Secret(ing) Conversations: Coleridge and Wordsworth

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“A Boat becalm’d! dear William’s Sky-Canoe!”
Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
“A Letter to ——” (1802)¹

I

Around 1795 Samuel Taylor Coleridge began to speak of what he called the “conversational poem.” In that year he wrote, among other works, a possible example of the “new genre,” “The Eolian Harp”; in 1797 he composed “This Lime-tree Bower my Prison” and, one year later, “Frost as Midnight” and “The Nightingale.” “The Nightingale” was added to Lyrical Ballads as the book was going to press, replacing Coleridge’s “Lewti, or the Circasian Love-chaunt,” and as if to acknowledge the necessity of acknowledging the “new genre” the title appeared with the subtitle, “The Nightingale, a Conversational Poem.” Even if Coleridge would later in his Biographia Literaria oppose what Wordsworth was to claim for the language of “conversation” in poetry, Coleridge had himself cleared the way for the use in poetry of what Wordsworth in the 1798 “Advertisement” to Lyrical Ballads called “the conversation in the middle and lower classes of society.”² Although Wordsworth would omit that phrase in the 1800 “Preface” to the book, where he changes the nature of the “experiment” to an examination of “how far” poetry can go in imparting “pleasure” through “a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation” (LB 241), he would nevertheless add to the 1802 version of the Preface “that the language of such Poetry as I am recommending is, as far as is possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men” (LB 254); the poet, he stated in a famous or infamous phrase, “is a man speaking to men” (LB 255).

If a poem is to be a conversation, or the imitation of a conversation, then it will have to consist of a speaker and a person spoken to. It should not come as a surprise then, although it does to Harold Bloom,³ that Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”⁴ has an addressee, even if the presence of his sister Dorothy as the person addressed is only acknowledged relatively late in the poem, from line 114 on. We find a similar use of a

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“hidden” or belatedly revealed addressee in Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode,” written in 1802, although here the “Lady” is first addressed much earlier in the work, in line 47, and in the very last stanza is revealed as an absence rather than a presence to whom the poet directs his words, or lines. In both cases, however, we have “a man speaking,” although it is interesting to note that, in spite of Wordsworth’s insistence in his 1802 “Preface” on the gender of the addressee, it is a man speaking to a woman.

But a real conversation keeps reversing the roles of speaker and addressee, as one speaker breaks in and the other breaks off. From the point of view of mimesis Coleridge’s idea of the “conversational poem” is actually a fragment of a conversation, the isolation of one voice, where the necessary other takes over what one might call “the silent half” of the poem: the listening that should precede and accompany the speaking. The dramatic poem would seem the more accurate mimetic model of an actual conversation, with its exchange of roles and voices, just as the dramatic monologue would seem to summon up more honestly the fragmentary nature of individual speaking in a moment broken off from and suspended in time. Once the other person is denied the possibility of a response, the “con” in “a conversational poem” becomes problematical: the poem turns away from the usual exchange, or sharing, to something else. And since a printed poem is written, and not spoken, the insistence on the spoken voice may inadvertently or advertently conceal its writerly elements. It may be, for example, that the insistence on the presence of an “addressee” masks another presence, not so much spoken to but written to and even against or over. At least this structure can be found in Wordsworth and Coleridge. What appear to be “sentimental” works dedicated and addressed to women can be read as “fragments of an agon,” moments of an agonizing struggle between two male rivals apparently friends but locked in a secret and mortal combat for the deadly right to be “the speaker” of “the word.”

II

“Tintern Abbey” has a temporal structure of absence and presence which is folded upon itself and projected into the future as we move from memory to imagination: grammatically, the poem moves from the “present perfect,” where the “past” is recuperable, to the “future” tense at the poem’s close, where the present situation is imagined as already “past.” The poem would appear to be about “loss” and “recompense,” words which occur in the poem (TA lines 87–88), as do the words “absence” (TA 23), “presence” (TA 94), and once again “absence” (TA
157); and the “flowing” language in the poem can be read itself as something like a “recompense,” or wished-for recompense, for “the flow of time,” as an attempt at a temporary if not an entirely temporal response to the homonymic question secreted in the very name of the River Wye.

Within this structure Wordsworth presents his “impressionistic” philosophy of perception with what appears to be an incredibly literal use of language. He borrows the idea of “forms” from Platonic philosophy, but he places those forms in what appears to be the real world. He speaks of the “beauteous forms” (TA 22) of nature and their “gift” (TA 36) to “inform / The mind that is within us” (TA 125–26); the passage from the “outer” to the “inner” is aided in this poem, as in other works by Wordsworth, by the double significance of the word “sense”: meaning itself passes from the sensed outer world available to sensory perception to the inner sense we have of the significance of things. Wordsworth insists upon that movement from “outer” to “inner” in his use of the prefixes “im” and “in”: in this poem the “forms” of “nature” “impress” (TA 6), “influence” (TA 32), “inform” (TA 125), and once again “impress” (TA 126) the beholder. A counter movement appears twice in the prefix “ex,” in “extinguished” (TA 58) and in “existence” (TA 149), but the force here is, if not minimalized, then literally halved: “And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought”; and it is later countered and compensated with what looks like its other half: “what they half create.” Wordsworth’s insistence on the importance of the “impression,” of “influence,” and of being “informed” is what makes his “environmentalism” both necessary and urgent. It is also what links brother and sister, male and female, in the poem, and this logical link is marked within the text by the logical connective “therefore.” It first appears in conjunction with Wordsworth:

Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

(TA 102–11)

The next time the word occurs it brings Dorothy into the same “environmental” logic:
Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk,
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee [...].

