

THE ROMANTIC POETS

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[...]

CHAPTER II: WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE

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But we must not go too far with Wordsworth before returning to Coleridge's poetry of this time. *The Ancient Mariner* was, equally with Wordsworth's contribution to *Lyrical Ballads*, a product of their life together in Somerset. It was begun on an excursion in 1797, originally as a joint venture. [56] Wordsworth contributed a line or two, and the idea of the crime for which the Mariner was to be punished. But the poem soon became Coleridge's alone. Indeed, his imagination worked in a very different way from Wordsworth's—which was why they could stimulate each other, but also why it would have been almost impossible for them actually to collaborate. Coleridge, on his rare creative occasions, had the power to do what Wordsworth rarely attempts—to embody his conceptions in a myth: but that is putting it wrongly, for the myth precedes the conceptions. Wordsworth's best poetry is reflective, Coleridge's is symbolical. "It is not possible," Yeats wrote at the end of the century, "to separate an emotion or spiritual state from the image that calls it up and gives it expression." In Wordsworth it often is possible: in Wordsworth's greatest poetry, in *Tintern Abbey*, for example, images are being found for emotions and spiritual states that preceded them. In *The Ancient Mariner* the images come first, and express something more, or at any rate something different, from anything that could be said in conceptual language. A dream only exists in the images in which it is embodied, though a shadow of its significance can be discussed for special purposes by an analyst. So it is with a myth, which exists to make actual a metaphysical, moral or psychological experience that is only potential until it has been embodied in imagery. In this respect Coleridge was more revolutionary than Wordsworth, and more fertile in his effects on the romantic age, which was seeking, among other things, a return to the poetry of creative myth after the long eighteenth-century dominance of the poetry of reasonable reflection.

Coleridge's poetic career, in its glories and in its failures, is even more extraordinary than Wordsworth's. Although Wordsworth's best poetry forms a fairly massive body, it is notorious that the best forms only a moderate proportion of the whole. I once knew a man in a prison camp who divided his copy of Wordsworth's poems into two halves, retained the first, and swapped the second for the bottom half of a pair of pyjamas. He rightly judged that the intellectual loss was very slight. Yet the process in Wordsworth is one of regular decline. His bad [57] poetry is hardly of a different kind from his good—it is just less good. And some good poetry crops up even in the period of decline. With Coleridge it is otherwise. There are two poems, *The Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan* that are unique, both in Coleridge's work and in the English language. There is one, *Christabel*, that outwardly appears to be of the same kind, but is actually a cleverly excogitated imitation. There is a handful of other good poems, *The Aeolian Harp*, *Frost at Midnight*, *Dejection* and a few others, of quite a different kind. And after that there is a considerable mass of verse, some of it a turgid waste of musing and preaching, some of it pretty and insignificant, that is fairly justly left unread by all but the most ardent Coleridgeans.

Of these *The Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan* are by far the most interesting. What was happening to Coleridge when he wrote them that was never to happen again, we do not know; but the most superficial reader and the most intense student of his work can alike see that there was something. J. M. Robertson, assiduous as ever in looking for burglars under the bed, has suggested that it was the influence of opium. But Coleridge took opium almost all his life, and these particular poetic results happened only twice. *Dejection* and *The Pains of Sleep* describe its commoner effects. Clearly some unconscious mental process was at work when he wrote these two poems that was utterly different from his normal habits of mind, and far more momentous poetically. They are a perfect type of Romantic

composition—meaning by romantic here something that grows according to an inner organic law, not something that is composed from outside according to a predetermined scheme.

It would be idle to pretend that we know enough about the psychology of poetic composition to explain this process. But as it happens we probably know more about the mechanism of these two poems than of any others in the language. In the first place, *The Ancient Mariner* fulfils the Coleridgean part of the joint bargain in *Lyrical Ballads*—to treat subjects “supernatural or at least romantic”, but to make them credible by truth to human nature and feeling, so as to cause “that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment that constitutes poetic [58] faith.” This might suggest the imposing of naturalistic characters on a fantastic plot—what happens for instance in Shakespeare’s comedies. But this is not what happens in *The Ancient Mariner*: there is no naturalistic character-drawing, and the truth to human nature and feeling is of a different kind. Outwardly the most obvious thing about the poem is that it is part of the mediaevalizing movement that had been going on since the time of Gray. In this case the mediaeval influence at work is that of the ballads. *Percy’s Reliques*, containing a large selection of the traditional ballad-poetry, had appeared in 1765. Literary appreciation of the ballads had never wholly ceased, as we can see by the references to Chevy Chase in Sidney and Addison, but Percy inaugurated an immense revival of interest in this popular poetry. Later editors had added to the collection, by Coleridge’s time the influence was already powerful, and it was natural enough for a tale of strange adventure to be told in the ballad style. This meant cutting out “characterization” and reflection, and reducing description to bare essentials. The archaisms of the ballad manner were more prominent in the first edition, and were later removed; but Coleridge uses the ballad stanza, with additions and extensions of his own; and above all he uses the ballad manner of narration, rapid, economical, without transitions, switching abruptly from narrative to dialogue. Of course the poem is longer and more highly organized than any ballad, but it retains the concrete directness that seems to remove it from the realm of modern self-conscious personal poetry altogether. The supernatural passages especially, in their laconic eeriness, remind us continually of the ballad of magic and enchantment—*Thomas the Rhymer* or *The Demon Lover*.

But, of course, the subject is not a mediaeval one at all. Its material is drawn from the voyages of the Elizabethan seamen. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge were great readers of books of travel. Shelvocke’s *Voyages* figure in the note to *We Are Seven*, which gives an account of the origins of *The Ancient Mariner*, and *Purchasers Pilgrimage* in the prefatory note to *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge was actually very widely read in such literature, and the structure of the poem is that of a typical [59] voyage round the Cape Horn, in which the ship, in the struggle against the westerlies, is driven to the high south latitudes, the land of ice and snow. At length they reach the Pacific, (‘the silent sea’ of v. 106) pick up the Trades (‘the fair breeze flew’: breeze—brise, the old word for trade-wind), and are finally becalmed in the equatorial Doldrums. The return is effected by purely spiritual agencies, so it would be idle to pursue the geography further.

As it happens, we have a notebook of Coleridge’s with records and excerpts from his reading about this time. This has been investigated by Professor John Livingston Lowes in his book *The Road to Xanadu*, which forms the most complete and fascinating record of the genesis of a poem that we possess. There is hardly one of the most striking images of *The Ancient Mariner*, (or of its companion poem *Kubla Khan*) which cannot be traced to an original, or more commonly to several originals, in Coleridge’s vast travel reading. Yet none have been transferred raw and naked, all have been transformed and fused perfectly, though it appears unconsciously, with the life of the poem as a whole. It is a supreme example of the working of the imagination in the Coleridgean sense, as we shall see in discussing his observations on that faculty in the next section. We are immensely in Professor Lowes’ debt for this piece of investigation, which must have been laborious enough, yet unlike so many laborious pieces of literary research, has cast a new and brilliant light on the working of the poetic faculty. The only thing that is lacking is the sense of a directing force behind all this elaborate linking of images.⁸ Professor Lowes gives us an associationist or Hartleian account of how they are linked

together, but he does not attempt to tell us why. Yet if there is one impression that the *Ancient Mariner* makes, it is of completeness and organic purpose.

Can we speculate a little about what the purpose is? Wordsworth suggested that the Mariner should kill the Albatross, and that the tutelary spirits of those regions should take it upon themselves to avenge the crime:⁹ and this is the formal theme of the poem. Coleridge adds a moral—that the Mariner is “to teach, by his own example, love and reverence to all things [60] that God made and loveth”. Mrs. Barbauld complained that the poem had no moral, but Coleridge replied that in his judgement it had too much.¹⁰ However this may be, we can, I think, be sure, as so often with Wordsworth too, that the controlling impulse of the poem is not a moral one, or not merely a moral one; it is something more. What Wordsworth put in his initial suggestion, what Coleridge put in the gloss quoted above, are not what the poem is “about”. In a sense this must always be true, even of the most manufactured poem: if it can be adequately summarized in a maxim, why write the poem? But we mean something more than this about *The Ancient Mariner*: the poem does not state a result, it symbolizes a process.

