

Poets at Odds: Coleridge and Wordsworth

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THE TRAJECTORY OF RELATIONS between Coleridge and Wordsworth needs no reminder of the change in relationship charted here. But last year, when I was called on to lead a seminar on Coleridge's poetry for a group of English Literature students, I was struck by the dates of the fifteen poems selected by the examining board. A preliminary chronological arrangement of the poems revealed that after 'The Eolian Harp' and 'Reflections on having left a place of retirement' (both written in 1795), seven following poems were written at Nether Stowey during Coleridge's new-found friendship with Wordsworth (1797–98). Those titles include the first versions of both 'Kubla Khan' and 'Christabel' (both 1797), followed in 1798 by 'Frost at Midnight', 'Fears in Solitude', and the first version of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', which appeared in the anonymous version of *Lyrical Ballads*. Following in 1802 (the year of Wordsworth's marriage) came 'Dejection an Ode' and in 1803 the 'Pains of Sleep'. In 1807, after Coleridge returned from Malta and Italy, he wrote 'To W. Wordsworth'. Ten years later the rewritten poem would be merely headed 'To A Gentleman', but the final two poems chosen by the examiners do not appear until the 1820s: 'Youth and Age' (1823) and 'Constancy to an Ideal Object' (possibly before 1820). The gap between 1807 and the 1820s suggests a loss of self-confidence and fractured friendship.

Wordsworth and Coleridge first met in Bristol in 1795, supposedly at what is now the Georgian House, town house of John Pinney, a rich West Indies sugar merchant. By 1797 William and his sister Dorothy were renting the Pinneys' Dorset home of Racedown. Coleridge moved from Bristol at the end of 1796 and settled at Nether Stowey. In the summer of 1797, Coleridge walked from Stowey through the Vale of Taunton and over the Blackdown Hills to visit the Wordsworths in Dorset, stopping to preach at the Unitarian chapel in Bridgwater on the way. The beginning of the friendship can be traced to the Wordsworths' famous account forty years later: 'We both have a distinct remembrance of his arrival: he did not keep to the high road, but leaped over a gate and bounded down a pathless field by which he cut off an angle'.¹ Before turning to the strains and severances of that friendship, we must recall those brief but fruitful years of collaboration—and the anonymous 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* with the *Ancient Mariner* placed at the very front of the volume.

The original advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads* describes the poems as having been written 'chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure'. The authors concede that the style of many of the pieces will not be to the taste of 'readers of superior judgment'.² Many of the

¹ Mary Wordsworth to Sara Coleridge (7 November 1845), in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years, 1821–1853*, 4 vols., ed. E. de Selincourt, rev. Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon: 1978–88), 4.719.

² 'Advertisement', in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (Edinburgh: T & A. Constable, 1963), 7.

poems may be seen as war poetry content. Not poetry of the trenches, but what Wilfred Owen said about his own poetry: 'My subject is war and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity'.³ In the 1798 version of Wordsworth's 'Old Man Travelling', the last six lines read:

I asked him whither he was bound, and what
The object of his journey; he replied
'Sir I am going many miles to take
A last leave of my son, a mariner
Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth
And there is dying in an hospital.'⁴

In 1816 the specific reference to the war is removed.

The relevance of this to our story lies in the way Wordsworth sought to distance himself from the political context of those creative eighteen months in 1797–98, when Coleridge and the Wordsworths roamed the Quantock Hills. And in seeming to deny the impact of those months, Wordsworth is downplaying his debt to Coleridge and putting their friendship under strain. Coleridge nevertheless joins William and Dorothy on their plan to tour Germany.

On 16 September 1798, before *Lyrical Ballads* had been published, the two Wordsworths, Coleridge, and a travelling companion (John Chester) sailed from Yarmouth. The disappointing reviews of *Lyrical Ballads* and Wordsworth's intention to exclude the *Ancient Mariner* from the second edition were in the future. At Hamburg the travellers met Victor Klopstock—younger brother of Friedrich, the famous German poet. But after only twelve days, Coleridge and Chester abandoned the Wordsworths and took the coach to Ratzburg. William and Dorothy were uncertain where to go next but hoped to reach Saxony. William's letter to Henry Gardiner records: 'every thing is very dear and the inn-keepers, shop-keepers &c are all in league to impose upon strangers. We intend to apply with utmost assiduity to learning the language when we are settled'.⁵

A post-script reveals Wordsworth's anxiety over the progress of *Lyrical Ballads*—still in the press. He reports: 'I do not yet know what is become of my poems, that is, who is their publisher. It was undecided when I came off, which prevented me from sending you a copy.'⁶ Only when the Wordsworths returned home did they read the reviews of *Lyrical Ballads*. Southey's famously brutal description of the *Ancient Mariner* in the *Critical Review* of October 1798 as 'a Dutch attempt at German sublimity' set the tone.