(TA 134–37)

Coleridge strenuously opposed what Wordsworth in “Expostulation and Reply” had called “a wise passiveness,” insisting on the importance of the “imagination” in the active role of perception. The dispute between the two poets is in part a dispute between British empiricism and German idealism, between Wordsworth’s version of Locke passed through Hartley, and Coleridge’s borrowings from Kant and Hegel, colored by his belated enthusiasm for Berkeley as a home-grown alternative to what he perceived as the too inactive role assigned to the mind by the British empiricists. The argument is recapitulated to Coleridge’s apparent advantage throughout his *Biographia Literaria*. In his poetry Coleridge’s opposition to Wordsworth’s “impressionistic” code of perception finds its most (in)famous moment of expression in “Dejection”: “I may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within” (45–46). The argument between the two poets can thus be seen in part as a difference of direction. For Wordsworth perception moves from outer to inner; where the things of the world “impress,” “influence,” and “inform” the mind, while for Coleridge, it would seem, “we receive but what we give”:

And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

(D 56–58)

Since the argument involves concepts of direction, it should not be surprising that it takes place in part in terms of prefixes. What we might call Coleridge’s “expressionistic” theory of perception, in opposition to Wordsworth’s “impressionistic” theory, finds in Coleridge’s use of “effluence” a word to counter Wordsworth’s earlier “influence.” The word occurs in a passage where the poet presents what he calls “this strong music in the soul” (D 60), “[t]his beautiful and beauty-making power” (D 63), and since this apparently public attack on Wordsworth would force Wordsworth to an equally public response it may be helpful to quote the passage at length:

Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne’er was given,
Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,
Life, and Life’s effluence, cloud at once and shower,
Joy, Lady! Is the spirit and the power,
Which, wedding Nature to us, gives in dower
A new Earth and new Heaven,
Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud—
Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—
We in ourselves rejoice!
And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,
All melodies the echoes of that voice,
All colours a suffusion from that light.

(D 64–75)

These lines would appear to embody “the beautiful and beauty-making power” that the poem asserts. But the problem for Coleridge, as stated in the poem, is that he cannot fulfill the code he himself has proposed, for he is plagued by

A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief
In word [...].

(D 21–24)

For all the insistence on the “effluence” of the “fountains . . . within,” Coleridge here would seem to have fallen under the—perhaps withering, even disfiguring—“influence” of Wordsworth. Shortly before composing “Dejection,” he had heard Wordsworth recite the first four stanzas of what in the course of two more years would become Wordsworth’s ode on “Intimations of Immortality.” Read in relation to the following assertion by Wordsworth, Coleridge’s lines become a confession not only of his failure to fulfill his own announced code but also of his inability to rival Wordsworth in his claim to be a “strong” poet; and it is significant that Coleridge inscribes his lack of “relief” within the same rhyme words of Wordsworth’s poem. For Wordsworth had written:

To me alone there came a thought of grief:
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong. (my emphasis)

In fact, throughout Coleridge’s poem the choice of a language of “failure,” of a “lack,” turns him into something like the lackey of the “strong” poet. Where Wordsworth writes, “The fulness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all” (II 41), Coleridge can be read as responding, “I see them all, so excellently fair, / I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!” (D 37–38).
This antiphonal procedure of statement and response can be extended to other poets, other texts. In “Tintern Abbey” the “recompense” of Nature’s teaching allows Wordsworth to counter an appropriated passage from Milton’s “Samson Agonistes.” There Samson in despair declares:

So much I feel my genial spirits droop,
My hopes all flat, nature within me seems
In all her functions weary of herself;

For Wordsworth it is precisely what the poet has learned from what he calls “Nature” that permits him to transform Miltonic “patience” into a “natural” value:

Nor perchance,
If I were not thus taught, should I the more
Suffer my genial spirits to decay.

Coleridge’s confession in “Dejection” is once again made within the language of Wordsworth, this time within the language of “Tintern Abbey,” folded into a shared allusion to the same passage in Milton, but in a way that underscores the lack of any “recompense” or “compensation” for the dejected poet:

My genial spirits fail;
And what can these avail
To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?

Even the “weight” of those lines can be seen as Wordsworthian: “... the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world” (TA 39–40). Moreover, in Coleridge’s case the “weight” has fallen on the poet’s “breast,” on the place where the “voice” “must issue forth,” as “from the soul”:

Ah! From the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth—
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!
In the light, or darkness, of the lines just quoted the following passage from Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality” can be read as a triumphal cry of the self-proclaimed “strong” Wordsworth, able to participate sympathetically in the world of the “Child of Joy” (II 34), over the failure of his friend and rival to attain to such a state: “Oh evil day! If I were sullen / While Earth herself is adorning” (II 42–43). Coleridge himself may have been trying to limit the damage by placing the sense-oriented Wordsworth, secretly, among “the sensual”:

Joy, Lady! Is the spirit and the power,
Which, wedding Nature to us, gives in dower
A new Earth and new Heaven,
Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud—

(D 69–70)

But Wordsworth himself would appropriate almost all the imagery and even a good part of the vocabulary for the final “joyful” stanzas of his “Intimations” Ode, written after Coleridge had composed “Dejection,” accelerating the movement of his poem by combining Coleridge’s “fountains” and “light” into the magnificent “fountain light,” as well as conjoining Coleridge’s separated “glory” and “cloud” into his own “clouds of glory”:

“Dejection”
I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within. (45–46)
[...]
Ah! From the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud (53–54)

“Intimations of Immortality”
Those shadowy recollections, Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day (151–53)
[...]
The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star, (59)
But trailing clouds of glory do we come (64)

Coleridge himself had taken over the landscape as well as the language of light and joy from Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” but Wordsworth took it all back with a vengeance when he converted “Dejection” into his own triumphal song of “Joy,” and the seventh section of his later poem can be read as an exact—and exacting—trumping of section seven in Coleridge’s poem. Whatever else it may be, Wordsworth’s triumph here is a triumph over Coleridge and thus, in a sense, a failure of friendship. What began as a difference in concepts of perception, expressed—or
impressed—through an opposition of prefixes, can be read as a disguised and deadly quarrel. The apparently private “conversation poem” has become a public combat.