Untrammelled progress and untried success are symbolized by the beginning of the voyage, and the albatross following the ship seems to stand for the power of Nature blessing the endeavour. Then, quite wantonly and for no reason, the Mariner kills the albatross. The sympathy between Nature and the voyagers is broken, and the other sailors know and feel it. But success continues—a life cut off from the deeper springs of energy can nevertheless run by its own momentum for a time. Not for long, however, for on reaching the Line the ship becomes becalmed, is afflicted with drought and stifling heat. Natural life becomes hideous and threatening: instead of the free and beautiful albatross,

—slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon a slimy sea.

The death-fires dance about the ship at night and the water assumes strange and unnatural colours. This passage and what follows is a powerful symbol of a life cut off by a paralysing sense of guilt from all sympathetic natural forces, and it is the more powerful since the horrible consequences are out of all proportion to the objective fault. It is followed by the terrifying episode of Death and Life-in-Death, in which Death wins the souls of the rest of the ship’s company, but Life-in-Death, that of the Mariner himself. The reign of Life-in-Death is more terrible than that of Death: it is the *misère de l’homme sans Dieu* [61]—the consciousness of being abandoned, and the utter inability to do anything for oneself towards salvation.

The many men so beautiful
And they all dead did lie:
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.
I looked to heaven, and tried to pray
But or ever a prayer had gusht,
A wicked whisper came, and made
My heart as dry as dust.

It is a complete paralysis of the will, symbolized by the motionlessness of the ship; and in that moveless state the Mariner envies the moon and stars for their steady progress through the heavens—beautifully expressed both in the verse and the prose gloss;

The moving moon went up the sky,
And nowhere did abide:
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside—

Her beams bemoek the sultry main
Like April hoar-frost spread;
But where the ship’s huge shadow lay I;
The charmed water burnt alway
A still and awful red.

“In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying moon, and the stars that sojourn yet still move onward.” And thus we approach the turning-point of the poem. The Mariner watches the water-snakes in the sea; formerly they had been slimy things, symbols of horror—but now they begin to assume a strange kind of beauty:

Blue, glossy green and velvet black,
They coiled and swam, and every track
Was a flash of golden fire. [62]

At this moment his whole feeling towards them changes: because they are alive and beautiful he blesses them.

O happy living things, no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The albatross fell off and sank
Like lead into the sea.

A new peace comes into his heart and he is able to sleep again. The misery and sterility of the preceding period has been symbolized by drought (as in *The Waste Land* and the Grail legend); and now it rains. The wind begins to blow again and the ship to move. A new spiritual power takes hold of the ship and begins to guide it home. Images of the homely land-world begin to appear in the waste of waters:

Sometimes a-dropping from the sky
I heard the sky-lark sing;
Sometimes all little birds that are
How they seem to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargonings.
It ceased: yet still the sails made on
A pleasant noise till noon,
A noise like of a hidden brook
In the leafy month of June,
That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune.

The regeneration of the Mariner has begun, and though he has still a long way to go, his path is now steadily homeward till he comes to his own country.

The poem is more than an allegory of guilt and regeneration. [63] In any ordinary sense the Mariner is very little guilty. But he has broken the bond between himself and the life of Nature, and in consequence becomes spiritually dead. What happens to him when he blesses the water-snakes in the tropical calm is a psychic rebirth—a rebirth that must at times happen to all men and all cultures unless they are to dry up in a living death. The whole poem is indeed a vivid presentation of the rebirth myth as conceived by Jung¹¹—the psychologist who has done most explain these recurrent forms of imaginative literature. But such explanations of poetry are not convincing to everyone and are not easily demonstrable, so I will not labour the point. What we must explain is that it is not the final “moral”, it is the living symbolization of this universal psychic experience that gives the poem its lasting power. It is as though Coleridge tapped a deeper level of consciousness here than he was ever to reach again.

Kubla Khan has the same quality of enchantment, but it is more puzzling, partly because it is a fragment, but for another reason, too—it is a fragment of a private experience, not of a universal one. Its origin is well known. It was composed in an opium dream¹² and before it could all be written out “a

person on business from Porlock” interrupted the poet at his task, and when he returned to it, as commonly happens with dreams, all was gone. An immediate inspiration was again in a book of voyages that Coleridge was reading just before he fell asleep; and Livingstone Lowes has shown that echoes from many other travels are found in its short fifty lines. But here it would be harder to look for the controlling purpose; if there was one, it was in Coleridge’s private biography, in a region that was not accessible to his own inspection, and is still less to ours. Only a poet with a mind like Coleridge’s, as sensitive as his own Aeolian harp, could catch the dream-images in all their strangeness and authenticity, and the abiding fascination of the poem is that it is a fragment of psychic life of a kind which in the nature of things is rarely communicable to the outside world. Writing of this kind, without the usual logical and conceptual framework is sometimes called ‘pure poetry’; it is not readily susceptible to analysis, except perhaps of a psychological kind. [64]

However, this is not wholly impossible. The poem as it stands does present a meaning, consistent both with itself and with what we know of Coleridge’s mind. The fact that a poem is not wholly or certainly explicable should not discourage us from explaining it as well as we can. The opening lines, suggested by a passage in Purchas’s *Pilgrimage*, that Coleridge was reading as he entered his dream or reverie, describes an ideal landscape watered by a sacred river, of paradisaical happiness, in which Kubla is such an all-powerful lord that he can create his pleasure-dome by mere decree. But in the succeeding lines (12-30) come images of fear, enchantment, violent and uncontrollable energy, oblivion and death and forebodings of strife. The paradisaical landscape is cleft by a chasm which is savage and fearsome, and from it a mighty fountain is forced, throwing up huge rocks: and the fountain turns out to be the sacred river itself, bursting out after an underground sojourn, like the classical Alpheus, from which its name Alph seems to be derived. It flows for a little in the open, then disappears for good. And Kubla hears prophecies of war. The idyllic calm of the opening lines is threatened, and the movements of Alph seem to echo or symbolize this. Lines 31-6 add little, but bring us back to the pleasure-dome, show it reflected in the river, and bring it closely into contact both with the fountain (uncontrolled bounding energy) and the caves (final annihilation).

Then we come to the last eighteen lines, of which Lowes said “the pageant is as aimless as it is magnificent.” And here is the most characteristic dream-feature of the poem—the sudden switch from Kubla and the Xanadu landscape. The poet now speaks in his own person and has a vision of an Abyssinian maid singing of Mount Abora. Mount Abora is Milton’s Mount Amara (so written in an earlier manuscript), and Mount Amara is a fabled paradise, as we can see by consulting *Paradise Lost*, IV, 268-84. So the Abyssinian maid is singing of a paradisaical landscape very like that of the opening lines—singing in fact of the same cluster of ideas under a different name and guise. And (42-54) if he, the poet, could re-live in his imagination her song, he himself could build the [65] magic pleasure-dome, as Kubla had done, he himself could become what Kubla was, a figure of power, of mystery and enchantment.

Explanation could be pushed much farther. This is enough to suggest that the poem, for all its dream-like air, is not unintelligible as Lowes suggests; and that what underlies it is the recurrent Coleridgean theme of poetic inspiration. Alph, the sacred river is surely the river of the Muses, the poetic imagination itself, which is terrible as well as seductive, and threatened ultimately with conflict and extinction, as Coleridge later was too bitterly to know. Could he only recapture at will the vision of it, and the paradise through which it flows, all his dreamed-of poetry would get written and he would become the inspired magical prophet-bard which the quintessential romantic poet asks to be.

