

# The Charles Lamb Bulletin

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## Contents

DICK WATSON: The 2005 Elian Birthday Toast	26
<i>Articles</i>	
PAMELA WOOF: The Solitary Poet at Home	28
RICHARD S. TOMLINSON: Pivotal Points in Coleridge's <i>Opus Maximum</i>	43
<i>Reviews</i>	
CONSTANCE PARRISH. <i>Isabella Lickbarrow: Collected Poems and a Biographical Study</i>	56
<i>Society Notes and News from Members</i>	
CHAIRMAN'S NOTES: <i>The Annual General Meeting</i>	59

## The 2005 Elian Birthday Toast

By DICK WATSON

The 2005 Elian Birthday Toast was held on Saturday, 19 February at the Royal College of General Practitioners, South Kensington, London

ON AN OCCASION SUCH AS A BIRTHDAY LUNCH, it is natural to think of anniversaries. It is this which was in my mind when I reflected that exactly two hundred years ago, to the day, on 19 February 1805, Charles Lamb was writing to William Wordsworth. It was the second letter in two days, referring to the death of Wordsworth's brother John in the shipwreck of the *Earl of Abergavenny* off Portland. It was an event which affected the poet, and indeed the whole family, very deeply, and which was only partially resolved in the 'Elegiac Stanzas' which Wordsworth wrote after seeing Sir George Beaumont's picture of Peele Castle in a Storm.

As Richard E. Matlak has shown in *Deep Distresses*, John Wordsworth had, by dint of hard work and good conduct, risen to become the captain of an East Indiaman. A captain in such a position stood to gain much from a voyage, and John had hoped to get enough money to set the family up in comfort. He required capital from the venture, and both William and Dorothy invested money in it. The ship set sail from Portsmouth on 1 February, and ran into bad weather. The pilot tried to run for shelter, but the ship struck a rock at four o'clock in the afternoon of 5 February. According to one account, John Wordsworth is supposed to have said, 'Oh Pilot! Pilot! You have ruined me!' Some of the crew and passengers got ashore in boats, but of the 402 passengers on board only 100 were saved.

The news reached the East India House on 7 February. On that day, Charles Lamb found a crowd of people outside as he went to work at seven o'clock. The news reached Grasmere on the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup>. Wordsworth wrote immediately to two people, Lamb and Beaumont (he would probably have written first to Coleridge, but he was in Malta).

Lamb wrote back on the 18<sup>th</sup>. He had obviously realised what the news would mean as soon as he heard it on the 7<sup>th</sup>, but had not liked to write, perhaps out of a delicacy of feeling, or perhaps from some inner compulsions of his own:

the subject of your letter has never been out of our thoughts since the day we first heard of it, and many have been our impulses towards you, to write to you, or to write to enquire about you; but it never seemed the time. We felt all your situation, and how much you would want Coleridge at this time, and we wanted somehow to make up to you his absence, for we loved & honoured your Brother, & his death always occurs to my mind with something like a feeling of reproach, as if we ought to have been nearer acquainted, & as if there had been some incivility shewn him by us, or something short of that respect which we now feel: but this is always a feeling, when people die, and I should not foolishly offer a piece of refinement, instead of sympathy, if I knew any other way of making you feel how little like indifferent his loss has been to us. I have been for some time wretchedly ill & low, and your letter this morning has affected me so with a pain in my inside & a confusion, that I hardly know what to write or how.

Lamb's sensitivity is extraordinary here. First, the sense of not wanting to intrude upon grief; then the acknowledgment that Coleridge would have been the man to whom the Wordsworths would have turned; then the wondering whether John Wordsworth had been neglected by the Lambs, because they had not known him as well as they should; and then the acknowledgment that he (Lamb) was writing about himself and his feelings rather than offering sympathy. It is a paragraph which twists and turns through every refinement of feeling and delicacy.

