

Coleridge's Capable Negativity in 'Dejection: an ode'

Throughout his career, Coleridge often indulged his negative emotions memorably and minutely:

It is a most instructive part of my life, that I have been always preyed on by some Dread, and perhaps all my faulty actions have been the consequence of some Dread or other on my mind / from fear of Pain, or Shame, not from the prospect of Pleasure / – So in my childhood & Boyhood ... imaginary fears of having the Itch in my Blood – then a short-lived Fit of Fears from Sex – then horror of DUNS, & a state of struggling with madness from an incapability of hoping that I should be able to marry Mary Evans (and this strange passion of fervent tho' wholly imaginative and imaginary Love uncombinable by my utmost efforts with <any regular> Hope – / possibly from deficiency of bodily feeling, of tactual ideas connected with the image) had all the effects of direct Fear, and I have lain for hours together awake at night, groaning and praying – then came that stormy time / and for a few months America really inspired Hope, & I became an exalted Being – then came Rob. Southey's alienation / my marriage – constant dread in my mind respecting Mrs Coleridge's Temper, &c – and finally stimulants in the fear and prevention of violent Bowel-attacks from mental

agitation / then <almost epileptic> night-horrors in my sleep / & since then every error I have committed, has been the immediate effect of the Dread of these bad most shocking Dreams – any thing to prevent them / – all this interwoven with its minor consequences, that fill up the interspaces – the cherry juice running in between the cherries in a cherry pie / procrastination in dread of this – & something else in consequence of that procrast. &c ...¹

The above notebook entry illustrates a typically choking efflorescence of Coleridgean unhappiness. Taken at its face value, Coleridge's 'procrastination ... & something else in consequence of that procrast. &c' meant that the poet considered himself incapable of producing great poetry. The point presents itself as a question: how should Coleridge's wealth of poetic activity in later years be regarded, given that he pronounced 'The Poet ... dead in [him]'² in 1801?

I do not wish to state categorically whether or not the composition of 'Dejection: an ode' should be thought of as marking a decisive turning-point in Coleridge's career, shaping all his future activity (or inactivity); nor do I wish to decide whether or not the poem should be thought of simply as an important episode, only partially related to what came before or

after. To do either would impose on me a heavier burden of proof than I am able to assume in the space available to me here. But it is worth observing that in 'Dejection', Coleridge's thinking revolved around a prodigious paradox: the fact that even as he pronounced himself dead as a poet he was at the same time exhibiting his continuing poetic life by his verbal facility and imaginative play.

With J.C.C. Mays's argument in mind, that Coleridge was capable of making his negative emotions poetically 'viable',³ I will argue that 'Dejection' involves the first conscious, explicit and formal enactment of what I will call Coleridge's capable negativity, which should be compared, but not confused, with Keats's negative capability.⁴ I will concentrate on the version of the poem published in the *Morning Post*, 4 October 1802,⁵ because, in my view, it marks how Coleridge ceremonially discontinued competing with Wordsworth as a poet,⁶ by displaying publicly his essential difference from (and possibly his superiority to) Wordsworth, despite the latter's productiveness. 'Dejection' is not simply the gesturing of a poet who is really dead. What, if anything, died? One may be inclined to answer that question with a shade of decadent humour if one recalls J.K. Huysmans' character, des Esseintes, hosting a sombre, formal 'dinner in pious memory of the host's (temporarily) lost virility'. Like Huysmans' knowingly 'regulation phraseology [in des Esseintes'] letters summoning relatives to attend the obsequies of a defunct kinsman',⁷ 'Dejection' has an oddly persuasive life of its own. The paradox of Coleridge's imaginative protestation of poetic death can be solved rather than simply stated: the news of the poet's death was greatly exaggerated.

Whereas Keats's negative capability (like Wordsworth's 'wise passiveness'⁸) involves passive achievement, Coleridge's capable negativity involves the eccentric reactivation of his negated imagination. Keats claimed that he

had a tinglingly sensitive imagination which, when it received sense impressions from the outside world, could produce poetry as organically as 'the Leaves of a tree'.⁹ Any anxieties in Keats about the past or the future could not, claimed Keats, contaminate the purity of his contemplation: 'nothing startles me beyond the Moment'. When, say, 'a Sparrow c[a]me before [his] Window [he] t[oo]k part in its existence and pek[ed] about the Gravel'.¹⁰ According to Richard Woodhouse, Keats had only to see a billiard ball, in order to 'conceive ... that it may have a sense of delight from its own roundness, smoothness volubility & the rapidity of its motion'.¹¹ Keats could accept that truth was beauty and beauty truth without attempting to square the circularity of the idea, and without any non-poetic obeisance to what S.T. Coleridge's son, Hartley, would call 'The dull arithmetic of prison'd sadness'.¹²

Coleridge, 'incapable [in Keats's view] of remaining Content with half-knowledge',¹³ announced in 'Dejection' that he could not gaze¹⁴ profitably: 'It were a vain endeavour, / Though I should gaze forever' (III. 42–3). In Coleridge's intellectual/imaginative hothouse (the poetic fragments, the philosophical theories, and the notebook entries) the natural production of poetry had apparently become impossible. Coleridge felt, or said he felt, he had squandered his energy in dilatory speculation (like 'a kind of St Vitus' Dance, eternal activity without action'¹⁵), when he ought to have used it to compose poetry. Notoriously, his unfinished projects outnumbered his finished projects:

I should not think of devoting less than 20 years to an Epic Poem. Ten to collect materials and warm my mind with universal science. I would be a tolerable Mathematician, I would thoroughly know Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Optics, and Astronomy, Botany, Metallurgy, Fossilism, Chemistry, Geology, Anatomy, Medicine –

then the mind of man – then the minds of men – in all Travels, Voyages and Histories. So I would spend ten years – the next five to the composition of the poem – and the last five to the correction of it.¹⁶

He anticipated, not acquired, the comprehensive knowledge¹⁷ necessary for the production of his 'Epic Poem'.

'Dejection' shows Coleridge crossing a shadowline¹⁸ of the emotions. In September 1801, he had apprised Tom Poole of his feeling of isolation from his family:

My family – I have wholly neglected them – I do not love them – their ways are not my ways, nor their thoughts my thoughts – I have no recollections of childhood connected with them, none but painful thoughts in my after years – at present ...¹⁹

By the time he came to write 'Dejection', he recognized that he had to stop prevaricating, speculating and deceiving himself and face the truth about himself: his gift was unspecific, and he could never satisfy his mind's enormous, deleterious need to keep moving, as it dragged with it the uncongenial tangle of 'abstruse research' (VI. 89) and negative personal emotions. The reminder of self hanging over Coleridge had to be integrated with his diffuse intellectualism in some way, because the former clamoured for more attention than he, his family, friends and editors could satisfy. The process of integration was not one that could be vetted by his fellow writers, because, as Marshall Suther puts it,

in the course of his development as a poet [Coleridge ended up] burden[ed].. with an invalid expectation that vitiated his own experience and led him into confusion and contradiction.²⁰

Coleridge remained fascinated by the scientific disciplines ('Mechanics, Hydrostatics ...'), but, in the context of poetic composition, he found

the management of his deficit of self the biggest challenge.²¹ The way in which Coleridge managed that deficit continues to challenge readers. Nora Meurs has said that "'Dejection: an ode" inaugurated a turning point in [Coleridge's] thinking, by prompting the self-preservative shift to "abstruse research".'²² Whether or not the poem did mark a turning point in Coleridge's career, it was certainly a public admission of personal disarray. But if there is any truth in J. Appleyard's view that Coleridge 'paradoxically invokes the imaginative gift he is denying',²³ then it is likely that the poet of 'Dejection' had more than a 'sole resource' or an 'only plan' (VI. 91).

'Dejection' is not primarily Coleridge's formal recognition of his inability to win 'from outward forms ... / The passion and the life, whose fountains [were] within' (III. 45–6). Nor does the poem primarily amount to his public application (to himself) for permission (from himself) to jettison the self-protective clutter of 'Metallurgy, Fossilism, Chemistry ...'. In 'Dejection', Coleridge recognized in himself the ubiquity of his melancholy. He had already privately recognized that ubiquity ('I write melancholy, always melancholy'²⁴), but once he publicized it, he could then publicly harness it, and therefore ply his own (recognizably not Wordsworth's) trade. In documenting (albeit impressionistically) the error of his younger self's ways ('Fancy [had] made [him] dreams of happiness' [VI. 79], and 'hope [had] gr[o]w[n] round [him], like the twining vine' [VI. 80]), he stabilized. He no longer needed simply to blame his sense of artistic unfulfilment on his family, or his wife,²⁵ whom – be it remembered, *before* their marriage – he had told Southey he did '*not* love'.²⁶ He instead disclosed his love for the beauty of his own recollections in whose light he stood condemned.

In following the apparition of his sorrows beyond his usual excuses, he reached a vantage point from which he could see the central reality of his personality 'infect[ing] the whole'

(VI. 92) of his personality. He now felt the familiar ache in a new context. He could see how the 'dull pain' (I. 20) of his dejection had been misdirecting and diminishing the natural impulses of his creativity. But now that he could lever himself out of the convolution of conscience and consciousness, he could begin new work at his new vantage point. He found that he could turn to poetic account his view of the mechanism productive in him of his sense of failure.

His sense of 'inachievement' (Mays, 58) has nothing to do with madness, as Wordsworth contemporaneously suggested in 'Resolution and Independence'.²⁷ Coleridge did refer to the wind as a 'Mad Lutanist!' (VII. 104), but referred to his own condition as 'A grief' (II. 19). Madness would have been too blunt, and even too glamorous, a term to describe the state of mind that 'Dejection' examines. Madness has since come to be associated with, say, Charles Baudelaire, in all his rich, gorgeous, cerebral disturbedness.²⁸ Dejection is pure dullness, and the sufferer, trapped in a 'colorless' consciousness, 'removed from the real throb of the senses',²⁹ cannot 'startle th[e] dull pain, and make it move and live!' (I. 20). In consciously enacting the slowness, dreariness and dampness of his condition, Coleridge made explicit, without making it too exciting, too literary, or too interesting in its connotations, the condition nowadays known as depression.³⁰ As John Beer has put it:

Readers ... knew that Coleridge had been there before them ... the account of the ills induced by over-developed habits of analysis in the 'Dejection' ode rendered with unexpected exactitude a drabness of feeling they could recognize.³¹

By 1802, the non-confessional³² Wordsworth was, in Coleridge's view, a prolific poet.³³ The subject of Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence' was how to beat dejection. Wordsworth told readers that if they felt

morbidity getting hold of them, they were to snap out of it, as he did by 'laugh[ing him]self to scorn'.³⁴

In a letter to Poole (May 1802), Coleridge mentioned that 'Wordsworth is as well as he usually is; & has written a considerable number of small poems'.³⁵ Coleridge finished the letter with two transcribed Wordsworth poems: 'To a Butterfly' and 'The Sparrow's Nest'. Or rather, he nearly finished the letter with the transcriptions. Actually, the very last words of the letter were:

I ought to say for my own sake that on 4th of April last I wrote you a letter in verse; but I thought it dull & doleful – & did not send it –³⁶

Wordsworth had begun 'Resolution and Independence' on 3 May 1802, in answer to the first draft of 'Dejection', which had been composed on 4 April 1802. In the above letter, Coleridge was making it known that he considered his poetry too set apart by spleen and too richly lugubrious for the contemporary taste. Coleridge's imagination was still moving 'among the tombs & touch[ing] the pollutions of / the Dead',³⁷ without inclining Coleridge to 'laugh.. [him]self to scorn', like Wordsworth.

In J. Robert Barth's view, 'The old moon [in 'Dejection'] must die if the new moon is to be born',³⁸ but even the new moon's appearance is ghostly: 'overspread with phantom light' (I. 10). Coleridge's enthusiasm for its appearance ('For lo! the New moon' [I. 9]) is reminiscent of the Mariner's ('Gramercy!') for the appearance of what was apparently (but was not) a rescue ship. Barth's view that Coleridge's 'imagination has come to life again'³⁹ could be reinterpreted less fondly, though more spookily, in the sense that the poet in Coleridge remains 'dead',⁴⁰ but his spirit haunts 'Dejection' like a life-in-death. That would square with Stephen Gill's view that Coleridge's 'number of.. declarations' of the deadness of the poet in him, though couched in 'strikingly imaginative prose could

not disguise the apparent accuracy of the self-assessment'.⁴¹ Nicholas Halmi has said that, elsewhere (in 'Christabel'), Coleridge 'demonstrates ... that ... realization depends on denying the audience the opportunity to dismiss the supernatural as a shadow of imagination *within the [poetry] itself*'.⁴² By the 'swimming phantom light' (I. 11) of a 'midnight' (VIII. 126) moon in winter, the specific acoustic and visual agitations in 'Dejection' – the 'sobbing', the 'moans' (I. 6), the 'luminous cloud' (IV. 54), the 'luminous mist' (V. 62), the 'groans of trampled men with smarting wounds' (VII. 112), and the moans of 'a little child / Upon a lonesome wild' (VII. 121–2) – blend felicitously, but in a way that Wordsworthian resolution and independence would not have promoted. Coleridge refined and modulated his 'haunting sense'⁴³ of self-doubt (his 'viper thoughts' [VII. 94]) into an idiom unlikely to fit with the flourishes of his competitor, 'wh[o] ask[ed] to be and c[ould] only be admired'.⁴⁴ As Halmi has said, 'What distinguishes the supernatural, and makes it attractive for [Coleridge's] purposes, is its very irreducibility to the psychological'.⁴⁵ Think how different our experience of 'Dejection' would be if the poem ended with the revelation that everything just related was merely the mental excreta awaiting the leech-gatherer's alchemizing presence. In 'death' (permanent inability to be like, or to compete successfully with, Wordsworth), the poet in Coleridge effectively laid claim to his laureateship of 'failure and inachievement'.⁴⁶ It was better for Coleridge to set up, and reign over, the negative commonwealth of 'Dejection' than serve in Wordsworthian 'Resolution':

Like a polar explorer or the heretical alchemist, the melancholy [Coleridge] undergoes extreme danger in hopes of discovering an elixir – the magnet's attraction, the philosopher's stone – to remedy the universe's lacerations.⁴⁷

Prior to the publication of 'Dejection', Coleridge had been verbally deft enough to help make the atmosphere propitious to the reception of the poem. Just as he would require the presence of a Preface to 'Kubla Khan' (1816), to contextualize it more alluringly, richly, and suggestively as a fragment remembered from a dream,⁴⁸ so for 'Dejection' he required the news of the death of the poet in him to be common knowledge. Richard Holmes's idea that Coleridge 'was living out what many people experience, in the dark disorder of their hidden lives, but living it on the surface and with astonishing, even alarming candour that many ... found unendurable or simply ludicrous'⁴⁹ is important. D.W. Harding has suggested that Coleridge was, just like his Mariner, undergoing 'the penance of repeatedly ... re-experiencing his guilt and horror' and that his life became 'the perpetual penance of a man who can never forgive himself'.⁵⁰ The wedding guest had been initially disturbed by the physical appearance of the Mariner (his glittering eye and skinny hand), and subsequently moved by the Mariner's story. But the apparently bodiless speaker in 'Dejection', who 'see[s]', but cannot 'feel' (I. 38) things, could not have accosted the wedding guest with sufficient force. 'Dejection' is the 'realization'⁵¹ of some of the sort of unsensational feelings that would later be so fully explored by Proust and Tolstoy, but for the time being, would be kicked aside by people hurrying to appointments.