Christabel was intended for inclusion in *Lyrical Ballads*— but like so many of Coleridge’s projects it was not finished in time, and in the end was never finished at all. Coleridge always said he knew exactly how it was to go on, but was never revisited by the creative impulse to finish it. A summary of the conclusion made by a friend does actually exist. But one suspects in this case, as perhaps in that of Keat’s *Hyperion*, that the defect was ultimately structural. If it had been conceived as a whole it would have been finished. It is a tale of chivalry and magic, somewhat like Scott’s lays, and it may actually have influenced them, for although it was written before and not I published till after them, Scott had

heard it read in manuscript. This suggests a common ancestry—and we are probably to find it in the ballads, and the Gothic romances that had been fashionable since Horace Walpole. It is an accomplished example of that less profound side of the romantic movement to which, in their different ways, *The Lady of the Lake*, *The Eve of St Agnes* and Morris's romances all belong—the use of mediaeval themes for their beauty or mystery or enchantment, without any other every strong reason for the choice. The difference between this poem and *The Ancient Mariner* is very marked, in spite of superficial resemblances. *The Ancient Mariner* seems to come as it comes, a complete conception, in response to some very deep [66] inner experience; while *Christabel* is a haunting piece of romantic composition, but definitely composition; its elements are not so much symbols as stage properties, and the setting, instead of being the inevitable environment for such a story, is an exquisite piece of *décor*. It is notable that Professor Lowes found it quite impossible to include *Christabel* in his study—or rather that *Christabel* obstinately refused to include itself. Whatever the process by which it was constructed, it was different from that which went to the making of *The Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*.

Nevertheless, it contains some of Coleridge's best verse—some enchanting vignettes in the romantic taste in the first part; and in the second the fine passage about the broken friendship between Roland and Sir Leoline, a passage that probably derives a good deal of its force from an estrangement that had come about between Coleridge and his friend Lamb. Coleridge announces that the verse is not, as it seems, irregular, but is founded on a new principle—that of counting the accents instead of the syllables. This is supposed to be a landmark in the romantic emancipation of verse-form. Actually what Coleridge is doing is not so new as he supposes: he is varying his rhythm, extremely subtly and beautifully, but in a way that would not have been very startling before the eighteenth-century insistence on strict syllabic regularity. Rather than doing anything new, he is returning to a use of the full metrical resources of English that had been normal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The rest of Coleridge's poetry is mostly discursive and reflective. The big pieces of his early years, *Religious Musings* and *The Destiny of Nations* are intolerably turgid and long-winded. He could at all times throw off harmonious and distinguished scraps of verse, and some of these coalesced into poems. Some are idyllic and domestic, like the early *Aeolian Harp*, *This Lime-Tree Bower* and *Frost at Midnight*. They are too diffuse and unorganized to make a very decisive total impression, but all contain lines and passages, descriptive, reflective and reminiscent, that breathe out the peculiar air of soft, delicate yet eager intelligence that is Coleridge's normal [67] endowment. *Love* and *Lewti* are pretty trifles. *France: an Ode* is chiefly interesting for its account of Coleridge's relation to the Revolution—a more vehement engagement and a more sudden disillusionment than Wordsworth's, and both less profound in their emotional effects. The greatest and most terrible of these poems is the *Ode on Dejection*, written in 1802: almost the swan-song of Coleridge's poetic career. It is a profoundly melancholy account of the state of nerveless hopelessness to which Coleridge had been reduced by ill-health, opium and domestic misfortune. He projects his own feelings into the stormy and moonlit night around him, finding in these natural forms a symbol of his own emotion, as Shelley does in the *Ode to the West Wind*. The descriptive passages are exquisite in their accuracy of observation—almost as though Ruskin had been writing them in verse: and the poem as a whole is unforgettable for its profound sadness. It is a description in other terms of the state in which the Ancient Mariner found himself when alone and becalmed in the tropical sea: but alas, the reviving rain and wind were never to visit Coleridge again except in the rarest and most fitful gusts.

iii. Poetic Diction and Imagination

One of the fullest commentaries on *Lyrical Ballads* and the poetry of its period is provided by Wordsworth and Coleridge themselves. Wordsworth's explanation of his own objects in various prefaces and essays, Coleridge's commentary on his own and Wordsworth's career in *Biographia Literaria*, are among the most celebrated documents of the time. Whether they deserve their reputation or not is another matter: they certainly provide an indispensable appendix to the original creative work; and they did a good deal to set the course of poetry for the whole of the nineteenth century. The effect

of Wordsworth's critical doctrines is indeed not exhausted yet; though there are probably few poets today who are directly under his influence, many of the feelings about diction and poetic ornament that [68] now seem almost instinctive are the direct result of the Wordsworthian reforms.

Wordsworth's prose writings are more voluminous than we might expect, and Coleridge gave a mass of literary lectures, surviving in various states of preservation, which we shall not deal with here. The vital part is the Preface and Appendix to *Lyrical Ballads*, first published in 1800 and revised in 1802; and Coleridge's critique of this, and of Wordsworth's work in general, in *Biographia Literaria* (1817). The whole is commonly regarded as a controversy between Wordsworth and Coleridge on the subject of poetic diction, and has acquired a sinister familiarity as an examination subject. This is unfortunate, since it tends to reduce the argument to a dreary tagging off of points, where Coleridge disagreed with Wordsworth and was right—or wrong, as the case may be—to the neglect of other and more interesting aspects of their criticism. In fact, they were hardly talking about the same things. Criticism of poetry may be either original exploration, or the providing of maps and sign-posts for later travellers. Wordsworth's was of the first kind—clearing of the ground for his own new work; he is concerned with what happens, or should happen, in the poet's mind in the act of composition. Coleridge, in these passages at any rate, is concerned with the *fait accompli*, with what happens in the reader's mind in the act of appreciation or judgement. Coleridge had a far more analytical mind, and was in any case writing after the event with the finished products before him. Naturally, he has the best of the argument, if we are to regard it as an argument. But perhaps that is not the most fruitful way of looking at this body of critical writing. It is rather an exploration, from two slightly different angles, of the widening possibilities of poetry.

The immediate purpose of Wordsworth's preface is to defend his poems against the charges of lowness and unpoeticalness that had been made against both their subjects and their diction. Its wider intention is to relate poetry as closely as possible to common life, to remove it in the first place from the realm of fantasy, and in the second from that of polite or over-sophisticated amusement. He speaks therefore of "the gaudiness and [69] inane phraseology of many modern writers", of neglect of the older literature in favour of "frantic novels, sickly stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse". Poetry should be "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", not the mere satisfaction of a taste for imagery and ornament. A historical critic might object that the feelings that inspire poetry need not be powerful, and that the overflow may be considerably less than spontaneous—unless we are to deny *The Rape of the Lock* and *Lycidas* the title of poetry: but Wordsworth's criticism, like that of most imaginative writers, is an indication of his own purpose, and we value it less for judicial impartiality than for its statement of the most powerful creative purpose of the time. Wordsworth's aim in all this is to show the poet as a man appealing to the normal interests of mankind, not as a peculiar being appealing to a specialized taste.

He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighted to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.

The poet's pleasure in his art is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the world. So is the work of the scientist, but his is an indirect and laborious pleasure, hard to come by and hard to transmit: while the poet comes "singing a song in which all huipaan beings join with him".

In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth and over all time. [70]

Wordsworth's argument, which is here at its most passionate and deeply felt, is that poetry is the concrete, the immediately experienced part of knowledge, in which the sensations and the emotions can join. Those who suppose that Wordsworth would confine the commerce of the poet to hills and sheep,

and that the advent of an urban and scientific age means some sort of anti-Wordsworthian revolution (the notion was vaguely current in the 1930s) should note the passage that follows.

If the labours of the men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself. The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time shall ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings. If the time should ever come when what is now called science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.