Lamb was in a unique position to help, because the East India House was full of the survivors who were being questioned. He had, he said, already seen Stewart, the Second Mate, who could tell him nothing; and by the Saturday he had seen Thomas Gilpin, the Fourth Mate, who gave him a rather better account. Newspaper reports began to circulate which suggested that John Wordsworth was so confounded by the loss of his hopes that he had made no attempt to save himself, saying only 'God's will be done'. Lamb hastened to assure Wordsworth that Gilpin thought otherwise; and during the month that followed, and right through until April, Lamb was sending accounts and evidence that he hoped would reassure Wordsworth of his brother's good conduct, which some newspaper reports had begun to question.

All this is the more remarkable for the indisposition which Lamb refers to in the first letter: 'a pain in my inside & a confusion'. The next day, 19 February, he was 'very unwell', and had permission to stay off work for a few days. One can guess at the reason. When Wordsworth wrote, as he did to Beaumont, of a family tragedy, and that 'the set is broken', Lamb must have found himself re-living his own terrible family tragedy of 1796. All the emotions of that dreadful time must have resurfaced. And yet he busied himself on Wordsworth's behalf, asking questions, sifting reports, putting the best construction on events that he could.

And, of course, he recovered his humour, if not his balance, immediately, although no-one knows what that humour concealed. As Talfourd said, 'no one, acquainted with Lamb's story, will wonder at the eccentric wildness of his mirth – his violent changes from the serious to the farcical – the sudden reliefs of the "heat oppressed brain"'. By 24 February Lamb was writing one of his funniest letters to Manning on the subject of a present of brawn from the cook at Trinity Hall and Caius Colleges in Cambridge. He might have sent all sorts of things, said Lamb, but brawn I could not refuse:

He might have sent, sops from the pan, skimmings, crumplets, chips, hog's lard, the tender brown judiciously scraped from a fillet of veal ... the tops of asparagus, fugitive livers, runaway gizzards of fowls ... the red spawn of lobsters, leveret's ears, and such petty filchings common to cooks: but these had been ordinary presents, the every-day courtesies of Dish-washers to their sweet hearts. Brawn was a noble thought.

In the midst of grief we have to hold on to something, with all the courage that we can muster. And to see Lamb in February 1805 is to marvel at his sensitivity, and also at his bravery. It is in that spirit that I invite you to rise and drink the toast to THE IMMORTAL MEMORY OF CHARLES LAMB.

## The Solitary Poet at Home

By PAMELA WOOF

The Muse nae Poet ever fand her,  
Till by himsel' he learn'd to wander,  
Adown some trottin' burn's meander,  
An' No' Think Lang;  
O sweet, to stray an' pensive ponder  
A heart-felt sang!

(Burns, 'Epistle to William Simpson', stanza 15)

SO WORDSWORTH, QUOTING THE FIRST FOUR LINES of this stanza by Burns in the Postscript to his *River Duddon Sonnets* (1820), and pointing out that Coleridge too had, in the early Quantock days of more than twenty years previous, thought of this same verse as the motto for his own unwritten poem, 'The Brook'. It is as though it was agreed among poets that the Muse comes only to the writer who 'by himsel' [had] learn'd to wander / Adown some trottin' burn's meander'.

In this instance of the River Duddon – to speak literally – it was long before Wordsworth learned to wander by it after his first experience of fishing there as a boy, 'the rain pouring torrents', the 'very sorry success' of the fishing, and the long exhausting walk back, the 'good man' from Hawkshead who had taken him angling, having mainly to carry him. 'For many years', he wrote, 'I never thought of the Duddon without recollections of disappointment and distress' (*Fenwick Notes*, 30-31). As a young man, however, in the late 1780s Wordsworth did wander by that river when staying with his cousin, Mary Wordsworth Smith at Broughton, but the episodes he recalls in the 1820 *Duddon Sonnets* are of wandering there, not alone, but in company. He evokes his soon to be dead cousin, Mary:

Whence that low voice? A whisper from the heart,  
That told of days long past, when here I roved  
With friends and kindred tenderly beloved; (*The River Duddon*, Sonnet 21)

It was with 'friends and kindred tenderly beloved' that Wordsworth made subsequent excursions to the Duddon: with Dorothy, 1794 and 1804; with Coleridge and Sara Hutchinson in 1808; with his wife Mary in 1811; and later again, with Mary, his daughter Dora, Miss Fenwick and the Quillinans. The walking with friends was an old pleasure. In boyhood days at Hawkshead before early morning school, Wordsworth had