³ *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. C. Day Lewis (London: Chatto & Windus 1961), 31.

⁴ William Wordsworth, 'Old Man Travelling', in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), in *William Wordsworth* ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 48–49.

⁵ William Wordsworth to Henry Gardiner (3 October 1798) in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787–1805*, ed. E. de Selincourt; revised Chester L. Shaver (1935; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 200–201; cf. Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, 2 vols., ed. E. de Selincourt (1941; Hamden, CT: Archon, 1970), 1.21–31.

⁶ Wordsworth, *The Early Years*, 202.

In December that year, the *Analytical Review*, while commending ‘the studied simplicity which pervades many of the poems’, echoed Southey’s verdict on the *Ancient Mariner*, describing it as ‘written professedly in imitation of the style as well as the spirit of the ancient poets’.⁷ The reviewer decides that ‘it has more of the extravagance of a mad German poet, than of the simplicity of our ancient ballad writers’.⁸ No wonder Wordsworth blamed Coleridge for the poor reviews. He told Joseph Cottle that the *Ancient Mariner* had been injurious to *Lyrical Ballads* as a whole because ‘the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on’.⁹

If the volume came to a second edition, Wordsworth explains, the *Ancient Mariner* would be dropped: ‘I would put in its place some little things which would be more likely to suit the common taste’.¹⁰ In the event, Coleridge refused to sacrifice the *Ancient Mariner*, and the poem was moved from the beginning of *Lyrical Ballads* to the end. But a footnote records,

. . . the Author was himself very desirous that [‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’] should be suppressed. This wish had arisen from a consciousness of the defects of the poem, and the knowledge that many persons had been much displeased with it. The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being . . . secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon: thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated.¹¹

After such stark words of censure from a supposed friend, Coleridge can hardly have been mollified by Wordsworth’s tribute to some ‘delicate touches of passion’ and ‘unusual felicity of language’—especially when followed by the comment that ‘though the metre is itself unfit for long poems’ the versification is ‘harmonious and artfully varied’.¹²

What Wordsworth’s insensitivity did was to destroy Coleridge’s self-confidence as a poet. And just as William and Dorothy had followed Coleridge by moving to Somerset in 1797, so now, in 1800, Coleridge made the more daunting move from Nether Stowey to Greta Hall in the Lake District. Coleridge explained to his Nether Stowey neighbour, Tom Poole, why he had decided to move North: ‘It is painful to me too to think of not living near him; for he is a good man and a kind man & the only one whom in *all* things I feel my superior’.¹³ That was before the publication of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical*

⁷ *The Analytical Review* XXVIII (1798): 583 in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, 314.

⁸ *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, 314.

⁹ William Wordsworth to Joseph Cottle (24 June 1799) in Wordsworth, *The Early Years*, 226–27.

¹⁰ Wordsworth, *The Early Years*, 227.

¹¹ Wordsworth, ‘Note to the Ancient Mariner’ (1800 edition), in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, 270.

¹² Wordsworth, ‘Note to the Ancient Mariner’, 271; cf. Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, 285.

¹³ *CLI* 491; cf. Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, 285 and Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Hodder & Stoughton 1989), ch. 7.

Ballads with its hurtful footnote. In December, a few weeks before it was published, Coleridge wrote sadly to a correspondent: 'As to our literary occupations they are still more distant than our residences—He is a great, a true Poet—I am only a kind of Metaphysician' (*CL* I 658).

The sense of separation between the two friends was intensified by Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson on 4 October 1802. By then Coleridge was in love with another Sara, Mary Hutchinson's sister. Six months earlier, he had written the first version of his poem 'A Letter to—' (the blank was Sara Hutchinson—or Asra—as Coleridge referred to her in his notebooks). And on the same fateful day of 4 October 1802, he published 'Dejection: an Ode' in the *Morning Post*, incorporating much of his 'Letter to Sara'—though without using her name. Thus, in a reference to Wordsworth, Coleridge had written in 'A Letter to—':

And better seem'd it for a heart like mine
Always to *know*, than sometimes to behold
Their happiness and thine.
For change doth trouble me with pangs untold
To see thee, hear thee, feel thee—then to part. (*PW* I.2 685)

Yet the attraction of moving permanently to the Lakes was too strong. When, in 1800, Coleridge moved to Greta Hall at Keswick to join the Wordsworths in the Lake District, the failures of the German expedition were forgotten. In 1803 they planned to tour Scotland, but the tour, beginning from Cumberland, was soon in trouble.