Surveying the poetry and the science of the present, we can hardly say that that stage has been reached: the remarkable thing about these lines, written in 1802, is that they can provide so adequate a faith for succeeding ages that they realize so clearly the difficulty of incorporating science into our imaginative life, yet still believe that it can be accomplished. Wordsworth here shows himself possessed of a conception of poetry that quite transcends the limits of his own time and temperament. [71]

As for the subjects of his poetry, Wordsworth emphasizes their psychological and moral interests in order to defend them from the charges of triviality and false simplicity that had been made against them. He is not after all trying to write familiar anecdotes or nursery tales; he is seeking the fundamentals of human life by contemplating its simplest forms. We are not asked to be interested in Michael because he is a picturesque character, peculiar by his station or calling, but because he is a man, revealing in their least elaborated form passions common to all men. Wordsworth is quite different from the rural poet who seeks to focus attention on the peculiarities of a special class or district; and it is in an attempt to make this plain that he talks of tracing in his familiar incidents "the primary laws of our nature". It is only in sudden flashes that Wordsworth becomes possessed of the piercing mystical intuition.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour:

and when this happens he rarely comments on it. The part of his poetry that he can explain is the more pedestrian part where he is, or believes himself to be, abstracting general laws from familiar instances.

Behind the question of poetic diction, then, more fundamental than any technical problem, is the fact that he is predisposed to his familiar themes for moral and psychological reasons. What he says is that

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; ... because the manners of rural life ... are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.

An utterance which combines, in typically Wordsworthian [72] proportions, the values of the eighteenth century with those of the Romantic age. The search for the permanent and the durable merely repeats, in other language, the Augustan principle of "following Nature", which, as a critical precept, means simply this. But, like other categorical imperatives, the command "follow Nature" turns out to be a formal principle without a clear material content. To follow Nature is to look for what is fundamental and unchanging in human life: but what *is* fundamental? It has often been remarked that every literary revolution announces itself as a return to nature. It is in Wordsworth's answer to this question that he is most typical of his own age. To some, the foundations of human nature are to be found in the grand passions of the noblest of mankind; to others in the metaphysical relation of man to God; to Wordsworth they are "the simple primary affections and duties", seen at their clearest in peasant life because it contains so little else. He could hardly have been so sure of this if the work of Rousseau had not prepared his generation for a revolt against sophistication, an idealization of simplicity. But

Wordsworth's conviction was not obtained at second hand; it was a part, of course, of the revolutionary and democratic sentiment that had absorbed his young manhood; but still more it was a part of the normal everyday experience of his childhood years. We all tend to feel that the people we have been brought up with are somehow more real than other varieties of the human race; and to Wordsworth it was the "shepherds, dwellers in our valleys" that continued to represent essential humanity.

It is from this root that his technical interest in the language of simple life naturally springs. If real humanity is to be found among simple people this also is the place to look for real human speech. And the equation between this and the proper language of poetry is to Wordsworth a perfectly obvious one. It will not necessarily be so to other people. Wordsworth quite evidently believes that a poem moves the reader in the same way as the experience it describes would have done, if it were encountered in real life. He even believes that a poem is the more moving the more closely it reproduces the language of the persons concerned in the actual experience. [73]

However exalted a notion we wish to cherish of the character of the Poet, it is obvious, that while he describes and imitates passions, his employment is in some degree mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his own feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes ... and, the more industriously he applies this principle, the deeper will be his faith that no word, which his fancy or imagination can suggest, will be to be compared with those which are the emanations of reality and truth.

However, Wordsworth has enough historic sense to realize obscurely that this is not in fact what poets in general have felt, that most poetry has not been written on this principle, and that experiment is therefore necessary to see whether it will work. His statement of his case varies in different places, and it is hardly worth while to stand too much on verbal niceties, since his general object is clear enough. The Advertisement to L.B. says that the majority of the poems were written "Chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure". The preface later describes the chosen diction as "a selection of language really used by men"; which is something rather different. The class aspect disappears, and the word "selection" allows the elimination of local and social peculiarities. This seems to imply that the principle is mainly negative; Wordsworth's main object is not so much to include the vernacular as to cut out all language that might not be used in ordinary speech. And this impression is confirmed when we turn to the poems themselves. There is nowhere in Wordsworth the slightest attempt to reproduce the actual turns of speech common in humble and rustic life. He never attempts dialect poetry in the manner of, say, William Barnes; nor does he try to base a literary language on an actual peasant speech, like Synge. He does not even enrich his language with the occasional salty colloquialism; and no one who knows Northern dialect could find him sensitive to its peculiar qualities. In fact his real worry is not about common speech: it is to come to some sort of [74] terms with established poetic diction, as we can see in the appendix to the preface of 1802. His historical account of how this poetic diction arose has been quoted above in the chapter on Gray. It is, within its limits, admirable, and is a just criticism of the vices of a style like that of Gray's odes. That Wordsworth had Gray in mind is shown by his quotation of the sonnet on the death of West, somewhat unfairly and summarily dealt with, and his mention of Gray in the same passage as "at the head of those who, by their reasonings, have attempted to widen the space of separation between Prose and Metrical composition". But his argument here still depends on the belief that a poem affects us as the incident it describes affects him who experienced it. Wordsworth never realizes that a poem is a new creation, not merely a representation of something that has existed in the actual world. He never realizes that words derive their power from their associations, that language is like a long-inhabited historic site, with the successive deposits of all cultural levels embedded in it. His theory would be perfect if every poet came new into a world with no previous poetry behind him. But it does not account at all for the growth of a tradition of poetic language, rich in memories and associations. To take a few obvious examples, it does not account for Anglo-Saxon poetry, with its large vocabulary of "kennings"—special phrases and names reserved for poetry alone; it does not account for Elizabethan verse, enriched with all the gorgeous lumber of the Renaissance; it

does not account for Milton—whose language is often almost incomprehensible without some sensibility to its learned overtones. But why go on? Anyone could supply with five minutes' thought half a dozen passages that would destroy the general application of Wordsworth's doctrine. And the partial quotations, the truisms and the illogical deductions by which it is supported do not inspire any great confidence. But the refutation of these can be safely left to Coleridge.

He passes on to the consideration of metre. He foresees that he may be asked "Why, professing these opinions, he has written in verse." To this his first answer is that metre is a "superadded pleasure" to the other virtues of good writing. [75]

But it is succeeded by a more analytical attempt to explain the function of metre. Wordsworth finds it in the attempt to find a bounding, regularizing influence to contain the excitement of passion. He argues here extremely ingeniously, and with considerable psychological subtlety, to show the effect of metre in making bearable the kind of scenes which are almost unbearably affecting in prose—that the moving passages of *Clarissa* really distress us, "while Shakespeare's writings, in the most pathetic scenes, never act upon us, as pathetic, beyond the bounds of pleasure—an effect which, in a much greater degree than might at first be imagined, is to be ascribed to small, but continual and regular impulses of pleasurable surprise from the metrical arrangement". It is hardly possible to ascribe this effect mainly to the metre: but Wordsworth's intention is clearly to present metre as one of the forces that remove the passions of poetry to a suitable "aesthetic distance", and so make them in themselves a source of pleasure. In prose form these emotions are brought closer to us, and so press more heavily on the sympathies.

In spite of inconsistencies of detail, the motive force of the preface is evident enough. It is an exposition of Wordsworth's poetic creed, and it is chiefly open to attack because it makes a statement of his own practice in the form of a statement about poetry at large. This is the burden of Coleridge's reply. It is found at length in *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter IV, and in Chapters XIV to XXII. He points out at the beginning that Wordsworth's poems would hardly have been attacked if it had not been for the challenging and dubious statements in the Preface. If Coleridge's aim had been merely to confute Wordsworth he could have done so simply enough by taking examples from existing poetry, as F. L. Lucas has vigorously pointed out.¹³ "There neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." The way to confute universal negatives of this kind is to produce contrary examples. But it is against Coleridge's nature to proceed in this manner. He prefers to argue from general principles. For he is not writing to contradict or confute, but to do something more serious—to disentangle the essential and [76] important truth from the difficulties created by Wordsworth's less philosophical utterance.