. . . travelled round our little lake, five miles  
Of pleasant wandering – happy time, more dear  
For this, that one was by my side, a friend  
Then passionately loved. (*Prelude* 1805, II, 350-53)

This schoolboy friend, John Fleming, would be replaced as a walking companion by Wordsworth's Cambridge friend, Robert Jones, by Coleridge, briefly by his brother John, by Mary, and sometimes by Sara Hutchinson, and most of all by his sister Dorothy. Wordsworth liked walking with people he loved. Companionship was important.

He also knew solitude. He describes in *The Prelude* how, rapturous among the boys skating on frozen Esthwaite Water,

I wheeled about,  
Proud and exulting like an untired horse,  
That cares not for its home. (*ibid.*, I, 458-60)

Yet, 'Not seldom from the uproar I retired' (*ibid.*, 474), wrote Wordsworth, moving in one moment from the 'tumultuous throng' of schoolboy skaters and the ringing noise, to his individual experience of a sudden braking at speed, a halting, and the consequent illusion of a rush of landscape wheeling by – it was the landscape now that wheeled, not the boy – and the revelation, to him only, of the mighty movements of the earth. Such transitions from the communal to the self and back again with an almost simultaneous awareness of both states are embedded in the texture of the *Prelude*: the single wren that sang to itself so sweetly in Furness Abbey could provoke thoughts that moved beyond the ruined historical church to a dwelling that was eternal:

there I could have made  
My dwelling-place, and lived forever there  
To hear such music. (*ibid.*, II, 133-5)

Even as the real boys, vivid and time-bound, Wordsworth amongst them, their steeds remounted, flew through the walls and scampered homeward (*ibid.*, 125-38).

The single contrasting with the group, the timeless with the historical is not however a requirement for knowing intense moments of solitude. Solitude by itself was also a habit: 'I would walk alone / In storm and tempest or in starlight nights / Beneath the quiet Heavens . . . I would stand / Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are / The ghostly language of the ancient earth . . .'. This aloneness and this listening, even to 'drink[ing] the visionary power' (*ibid.*, 321-8) is the equivalent of finding the Muse when, in Burns's words, the poet 'by himsel' has learn'd to wander, / Adown some trottin' burn's meander / An' No' Think Lang'.

Wordsworth combined in his temperament a delight in the right kind of company and the knowledge that

Points have we all of us within our souls  
Where all stand single; this I feel . . . (*ibid.*, III, 186-7)

and feeling for Wordsworth was the strongest sort of knowledge. This recognition of our unalterable aloneness, along with our pleasure in being with chosen others, is one we most of us acknowledge, and, for us too, it is as powerful in the context of home as in the outdoor natural world.

Wordsworth lived with his sister Dorothy in their first shared home as adults at Racedown, Dorset, in 1795. He was twenty-five. The title of this article is 'The Solitary Poet at Home', and this might conjure up such a picture as that, say, of Thomas Hardy, a writer daily immured in his study for hours, the study itself a silent room in a silent house. But Wordsworth, probably our finest poet of solitude and solitaires, was himself by no means habitually solitary, was not for a long time 'at home', nor even totally confident for years that he would succeed in being a poet.

First, a glimpse of Wordsworth before he had a home. About to take his Cambridge degree in January 1791, he stayed for six weeks over Christmas at Uncle William Cookson's rectory at Fornsett, Norfolk, where his sister was living. Even there, something of the pattern of the brother and sister's future home-life began:

. . . we used to walk every morning about two hours, and every evening we went into the garden at four or half past four and used to pace backwards and forwards till six . . . (Dorothy Wordsworth to Jane Pollard, 23 May 1791, *EY* 47)<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth then ‘prepared’ for his imminent degree examinations by spending the week previous to them reading Richardson’s novel *Clarissa Harlowe*. Two years later, and not having seen her brother since, Dorothy still recalled that Forncett walking:

Nothing but Rain or Snow prevented our taking this walk. Often have I gone out when the keenest North Wind has been whistling amongst the Trees over our Heads . . . (16 June 1793, *EY* 96)

