Delinquent Travellers: Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Rhine Tour of 1828

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ON 16 JUNE 1828 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, WHO WAS IN LONDON with his daughter Dora, wrote to Henry Crabb Robinson to request the loan of his carpet bag.[1] It was the first sign that a new, and seemingly highly improvised, foreign tour was in the offing. He, Dora, and Coleridge left for the Continent just six days later: travelling direct from London to Ostend, they made a circuit of Belgium, the Rhine Valley, and Holland, returning just over six weeks later. The expedition appears to have taken Wordsworth's wife, Mary, who had been with him and Dora in London and was now expecting them to join her in Leicestershire, by surprise. She wrote to Edward Quillinan the day after their departure, saying that her husband and daughter had 'played us all a pretty trick by flying off in this way' and leaving her completely 'in the Dark' about their plans.[2] Richard Holmes claims that it was as a result of this tour, which effected a final reconciliation between Wordsworth and Coleridge, that the latter wrote his poem, 'The Delinquent Travellers', which among other things satirises the 'rage' for Continental tourism.[3] Holmes's dating of this poem is not endorsed by Coleridge's editor, Jim Mays, who in the absence of definitive evidence prefers late 1824 as the probable time of composition (PW 1, 2, 1022). Be that as it may, there was clearly more than a hint of delinquency about the way in which Coleridge and Wordsworth, together with Dora, took off to the Continent in the summer of '28.

The route of their tour was a well-beaten one for Wordsworth, a compulsive traveller whose production of tour poems and poem-sequences became an increasingly important part of his output in later life. He had covered parts of the route in Belgium and Holland as recently as 1823 with his wife, while the entire first half of the tour, including a stretch of the Rhine between Cologne and Bingen, replicated the itinerary of his much more extensive five-month tour of 1820, in a larger party including Mary and his sister Dorothy.[4] That 1820 tour was itself very largely a retracing in reverse of his famous pedestrian tour of 1790, which provided the subject-matter of Book 6 of the 1805 *Prelude*. So Wordsworth knew where he was going. Coleridge was in a different situation. As Tilar Mazzeo has described in a survey essay on Coleridge's travels, he did virtually no travelling at all, and no overseas travel, between his return from Malta in 1806 and the 1828 expedition

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1 *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Vol IV, The Later Years 1821-1828*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, 2nd edn, rev. Alan Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), IV 613. (Hereafter WWLY, cited parenthetically within the text.)

2 *The Letters of Mary Hutchinson Wordsworth*, ed. Mary E. Burton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958), 124.

3 PW *599* 20; see Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 553.

4 For expert re-tracings of these tours see Donald E. Hayden, *Wordsworth's Travels in Europe II* (Tulsa: University of Tulsa Press, 1988), 1-48, and (for the 1820 tour) *Wordsworth's Travels in Europe I* (Tulsa: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 41-109.

with the Wordsworths that is the subject of this paper.[5] His trip to Germany in 1798-99, which included periods of residence in the towns of Ratzeberg and Göttingen and pedestrian touring in the Harz mountains, took him nowhere near the Rhine Valley, so the picturesque scenery of this part of the 1828 tour – indeed, the route of the tour as a whole—was completely new to him.

This raises the main question that puzzles me about this tour: why did it produce so little poetry? Coleridge was travelling through new and constantly changing terrain, with much to stimulate him visually and intellectually. His ten months in Germany at the end of the previous century had resulted in a significant amount of verse, albeit much of it in the form of translations and adaptations, and of course his domestic travels, notably in the South West, fuelled the composition of some of his best-known poetry. Yet the 1828 tour produced just a tiny handful of fragments and humorous squibs, along with a thin vein of notebook entries that are often completely unrelated to the tour in progress. Wordsworth's low productivity with regard to the expedition is even more remarkable. Travel was habitually a major source of inspiration and subject-matter for his poetry. The 1820 expedition, for instance, gave rise to the thirty-nine poems separately published as *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent*, while the Scottish tours of 1831 and 1833 were to produce lengthy sequences of poems incorporated into *Yarrow Revisited and Other Poems* in 1835. Yet the 1828 tour yielded just two poems. The fact that Wordsworth was treading familiar ground does not explain this creative inertia, since his literary biography shows that throughout his career revisitation was more likely to be a stimulus than an impediment to the making of poetry. However, while Wordsworth's Muse had apparently flown and Coleridge would only occasionally splutter into life with an epigram, *Dora* Wordsworth was writing furiously – producing a 96-page journal of the tour that would initiate her into the non-professional female scribal community that flourished below the public radar within the Wordsworth circle.[6]

Is there a larger biographical context that might inform our reading of the Wordsworth and Coleridge 'reunion tour'? In this phase of Wordsworth's life, biographers tell us, his reputation was growing and spreading across the Atlantic; he entered enthusiastically into social life on his visits to London and began to enjoy his fame; he sustained old friendships and made new ones among a younger generation of writers and intellectuals. However, he published little new poetry between 1822 and 1828; in 1828 itself he wrote just a handful of poems, and by November of the same year he declared that his 'vein' was 'run out' (WWLY 656). As for Coleridge, the same period saw him managing his opium addiction under the care of the Gillmans in Highgate, fretting over the fate of his eldest son, Hartley, monitoring the developing relationship between his daughter, Sara, and nephew, Henry, and seeing into

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5 Tilar Mazzeo, 'Coleridge's Travels', *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104.