In the first place, he attacks the illusions about the language of rustic life, and finds it easy to demonstrate that such a language, purged from local and class peculiarities, is no different from any other language, except as it is more limited in its range. He shows, with copious illustrations, that the virtues of neutral and unelaborated simplicity are by no means those of the most striking passages of Wordsworth's own poetry. He points out that Wordsworth's proposition that there is a large part of the language of poetry which differs in no way from that of prose is not convertible; it does not show, what alone requires to be shown, that there is no part of the language of poetry that differs from that of prose. And he argues from the effects of metre. Metre arouses in the reader certain expectations of a language different from the ordinary. "I write in metre because I am going to use a language different from that of prose." Though this is little more true as a general statement than Wordsworth's own, and Coleridge goes on to contradict himself in the next chapter where he shows, quite rightly, that there is a neutral style, or one common to both prose and poetry. His argument is more logical, more analytical than Wordsworth's, but still not wholly satisfactory as a piece of dialectic. Its main merit is that it produces by the way the earliest, and still one of the fullest and most penetrating analyses of the peculiar excellences of Wordsworth's verse.

Nevertheless, the marks on our literature have been permanent. "Gaudiness and inane phraseology", at least of the type of which Wordsworth was talking, now finally disappear. Attention is focused on

the relation of poetry to living speech —relation which is not so simple as Wordsworth supposed, which had been discovered in practice long before his day, but which he first brought into the critical limelight. If we were asked to amend Wordsworth's and Coleridge's conclusions in the light of current critical opinion we should have to pay as much attention to rhythm as they do to vocabulary: we now realize more clearly that "the language really used by men" is not merely a matter of the choice of words—which is Wordsworth's [77] chief concern; or even of word-order, which to Coleridge seems at least as important: it is a matter of the whole run and movement of the sentence, its structure and its pauses. We realize that the living speech of the age is a constant source of vitality to poetry; but that living speech cannot be simply "fitted to metrical arrangement", as Wordsworth puts it; the life of verse springs from an ever-present but ever-varying tension between the rhythm of current speech and the formal metrical scheme. And there is a similar varying tension between the language of the age and the language of poetry. Sometimes the two come very close together; if they remain too close for too long the result is an unimaginative limitation of the themes and emotions with which poetry can deal. For we expect poetry to cope with experiences more intense and more subtle than those which "the language of the age" meets with every day. Commonly, after a time of approximation they tend to diverge; if the divergence goes too far and lasts too long the danger is that poetry develops a factitious dialect divorced from the current springs of life. Almost any statement about the relation between the two languages *may* be true, at some stage in the process. Gray's "the language of the age is never the language of poetry" was written when poetry had had a surfeit of rational discourse in a polished conversational style: Wordsworth's pronouncements when it had had a surfeit of the "cumbrous splendours" of Gray. Each was justified in its day: but to make any statement of the matter that is generally true is more complicated than either of them suspected. Perhaps we are often mistaken in trying to judge such critical pronouncements in the light of eternity—for their real function was to indicate the next thing to be done.

This brings up the whole question of Coleridge's speculative and philosophical criticism. More than any other critic he makes the constant attempt to base his judgements on general principles—and not only critical principles, but epistemological and ultimately metaphysical ones. The enterprise is obviously one to be admired; but it has created obstacles which his less strenuous successors have often been unwilling to surmount. However, one is apt to find at the end that Coleridge's definitions [78] and distinctions have survived, that his conclusions remain active among minds that have never troubled to look into the processes by which they were reached. Half the nineteenth century was taught to think by Coleridge, as John Stuart Mill remarked; and there is a certain impertinence in thus neglecting the mental processes of one whose equipment was so formidable and whose influence was so immense.

Many of Coleridge's elaborately philosophical definitions turn out to be of direct literary value. Such is the definition of a poem in Chapter XIV of *Biographia*. The attempt seems unpromising enough, and we are not encouraged by the opening passage on "the office of philosophical disquisition". Coleridge begins by noting the obvious distinction of metre and rhyme, pointing out that it may be used for merely mnemonic purposes (as in the gender rhymes, "Thirty days hath September", etc.), but that even in these lowly forms the regular recurrence of sounds and quantities (if he is speaking of English verse he means stresses) gives a certain pleasure of its own. But a further distinction between a poem and other kinds of writing is the difference of object. The immediate object may be the communication of truths, as in works of science or history. But in a poem this is not the immediate object; the immediate object is the communication of pleasure. The word pleasure here perhaps needs further analysis, but the term is traditional, and we may agree that the distinction is a valid one. The communication of pleasure, however, may be the object of works not metrically composed, such as novels and prose romances, which no one has ever attempted to call poems. Suppose one cast these into metrical form, would they then become poems? No; because the metre would be a mere meaningless addition, and "nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise." The regular recurrence of accent and sound in metre excite a perpetual and distinct attention to each part. We cannot read a poem by merely skimming through it to get the general gist, as we can a newspaper article. On this basis then we can work out a final definition.

A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed [79] to works of science by having for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species—(having this object in common with it)—it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part.

It would be a great mistake for the pure “literary” critic to object that this is mere arid argument in general terms, without reference to actual poems. It is of course based on long experience of poems and poetry, which Coleridge does not at the moment choose to bring into the foreground. The test is whether the general statement can be usefully applied to actual poetry. We often do not realize the value of Coleridge’s distinctions because we do not seek to use them in practice. When we do we are apt to find their value soon enough. This definition of a poem, often passed over, is in fact one of the most pregnant of critical utterances. It contains the germ of the modern distinction between “scientific” and “emotive” language; and the germ therefore of much later discussion of poetry and science, poetry and belief. And in the final sentence—that poetry demands attention, not only to the whole, but to each individual part, we surely have the ultimate distinction between prose and poetry, a criterion which overrides that of mere metre, which explains our obstinate tendency to class the more consciously rhythmical kinds of prose with poetry; which, properly understood, leads on, not to hair-splitting and abstraction, but to that close attention to texture and imagery that the proper reading of poetry demands. It is easy to class abstract and general criticism of this kind as mere word-spinning: at its best it is not so; it removes us for a time from the purely literary field, but only in order that we may understand it the better when we return to it.

By far the most celebrated of Coleridge’s essays in this direction is his distinction between Fancy and Imagination. This has been variously discussed—first from the strictly philosophical point of view, its relation to the thought of the German [80] idealists, Kant and Schelling, who exercised such a profound influence on Coleridge’s mature philosophical ideas. This lies outside our field. Much labour has been wasted in discussing whether there “really” is any such distinction. Many pure critics have written the whole thing off as a piece of transcendental mystification. But literary critics can be wrong; and in England they have often been so because they are unable or unwilling to relate literary judgements to other departments of thought. Let us first try to discover as simply as we can what Coleridge meant.

We may admit at the start that those who accuse Coleridge of mystery-making are given a good deal of justification. We first hear of the Imagination-Fancy distinction in Chapter IV of *Biographia*, in connection with Wordsworth’s poetry, of which Imagination is said to be the dominant quality. We are promised a full explanation of it. There follow five chapters intended as a preliminary explanation of the foundation of Coleridge’s philosophical beliefs, including his confutation of Hartley’s association theory and an account of his own debt to the German idealists, especially Kant, Fichte and Schelling. Of the philosophical merits of these chapters I am not qualified to speak, but they are of course vital as an account of the growth of one of the most influential minds of the century. There follows (a typical, and maddening, Coleridgean trick) two chapters of mere digression. And thus we reach Chapter XII, which announces itself as a preliminary exhortation to those who propose to study the distinction that is about to be made. Its most significant part is Coleridge’s attempt to find a secure basis for all our knowledge. This he discovers in the act of self-consciousness, the act of saying I AM, for that alone depends on no outside object; subject and object, that which knows and that which is known here being perfectly united. God’s self-consciousness, his recognition of his own being, is the primary creative act of the universe. Chapter XIII then holds out to us the promise of discussing “The Imagination or Esemplastic power” itself. But alas, the prospect turns out to be a mirage; at the moment when the secret is about to be revealed there is interposed a fatal letter from a friend (a mythical friend, one of [81] Coleridge’s other selves) advising him not to communicate so strange a truth to a world unprepared to receive it. And we are put off with the two paragraphs that follow.