The walking and the talking, ‘long long conversations’, writes Dorothy (*ibid.*) had been established, but it was some years before they could be repeated. Wordsworth, after Forncett and Cambridge, was for four months in London in 1791, a young man far indeed from home:

. . . pitched my vagrant tent,  
A casual dweller and at large, among  
The unfenced regions of society.  
Yet undetermined to what plan of life  
I should adhere . . . (*Prelude* 1805, VII, 60-4)

Later, and after other visits to the capital, time and memory would sort out

. . . the quick dance  
Of colours, lights and forms, the Babel din,  
The endless stream of men and moving things (*ibid.*, 156-8)

that was London, and the ‘weight and power’ through history of the city (*ibid.*, VIII, 705), but at the time, Wordsworth’s outward life gave little hint of what was being absorbed, images that would later feed the vital London passages of the *Prelude*. He told his friend Mathews, on 17 June 1791, that his time passed in London

. . . in a strange manner; sometimes whirled about by the vortex of its *strenua inertia*, and sometimes thrown by the eddy into a corner of the stream, where I lay in almost motionless indolence. Think not however that I had not many very pleasant hours . . .  
(*EY* 49)

He laments, but not too troublingly, ‘how much of my time has lately passed unconnected with reading’ and concludes that Learning would be a most desirable attainment ‘if the time exacted for it were not so great’ (*ibid.*). A walking tour into North Wales with Robert Jones and a visit with him to Jones’s parents at Plas-yn-Llan, Denbighshire, for three months hardly helped to give Wordsworth a sense of purpose; he managed to read, he told Mathews, another novel, *Tristram Shandy*, and ‘two or three papers of the *Spectator*’:

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, *The Early Years, 1787-1805*, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967); hereafter *EY*.

. . . the truth of the matter is that when in Town I did *little*, and since I came here I have done nothing . . . I rather think that my gaiety encreases with my ignorance . . .  
(3 August 1791, *EY* 56)

But, within two years, by June 1793, Wordsworth had been in France, his child by Annette Vallon was born, the Terror had turned the French Revolution sour; the French King was executed, England was at war, and Wordsworth back in England; his two long descriptive poems were in print and Dorothy was still in Norfolk, dreaming, she told her old Halifax friend Jane Pollard, of ‘the Day of my Felicity, the Day in which I am once more to find a Home under the same Roof with my Brother’ (16 June 1793, *EY* 93). Unfortunately, she continued, William ‘has not yet got any settled Employment. He is looking out and wishing for the opportunity of engaging himself as Tutor to some young Gentleman . . .’ (*ibid.*, 95). Wordsworth was still ‘looking out’ when he met Dorothy again some eight months later, in February 1794 in Halifax. She had not seen him since the winter walks at Fornsett three years before. The brother and sister were now for some four months in each other’s company: at Halifax; at Windy Brow, Keswick; and visiting relations. Dorothy spent the winter months of early 1795 at Newcastle, and the summer in Halifax. It was a wandering life for both of them, and hardly surprising that she rejoiced, and knew that Jane Pollard (now Jane Marshall) would rejoice too in

. . . the prospect which at last opens before me [September 1795], of having, at least for a time a comfortable home, in a house of my own. You know the pleasure which I have always attached to the idea of home . . . (2 and 3 September 1795, *EY* 146)

The home was at Racedown Lodge in Dorset and the rich Pinney brothers had let it to Wordsworth (unbeknown to their father, rent-free). William and Dorothy stayed almost two years.