6 See Judith W. Page, 'Neatly-Penned Memorials: Dora Wordsworth's Journal of 1828 and the Community of Authorship'. *Auto/Biography Studies* 17.1 (2001), 65-80.

print his *Aids to Reflection*. Like Wordsworth, he was enjoying his celebrity, had an active social life, and his home in north London had become a site of pilgrimage for visitors from home and abroad. Also like Wordsworth, though, he was pessimistic regarding his creativity, declaring in May 1828 that he was unable to 'resume Poetry' as a consequence of 'Life *unendeared*' (CL VI 731) – although, as Morton Paley points out, Coleridge had been announcing his demise as a poet as early as 1801, while the last decade of his life was in fact 'especially productive' as far as poetry was concerned.[7]

Were Coleridge and Wordsworth both simply feeling the pressure of advancing years and the burden of mortality when they completed their reconciliation and hooked up for the 1828 tour, and did this impact on production of the poetry that might have been expected to flow? Coleridge was 55, Wordsworth 58: how did they see themselves in terms of the ageing process? One conventional model for picturing the human life cycle at this time was that of a rising and falling staircase or pyramid of stairs, with each stair corresponding to a particular age or stage of life with its appropriate behaviour and mentality.

The Various Ages and Degrees of Human Life. Etching. London, 1793. ©Trustees of the British Museum.

[7] Morton D. Paley, *Coleridge's Later Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

First emerging in the early sixteenth century, this motif initially portrayed only men, but by the seventeenth female versions of the stages of life started to appear as well as versions representing couples. The motif maintained its influence through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even though, as Thomas Cole observes, its apparent ideal of 'a long, orderly, and secure lifetime would not become a social and demographic reality' for another hundred years.[8] Although the number of ages or stages varies across the life of this motif, in the examples I have seen from the Romantic period 50 is always the top of the pyramid, as in the examples reproduced here from 1793 and 1811. The conventional annotation to age 50 reads thus: 'We that have Passed on half of our Time are half Dead so that the Lengthening of our Life is Really the Shortning of it. The Time past is Dead the Present Living but is Dying and that which is to come will certainly fall under the Power of Death.'

The Various Ages and Degrees of Human Life. Hand-coloured, etching. London, 1811. © Trustees of the British Museum.

If Coleridge and Wordsworth took much notice of this pervasive iconography, at the time of the Rhine Tour they would have had every excuse for seeing themselves as virtually decrepit, compelled to focus increasingly on their

[8] Thomas R. Cole, The *Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 28.

spiritual health as they nervously descended the slippery staircase of physical decline. If that was the case, it would not have been unreasonable if their creative energies were depleted. They would merely be confirming Simone de Beauvoir's generalisation that 'great age is not favourable to literary creation'. According to de Beauvoir, age typically brings 'physical weariness, general fatigue and indifference', which are fatal to a writer, who experiences 'the dread of having reached the bottom of the barrel, of being capable of nothing but self-repetition'. She quotes art historian Bernard Berenson's observation that 'what a man writes after he is sixty is worth little more than tea continually remade with the same leaves'.[9] With Coleridge and Wordsworth both approaching that milestone, was the comparative poetic barrenness of the Rhine Tour a sign of the creative exhaustion that de Beauvoir describes – a reluctance to continually pour hot water on the spent tea leaves of past performance?

There is, of course, plenty of evidence, in poetry as well as correspondence, to confirm that Coleridge and Wordsworth were thinking about ageing in their fifties. In a poem of 1826 that begins by recalling the famous lines from the ballad of Sir Patrick Spens on seeing 'the new moone / Wi' the auld moone in hir arme',[10] Wordsworth uses his former inability to see the dark side of the moon – to see that 'dusky Shape' (4) inside the crescent moon (by the phenomenon known as earthshine) – as a symbol of his youthful optimism and idealism; now he is ever more conscious of the 'dark Associate' (32) of each new moon, 'Emblem' (33) of more sombre thoughts that he associates in the final stanza with 'mortal Life' and 'fleeting years' (37). Religious faith is all that he can set against that 'mournful change' (38).