Coleridge's public realignment of the pieces of his inner life did not necessarily mean an increase in his honesty. The *Morning Post* version of 'Dejection' reflects what Anthony John Harding has called 'a counter-trend to self-exploration and self-revelation – the rejection of what is too personal and discreditable'.⁵² The earliest draft of 'Dejection', addressed as a letter to Sara Hutchinson (4 April 1802), contains Coleridge's 'half-wish ...' that his own children 'never had been

born!⁵³ whereas the *Morning Post* version contains no such matter. In the *Morning Post* version of 'Dejection', Coleridge found a verbal common denominator with which to define the common condition, depression,⁵⁴ which was unrecognized by the medical profession until long after Coleridge's death:⁵⁵

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh, or tear – (II. 1–4)

One does not need to have been psychologically incapacitated by dependence on any drug to recognize the volume of negative emotion condensed in the above thirty-seven syllables (though Molly Lefebure has called the poem 'opium-sodden'⁵⁶); nor does one need to have been bereaved.⁵⁷ In 'A Nocturnal upon S. Lucie's day', John Donne's perception of himself as 'ruin'd' and 're-begot / Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not'⁵⁸ was probably elicited either by the serious illness or death, of his patroness, Lucy, Countess of Bedford, or by the death of his wife.⁵⁹ Coleridge had written to Southey in October 1801 about the central importance to the human experience of unclassifiable unhappiness, and the necessity, for many individuals, in accommodating the presence of that unhappiness with bad habits of mind:

We all have obscure feelings that must be connected with some thing or other – the Miser with a guinea – Lord Nelson with a blue Ribbon – Wordsworth's old Molly with her washing Tub – Wordsworth with the Hills, Lakes, & Trees – / all men are poets in their way, tho' for the most part their ways are *damned bad ones*.⁶⁰

Knowing that '*damned bad*' ways had 'grown the habit of [his] soul' (VI. 93), Coleridge saw the wisdom in accepting the entanglement, but reflecting upon that entanglement. Coleridge's was

a preternaturally sensitive consciousness so keenly attuned to the complexities of existence that it simply could not embrace one view or action at the expense of all others (Wilson, xiii).

He intuitively continued to allow his knowledge (or his unKeatsianly irritable 'half-knowledge'⁶¹) of science and his knowledge of his own emotional weaknesses to interanimate. In 1801, he had told Godwin that 'I look at the Mountains (that visible God Almighty that looks in at all my windows) ... only for the Curves of their outlines; the Stars, as I behold them, form themselves into Triangles'. With something of the 'newly adventurous skepticism'⁶² of his friend, Humphry Davy, Coleridge recorded sense impressions with experimentally godless prose, effectively severing 'God Almighty' from his view of 'the Mountains' and putting Him within brackets.⁶³ But he felt guilty about disconnecting God from the power-source of his lucubration: having accepted the Newtonian postulate with his mind, there was a danger of his accepting it with his heart. (Think of the way his enthusiasm for Hartleian necessitarianism veered towards Berkleian idealism in the 1790s, and the simultaneous loosening of his commitment to his son, Hartley, about which Coleridge would later feel guilty.⁶⁴)

Where Keats, as Christopher Ricks puts it, 'never relaxe[d] his intelligence but always ha[d] a relaxed intelligence',⁶⁵ Coleridge felt 'bow[ed] down to earth' (VI. 82) by the pressure of the 'outward forms' (III. 45) he had borrowed to help him understand the universe, and, more damagingly, his own life. 'Keats's imagination can transubstantiate, can convert gall into manna';⁶⁶ Coleridge's imagination may have changed the appearance of his anxieties, but they remained anxieties. A notebook entry of 1800 illustrates that the prosaic sound of an autumn wind can quickly acquire a prodigious range of negative associations, as it sweeps

across a mind as troubled and complicated as Coleridge's:

Oct.21 – Morning – 2 °clock – Wind amid its
[?brausen] makes every now & then such a
deep moan of pain, that I think it my wife
asleep in pain – A trembling Oo! Oo! Like
a wounded man on a field of battle whose
wounds smarted with the cold – ⁶⁷

Robbed of the elasticity known as perspective, Coleridge was simultaneously upset and intrigued as he saw, not felt (II. 38), the scenes of natural beauty all around him at Keswick in 1802. The state of mind evoked by 'Dejection' does not have the enigmatic clarity of an albatross being shot, and, subsequently, a ship's crew being doomed. That sort of clarity had been made possible by negative capability (or wise passiveness), whereby the unforced idea (Wordsworth's⁶⁸) for the sudden, unaccountable shooting of the albatross released a fresh torrent of creative and interpretive possibilities.⁶⁹ By the time of 'Dejection', 'Although [Coleridge's] capacity for theorizing and arguing about poetry was undiminished, the power to write it seemed to have yielded against the onslaughts of money worries, ill health, and personal unhappiness'.⁷⁰ It would have taken the souls of five hundred Coleridges to make up the soul of a Shakespeare or a Milton:⁷¹

You would not know me – ! [he wrote to Godwin in 1801] all sounds of similitude keep at such a distance from each other in my mind, that I have *forgotten* how to make a rhyme ...