The imagination then I consider as either primary, or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word choice. But equally with the ordinary memory, it must receive all its materials ready-made from the law of association.

The reader who wishes for a full discussion of this passage, its genesis and its bearings, must be referred elsewhere.¹⁴ Let us here attempt something much more modest. The primary imagination is then the act of self-consciousness referred to above as the foundation of all knowledge and all perception. It is literally the act by which each one of us creates his world, and is a human repetition of the act by which God created the world as a whole. The secondary imagination is the poetic imagination, with which we are here specially concerned. Just as the primary imagination unites the knower and the known in a single act, so the secondary or poetic imagination unites the poet's mind with the objects of its contemplation, and these various objects with each other. It is that which makes a poem, not merely a reproduction of things previously existing in the objective [82] world, but a new unity, with an existence of its own. How it does so is best described in the words Coleridge uses of Wordsworth's poetry; it is by

The union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying, the objects observed; and, above all, the original gift of spreading the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world, around forms, incidents and situations of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre and dried up the sparkle and the dewdrops.

It is this power then that makes the figure of the Leech-gatherer something more than a mere remembered old man, and Tintern Abbey something more than a remembered landscape. In both detached material reminiscences are made into new wholes under the pressure of a powerful impulse of feeling. Fancy merely recombines existing things in a new way; if it produces a unity it is that of a mixture, not that of a chemical compound. Often it is playful; compare the sentimental assembly of recollected fragments in Rupert Brooke's Grantchester with the Wordsworthian treatment of a remembered landscape. Yet the difference is not one of seriousness, it is a different kind of thinking.

Mark you the floor? that square and speckled stone,
Which looks so firm and strong.
Is Patience:
And the other black and grave, wherewith each one
Is checker'd all along,
Humility:
The gentle rising, which on either hand
Leads to the quire above.
Is Confidence:
But the sweet cement, which in one sure band
Ties the whole frame, is Love
And Charity.

The gentle gravity of these lines of Herbert's (from *The [83] Church Floor*) is wholly serious in intention; yet it remains a fanciful, not an imaginative way of thinking. When Herbert's imagination awakes the effect is quite different; as in the closing lines of *The Collar*:

But as I raved, and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Methought I heard one calling "Child":
And I replied, "My Lord!"

The application of the distinction to imagery has been indicated by Coleridge himself¹⁵ and exhaustively discussed by I. A. Richards. But the principal significance of the Coleridgean concept of Imagination is not in this field, not in its use as a tool in the analysis of styles and images. It is in the connexion between the secondary and the primary imagination. If the poet's imagination is an echo, an analogy of the act which is the foundation of all knowledge and all perception, it occupies a more central position in the scheme of things than had hitherto been suspected. The poets had been revered before as leaders and teachers of mankind—but only because they provided living examples of virtues that were known without them; at worst they had been respected as honest entertainers. Coleridge's theory implies a claim that the poet is in possession of a voluntary power, which is in some sense one not only with the power that is active in all human perception, but is even a human analogy to the creative power of God. This is to exalt the position of the poetic imagination very high indeed, and to exalt the poet into a man with some special insight into the nature of things. It is no longer his duty to follow Nature by following the Ancients; he has private access to the secrets of Nature, because he is working by a power analogous to hers. Whether or in what sense this belief is true, we need not discuss. But we must record it as a historical phenomenon; for it forms the ideological foundation of romantic poetry. We can see in it the beginning of a split between the poet and the man of the world that was unknown to the eighteenth century, and that has [84] grown steadily more acute till our own day. The poet assumes the rôle of the prophet; and a stiff-necked and uncircumcised generation retaliates by reducing him to a social misfit; till at the close of the nineteenth century the poets retort upon the world by trying to cut art off from its social roots altogether. But this is for the future; in the Romantic age itself the Coleridgean doctrine of imagination provides the philosophic background for Shelley's dictum "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world".

One of the critical results of this faith is illustrated in Coleridge's Shakespeare criticism. To the eighteenth-century critics, Shakespeare had been a poet, pre-eminent among his fellows, but still a man as other men are, capable of lapses and errors. To Coleridge, Shakespeare is the supreme example of a central and supremely important faculty, and begins therefore to assume almost superhuman status. His lightest inconsistencies, his most obvious lapses of attention are not to be accounted for as we account for other human frailties, but to be justified as we justify the works of God to man. It is the beginning of Shakespeare idolatry—an exaggerated reverence which has been compensated in our day by a rather too self-consciously down-to-earth approach. There are some bad lapses into rigmarole and unctuousness in Coleridge's Shakespeare criticism; and they inspire at times a passing wish for the few clear concepts, the steady common sense of Johnson.

But it is only a passing wish. The work that could be done with the Johnsonian apparatus had been done. Augustan criticism had become a standing pool. Coleridge came to trouble the waters, and his operations, like those of the angel, brought an access of life and strength. His philosophy is the intellectual centre of the Romantic movement, and his criticism is a part of his philosophy. The artistic imagination is only one instance of a power by which the dead mechanistic world of later eighteenth-century thought was to be revived. *Biographia Literaria* must be supplemented by *Aids to Reflection* and *The Friend* if it is to be fully understood. It will not yield to impatient reading, but it is a book to which the serious student of poetry must constantly return, often to find new light in [85] places that before seemed exceedingly obscure. Gradually one comes to realize the unity of Coleridge's thought, and the strength that his criticism derives from the depth and range of his philosophic interests.

iv. Later Years

Almost the last momentous change in Wordsworth's outward life was the return to his own Lake country in 1799. Alfoxden saw the genesis of *Lyrical Ballads*, but Wordsworth's life was not re-established on its permanent foundations until he went back to Westmorland and settled with Dorothy at Town End at Grasmere. This was to be his home for the next eight years, and it is here that most of the poems of his great period were written. The daily life of the Wordsworths in these peaceful and productive years can best be seen in Dorothy's journals; and its dominant emotional experiences both

in the Westmorland eclogues like *Michael* and *The Brothers*, and the many smaller pieces, especially those written between 1800 and 1803. The major record, however, of the emotions with which they returned to their own country is to be found in the fragment of *The Recluse*—not published till 1888, long after Wordsworth’s death: but apparently written for the most part in 1800.¹⁶ Apart from *The Excursion*, it is all that was completed of the great tripartite work that he had planned at the beginning of his career. This rather shadowy project dominated the central years of Wordsworth’s life. But there is a significant change of tone between *The Recluse* of 1800 and *The Excursion* of 1814; and the change betrays the passing over of the young Wordsworth into the middle-aged man who commands less of our interest and sympathy.

The fragment of *The Recluse* consists largely of a description of the vale of Grasmere where they had come to live. It is filled with a radiant sense of homecoming, of complete participation both in the natural life of the place, and in the life of the other dwellers in the valley. It is the perfect appendix to *The Prelude*, but it is not a conclusion. It is at once a return to early pieties [86] and the start of something new. Apart from the joy in natural loveliness, perhaps the most important feeling in it is the sense of being again among one’s own people, of belonging, by every tie of affection and proximity, to a natural society.

we do not tend a lamp
Whose lustre we alone participate,
Which shines dependent upon us alone,
Mortal, though bright, a dying, dying flame.
Look where we will, some human hand has been
Before us with its offering; not a tree
Sprinkles these little pastures, but the same
Hath furnished matter for a thought; perchance
For some one serves as a familiar friend.

The fragment ends with the splendid Miltonic passage in which Wordsworth gives a visionary survey of his poetic intentions.

Of Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love and Hope,
And melancholy Fear subdued by Faith;
Of blessed consolations in distress;
Of moral strength and intellectual power;
Of joy in widest commonalty spread;
Of the individual Mind that keeps her own
Inviolable retirement, subject there
To Conscience only, and the law supreme
Of that Intelligence which governs all—
I sing
 Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic Main—why should they be
A history only of departed things.
Or a mere fiction of what never was?
For the discerning intellect of Man,
When wedded to this goodly Universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day. [87]

Much of this ambition is fulfilled in the shorter poems of the years before 1807; and indeed the two passages above are hardly too grandiose a description of the best of Wordsworth’s poetry. But according to the preface prefixed to *The Excursion* in 1814, these shorter poems were to be merely “the little cells, oratories and sepulchral recesses” attached to the great cathedral of which *The Prelude* was to be the antechapel. We must turn then to the only part of the great cathedral that was built—to *The Excursion*—to trace the progress of this splendid scheme.