III

Both “Tintern Abbey” and “Dejection” have a female addressee; they each vary the famous pronouncement of the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* by presenting poetic language in the form of a man speaking to woman. Wordsworth’s poem, addressed to Dorothy, his “dear Sister” (TA 121) and “dearest Friend” (TA 115), would seem to assert both a shared logic of a perceptive equality (“Therefore”) as well as a pronominal identity (“us”). Coleridge’s poem, on the contrary, posits a radically different possible fate for his “friend” (D 127) and “Dear Lady” (D 138). In a concluding stanza remarkably similar to the ending of Hölderlin’s great hymn “Germanium,” Coleridge asserts a difference of destiny for his “Lady” in much the same way that Hölderlin would close his poem by declaring for his friend Sinclair a happy fate that was clearly not to be the poet’s. In the last stanza of “Dejection,” the “Lady” is addressed in terms of a vertical structure (“stars,” “rise,” “lift,” “guided from above”) where her accession to the (divine) heights of “joy” marks the insomniac poet’s alienation from such a fate and underlines the fact that he himself has been “thrown down,” or dejected, from such an elevated position. In this sense, “Dejection” is another version of “Paradise Regained” that belongs to the “Lady” and thus serves to underscore even more “damningly” the poet’s distance from such a conversion.

But the “final” poem published in *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) is in some ways a fiction. For the poem appears to have been originally written in the form of a letter to Sara Hutchinson and first given by Coleridge to Mary, Sara’s sister, to transcribe before being sent on to her sister. All this came to light only in 1977, when what is now most likely the earliest extant draft of the poem was included in a mass of Wordsworth letters and papers offered for sale at auction at Sotheby’s under the rubric “The Property of a Gentleman.” The manuscript of the poem, now known as “the Cornell Manuscript” after the name of its purchaser (it was resold seven months later at purchase price to the Dove Cottage Trust in Grasmere) was copied in April 1802 by Mary Hutchinson, later that year to become Wordsworth’s wife, and addressed directly to Sara, Mary’s sister. The poem bears the title, “A Letter to——,” and can be read as a confessional love letter to Sara, the “private” nature of which would seem to be called into question, if not compromised, by its “public”
passage through Mary's hands. For what looks to be a private confession was actually a public performance, involving Mary and no doubt her future husband, William Wordsworth, who is named several times in the course of the "letter" and who must have witnessed whatever Mary copied. This performative aspect of the poem obliterates the "privacy" of its apparent confession by turning it into a public event, for the first reader was not its apparent addressee but her sister and most likely Wordsworth himself.

The "letter" is a rambling poem of three hundred thirty-nine lines, two hundred lines longer than both the version Coleridge published in the *Morning Post* in October 1802 and, somewhat changed, in *Sybilline Leaves* in 1817. Within its fictive "confessional mode" the "letter" compares the two Saras in Coleridge's life, "dearest" Sara Hutchinson, the poet's "Comforter" (L 249) and the letter's nominal recipient, who is directly addressed throughout the poem, and Sara Fricker Coleridge, the poet's estranged wife, who is never named, but who is clearly held responsible for

\[
\text{those habitual ills,} \\
\text{That wear out Life, when two unequal minds} \\
\text{Meet in one House, and two discordant Wills}
\]

(L 242-44)

The dowry of gifts that "Joy" bestows, including that of "wedding Nature to us," survives all subsequent revisions of the poem, but it takes on a different range of meanings in the letter's context of marital complaint and postconjugal remembrance of a time "E'er I was wedded" (L 231). Within the apparent "confessional" mode Wordsworth appears directly in the "letter," as does his future wife as well as his sister Dorothy. The "letter" openly appropriates a Wordsworthian image:

\[
\text{Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew} \\
\text{In it's [sic] own cloudless, starless Lake of Blue,} \\
\text{A Boat becalm'd! dear William's Sky-Canoe!}
\]

(L 39-41)

The wind, once it ceases to be the "Mad Lutanist" (L 194), is identified through its "Sounds" with the Wordsworth of "Lucy Gray":

\[
\text{And it has other Sounds, and all less deep, less loud!} \\
\text{A Tale of less Affright,} \\
\text{And tempered with delight,} \\
\text{As William's self had made the tender lay!} \\
\text{Tis of a little Child}
\]
Upon a heathy wild
Not far from home; but it has lost its way!
And now moans low in utter grief and fear,
And now screams loud and hopes to make its Mother hear!

(L 207-15)

That Wordsworth was more intimately involved than one might imagine from the "final" version can also be seen from his subsequent appearances in other versions of the poem, in particular in the excerpts of the poem sent as part of an actual letter to William Sotheby on July 19, 1802. There Coleridge announces in a prose note prefacing the included verses that the poem was in fact written "to Wordsworth": "... I believe that by nature I have more of the Poet in me / in a poem written during that dejection to Wordsworth . . . ."9 The lines "written . . . to Wordsworth" and sent to Sotheby begin with a direct apostrophe to the Lake poet: "Yes, dearest Poet, Yes!" The change of the poem's internal recipient changes the nature of the contrast from the domestic to the poetic:

A Grief without a Pang, void, dark, & drear!
A stifling, drowsy, unimpassioned Grief,
That finds no natural Outlet, no Relief
In word, or Sigh, or Tear!
This, William! Well thou know'st,
Is that sore Evil which I dread the most,
And oft'nest suffer.