The central, informing principal of Coleridge's inner life seemed, to Coleridge, to have died, leaving his far-flung thoughts and feelings ('*habituated to the Vast*'⁷²) with nothing special to orbit. According to Coleridge, the dispiriting geometrization of hitherto sublime phenomena even involved physical pain:

– and my hands are scarred with scratches from a Cat, whose back I was rubbing in the Dark in order to see whether the sparks were refrangible by a Prism.

According to his own logic, he became incapable of 'deep thinking [because it] is attainable only by a man of deep feeling'; he became a 'lazy *Looker-on* at an external world', just the kind of observer he had recently anathematized in his letter to Thomas Poole (23 March, 1801). In 'Dejection', the clouds, stars and moon seemed to Coleridge to be part of the blind mechanism – the 'lifeless Non-I'⁷³ – that Newton took the world to be. In admitting to being an uncreative observer of the mountains, the stars, and the static sparks from a rubbed cat, Coleridge effectively conceded that he had become more like a Newton than a Milton. Yet, as Appleyard suggests, Coleridge announced, and anatomized, the negation of his imagination with paradoxical ebullience:

... my imagination (or rather the Somewhat that had been imaginative) lies, like a Cold Snuff on the circular Rim of a Brass Candlestick, without even a stink of Tallow to remind you that it was once clothed and mitred with Flame.

He began to realize that he could profess his feeling of heaviness while at the same time creating a vision of almost magical lightness, the elements of which appear to move in relation to him:

... I was once a Volume of Gold Leaf, rising & riding on every breath of Fancy – but I have beaten myself back into weight and density, & now I sink in quicksilver, yea, remain squat on the earth amid the hurricane, that makes Oaks and Straws join in one Dance, fifty yards high in the Element. (CL, ii. 714).

Wordsworthianism, by its very nature, triumphs by managing to contain the torsions

of 'despondency and madness'. Wordsworth's exclamation, "'God, said I, "be my help and stay secure; I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor"',⁷⁴ denotes a reassertion of Wordsworth's will to live, ultimately an equivalent to Coleridge's 'Thus mayst thou ever, evermore rejoice' (VIII. 139). But, in the instance of that particular comparison, it is Coleridge's vowels that are encased in the rinds of the softer consonants and therefore the parting, and still plangent, euphony of 'Dejection' seems to swell with a ripe sadness. With meltingly exquisite intuition, Coleridge formally and publicly acknowledged how instinctively at home he felt in the dark and malodorous corners of Romanticism. The plaintive plenitude of 'Dejection' became – officially – different tastes and textures to be relished from those produced by Wordsworth's wholesome redoubling of his positive thinking.

In order to make possible his different, haunting presence as a poet, Coleridge was initially obliged to be 'dead' as a poet. That entailed his experiencing what it might be like to be inert matter ('without a pang, void, dark'), buffeted meaninglessly like Newtonian atoms with no instinct to create. 'The same causes, that ha[d] robbed [him] to so great a degree of the self-impelling self-directing Principle, ha[d] deprived [him] too of the due powers of Resistances to impulses from without.'⁷⁵ The 'weight' was 'smothering', but the poet of 'Dejection' was, if unable to 'lift' it 'off [his] breast' (III. 41), able to see, define, and incorporate that weight with his desire to write:

You will suspect that [melancholy] is the fault of my natural Temper. Alas! no. – This is the great Occasion that my Nature is made for Joy – impelling me to Joyance – & I never, never can yield to it. – I am a genuine *Tantalus*.⁷⁶

Coleridge remained 'a genuine *Tantalus*', which is consistent with his earlier impulse to remain

'Resolved – but wretched!'⁷⁷ whilst walking with open eyes into a wrong marriage.

Coleridge's pain was so bad that it had no value to him that he could consider redeemable by a leech-gatherer. Coleridge's pain was so intense that it had woven itself into his system in a way that it seemed impossible to resolve to beat it, or achieve independence from it. So he staged his 'death' in its coils in order to reassert his presence spectrally, 'sweet[ly] and potent[ly]' (IV. 57), if not glitteringly. Geoffrey Yarlott's 'wonder' that Coleridge 'succeeded at all [in 'Dejection'] in diagnosing a condition which by its very nature was an obstacle to detached analysis'⁷⁸ is understandable up to a point, but Yarlott did not take the poet's 'death' very seriously. One does not need to agree with Eric G. Wilson's view of Wordsworth's 'lack of intellectual curiosity and ability to endure ambiguity' (Wilson, 114), but Wordsworthian life-energy would have lost its viability on the Coleridgean side of the shadowline infused with 'phantom light', the side where the sound of wind could become 'a scream / Of agony by torture lengthened out' (VII. 96–7).