Coleridge's poem 'Youth and Age', begun in 1823 and first published in 1827, makes a useful comparison. The impressive musicality of this poem, its frequently exclamatory tone and its sprightly personifications disguise the real pathos with which he presents the notion of his inner being trapped in a 'breathing House not built with hands' – a deteriorating body 'that does me grievous wrong' (PW *592* 8-9). He underlines the contrast between Youth and Age by assigning all his personifications – friendship, love, liberty and the rest – to Youth, and figuring his former self as a steamboat which powered through life in defiance of wind and weather; Age, by contrast, is seen as an unwitting disguise, but one that resembles all too closely what we know of the later Coleridge – already completely white-haired in Washington Allston's 1814 portrait. He ends seemingly committed to denying the truth about his ageing body – 'Life is but Thought; so think I will / That YOUTH and I are House-mates still' (PW *592* 37-38) – but however futile this self-deception may appear to the reader the breezily epigrammatic way in which it is expressed suggests a speaker refusing to give in to despair.

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[9] Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (London: Andre Deutsch and Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), 399-401.

[10] This poem, indexed by its first line ("Once I could hail (howe'er serene the sky)"), is quoted from *Last Poems, 1821-1850*, ed. Jared Curtis et al. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 76-78. Line references are provided parenthetically.

Whatever the preamble to the Rhine Tour, in life or verse, may have been, the tour itself seems to have gone well, both in the tourists' own accounts and in those of people who met them along the way and recorded their impressions, such as the Irish novelist and travel writer, Thomas Grattan, and Julian Young, son of the Shakespearean actor Charles Mayne Young.[11] Towards the end of the tour Dora wrote to Edward Quillinan, her future husband, that they 'get on delightfully' and that she had been 'the best traveller of the trio' (WWLY 620). Her journal[12] very noticeably marginalises her two famous travelling companions and focuses on her own impressions and experiences. Nevertheless, in passages such as that in which she describes 'the Poets' being 'in ecstasies' over yet another ruined castle as they journey up the Rhine from Koblenz (39), she testifies to their renewed pleasure in each other's company as well as their immersion in the standard picturesque itinerary. Wordsworth said afterwards that the tour 'answered perfectly' and that Coleridge had 'enjoyed himself greatly' (WWLY 634), while Coleridge himself reported that his 'Health and Spirits' had been considerably improved (CL VI 749). However loudly 'time's winged chariot' was sounding in either of the poets' ears, it clearly did not prevent them having a thoroughly enjoyable tourist experience, and this cannot be put forward as a reason for their poetic inertia.

In the space remaining, I shall look more closely at one or two moments in the tour, as recorded both in Dora's journal and Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poems. Cologne was one place that elicited strong reactions from the travellers:

> on looking out of the Window a scene was before me which would have repaid twenty times the fatigue – The noble Rhine crossed by the bridge of boats, taking the form of a gentle curve, lighted on one side by a few dim lamps […] The moon above now shining forth and making a silver pillow in the Water below – now half obscured by clouds – the buildings on the opposite shore seen so indistinctly the fancy may make of them what she will – not a sound to be heard but the rippling of the Waters against the bridge & the step of the sentinel passing to and fro – Had I seen no more of Cologne what a magnet it would have been to the memory – but next morning –
> Wednesday the 3rd July
> The heat of the rooms, cross lights no blinds – offensive smells (26-27)

This passage is a good example of Dora's style: a style combining a pictorial approach to composition – here utilising the window as a convenient frame for the scene and the 'bridge of boats' (a wooden pontoon bridge of very recent

[11] Grattan recorded his impressions of the two poets in *Beaten Paths and Those Who Trod Them*, vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1862), 107-45; Young described his meeting with them in *A Memoir of Charles Mayne Young, Tragedian*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1871), 171-85.

[12] Dora's 'Journal of a Tour on the Continent, 1828' (DCMS 110) remains unpublished and quotations below are included by kind permission of The Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage, Cumbria. Page references are incorporated parenthetically in the text.

construction) as a way of connecting one side of the 'picture' to the other – with qualities of the verbal sketch, a more tentative and experimental way of recording her impressions that 'did not aspire to be polished or complete'.[13] Here the sketchiness is very apparent in the sentence fragments, the frequent use of dashes, and the preference for participles rather than active verbs. Dora also enjoys undoing her own compositions, as she does here by undermining her charming moonlit set-piece with brusque notation of the next day's contrasting sensory experience: overpowering heat, harsh cross lights and offensive smells.

