 40 (2012), pp.79-87.

[2] James Seay, "Where Books Fall Open", *Oxford American* 84 (2014), https://main.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/139-where-books-fall-open [accessed 15 August 2022].

in a letter to Oriel College pleading with them to forgive his son's inconsistencies, 'without having Hartley recalled to me, as he appeared from infancy to boyhood'.[3] Sara, Coleridge's daughter, registered something similar when she wrote, with a characteristically Coleridgean ability to combine ideas from disparate sources, that:

Chemists say that the elementary principles of a diamond and of charcoal are the same; it is the action of the sun or some other power upon each that makes it what it is. Analogous to this are the products of the poet's mind: he does not *create* out of nothing, but his mind so acts on the things of the universe, material and immaterial, that each composition is in effect a new creation.[4]

It's like this that a reader might repeatedly discover a treasure trove — or, at least, a fire pit — from re-reading the lines to which a book falls open. Just as diamonds and charcoal develop from the same core materials based on the external forces applied to them, so each reader — even each version of the same reader — makes a 'new creation' out of identical lines. Coleridge described his intellectual habits working in a similar way; he couldn't process things or thoughts immediately, but rather needed time for thing and thought to combine into a new enmeshed phenomena. To be meaningful, he wrote, a thing 'must be taken up in the mind, diffuse itself thro' the whole multitude of Shapes & Thoughts, not one of which it leaves untinged.' Reading, for Coleridge, worked in precisely this way: the book must be allowed to pervade our minds and souls, and we must be open to the possibility that what we read will 'tinge' every part of ourselves. What Coleridge reminds us is that re-reading is a deeply personal process, and one that always holds open the potential for radical change that extends beyond ourselves. My book's well-worn pages contain a record of attempts to respond to loss — of past selves, of other people, and the health of natural world. But it's been a catalyst, too, for understanding how powerful a tool dejection can be for forming new connections.

The 'Dejection' ode is perhaps Coleridge's most adept poetic expression of this capacity for change; it is a paean to disconnection, but that means it is also an extended meditation on how to unite thing and thought into some new — and so newly hopeful — experience. Every time my copy of Coleridge's poems falls open at the 'Dejection' ode, two lines simultaneously burn darkly and glitter brightly — at once charcoal and diamond — at me from the worn page:

> I see them all, so excellently fair;
> I see, not feel, how beautiful they are. (ll. 37-38)

Since I first encountered it aged 17 — thanks to another teacher determined that we'd leave the classroom with more than just decent grades — this couplet has come to mean more for me than any other lines in literature. What Coleridge brutally captures in these chiasmotic [chiasmatic?] lines is how it

[3] Letter: STC to Dr Coppleston, c.11 October 1820, in *CL*, V, p.111.
[4] Letter: Sara to Henry Nelson Coleridge, 25 October 1836, in *ML*, p.129, original emphasis.

feels to live with depression, to exist alongside a world that you don't seem to be part of. In his seeing, not feeling, he acknowledges a form of high-functioning depression, where you can fake what you think you ought to be, all the time feeling as though you're wrapped in a shroud that closes you off from anything truly real or meaningful. The misstep in Coleridge's near-rhyme ('fair'/ 'are'), at the end of a stanza of predictable AABB couplets, underscores the one thing that is, still, deeply felt: a sense of being fatally out of kilter with everything, everyone, else.

In my late teens and early twenties, it was enough for me that someone else had been able to articulate that sense of disconnection so well. I was fascinated by the different ways Coleridge tried to overcome his dejection: 'I see, not feel' seemed aspirational. I wrote my undergraduate dissertation on Coleridge's opium use in the months after my father died, when I was seeking some kind of divorce from the complicated feelings that death initiated. The frailty that pervades Coleridge's thinking and writing seemed deeply personal to me, then: he offered a way of articulating a form of despair that I didn't dare acknowledge myself. It also seemed — to employ that word so overused by students — more believable to me than Wordsworth's apparently complacent confidence that he was not only witness to the 'life that rolls through all things', but part of its motion. It's seductive, that firm belief that he belongs to and in the world, and certainly Coleridge wanted to believe that he could attain a similar state; his early Conversation poems map a series of negotiations between poet and place in attempts to reach a semblance of that confidence inherent to feeling indissolubly connected the planet's other living beings. For Coleridge, that sense of unity with external things never came easily — but there is something useful in this apparent failure for our own attempts to navigate private and social disconnections between human and non-human lives.

Take, for instance, 'The Eolian Harp.' The poem is a particularly revealing one for understanding how Coleridge navigated his constitutional dejection to allow him to discover moments of connection: those (too often isolated) instances where he could both see and feel. Coleridge, of course, is rarely fully consistent; often, he is working out his thought processes and stances across one poem, let alone across the decades of his letters and notebooks. 'The Eolian Harp' is no exception. While the later version of the poem advocates for that quasi-Wordsworthian ideal of the 'one life', the earlier version, composed in August 1795 before the intimacy with the Wordsworths developed, is more comfortable with the idea that difference, even disconnection between things, might be the crucial element of an ecosystem. In 'Effusion XXXV', the young poet wonders:

> And what if all of animated nature
> Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
> That tremble into thought, as o 'er them sweeps,
> Plastic and vast , one intellectual Breeze,
> At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (ll. 36-40)