In 'Dejection', Coleridge spirited himself idiomatically in and around the components of his 'wan and heartless mood' (II. 25). Coleridge thought so little of himself⁷⁹ that the one thing that justified his existence was his '*pregnan[cy]*' with '*man's*', and '*men's*', 'agony'.⁸⁰ 'Dejection' marks the delivery of that universal agony, and the transformation of Coleridge's hyper-sensitive approach to life into an exploitable personal resource. That is not to imply that Wordsworth merely sloughed off his depression with a 'trite'⁸¹ shrug, nor is it to ignore Wordsworth's equivalent subtlety by implying that he should only be seen as a cheerful comrade, trying to brace Coleridge into positive activity. Wordsworth was, of course, subject to melancholy moods, and Wordsworth and Coleridge were comparably didactic, and comparably inclined to hold up their own experience as instructive. But Coleridge

translated his depression into a

unique fusion of public speculation and private introspection under the mantle of depressive idealism, a rejection of Romantic apotheosis in favor of self-dramatizing failure.⁸²

In 'Dejection', Coleridge created an idiom in which readers could recognize their own discarded thoughts returning to them in phantasmal majesty.

Coleridge's persona had the selling point of madness, and an aspect of performance art ('Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds!' [VII. 198]). He was often able to reduce a disagreeable experience into the perfect anecdote, or the ideal after dinner monologue. He made his account of his having run away from university to join the Dragoons 'so hilarious that his hearers literally rolled about utterly helpless with laughter and with tears streaming down their faces',⁸³ but he did not reveal that he had bolted rather stupidly to escape debt and academic unfulfilment.⁸⁴ At his enraptured best he had all the passion and rich inventiveness of an *improvisatrice* and could hold an audience in a trance of mingled wonder at him and worry for him.

In 'Resolution and Independence', Wordsworth said that he had lived his 'whole life ... in pleasant thought, / As if life's business were a summer mood',⁸⁵ and that he wanted to give 'human strength, and strong admonishment'⁸⁶ to his readers. In doing that, in attempting to cajole his own mind (and the minds of his readers) into peace, Wordsworth broke 'the circular and mutual influence of thought and feeling'.⁸⁷ Wordsworth, in his 'unmalleable individuality',⁸⁸ built poems out of his stockpile of recollections. Coleridge was incapable of attaining as 'firm a mind'⁸⁹ as Wordsworth, and equally incapable of breaking that 'circular and mutual influence of thought and feeling'. In the 'dark dream!' (VII. 95) of 'Dejection', Coleridge picked his way through

the detritus extruded by his own 'neuronal ivory tower',⁹⁰ searching for the lost lineaments of the most high in the most low. When he rummaged through the recrements, he did not find any good literary reason to continue yoking his and Wordsworth's heterogeneous endeavours together. As he felt (or said he felt) the poet in him moulder and crumble away, Coleridge let that poet do so, and when nothing remained of that poet, he felt newly recycled to swell and plump 'Dejection' with the fruitful discord of

every error I have committed ... Dread of ...
bad most shocking Dreams ... – all this
interwoven with its minor consequences,
that fill up the interspaces – the cherry juice
running in between the cherries in a cherry
pie / procrastination in dread of this – &
something else in consequence of that
procrast. &c ...⁹¹

Amidst the debris of a life lived badly, amidst the guilt (the permanent, inexpungible, lifetime variety that turns the individual into a sort of earnest clown), the dejected poet could not, like Keats, have put his trust in the negatively capable contemplation of a sparrow or a billiard ball; nor could he lift himself clear of 'despondency'⁹² and into beneficial spiritual kinship with a leech-gatherer. Having failed to deceive himself by 'creating self-exculpatory strategies from his own distress',⁹³ he re-centralized his rhetorical economy in 'Dejection', and announced to his readers that he had done so. How closely he remained faithful to the exigencies of that rhetorical economy thereafter is another question.

NOTES

1. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn *et al.* (5 vols, Princeton, 1957–2002), ii. n. 2398. Hereafter CN.
2. *The Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E.L. Griggs (6 vols, Oxford 1956–71), ii. 714. Hereafter CL.
3. J.C.C. Mays, 'Coleridge's "Love": "All he can