But let us first remark that some of the little oratories are in a different style from the rest of the edifice. *The Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle* and *The White Doe of Rylstone* are wide departures

from the usual Wordsworthian plan. They take us into the age of chivalry; and they are fictions, not the direct commerce of the heart with “substantial things”. Yet both subdue the externals of romance to an essentially Wordsworthian purpose. Brougham Castle is based on the story of Lord Clifford, dispossessed in infancy and brought up by shepherds, at last restored to his estates. The minstrel’s song in which this is celebrated is in vigorous octosyllabics, owing something to Gray and something to Scott; but the essence of the poem is in the closing lines, spoken in the poet’s own person. The minstrel is simply hailing the return of a feudal lord: but Lord Clifford’s experiences among the shepherds have brought a development of his nature that his subjects do not suspect.

Love had he found in huts where poor men lie;
His daily teachers had been woods and rills;
The silence that is in the starry sky,
The sleep that is among the lonely hills.

—lines which might as well have come from the Leech-Gatherer or Michael as from a poem on a chivalric theme.

The beautiful and perhaps rather neglected poem, *The White Doe of Rylstone* is Wordsworth’s only attempt at a sustained romantic narrative. He tells us in a note that it had been thoughtlessly compared to Scott’s metrical romances, but he is himself perfectly clear about the difference. [88] Scott deals with adventure and external turns of fortune, and confines himself to that sphere. But “everything that is attempted by the principal persons in *The White Doe* fails, so far as its object is external and substantial. So far as it is moral and spiritual it succeeds”. The tale is apparently one of adventure and conflict. But the hero refuses to take sides, follows his father and brothers in their revolt, but goes unarmed and is determined not to fight. When their cause is lost, the heroine, his sister, finds her comfort and exaltation in following her brother’s injunction “not to interfere with the current of events, either to forward or delay them”. The doe who becomes her companion seems to be a natural symbol of the spirit of contemplation in which she ends her life. This is one of Wordsworth’s very few attempts at embodying his conceptions in a deliberately devised mythological form. It is characteristic that he should use his nearest approach to a story of action to enforce his most quietist lesson.

The *Excursion* appeared in 1814; but being a part of the plan that occupied Wordsworth’s mind for a great part of his life, it was not all composed at one time. Some of it is very early; the story of Margaret in Book I was partly written before 1795: it is therefore the predecessor of *Michael* and the other blank verse idylls. Book IV, lines 1207-1274 were written by 1798: Books II and III, with the rest of IV were planned and partly written in 1806. The remainder dates from 1811-14.¹⁷ For the most part, then, *The Excursion* belongs to Wordsworth’s early middle-age, and it was subject to much revision throughout his life. Its discursive parts are in externals similar to those of *The Prelude*—though now less personal. Wordsworth speaks not directly of the growth of his own mind, but through the mouths of assumed characters; and this is a loss of immediacy without any gain in dramatic force. He prefixed to *The Excursion* the closing lines of *The Recluse* fragment, beginning

On man, on nature, and on human life
Musing in solitude ...

Musing on man is not the same thing as re-creating one’s [89] experience; and the difference between reflection and energetic creation is seen everywhere in the contrast between *The Excursion* and *The Prelude*. There are few passages in *The Excursion* to compare with the moments of mystical exaltation, or the glowing presentations of physical joy in the early books of *The Prelude*. The best part of Wordsworth’s mind is the concrete part—the part that deals with immediate experience. In *The Prelude* that is what he is doing—retracing an actual course of development. In *The Excursion* he is excogitating an argument; his scheme is not given, it is constructed; and not only is the construction weak, but the organic weakness communicates itself to the style, and there is much flatness and diffusion. It is over the reading of *The Excursion* that the professed Wordsworthian and the unpartisan reader of poetry are most likely to part company.

What has happened to bring about the change? Failure of impulse, or the abnegation of his deepest-rooted convictions in favour of a conventionally conservative middle age, are the common explanations. Probably Wordsworth has explained it best himself—in the *Immortality Ode* and, more clearly, in the *Ode to Duty*. This dates from 1805; but it already contains within it the germs of Wordsworth's middle age. The poem first proclaims the happiness of those who act rightly from an instinctive joy and confidence:

There are who ask not if thine eye
Be on them; who in love and truth,
Where no misgiving is, rely
Upon the genial sense of youth.
Glad hearts! Without reproach or blot
Who do thy work, and know it not.

But when this happy self-trust begins to fail, the power of duty must be called in to supply its place. The sense of something lost is as clear as in the *Immortality Ode* (or, for that matter, in *Tintern Abbey*): and the poem ends with the same assertion that something else can be found which will be abundant recompense [90] for what has gone. There is no reason to doubt that Wordsworth was perfectly sincere in this. He did achieve a serenity and control in his middle years that was not achieved by any other of the romantic poets, and morally this is admirable: but unhappily what has been lost was what produced the poetry; and this Wordsworth never clearly saw. He hails with perfect genuineness a gain in conscious purpose; but as his earlier writing constantly tells us, he was not a poet in whom conscious purpose did the essential work. In *The Excursion* he is not one of those 'Who do thy work and know it not': he knows only too well what he is doing. He is expounding a personal philosophy of which he is clearly aware in advance; and his best poetry comes when something of which he is not yet clearly aware expresses itself through him.

But it is not a negligible philosophy. One who is in sympathy with the Wordsworthian ethos can read *The Excursion* with edification and a temperate pleasure: anyone who wishes to understand the nineteenth century must read it. It is one of the great reassertions of traditional values against the unhistorical rationalist optimism of the enlightenment. The principal characters are the Wanderer, one of Wordsworth's philosophers from humble life—a leech-gatherer grown improbably articulate and self-conscious; and the Solitary, one who has given himself to revolutionary hopes, suffered the inevitable disillusion, and has never found anything to take the place of what he now thinks to have been the false idealism of his youth. The purpose of the argument is to combat the Solitary's misanthropy and morbid isolation and bring him back to juster views. In this the Wanderer is abetted by the Pastor, who supplements the Wanderer's natural religion by urging the claims of revelation and a church establishment. Interspersed are many anecdotes, accounts of rural lives, in the familiar Wordsworthian vein, but rarely with much of the old inspiration. One would rather have them in the prose of Dorothy's journals than in this unpoetical poetry. The Wanderer's faith is that which we have already seen Wordsworth working out for himself—in *The Prelude*, *Tintern Abbey* and the fragment of *The Recluse*. And this, perhaps, is the key to the lack of poetical *élan* in *The Excursion*—[9] Wordsworth is expounding a philosophy which he is by now in possession of, fully formed: the poetry came in the process of forming it. But all the questions are now settled, and the Wanderer blows all the answers; and the Solitary's disillusions and despairs are only ninepins set up to be bowled over:

as no cause
Could e'er for such exalted confidence
Exist; so, none is now for fixed despair:
The two extremes are equally disowned
By reason: if with sharp recoil, from one
You have been driven far as its opposite,
Between them seek the point to build
Sound expectation.

—lines in which recollections of the eighteenth century and the coming Victorian *via media* are curiously mingled. Bits of the eighteenth century get rather oddly into the verse, too; indeed Wordsworth henceforth often seems to forget his earlier campaign against “poetic diction”.

What other spirit can it be that prompts
The gilded summer flies to mix and weave
Their sports together in the solar beam.
Or in the gloom of twilight hum their joy?
More obviously the self-same influence rules
The feathered kinds.