This is not quite a unifying life-force, but one intellectual principle operating differently on diverse lifeforms, each of which remains separated by the individual 'frame' that, while they hold open the possibility for cohesion, are fundamentally indicative of a shared isolation. Here, then, diversity matters more than unity. Not only is endless variety represented by those 'frames' that contain life, but even that 'one intellectual breeze' is neither homogenous nor reliable. 'Plastic and vast', it anticipates the flexibility that would later underpin Coleridge's understanding of what he called in the *Biographia Literaria* 'esemplastic' thought. 'Esemplastic', Coleridge explains, means 'to shape into one'; in other words, it takes disparate existing objects, forces, or thoughts and combines them into what we've seen Sara call a 'new creation'. The breeze's effects are contingent on the ways it combines with the things it meets to generate new, hybrid models. But there's something else striking about this passage's meteorology: a breeze is never constant. Feeling it, being affected by it, depends entirely on positioning — and this seems to me a deeply contingent and unstable means of partaking in any kind of 'one life'. What happens, I wonder, to those 'frames' not lying across the breeze's route? The breeze offers the possibility that the body, the individual soul, and a universal God can be fused into 'animated nature' — but it also allows for the fact that some lives will not be touched by that shared unity.

Later, via an errata to *Sibylline Leaves* in 1817, Coleridge is still trying to navigate what he sees as a tension between the possibilities for eco-spiritual cohesion, and his own sense of not quite being a part of it:

> 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[.] (ll. 26-29)

'It should,' the speaker muses, 'have been impossible / Not to love all things in a world so filled' (ll.30-31). But there's a telling contingency, even here: 'it *should* have been'. The love that seemed to come to Wordsworth so freely eludes Coleridge: he can see that it 'should' be naturally present, yet he can't seem easily to feel it. I've never been sure that many of us do find that the connection between human and non-human lives that Wordsworth describes comes very naturally to us. Much more often, it's something we have to work for. It can seem almost impossible — sometimes it is — to lift what the 'Dejection' ode calls that 'smothering weight' (l. 41) from us so that we can engage with the external world. But what Coleridge teaches us, I think, is that connection with other living things — human or otherwise — is no less valid if we have to work for it. In fact, it might be better for us if we do have to work out how to forge these connections in spite of ourselves; how else will we know how to discover 'joyance every where' if we've not taught ourselves how both to see and feel it?

When the 'Eolian lute' reappears in the 'Dejection' ode, Coleridge reflects bitterly that it 'better far were mute'; its music, like the sounds of a stormy

night, have [has?] at times 'sent [his] soul abroad', but now he worries that these stimuli 'Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!' (ll. 7-20). The ode is a masterclass in how to 'see, not feel': Coleridge describes how he has used his 'abstruse research' to distance himself 'From my own nature' (ll. 89-90). By extension, this process disconnects him from all other forms of nature, too; as he advises his addressee, 'in our life alone does nature live' (l. 48). But the poem is masterful, too, in offering a glimmer that we might follow to move away from this debilitating dejection:

> Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,
> Reality's dark dream!
> I turn from you, and listen to the wind,
> Which long has raved unnoticed. What a scream
> Of agony by torture lengthen'd out
> That lute sent forth! (ll. 94-99)

What Coleridge describes here is a mindful response to his depression: he acknowledges it, but makes a conscious choice to reject its attempts to isolate and strangle him in those snake-like coils. Instead, he turns his attention to the elements outside. The wind over this lute is no gentle 'breeze'; rather, it draws from the instrument the kind of dejection that Coleridge has been articulating in himself. Little wonder that Coleridge has not felt able to listen to it before; the wind's over-animation of nature seems to confirm the legitimacy of his personal despair in a world that also seems to be howling. Yet, even this raving storm does offer a unity between disparate things: it blows around the mountains, the trees, a house, and finally a 'little child'. Each of these lifeforms is disconnected from the rest: they are 'bare', 'blasted', 'lonely', and lost 'Upon a lonesome wild' (ll. 100-122). But the violent wind offers some hope: it holds out the possibility that, even in individual desolation, we might be part of a community united by shared experience.

As Coleridge records in his ode, there's a comfort in recognising that some form of 'one life' prevails, even in these moments of darkest isolation. At a personal level, that's profoundly reassuring; sometimes all we need is the smallest chink of light in a dark room. Being able to uncover and recognise these potential connections is important for our own personal happiness, and perhaps that in itself is reason enough for attending to Coleridge's dejection. But, at an ecological moment where raving winds are more than just uncomfortable metaphors but indicative of widespread climate breakdown, we can, I think, extrapolate Coleridge's response to his dejection as a guide for social, as well as private, feelings of disconnection. We are in a moment when feeling isolated is more than just a social problem: it's an urgent environmental one, too. A challenge for modern ecology is to work out how to connect people who are culturally severed from nature with the nonhuman world; another is to mobilise people into action when things seem beyond all hope. If we see Coleridge's disconnection from that world as an early, individual symptom of a modern, social problem, then we can also find in his writing

guidance for how to utilise — if not overcome — it. Exploring, rather than shunning, Coleridge's dejected ecopoetics might offer some hope: after all, Coleridge tends to find that what starts in dejection, in disconnection, can be transformed into connection with and between human and non-human ecosystems. At a moment of environmental catastrophe and climate crisis driven to a substantial degree by widespread disconnection from the non-human world, understanding the role that dejection might play both for ourselves and for the world we inhabit has perhaps never been more important.

STC at 26 or 27,
Unknown artist in Germany; pastel; 1798-9; (size unknown).
Location unknown; MP cat. 4