(17-23)

Coleridge's "dearest Sara" is here his "dearest Poet," the crescent moon boat (to vanish in the later published versions) "thy own sweet Sky-Canoe!"; "innocent Sara" (312) is transformed into "blameless poet," and Wordsworth directly acknowledged as the putative author of the "less fearful & less loud" tale of the wind: "As thou thyself had'st fram'd the tender Lay—" (210). The difference between the addressee and the addressee here is made in terms of "genius," and the "vertical structure" now privileges Wordsworth as the (divinely inspired) strong poet over the dejected and weak(ened) Coleridge:

Calm stedfast Spirit, guided from above,
O Wordsworth friend of my devoutest Choice
Great Son of Genius! Full of Light & Love!
    Thus, thus dost thou rejoice.
To thee do all things live from pole to pole,
Their Life the Eddying of thy living Soul!
Brother & Friend of my devoutest Choice,  
Thus may'st thou ever, ever more rejoice!

(41)

Coleridge soon began, however, to conceal the original addressee in a series of rewritings. In five successive versions of the poem, we can see the poet deleting "Sara" from the poem, first converting "Sara" to "Wordsworth" in the letter to Sotheby, then "Wordsworth" to the fictive "Edmund" of the version published in the Morning Post on October 4, 1802 (the day of Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson as well as the anniversary of Coleridge's unhappy marriage to Sara Fricker), "Edmund" back to "William" in a letter almost one year later to Beaumont and, finally, "William" to the abstract and anonymous "Lady" of the "final" version of the poem, published in Sibylline Leaves. The changes in the poem's addressee are particularly clear in what would become line 48 of "Dejection" but began as line 295 of "A Letter to ——":

O Sara! We receive but what we give ("A Letter to ——," April 1802)
O Wordworth! We receive but what we give (Coleridge's letter to Sotheby, July 1802)
O Edmund! We receive but what we give (Morning Post, October 1802)
O William! We receive but what we give (Beaumont, August 1803)
O Lady! We receive but what we give, (Sibylline Leaves, 1817)\(^{10}\)

Sara here is turned into text, as is Wordsworth. In all these drafts of the poem, however, Wordsworth is always present, even if in the "final" version of the poem, and as if in revenge for what Wordsworth had done to Coleridge in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, his name does not appear in print. For even deleted Wordsworth remains in the allusive and antiphonal structure of the poem. And even if in the "final" version Coleridge transforms into "Otway's self" what was in an earlier draft "thou thyself," the author of the "tender lay" (120) about the "little child" (121) remains implicitly the Wordsworth of "Lucy Gray." The "conversation" of the "final" version of the printed poem not only shifts the "register" or tone of the poem from the writerly to the spoken, it actually masks the addressee of all of the earlier written works and limits if not conceals the intertextual struggle or agon within the poem as well.

But if Coleridge can cancel Wordsworth as a word in writing, he cannot cancel the worth of his words. It is no wonder, then, that "the wind" brings him from the beginning not the "music" of the earlier "Eolian Harp" but "a scream / Of agony by torture lengthened out" (D
97–98), involved as he is in an agon he is bound to lose. The “Lady” here becomes a kind of textual substitute to mask both “the romantic agony” and the textuality of this poem. What looks like a human presence turns out to be an absence in which another presence, that of Wordsworth, appears to be repressed only to reappear all the more forcefully through the force of the repression. Wordsworth’s addressee, “Dorothy,” is also turned into “text” in “Tintern Abbey.” What Wordsworth experiences in her “presence” turns out to be a reading of himself:

and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes.

(TA 116–19)

Dorothy herself, then, as person, becomes the absence of a person, much like Coleridge’s ultimate “Lady.” She becomes a text in which the poet finds “[t]he language” that, in a sense, serves as the pre-text to the language of the poem. She may be an enabling power, in that her silent “listening” makes possible the illusion of the spoken text, but this is only an illusion, and she herself goes under in the process.

Nor is Dorothy alone in becoming text. “Nature” it (or her-) self is turned into “landscape” (TA 8) and later passed through “the language of the sense” (TA 108) and interpreted, as if, once again, we were in the presence of the legible rather than in that of the utter and unutterable otherness of the world. In fact, everything in “this green pastoral landscape” turns into a mode of poetry, even “These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms” (TA 15–16). The poem may seem to celebrate what Wordsworth in this poem calls “nature and the language of the sense” and at the beginning of The Prelude would call “the world,” but it does so only by converting everything in the world into text and so, in a sense, removing it from the world and the world from the text.

This power of conversion is the power of the poem. But the power of conversion makes the world a “blank,” much as Coleridge himself in “Dejection” had looked upon the sky with “so blank an eye,” and displaces the statements of the poem into statements about other texts. The transformation of Dorothy into text makes it possible for the poet to hide writerly attacks on his male rival within what look to be sentimental assertions spoken to a female “friend,” just as Coleridge’s conversion of “Wordsworth” into his “Dear Lady” allows him not only to conceal the extent of his poetic defeat but to create a magnificent poem on the subject of defeat. But transformed into text the women lose all sem-
blance of individual identity. They are holes, listening holes, for men. If "conversation" remains in the poem, it is no longer what it was or might have been: it has turned into a battle without bounds, an attempt to throw the other down, where "dejection" and "abjection" are the risks in a combat between male writers using women as masks for a *conversatione* that is anything but *sacre*.