There was little society at Racedown and Wordsworth clearly felt this as a lack:

. . . [we are] both as happy as people can be who live in perfect solitude. We do not see a soul. Now and then we meet a miserable peasant in the road or an accidental traveller. The country people here are wretchedly poor; ignorant and overwhelmed with every vice that usually attends ignorance in that class, viz – lying and picking and stealing &c &c. Yesterday I walked over to Lyme not without a hope of meeting Leader, but I was disappointed. I therefore returned to dinner. Nota bene. Lyme is at least eight miles and a half from Racedown. (20 October 1795, *EY* 154)

The Irish law student, friend of Mathews, Montagu and the Tobins, Nicholas Leader, did in fact ride (not walk) over to Racedown in a day or two, but ‘I could not prevail upon him even to stay all night. I should have been glad of his company for as long as he would have made it convenient to stay’ (24 October 1795, *EY* 155). A similar appeal went out to Wrangham within a few weeks in late November, ‘Will you come and help us?’ They had, said Wordsworth, to ‘manufacture’ society (20 November 1795, *EY* 159). They looked forward to Montagu at Christmas, but he was, it turned out, too ill to come. Apart from Wordsworth’s very brief visit to Bristol ‘to see those two extraordinary young men, Southey and Coleridge’ in early November (*EY* 156), and a visit from the Pinney brothers at Christmas, the Wordsworths had no company at Racedown until the Pinney brothers came for a second visit in spring 1796. ‘We plant cabbages’, wrote Wordsworth, and he joked that retirement might work transformations and ‘into cabbages we shall be transformed’ (21 March 1796, *EY* 169). He handles ‘the spade with great dexterity’, confirmed Dorothy (*EY* 163); they lived, declared Wordsworth, ‘upon air and the essence of

carrots cabbages turnips and other esculent vegetables, not excluding parsley' (25 February 1797, *EY* 178). Wordsworth hewed wood and rooted up hedges; it was all good preparation for home life at Dove Cottage where part only of an ode could be written at breakfast before 'Wm went to work in the garden' because 'Mr Olliff had sent the Dung' (27 March 1802). And Dung will not wait.

Apart from a need for company, the solitude of Racedown made Wordsworth long for newspapers, and he made two appeals to Wrangham to try to get the *Morning Chronicle* sent him, 'as we only see here a provincial weekly paper, and I cannot afford to have the Chronicle at my own expense' (20 November 1795, *EY* 159). Newspapers, he wrote, 'would be a great amusement to us in the depth of our present solitude' (7 March 1796, *EY* 168). He begged Mathews to visit, and at the least to send 'some news about the theatre' (21 March 1796, *EY* 171). The Sherborne, Dorset, *Weekly Entertainer*, the provincial weekly paper Wordsworth mentions, had of course its own interest: Wordsworth was to send a letter to the Editor in October 1796 assuring readers of the spuriousness of certain writing purporting to be by Fletcher Christian, and the following spring the popular French lyrical novel *Paul et Virginie* in Helen Maria Williams's translation was to be serialised in the paper. Wordsworth undoubtedly, and Dorothy probably, knew St Pierre's novel already; its local printing would re-inforce its power to move, through its elegiac feelings, its accounts of the creation of a wild natural garden, and of the strength of an almost sibling relationship. But the Sherbourne *Weekly Entertainer* was not the paper Wordsworth wanted.

Lack of society and lack of serious newspapers left him in the quietness of Racedown to his own books and the books that were there. The Pinneys had, in Wordsworth's words, 'a very tolerable library here . . . Machiavel Boccacio, D'avila and several other italian Books' (24 October 1795, *EY* 155). Dorothy, with Wordsworth's help, was studying Italian, and by March 1796 they had begun reading Ariosto. There were also many English works. The Pinneys' visit of spring disturbed the 'usual regularity' (7 March 1796, *EY* 165) of their reading. 'I was tolerably industrious in reading', wrote Wordsworth, 'if reading can ever deserve the name of industry, till our good friends the Pinneys came amongst us; and I have since *returned* to my books. As to writing it is out of the question' (21 March 1796, *EY* 169). Writing was not entirely out of the question of course: Wordsworth re-wrote his radical *Salisbury Plain* and did some of his version of Juvenal, but there is no real thrust to the writing until the latter part of 1796 and at that point Dorothy's friend Mary Hutchinson came to stay and remained six months. The solitary poet was less alone, now wrote intensely, decided against seeking pupils as a basis for a livelihood, and became most cheerful. This would be the pattern at Grasmere, both when Mary visited before marriage and after she became Wordsworth's wife in October 1802. At Racedown, during Mary's first long visit, Dorothy described Mary as