- manage, more than he could"', in *Coleridge's Visionary Languages: Essays in Honour of J.B. Beer*, ed. Tim Fulford and Morton Paley (Cambridge, 1993), 58.
4. 'Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason ...'. *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (2 vols, Cambridge Mass., 1958), i. 193–4.
 5. Martin Seymour-Smith's essay, 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge', in *Poets Through Their Letters* (Constable, 1969), concentrates on the most personal, and earliest, draft of 'Dejection', addressed as a letter to Sara Hutchinson.
 6. Matthew Schneider, 'The Nowhere Man and Mother Nature's Son: Collaboration and Resentment in the *Lyrical Ballads* and the Beatles', *Anthropoetics*, 4, 2 (Fall 1998/Winter 1999): 'In effect, each [Wordsworth and Coleridge] says to himself, "My. vision will be enriched to the degree I can absorb and reconfigure on my own aesthetic terms the opposite worldview of my partner".' Schneider argues that both Wordsworth and Coleridge were weakened as poets when they stopped working with each other closely.
 7. J.K. Huysmans, *À Rebours* (1884, trans. *Against the Grain* (Dover, New York, 1969)), 12.
 8. *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1984), 130.
 9. *Letters of John Keats*, i. 238.
 10. *Ibid.*, 186.
 11. Quoted in Walter Jackson Bate's *John Keats* (Cambridge Mass., 1964), 261.
 12. Hartley Coleridge, 'Isabel', *The Complete Poetical Works of Hartley Coleridge*, ed. Ramsay Colles (London, 1908), 71.
 13. *Letters of John Keats*, i. 194.
 14. Graham Davidson offers an excellent Coleridgean definition of 'gazing': 'gazing is an active process which spiritualizes the gazer; it certainly isn't a seeing or a looking, and Coleridge supposes that it will dematerialize what it gazes upon, in order to reveal the lightly veiled presence of God'. 'Coleridge and the Bible', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 23 (Spring 2004), 68.
 15. Quoted in Ramsay Colles's Introduction to *The Complete Poetical Works of Hartley Coleridge*, xxxv.
 16. CL, i. 320–21.
 17. In *Unweaving the Rainbow* (Penguin, 1998), Richard Dawkins insists that Coleridge was often 'beside himself with confusion' when attempting to excogitate specific scientific ideas (40).
 18. Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London, 1998), 65.
 19. CL, ii. 756.
 20. Marshall Suther, *The Dark Night of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York, 1960), 150.
 21. In his review of *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life* (ed. Nicholas Roe), Anthony John Harding reports that 'one of the results of [Coleridge's abstruse] researches, Vickers suggests ... was that Coleridge came to connect his own "afflictions" with the sad fact that, both as a child and as a young man, he had lacked the experience of physical closeness, the loving touch of another human being, that would have provided a sense of self-worth'. *The Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 21 (Spring 2003), 96.
 22. Nora Meurs' review of *Coleridge's Writings, Volume 5: On the Sublime*, ed. David Vallins, in *The Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 23 (Spring 2004), 98.
 23. J. Appleyard, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), 72.
 24. CN, i. n. 1609.
 25. For example, his letter to Joseph Cottle (1796), in which he reports that his wife's 'groans, and complaints & sickness!' are shattering his attempts to write (CL, i. 185–6); or his letter to Southey (1802), in which he believes that his 'selfish' wife will only be kind to him when 'the fears of widowhood c[o]me upon her' (CL, ii. 832); or his letter to Tom Wedgwood (1802), in which he reports the 'ill-tempered Speeches ... freezing looks [and] ... screams of passion' of a downright anti-poetic wife (CL, ii. 876).
 26. CL, i. 145.
 27. 'We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness.' *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1984), 264.
 28. In *À Rebours*, Huysmans has his character, des Esseintes, declare that 'Baudelaire had gone further [than the saner, and therefore more pedestrian, Balzac]; he had descended to the bottom of the inexhaustible mine, had pushed his way along abandoned or unexplored galleries, had penetrated those districts of the soul where the monstrous vegetations of the sick mind flourish' (133–4).
 29. Susan Greenfield, *The Private Life of the Brain* (Penguin, 2000), 120.