IV

In chapter IV of the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge claims that "[t]o admire on principle, is the only way to imitate without loss of originality." That he opposed Wordsworth *on principle*, while admiring him in practice, he makes abundantly clear throughout the *Biographia Literaria* but especially in chapter XII. By his own logic, then, anything like an "imitation" of Wordsworth would necessarily imply a "loss of originality" and would place his own work, along with "the appropriation" of Milton by Cowley, not in the "superior" category of "imagination" but rather in the lesser one of "fancy." That Coleridge may indeed have had his relationship to Wordsworth in mind when writing of Cowley's to Milton can be inferred from the fact that only a few lines later he comments on just that relationship:

The explanation which Mr. Wordsworth has himself given [concerning the terms "imagination" and "fancy"] will be found to differ from mine, chiefly perhaps, as our subjects are different. It could scarcely indeed happen otherwise, from the advantage I have enjoyed of frequent conversation with him on a subject to which a poem of his own first directed my attention, and my conclusions concerning which, he had made more lucid to myself by many happy instances drawn from the operation of natural objects on the mind. But it was Mr. Wordsworth's purpose to consider the influences of fancy and imagination as they are manifested in poetry, and from the different effects to conclude their diversity in kind; while it is my object to investigate the seminal principle, and then from the kind to deduce the degree. My friend has drawn a masterly sketch of the branches with their poetic fruitage. I wish to add the trunk, and even the roots as far as they lift themselves above ground, and are visible to the naked eye of our common consciousness. (*BL* 62)

Coleridge's insistence in this passage on "the seminal principle" calls attention to the importance, for him, of male generational force in the creation of imaginative literature, and to the apparent absence, if not the necessary exclusion, of the female from that creation, an exclusion that may have generated a counter-model in *Frankenstein*. But Coleridge's figure for his relationship to Wordsworth is also interesting when
considered in the light, or shadow, of his insistence, in other writings, such as his *Notebooks*, on the importance of "organic form" in literature. For Coleridge's "tree" here is not a tree but the sketch of a tree, a cultural and not a natural (arti)fact, in other words, and a composite sketch at that; a "tree," moreover, that comes into existence, temporally, from the top down. And it is the prior Wordsworth who is assigned the credit for "the branches with their poetic fruitage," while Coleridge's task—which he no doubt wished to realize in the following pages of the *Biographia Literaria*—is "to add the trunk, and even the roots as far as they lift themselves above ground, and are visible to the naked eye of our common consciousness." The "roots" would seem to be the theoretical hold of and for the "poetic fruitage" that has curiously preceded them, so that even here, where Coleridge consciously differs from Wordsworth and attempts to express that difference conceptually, it is Wordsworth who—literally—both precedes and tops him in an image that inverts the very organic processes it appears to proclaim as its own justification.

There is an attempt within the individual poem by Coleridge to recover the sacred through the word. But whatever glimpses of a "paradise regained" we might have in the poem are lost again in difference and division, a difference often marked by the alienation of the sexes. This is in part no doubt a reflection on Coleridge's own unhappy marriage and his unsuccessful attempts to find an alternative and sustained relationship equal in imagined promise and satisfaction to that of Wordsworth and Mary. Coleridge's light and fountain imagery in "Dejection," for example, can be read as an attempt to reclaim that "active" force celebrated in the *Biographia Literaria* as the imagination and figured in the poem as the "light" that must "issue forth" from the "soul" (D 53–54), from those "fountains...within" (D 46). In spite of the conventional use and abuse of such a topos for male sexuality, the process might seem to apply to both male and female in the conjoined "we" in the middle of the poem, but at the close of the "final" version of the poem the "Lady" has (been) withdrawn into the "passive" and "guided" role that Coleridge in the *Biographia* would assign to the "fancy," and the only voice remaining is that of the isolated male poet deprived of precisely that "beauty-making power" with which the "active" imagination was supposed to inseminate the world.

In "Kubla Khan" the male "force" of the "sacred river" literally interrupts, and puts an end to, the seven successive feminine endings that begin the second verse paragraph. The sexualization of metrical terminology in the English language appears to be no accident here—and Coleridge was certainly aware of the vocabulary, as a remark in his letter of September 30, 1799 to Southey proves—for it is in this succession of feminine endings that we meet the "woman wailing for her
demon lover.” Lowes has shown us what the “artificial paradises” that lie behind and within “Kubla Khan” may offer men in terms of women, and women as “passive” objects of desire and decree, even if he omits what those “paradises” offer women in terms of men.\(^ {13} \)

When “woman” takes over the “active” role that Coleridge reserved for the “imagination” in the Biographia, as she does in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the results are literally nightmarish for the men: it is not only that “the Nightmare Life-in-Death” turns out to be a parody of “the beautiful woman” of the older ballads, or that the “male” sun in the poem is beheaded in a parody of the “death of God” (and with the help of the hidden pun on “sun”/“son”), or that this can be read as a “castration” of that “active” force Coleridge with increasing personal and poetic desperation was trying to vaunt, but that the “female” ship begins to rock like a woman in orgasm until the helpless male narrator, with everything out of his control and thus in “the woman’s role,” much like the later Jonathan Harker in Dracula’s castle, avoids the consciousness of impotence by losing consciousness.