But the direction of the poem is towards the Victorian age: if it were more read, it would go far to reduce the supposition of a sharp break between the earlier romantic generation and those who began to write after 1830. The familiar Victorian problems begin to make their appearance—the growth of industrialism and its consequences, popular education; and the desire to find answers that will combine the possibility of progress with an emotional traditionalism. Especially typical is the process by which, after the magnificent entry of the Wanderer’s natural [92] religion, serenely deduced from universal experience, the whole of Anglican theology and church government is smuggled in behind it, and is found to fit so well into the landscape that it remains without any further examination of its credentials.

Indeed, *The Excursion* is a justification, in the light of Wordsworth’s own experience, of traditional ways of life, of traditional morals and traditional pieties. It assumes that the essential conditions in which human nature will find its satisfaction are already known, and that they will not change. To that extent it is unprogressive, and quite different from the faith with which the young Wordsworth had beheld human nature seeming born again. But Wordsworth’s later Toryism is not mainly political: it results from the need to find his intuitions embodied in institutions and in a way of life. A mystical experience inspired by the contemplation of Nature was at the heart of his sensibility; but man cannot live by nature-mysticism alone, and Wordsworth is seeking in *The Excursion* a pattern of human life in which his natural religion can find its proper setting.

Beyond *The Excursion* we need hardly follow him. At this point his ideas were formed and settled. His best poetry had been a product of their development: now that the development is complete the poetry almost stops. Wordsworth wrote a great many verses after 1815, and was to live for forty years more, a serene and well-organized existence: but apart from some repetition of earlier lyric themes, and occasional fine sonnets, there is nothing in the remainder of his work that we could not well spare.

By unregenerate radicals who had kept their earlier political ideals raw and untempered this was seen as Nemesis overtaking the poet for treachery to his revolutionary past; and the “Lost Leader” tradition persisted into the next age, as we can see in Browning’s poem. Did not Wordsworth accept the patronage of Lord Lonsdale and Sir George Beaumont, and, ultimately, a Crown sinecure? He did indeed: but the lines

Just for a handful of silver he left us
Just for a riband to stick in his coat [93]

become quite absurd when we recall that Wordsworth had forsaken revolutionary liberalism years before he became Distributor of Stamps for the county of Westmorland. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge were more deferential to Sir George Beaumont than was altogether appropriate, but there is no ground for the supposition that they had sold themselves to the ruling class. The case of Coleridge is indeed different. He achieved none of Wordsworth’s semi-official status; he spent a philosophic old age, of social obscurity but astonishing intellectual influence; and his later views were so original, and so far from conventional Toryism, that it would be fantastic to suggest that he developed into a complacent supporter of the *status quo*.

There is no more to record of Coleridge’s poetical history. In 1816, after a period of miserable disintegration, he found refuge in the household of the kindly Dr. Gillman at Highgate, thought of finishing *Christabel*, but never did; and developed into the Table-Talker, the thinker aloud. Yet it was

in this period that he had his greatest effect on the thought of his time, and it was the works of this period, *Aids to Reflection* (1825), *On the Constitution of Church and State* (1840), and *The Confessions of an Enquiring Spirit* (posthumously published, 1840), that were to exercise such an immense influence on the young intellectuals of the rising Victorian generation. Coleridge's influence is very fully recorded in John Stuart Mill's essay but its extent is still, perhaps, not generally realized, and we must find room for a word on his later ideas.

In general, he was moving in the same direction as Wordsworth, but independently, for there was little intercourse between them after 1810. Like Wordsworth, he passed from an indefinite uninstitutional religion to a firm support of the Anglican establishment; and to a respect for something like the traditional hierarchy of English society, or rather, a sort of Platonic idea of English society. But his reaction from revolutionary radicalism was both more violent and more intellectual than Wordsworth's, and instead of finding an alternative in an established pattern of life, he sought it in German idealist philosophy. The vexed question of his relation with the German transcendentalists [94] cannot concern us here; what is important is that he evolved, whether from this source, or from his own inner consciousness, a type of religious apologetic that was to form the staple of Victorian broad-church thought, and was not without its influence even on the Oxford movement. It is a thorough-going subjectivism: Christianity is defended, not by external proofs, but by its correspondence with the needs of the human heart.

Evidences of Christianity! I am weary of the word. Make a man feel the *want* of it; rouse him to the need of it; and you may safely trust it to its own *evidence*.

This passage, from the conclusion of *Aids to Reflection*, points clearly enough to *In Memoriam*, where the ultimate answer to religious difficulties is "The heart stood up and answered 'I have felt'." Among Coleridge's Highgate disciples were F. D. Maurice, John Sterling and Julius Hare, all leading lights of Tennysonian Cambridge; so the influence was probably direct enough. In *The Confessions of an Enquiring Spirit* is a proposal for a more liberal interpretation of Scripture: and when, in years to come, evolutionary theory and the higher criticism came to threaten the Christian position, its defenders found in Coleridge's work weapons ready to their hand.

Socially, Coleridge's thought is equally remarkable. In *The Constitution of Church and State*, he carries on the work of Burke in opposing, to Jacobin theories of equality and natural rights, the notion of society as an organism—not a Marxian battle ground of conflicting class interests, or a Godwinian concourse of individualisms, but an interrelated whole, whose parts only have meaning in relation to the whole. In this conception, the Church, as the organized expression of the nation's learning and piety, plays an important part: and it is worth noting that both Wordsworth and Coleridge, apart from any devotional sentiment, conceived a perfectly clear political admiration for the Church as a national institution. In his consciousness of the threat to traditional values of the Benthamite ideology of the new manufacturers, Coleridge resembles the Wordsworth of *The [95] Excursion*: and both look forward to the Carlyle of *Past and Present* and the Ruskin of *Unto This Last*. The common picture of Coleridge as wasting into deliquescence after a few brief flashes of poetical greatness is quite untrue. Though it is outside our field, it should be recorded here that recent work on Coleridge has all tended to re-emphasize his philosophical importance; a closer study of Victorian letters must continue to reveal his dominant influence in later nineteenth-century thought—and how mistaken is the patronage sometimes bestowed on his supposedly wasted powers.

NOTES

Chapter II. Wordsworth and Coleridge

1. I owe most of what is said in these paragraphs to Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* and *The Eighteenth Century Background*, The latter especially should be consulted for the development of the idea of Nature.

2. References to *The Prelude* are to the 1805 version.

3. In Brailsford, *Shelley, Godwin and their Circle*; and in Harper, *William Wordsworth*, I, 253-260.

4. This was not Coleridge's view; he already thought Wordsworth the first poet of the age; and it is true that the story of Margaret in *Excursion*, Book I had already been begun. Wordsworth had thus begun to develop his austere blank-verse manner before meeting Coleridge.

5. *Biog. Lit.*, Chap. XIV,

6. See Lionel Trilling, "The Immortality Ode", in *The Liberal Imagination*, 1951.

7. See the essay "Wordsworth in the Tropics", in *Do What You Will*,

8. He designedly omits speculations of this kind; v. *Road to Xanadu*, note, p. 400.

9. See Fenwick note to "We are Seven".

10. Coleridge, *Table-Talk*, May 31, 1830.

11. It is discussed from this point of view in Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*. For other studies of A. M. see G. Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome*, 1941; and E. M. W. Tillyard, *Five Poems*, 1948. (Re-issued as *Poetry and its Background*, 1955.)

12. But this has been doubted. On this, and K. K. in general see E. Schneider, *The Dream of Kubla Khan*, Publication of Modern Language Association of America, 1945.

13. In *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal*.

14. *Biog. Lit.*, ed. Shawcross. See the detailed and learned introduction. [96] Also I. A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination* (1934), where Coleridge's doctrines are discussed from a very un-Coleridgean philosophical standpoint; and D. G. James, *Scepticism and Poetry*, 1937, where Richards's views are criticized.

15. V. Raysor, *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, I, 213; and Richards, *op. cit.*

16. See *Works*, ed. de Selincourt, V, 475.

17. *ibid.* V, 369-72.

18. In *Dissertations and Discussions*; also *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*, ed. F. R. Leavis.