Typically, the three would-be tourists disagreed on the mode of travel. Coleridge favoured a walking tour with a side-saddled pony for Dorothy, but Wordsworth insisted on wheels—and gave Coleridge the task of finding a horse and conveyance. He managed to get an 'Irish jaunting car' from distant Devon, and (as Coleridge told Southey) 'a stout Horse—aged but stout & spirited' (*CL* II 975). It did not take long for the stout and spirited horse to show its spirit. As Dorothy reported: our horse jibbed 'upon a steep bank where the road was not fenced . . . and we had a second threatening of disaster in crossing a narrow bridge between two dales'.¹⁴

Perhaps it was wise of Coleridge to decide at the outset not to take the reins. His insistence that Wordsworth should do so has a certain psychological relevance, given Wordsworth's evident dominance since their move to the Lakes. Dorothy's *Recollections* constantly refer to 'poor Coleridge' and his delicate state of health. She reports that 'Coleridge was not well and slept upon the carriage cushions', while she and Wordsworth went for a long walk after dinner'.¹⁵ Earlier that day he had not gone with them to see Robert Burns's

¹⁴ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 39.

¹⁵ Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, 44.

grave. At the inn the next day, Dorothy records: 'Coleridge was weary, but William and I walked out after tea'.¹⁶

Arriving at Lanark the next morning, Dorothy wanted to see the famous waterfall, but 'Coleridge was unwell and could not go'.¹⁷ Three days later at Dumbarton: 'We went early to bed; but Coleridge could not sleep for the noise at the street door'.¹⁸ At Loch Lomond, when a ferryman was found to row them down the lake, 'Coleridge was afraid of the cold on the boat, so he determined to walk down the lake, pursuing the same road we had come along'.¹⁹

Coleridge once said of his relationship with William and Dorothy that 'tho we were three persons, it was but one God' (CL II 775). That was hardly the case now. The decision was taken (by Wordsworth) that Coleridge should travel with them no further and should return to Keswick. At the end of August they parted, after only a fortnight together on the road. According to Dorothy, 'We partitioned out the contents of our purse before parting; and after we had lost sight of him, drove heavily along'.²⁰ Characteristically, Coleridge accepted an unequal division of the money: 'they took 29 guineas, and I six', Coleridge told his wife.²¹ Presumably the calculation was based on the assumption that Coleridge would be going straight home.

But Coleridge did nothing of the sort. Instead, he hired a boat on Loch Lomond, and was persuaded by the boatman to visit a distillery and take a dram of whisky with him. At the inn where Coleridge spent the night, he was told that Glencoe was only forty miles to the north. He celebrated his freedom from the Wordsworths by setting out on a solo journey round the northern Highlands. From Glencoe he walked to Ballachulish and Fort William. Pausing to explore Glen Nevis, but not climbing Ben Nevis, he walked on to Fort Augusta; eleven days after parting from the Wordsworths, he was in Inverness. All this was done without a map, which the Wordsworths had kept, not unreasonably supposing that he would not need it.

For the next seven days, Coleridge travelled south from Inverness via Aviemore and Dalwhinnie to Perth. Here he heard that the Southneys had just lost their baby daughter from what was described as 'Water on the Brain from teething' (CL II 1006). The heartbroken parents had decided to move to the Lakes, too, and were now at Keswick.

The news provoked Coleridge into making a hasty dash to join the Southneys. He reached Perth at 8.30 in the evening; by 9.00 p.m. he had read and responded to the Southey's letters, and by 4 o'clock the next morning he was on the mail coach to Edinburgh. He stayed two nights in Edinburgh, touring the city sights, including Walter Scott's house on Castle Street.

¹⁶ Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, 51.

¹⁷ Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, 59.

¹⁸ Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, 77.

¹⁹ Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, 101.

²⁰ Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, 117.

²¹ Coleridge to his wife in *Letters of the Scottish Tour: Letter 1*, in C. K. Walker, *Breaking Away: Coleridge in Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 180.

Coleridge's energy as an Edinburgh tourist is unrecognisable as the Wordsworths' travelling companion. On his second morning in Edinburgh, Coleridge took the coach for Keswick and was at Greta Hall by noon.²²

From July 1804 to August 1806 Coleridge was in Malta and Italy. He returned to England in time to compose: 'To W. Wordsworth: Lines composed for the greater part on the night on which he finished the recitation of his poem (in thirteen books) concerning the growth and history of his own mind'. It was dated 'Jan^{ry} 1807. Cole-orton near Ashby de la Zouch'. The twenty-two lines begin: 'O Friend! O Teacher! God's great Gift to me!' (*PW* II.2 1029). When the poem was finally published in *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), Wordsworth's name in the title was replaced by 'A Gentleman', and the first line of the poem was changed to the cooler dedication of 'Friend of the Wise! And Teacher of the Good' (*PW* I.2 816).