In all three poems, then, the “male force” critically acclaimed in the Biographia Literaria is called into question for the poet within the poem. In “Kubla Khan” the speaker of the final lyrical section can not “revive within” himself “the sympathy and song” of the “Abyssinian maid” which, if he could, would allow him to do what Kubla Khan had done in the first two narrative stanzas of the poem: to create by decree, by word alone, in imitation, if not in parody, of the power of the word Coleridge admired so much in Saint John.\(^ {14} \) The conditional grammar at the poem’s close marks a condition of difference that excludes the speaker of the poem from the wished-for creation, which, even if realized, would only alienate him further, as his audience would have to “close” their eyes and thus lose all visual—or readerly—image of and contact with him, having merely the “presence” of that (no longer legible) “voice.” But Kubla Khan’s “paradise” is a “false” paradise, at least compared to the “heavenly” and Christian paradise Milton claimed to celebrate, filled as Kubla’s is with “ancestral voices prophesying war.” If for the speaker Kubla’s “pleasure dome” is another example of “Paradise Lost,” the lost “paradise” is itself not the “real” one, and so that “original” paradise is lost at a double remove. If “woman” ends up “wailing for her demon lover” in the world of Coleridge’s logic, and in a line Byron admired so much that he made it the epigraph to one of his own poems,\(^ {15} \) it is possibly because her lover has been sent off to the “war” the “ancestral voices” prophesied, and possibly because she herself has been “forced” to perform other equally “ancestral” practices within the “pleasure dome” itself. The later “Abyssinian maid” is no “recompense,” neither for the “woman” nor for the male poet: even as “vision” she cannot help
the impotent speaker from the abyss/sin of isolation, for what is lacking in the word, and in the (male) world of the word, is precisely that power postulated or posited for it in what turns out to be an imposture of power.

In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” speech also fails and falls, though here it falls into obsession and repetition, even further from that paradisal “symphony and song.” If speech “frees” the speaker, it can do so only “momently,” through an act of force, and it condemns those “forced” into being spoken to within the poem to fates that are hardly “redemptive” in the conventional Christian “reading” offered by the later marginal gloss: the Pilot’s boy, who had dared to interpret the speaker’s identity, goes mad, as if to warn against the dangers of “literal reading,” and the bridal guest does not participate in the wedding ceremony or its “merry minstrelsy,” any more than the Mariner does. The answer to the question, “What manner of man art thou?” is the narrative itself. But if the question of identity creates the “answer” of the narrative, the narrative cannot sustain identity beyond itself; there is no breaking out of the circle of language. If the listener rises “a sadder and a wiser man,” it is only after being “of sense forlorn,” and in both senses of the word, stunned, but also stripped of significance through a narrative that can at best only signify the arbitrary and repetitive character of its own speech acts.

V

If the “majority” of the poems in Lyrical Ballads were originally “considered as experiments . . . 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” (LB 7), as Wordsworth wrote in his anonymous “Advertisement” of 1798, another use of verbs of conversation in the same text reveals an at least equal interest in the written:

It is apprehended, that the more conversant the reader is with our elder writers, and with those in modern times who have been the most successful in painting manners and passions, the fewer complaints of this kind will he have to make.

An accurate taste in poetry, and in all the other arts, Sir Joshua Reynolds has observed, is an acquired talent, which can only be produced by severe thought, and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition. (LB 7–8)

The written here not only displaces but replaces the spoken, at least for the reader, in an intercourse or conversation with what turn out to be other literary texts.
Successive rewritings of the introduction to *Lyrical Ballads* would diminish even further the apparently “revolutionary” implications of the Advertisement. In the 1800 Preface Wordsworth modified the “nature” of the “experiment” altogether, removing the “class” element and substituting for it a more general, and a more classically “decorous,” view of “fitting” language: “It [the “First Volume”] was published, as an experiment which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavor to impart” (*LB* 241). In the Preface the Advertisement’s (in)famous phrase, “the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society,” vanishes; what we find instead is “a selection,” and by implication one made by a “selectman” who is “superior” to those “middle and lower classes of society” that served as a source of his poetry in the initial volume. An exclusive gender element appears as well, for the “selection” is now “a selection of the real language of men” (as if there could also be an “unreal language” of men), and “men” no longer in “conversation” but rather “in a state of vivid sensation.” Quantity becomes important as well, and the poet’s mental control is also emphasized (“that quantity of pleasure . . . which a Poet may rationally endeavor to impart”), where the claimed “rationality” of the poet stands in apparent contrast to the “men in a state of vivid sensation.” When the word “class” does appear, later in the Preface, it no longer has the socioeconomic dimension that it had in the earlier Advertisement; instead, it has been turned into a synonym for “category” or “type”: Wordsworth now writes of “a class of poetry” (*LB* 242) as well as of a “class of ideas” (*LB* 243), as he later refers to a “species of poetry” (*LB* 272).

A great deal has been taken back, in other words, a fact that should not surprise us, since the Preface has a different function than the Advertisement. For one thing, Wordsworth’s poems now exist, acknowledged as his own, and “so materially different” (*LB* 243) from earlier poetry, at least for Wordsworth, that the difference must now be justified. The Preface then is less a manifesto than an explanation of difference. On the “surface,” what Wordsworth now offers, among other things, is something like an “apology” for poetry, a “defence” of his own accomplishments, including an explication of his “metrical contract,” modeled, it would seem, on Rousseau’s idea of the *contrat social*; he also adds an historical dimension, which he will expand in 1802, to his analysis of poetry; and he uses teleological and moral terms such as “purpose” (*LB* 244, 246) and “duty” (*LB* 244) to define the “poet” and his work in society.