30. Greenfield's definition of depression is vivid and succinct (119–37), ascribing the terminologies of psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience to exactly the kind of feelings explored in Coleridge's 'Dejection'.
31. John Beer, 'Coleridge's Afterlife', *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge, 2003), 232.
32. Keith Hanley, "'Things of which I need not speak': Between the Domestic and the Public in Wordsworth's Poetry", *The Wordsworth Circle*, 34, 1 (Winter 2003), 43. Hanley says that in 'Resolution and Independence' 'the poet has to help negotiate what for his reader is ... an intermediate state, between the kind of effect which the leech-gatherer produces on Wordsworth's depressed mood, the moral discourse for which he comes conclusively to stand, and Wordsworth's too immediate closure of that slippage in his own explanation of the poem ... and in the poem's trite ending ... which foreshadows a future emptiness in his poetic language'.
33. CL, ii. 830. 'I am far from going all lengths with Wordsworth / He has written lately a number of Poems (32 in all) some of them of considerable Length / (the longest 160 Lines) the greater number of these to my feelings very excellent Compositions'.
34. William Wordsworth, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1984), 264.
35. CL, ii. 199.
36. Ibid., 801.
37. CN, i. n. 194.
38. J. Robert Barth, *Coleridge and the Power of Love* (Columbia, 1988), 101.
39. Ibid., 98.
40. CL, ii. 714.
41. Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth, A Life* (Oxford, 1988), 200.
42. Nicholas Halmi, 'How Coleridge was Wilder than Byron', *Romanticism*, 10.1 (2004), 148.
43. CL, ii. 959.
44. Mays, 58.
45. Halmi, 148.
46. Mays, 58.
47. Eric G. Wilson, *Coleridge's Melancholia: An Anatomy of Limbo* (Gainesville, 2004), 20.
48. David S. Hogsette, 'Eclipsed by the Pleasure Dome: Poetic Failure in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"', *Romanticism on the Net*, 5 (February 1997), 2: 'the preface is elevated to the literal and (mis)construed as an expository addition to the imaginative poem ...'.
49. Holmes, 65.
50. D.W. Harding, 'The Theme of "The Ancient Mariner"', *Coleridge: Critical Essays*, ed. K. Coburn (Englewood Cliffs, 1967).
51. Halmi, 148.
52. Anthony John Harding, 'Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Tracey Emin, and Romantic Autobiography', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 34 (Spring 2003), 61.
53. CL, ii. 797.
54. P.C. Whybrow, *A Mood Apart: A Thinker's Guide to Emotion and its Disorder* (London, 1997), provides a general commentary on the different types of depression; G. Andrews, M. Neilson, C. Hunt, G. Stewart and L.G. Kiloh, 'Diagnosis, personality and the long-term outcome of depression', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 157 (1990), 13–18, or C.F. Duggan, A.S. Lee and R.M. Murray, 'Does personality predict long-term outcome in depression?', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 157 (1990), 19–24, provide more technical discussions of the various types of depression.
55. According to Greenfield, it was not until 'the early 1950s' that 'the first drugs [were] used to treat depression'. Fascinatingly (and Coleridgeanly), the discovery of the treatment was serendipitous: the drug (iproniazid) that was being given to patients with tuberculosis was found to have 'a particularly curious side effect: happiness' (123).
56. Molly Lefebure, *The Illustrated Lake Poets* (London, 1987), 115.
57. Susan Greenfield calls the depression occasioned by bereavement 'The most understandable.. reactive depression, [which is] so called because it is triggered by an obvious event, such as the death of a spouse ... The newly dead figure might dominate the prevalent brain state not because of any strong external input from the outside world, but because an established, idiosyncratic network happened to be very extensive ... The death of a spouse would ignite vast arrays of neuronal connections. As the fire glows, there would then be a persistent, abnormally sustained brain state for that on scenario alone ... The activity within these connections would be so vigorous and extensive, it would be hard to dislodge ...' (121).
58. John Donne: *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith (London, 1971), 72.

59. *Ibid.*, 390–1.
60. CL, ii. 768.
61. *Letters of John Keats*, i. 71.
62. Ted Underwood, 'Skepticism and Surmise in Humphry Davy', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 34, 2 (Spring 2003), 96.
63. Graham Davidson has discussed Wordsworth and Coleridge's 'withdrawal from the tyranny of sense impression in order to purify the spirit; and [that they found] in geometry a paradigm for that process' (67).
64. Molly Lefebure, *A Bondage of Love* (London, 1986), 136–7.
65. Christopher Ricks, 'Keats's sources, Keats's allusions', *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge, 2001), 163.
66. *Ibid.*, 157.
67. CN, i. n. 832.
68. Wordsworth said: '[C]ertain parts I myself suggested [for inclusion in *The Rime*], for example, some crime was to be committed, which would bring upon the Old Navigator, as Coleridge afterwards delighted to call him, the spectral persecution as a consequence of that crime, and his own wanderings. I had been reading Shelvok's Voyages a day or two before that while doubling Cape Horn they frequently saw Albatrosses in that latitude ... some extending their wings 12 or 13 feet. "Suppose," said I, "you represent him as having killed one of these birds on entering the South Sea ..."' *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (5 vols, Oxford, 1940–49), i. 360–1.
69. George Whalley, 'The Mariner and the Albatross', *Coleridge: Critical Essays*, ed. K. Coburn (Englewood Cliffs, 1967), 43.
70. Gill, 200.
71. The letter to Tom Poole, 23 March, 1801, in which Coleridge says: 'The more I understand of Sir Isaac Newton's works, the more boldly I dare utter to my own mind & therefore to *you*, that I believe the Souls of 500 Sir Isaac Newtons would go to the making up of a Shakspeare or a Milton,' CL ii. 709.
72. CL, i. 354.
73. Lionel Hurtrez, 'Nature and Subjectivity; Coleridge and Fichteanism', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 18 (Winter 2001), 8.
74. *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill, 264.
75. CL, ii. 782.
76. CN, i. n. 1609.
77. CL, ii. 65.
78. Geoffrey Yarlott, *Coleridge and the Abyssinian Maid* (London, 1967), 267.
79. Holmes never forgets the significance of Coleridge's 'astonishing lack of self-worth, and the moral humiliations of his private life – not least in the relationship with the Wordsworth circle' (281 n).
80. CL, ii. 748.
81. Hanley, 43.
82. Eric Gidal's review of Eric G. Wilson's *Coleridge's Melancholia: An Anatomy of Limbo*, in *The Wordsworth Circle*, 36, 4 (Autumn 2005), 160.
83. *Ibid.*, 42.
84. *Ibid.*, 43.
85. *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill, 261.
86. *Ibid.*, 264.
87. Lynda Pratt's review of David Vallins' *Coleridge and the Psychology of Romanticism*, in *The Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 18 (Winter 2001) 54.
88. Felicity James's review of Gurion Taussig's *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship*, in *The Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 23 (Spring 2004), 105.
89. *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill, 264.
90. Greenfield, 120.
91. CN, ii. n. 2398.
92. *Ibid.*
93. *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill, p. 201.