Between the two dates, relations between the two poets had definitely cooled. Within two years their friendship was broken—as exquisitely described by Duncan Wu in *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man*. Coleridge, visiting Basil Montagu in London in 1810, learned that Wordsworth had warned Montagu never to let Coleridge into his house, as his presence would be 'a serious injury' to him and his family. What was worse, Wordsworth had authorised Montagu to tell Coleridge what he had said. No wonder Wu's account has Coleridge reduced to tears.²³

Two years later, in May 1812, Wordsworth came to London where Coleridge was giving lectures at the Surrey Institution. Although Wordsworth had come in search of reconciliation, he snubs Coleridge's offer of a ticket for the lectures and observes to his wife Mary Wordsworth that 'it was a most odious way of picking up money, and scattering about his own and his friends thoughts'.²⁴ Wordsworth would not see Coleridge again until he met him in London in late 1817. By then Coleridge had published his *Biographia Literaria*. In the fourth chapter, Coleridge remembers that he was twenty-four when he first 'had the happiness of knowing Mr Wordsworth personally; and, while memory lasts, I shall hardly forget the sudden effect produced on my mind by his recitation of a manuscript poem which still remains unpublished' ('Guilt and Sorrow'—not published until 1842) (*BL* I 78).

By the beginning of chapter XXII of *Biographia*, Coleridge addresses what the headline calls 'The characteristic defects of Wordsworth's poetry' (*BL* II 119). Coleridge is anxious to demonstrate that, in spite of Francis Jeffrey's bracketing of Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth under the collective title of 'Lake Poets', their individual poetic styles are different. Coleridge sees the first (though only occasional) characteristic of Wordsworth's poetry as the 'sudden and unprepared transition from lines or sentences of peculiar felicity (at all events striking and original) to a style, not only unimpassioned but

²² Walker, *Breaking Away*, 18.

²³ Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 135, 191.

²⁴ William and Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, vol. VIII: A Supplement of New Letters* ed. A. G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 55.

undistinguished' (BL II 121). After a selection of examples, Coleridge turns to the defect of 'a *matter-of-factness* in certain poems' (BL II 126). First, 'a laborious minuteness and fidelity of representation of objects, and their positions, as they appeared to the poet himself'. And secondly, 'the insertion of accidental circumstances, in order to the full explanation of his living characters . . . in real life, where nothing is taken for granted by the hearer, but appear superfluous in poetry, where the reader is willing to believe for his own sake'.

After several pages of criticism, Coleridge turns to Wordsworth's excellences of 'purity of language . . . in short a perfect appropriateness of the words to the meaning' (BL II 142). The 'second characteristic excellence of Mr. W's works is: a correspondent weight and sanity of the Thoughts and Sentiments,—won not from books; but—from the poet's own meditative observation. They are *fresh* and have the dew upon them' (BL II 144–45). Other somewhat excessive compliments follow, but like Wordsworth's belated praise after his stinging criticism in his footnote to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the criticism comes first and is therefore what is remembered most.

Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, as one might have guessed, had not pleased Wordsworth. According to Henry Crabb Robinson, Wordsworth found 'just fault with Coleridge for professing to write about himself and writing merely about Southey and Wordsworth . . . With the criticism of the poetry too he is not satisfied. The praise is extravagant'.²⁵ But on 27 December 1817, when Robinson was dining with Tom Monkhouse and other guests, including Wordsworth and Coleridge, Robinson found himself 'for the first time in my life not pleased with Wordsworth, and Coleridge appeared to advantage in his presence'.²⁶

I remain convinced that it was principally Wordsworth's fault that Coleridge turned largely from poetry to prose. Yet, remembering Wordsworth's abrupt dismissal of Coleridge's 1812 lectures, it is a surprise to find that, before Wordsworth left London, he wrote privately to a friend to ask him to attend the new series of Coleridge's lectures and help to make them a success. Juliet Barker comments: 'His sympathy for Coleridge was explicit, generous and warm'.²⁷ So perhaps it is only fair to leave that endorsement of Wordsworth ringing in our ears.

²⁵ Henry Crabb Robinson, *Diary* (4 December 1817), quoted in Juliet Barker, *Wordsworth: A Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 353.

²⁶ Quoted in Barker, *Wordsworth*, 353.

²⁷ Barker, *Wordsworth*, 354.