Doubts or reservations also appear about what Wordsworth now calls
“low and rustic life” (LB 245). Poems are “to make the incidents of common life interesting” (LB 244), as if they were not actually interesting in themselves. The “language . . . of these men “is now “purified . . . from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike and disgust” (LB 245). In the 1802 additions to the Preface the erasure of “the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society” is even more prolonged: “I answer that the language of such Poetry as I am recommending is, as far as is possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men; that this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feeling, will of itself form a distinction far greater than would at first be imagined, and will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life; and, if metre be superadded thereto, I believe that a dissimilitude will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind” (LB 254). “Ordinary life” has now become the source of “vulgarity and meanness,” and what Wordsworth here calls a “superadded” meter hardly seems to have grown from the (consideration of the) subject itself; such a meter would seem to belong much more to what Coleridge called “the mechanical” as opposed to “the organic” (BL 73, 62). But even the idea of the “subject” now starts to differ with itself and within itself. In the 1798 Advertisement Wordsworth had declared that “[i]t is the honourable characteristic of Poetry that its materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind” (LB 7). But in an 1802 addition to the Preface Wordsworth restricted the subject to the “judiciously chosen,” claiming that “if the Poet’s subject be judiciously chosen, it will naturally, and upon fit occasion, lead him to passions the language of which, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures” (LB 254–55). For Wordsworth, the “necessity of producing immediate pleasure . . . is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe” (LB 258). The poet “considers . . . the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature” (LB 259). This begs the question of (the source of) those “defects,” that “dislike” and that “disgust” Wordsworth mentioned earlier. Here the natural (“naturally”) and the artificial (“the mirror”) would appear to be conjoined. But what “the mirror” offers, unified as the vision may be, is not a totality, but a “selection,” inscribed within an act of exclusion; something has been left out, the less fair and interesting qualities of “nature,” not to mention “the world”—almost everything, one could argue, and certainly what Wordsworth had himself come to call, in the course of his revisions, “the defects,” “the low,” “the vulgarity and the meanness of ordinary life.” A “fall” has taken place within language itself, then, even if it has gone almost unnoticed, and the “poet” is left “conversing” only with the
fragments in the mirror, “beautiful” as they may be, and what they occasion, a mere “selection” of words and feelings, where “nature” itself—or herself—has been “denatured,” and thus ceases to be “whole,” “organic,” or, for that matter, even “natural.”

The earlier emphasis on “the language of real men”—on spoken male language, in other words—can be glimpsed now as a desperate attempt to hold back the denaturing of the world through writing, as an attempt to conceal that denaturing as well as the privileged position that that denaturing had begun to confer on a writer such as Wordsworth. The price paid is that everything and everyone becomes text—family, friend, and foe alike. This is hardly revolutionary in the terms of “class” advertised in 1798. But it is a monstrous vision in its own right, monstrous for the people subjected to the text as well as for the poet himself. Within four years Wordsworth the critic could lay claim to having learned how to tame the beast that the poet had raised. The “revolution” had come full circle: “while he [the poet] is only selecting from the real language of men, or, which amounts to the same thing, composing accurately in the spirit of such selection, he is treading upon safe ground” (LB 261).

VI

_Lyrical Ballads_ was first published anonymously in 1798. Of the original twenty-three poems nineteen were by Wordsworth, and four by Coleridge. Although the work was a collaborative effort, the two-page “Advertisement” spoke of the “author” in the third-person singular. In the second edition, dated 1800 but published in 1801, and consisting of two volumes, the title page ascribed the entire book to “W. Wordsworth,” even though Coleridge had contributed an additional poem to the new volume. Coleridge’s participation in the book is acknowledged in the third paragraph of the Preface, but only anonymously, as “the assistance of a Friend”:

For the sake of variety and from a consciousness of my own weakness I was induced to request the assistance of a Friend, who furnished me with the Poems of the ANCIENT MARINER, the FOSTER-MOTHER’S TALE, the NIGHTINGALE, the DUNGEON, and the poem entitled LOVE. I should not, however, have requested this assistance, had I not believed that the poems of my Friend would in great measure have the same tendency as my own, and that, though there would be found a difference, there would be found no discordance in the colours of our style; as our opinions on the subject of poetry do almost entirely coincide. (LB 242)
Wordsworth's behavior toward Coleridge, however, had hardly been that of the ideal "Friend." Nor in his correspondence did he maintain the "coincidence" of "opinions on the subject of poetry." In a letter written on June 2, 1799 to the publisher of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Joseph Cottle, Wordsworth mentioned that rather than reprinting the book as it had originally appeared he would "probably add some others in Lieu of the Ancyent Marinere."¹⁶ On the twenty-fourth of the same month he again wrote Cottle: "You tell me the poems have not sold ill. If it is possible, I should wish to know what number have been sold. From what I can gather it seems that the Ancyent Mariner has upon the whole been an injury to the volume, I mean that the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on. If the volume should come to a second Edition I would put in its place some little things which would be more likely to suit the common taste" (264). As Wordsworth claimed to his publisher that he had "published those poems for money and money alone" (267), it may be no surprise that he took the "injury" to his fortunes seriously enough to risk injuring his "Friend" by demoting "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" from its original place as the first poem in the 1798 volume to its subsequent position as the twenty-second and penultimate poem of the first volume of the 1800 edition. Moreover, in a letter to his new publisher Wordsworth asserts precisely that "discordance" between himself and Coleridge that he denies in the third paragraph of the Preface: "A Poem of Mr Coleridge's was to have concluded the Volumes; but upon mature deliberation I found that the Style of this Poem ['Christabel'] was so discordant from my own that it could not be printed along with my poems with any propriety" (309). Coleridge revised the "style" of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" for the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. But even with its revisions Wordsworth maintained his objections to the poem, for in mailing the last two paragraphs of the Preface to his publisher shortly before the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth added the following note, which was included in the 1800 edition:

I cannot refuse myself the gratification of informing such Readers as may have been pleased with this poem, or with any part of it, that they owe their pleasure in some sort to me; as the Author was himself very desirous that it should be suppressed. This wish had arisen from a consciousness of the defects of the poem, & from a 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 who having been long under the controul of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural; 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. Yet the poem contains many delicate touches of passion, and indeed the passion is everywhere true to nature; a great number of the stanzas present beautiful images & are expressed with unusual felicity of language; and the versification, though the metre is itself unfit for long poems, is harmonious and artfully varied, exhibiting the utmost powers of that metre, & every variety of which it is capable. It therefore appeared to me that these several merits (the first of which, namely that of the passion, is of the highest kind,) gave to the poem a value which is not often possessed by better poems. On this account I requested of my Friend to permit me to republish it.