It was the 'offensive smells' that Coleridge chose to focus on in the humorous verses that made up part of his meagre output from the tour. On that same first morning in Cologne he commented in his notebook: 'Noise, Heat, ~~all~~ Stench – all intolerable' (CN V 5890). The first of his 'Two Expectorations from Cologne' turns that into the punch line of a cleverly extended limerick stanza:

> As I am a Rhymer,
> And now at least a merry one,
> Mr MUM'S Rudesheimer
> And the church of St Geryon
> Are the two things alone
> That deserve to be known
> In the body-and-soul-stinking town of Cologne.
>
> (PW 1, 2, 1086)

Castle ruins, Bad Godesberg (see next page).

[13] Page, 'Neatly-Penned Memorials', 72.

Other than noting that drinking Mum's Rudesheimer wine seems to have been a highlight of the trip for Coleridge, there is not a lot to say about this except that it is plainly an exuberant piece – of a kind that he enjoyed writing throughout his career – that he clearly thought well enough of to publish, and it is interesting to note his self-characterisation as a 'merry rhymer'. This mood – leaning towards good-humoured satire – seems to have prevailed for much of the tour and inflects many of his observations, as when he takes the trouble (as a passionate sea bather himself) to transcribe an unfortunately worded advertisement for some sea baths at Zantvoort as 'a splendid Specimen of Dutch English' (CN V 5912), or when he describes the tower at Bad Godesberg as 'two Stilton Cheeses' (CN V 5898).

Wordsworth's two tour poems were of a more sober character. Dora Wordsworth provides the context for one of these, 'Incident at Bruges', describing how, as they entered the city, all her 'giddy and joyous feelings fled', overwhelmed as she was by the 'solemn grandeur' of the deserted streets (3). However, if the 'incident' took place then she doesn't mention it; it is only when they pass through Bruges again on their way home that she writes:

> Passed the convent of English Nuns – the most melancholy dismal looking Prison that was ever seen but Father's Poem tells all we saw & heard & felt (93)

The English Convent, Bruges.

Wordsworth's poem describes how the speaker and his companion, walking down a quiet street, hear a beautiful melody and song coming from the 'grim turret' (11) of a convent – a happy song at odds with the gloomy building.[14] The setting sun is playing on the pinnacle and spire, although at ground level the pedestrians see little of it. The glory of the sun – perhaps symbolising heaven – can only reach the nun (if at all) through an iron grate. Like Dora, the speaker sees the nun as a captive, shut out from life and love, and the fact that it is apparently an *English* nun is especially poignant:

> Such feeling pressed upon my soul,
> A feeling sanctified
> By one soft trickling tear that stole
> From the Maiden at my side;
> Less tribute could she pay than this,
> Borne gaily o'er the sea,
> Fresh from the beauty and the bliss
> Of English liberty? (33-40)

The poem expresses a tension between world and spirit, but the rhetorical balance undoubtedly tilts towards the former. This does not read like the work of a man so burdened by consciousness of mortality that his eyes are solely on the heavenly prize.

It is true that both poets, in their fifties, had been thinking and writing a fair bit about ageing and death; but neither was yet prepared to embrace that narrative of relentless decline and decrepitude into which the institutional ageism of Romantic studies – still fixated on the movement's supposed cult of youth – has been all too willing to incorporate them. The subtext of the 1828 tour might be phrased as: 'we're not dead yet'. The tour itself may have yielded little poetry, but both poets, as it turned out, still had plenty of fuel in the tank: Coleridge would bring out three editions of his *Poetical Works*, each larger than the one before, and publish his important work of political philosophy, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, in 1829; Wordsworth, who of course significantly outlived Coleridge, would, among other things, bring out major new collections in *Yarrow Revisited and other Poems* (1835) and *Poems Chiefly of Early and Late Years* (1842). The 1828 tour, in my reading, was a hiatus in two literary careers: it was a trip carried out at short notice, with an air of delinquency in the manner of their departure and occasionally in their conduct on tour. Part of that delinquency arguably lay in the low productivity of two professional poets otherwise accustomed to turning experience into text. It was a timeout, a period of readjustment and reassessment – as well as reconciliation – that would leave them stronger, ready for another phase of what Betty Friedan calls 'generativity' – a burning need to 'be part of something larger than oneself, to contribute something to the ongoing human

[14] Quoted from *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems, 1820-1845*, ed. Geoffrey Jackson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 409-10. Line numbers are inserted parenthetically in the text.

enterprise, to pass on some legacy to the next generation'.[15] Towards the end of her journal Dora Wordsworth writes of how pleased and excited they all were to see the agitated waves and 'Ocean roaring in her majesty' on the coast at Scheveningen, which made such a contrast with the waters 'still as death' that they had been travelling on for so long (80-81). It seems a fitting reflection on her companions, two poets who had a tendency to represent themselves as older, more senile, and more creatively incapacitated than they actually were.

[15] Betty Friedan, *The Fountain of Age* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 612.