(LB 276–77)

Coleridge seems to have accepted for a time the judgments of his "Friend," although his progressively ill health may have been part of the price paid for his acquiescence to Wordsworth, for he not only revised "the old words" of his poem for the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, but saw the book into print in its new form at a moment when he had other pressing commitments, including the serious illness of his youngest child. And he continued to maintain in his letters a reverence for Wordsworth, "of whom I do not hesitate in saying, that since Milton no man has manifested himself equal to him" (CL 1.328). When Thomas Poole charged Coleridge "with prostration in regard to Wordsworth," Coleridge replied: "What if you had known Milton at the age of thirty, and believed all you now know of him?—What if you should meet in the letters of any then living man, expressions concerning the young Milton *totidem verbis* the same as mine of Wordsworth, would it not convey to you a most delicious sensation? Would it not be an assurance to you that your admiration of the *Paradise Lost* was no superstition, no shadow of flesh and bloodless abstraction, but that the *Man* was even so, that the greatness was incarnate and personal?" (CL 1.330). Coleridge’s comparative admiration for Wordsworth the poet became more and more entangled, however, with his denigration of his own powers as a poet. He wrote to William Godwin on September 8, 1800 that Wordsworth was "the latch of whose Shoe I am unworthy to unloose" (CL 1.349), and to John Thelwell on December 17 of the same year that "[a]s to Poetry, I have altogether abandoned it, being convinced that I never had the essentials of poetic Genius, & that I mistook a strong desire for original power" (CL 1.369). Two days later, in a letter to Francis Wrangham, he added that Wordsworth "is a great, a true Poet—I am only a kind of a Metaphysician" (CL 1.371).

It was Wordsworth who then "replaced" Coleridge as the "great," the "true" poet in Coleridge's own statements. On March 25, 1801 Coleridge went so far as to announce to William Godwin his own "death" as a poet:
“The Poet is dead in me—my imagination (or rather the Somewhat that had been imaginative) lies, like a Cold Snuff on the circular Rim of a Brass Candle-stick, without even a stink of Tallow to remind you that it was once cloathed & mitred with Flame. . . . If I die, and the Booksellers will give you any thing for my Life, be sure to say—Wordsworth descended on him, like the Γνωθι σεαυτόν [know thyself] from Heaven; by shewing to him what true Poetry was, he made him know, that he himself was no Poet” (CL 2.390).

As the occasion for the “death” of the poet, the book that is often claimed to have launched the “romantic movement” in English literature can also be said to have put an end to it, and not only for Coleridge, even if that end would propel both Wordsworth and Coleridge to suffer from the other in what would turn out to be a posthumous and never ending fiction of literary origins.

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NOTES


8 “A Letter to ——,” included in Coleridge’s letter to William Sotheby, 19 July 1802, as printed in Parrish, Coleridge’s “Dejection,” p. 37; hereafter cited in text by line number.

9 As Parrish observes in his introduction to Coleridge’s “Dejection,” p. 17.

10 These lines are printed in Parrish, Coleridge’s “Dejection,” pp. 33, 40, 54, 55.


12 Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1956); hereafter cited in text as CL by volume and letter number: “Male and Female Rhymes are neither more or less than single and double Rhymes—Right, Light, are Masculine Rhymes; Ocean, Motion, feminine.—At present, they are called Masculine & Feminine, not Male & Female [...]”(Vol. I, 294). See also Biographia Literaria, Vol. 2, “Satyrrane’s Letters,” p. 178:
“I told him [Klopstock] that we were not so exact with regard to the final endings of the lines as the French. He did not seem to know that we made no distinction between masculine and feminine (i.e. single or double) rhymes [...]”


14 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. I, pp. 91–92: “I shall not dilate further on this subject; because it will, (if God grant health and permission), be treated of at large and systematically in a work, which I have many years been preparing, on the PRODUCTIVE LOGOS human and divine; with, and as the introduction to, a full commentary on the Gospel of St. John.”


16 William Wordsworth in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. ed. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967), Vol. 1, p. 263; hereafter cited in text. Coleridge seems to have accepted the general tenor of Wordsworth’s literary criticism as well, at least for a time, and to have maintained in his correspondence that he and Wordsworth had the same critical attitude toward poetry. “The Preface,” he wrote to Daniel Stuart at the end of September, 1800, “contains our joint opinions on Poetry” (*Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 354). He also supported Wordsworth’s public rejection of “Christabel.” In a letter written to Josiah Wedgwood on November 1, 1800, he informed his patron that the poem had grown “so long & in Wordsworth’s opinion so impressive, that he rejected it from his volume as disproportionate both in size & merit, & as discordant in it’s [sic] character” (*Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 362). The exclusion of “Christabel” from *Lyrical Ballads*, however, seems to have “increased in him a sense of his shortcomings as a poet,” as Griggs has pointed out (*Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, 356 n.2). Within two years Coleridge would begin to disavow the congruence of their literary opinions, at precisely the point, as we have seen, when Wordsworth began to appropriate much of Coleridge’s own criticism of his critical theory.