. . . one of the best girls in the world and we are as happy as human beings can be; that is when William is at home [he had gone with Montagu to Bristol for a fortnight] . . . he is as chearful as anybody can be; perhaps you may not think it but he is the life of the whole house . . . (19 March 1797, *EY* 181)

This final and cheerful period at Racedown was creative, and then, hardly had Mary left in early June 1797 than Coleridge came, and the Wordsworths were taken up in a whirlwind and found themselves before long in another house, another home, Alfoxden. It is well known that at Alfoxden Wordsworth had company enough. The child Basil Montagu and their good helper Peggy Marsh were part of the household as at Racedown, and only four miles away was Coleridge, and all the talk, visitors, friends, excursions that Coleridge generated. There was the reading to and listening to Coleridge, the sharing of Wordsworth's near-documentary *Salisbury Plain*, his play *The Borderers*, the elegiac narrative *The Ruined Cottage* – poems that had come out of the impulse to write in the last months at Racedown. There



were the shared walks over the Quantocks, the conversations about nature's distant prospects and its details; there was the admiration of each poet for the other; there were the joint plans for *Lyrical Ballads*. Dorothy was part of it all.

She begins her Journal of this time halfway through it, in the latter half of January, when Coleridge was away in Shrewsbury for a few weeks. She records – perhaps indeed for Coleridge who could not be with them – walk after walk shared with Wordsworth: night walks, moonscapes, winds in the woods, seascapes. She and Wordsworth clearly talked together, and within their differences of prose and poetry, they often used the same language, the language probably of their conversation, to describe these landscapes and skylines. If Wordsworth unusually took a walk alone – ‘William walked to the top of the hill to see the sea’ – he immediately came back and told his sister how he found the view. If he saw a moon rainbow he called her quickly to share it with him. When Coleridge returned in early February the three of them walked and talked together, not every single day, but many days one after another as before.

Where then is the solitary poet during these Alfoxden days of friendship and literary relationship? The solitude is not in the life but in the poetry. It is in the imaginative world that the solitude that was a part of Wordsworth is expressed. That world, in a way, is his Wessex. This is a vein that had begun to be felt at Racedown and particularly after Mary Hutchinson came to stay for the last six months and Wordsworth was cheerful, ‘the life of the whole house’. Out of this cheerful time comes the first drafting of *The Ruined Cottage*, that most sad study of a woman truly solitary, broken by longing for the husband who thought it best to join the army and leave her with the King's shilling. Despair makes her gradually like her house, reft ‘by frost and thaw and rain . . .’.

. . . and when she slept the nightly damps  
 Did chill her breast, and in the stormy day  
 Her tattered clothes were ruffled by the wind  
 Even at the side of her own fire. (*Ruined Cottage*, 483-6)

She simply sinks into the elements, and dies. The solitude is in ‘The Baker's Cart’ fragment where the bereft woman with five hungry children is abandoned even by the baker's cart which, as its horse knew, had been accustomed to stop at her door. ‘That wagon does not care for us’ was all she said. The solitude – and the futility of a bitter kind of solitude – is in ‘Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew Tree’, an account of a man who turned with rash disdain away from society and ‘sustained his soul / In solitude’, with, had not the poet written his poem, only a seat left as a memorial to what could have been an enriched and enriching life.

At Alfoxden there was both more imagined solitude and more actual activity than at Racedown. Alfoxden was Racedown intensified: within the space of one year, not two, both far more company and half a *Lyrical Ballads* volume of poems that stressed the solitary and abandoned. Beyond the walks, talks, visitors, pedestrian tours, Wordsworth was still throwing out invitations: ‘how happy we shall be to see you here’, he wrote to Joseph Cottle, Coleridge's publisher, ‘and’, he added, ‘any of your friends who you may chuse to bring along with you’ (18 August 1797, *EY* 191), and a month later, the same, ‘if you can manage to come over . . . we shall be *very glad* to see you’ (13 September 1797). Cottle did not in fact come over until the following May (1798) and he was able then to take back copy to Bristol for the joint *Lyrical Ballads*. Others came and stayed a few days: Montagu, the Pinney brothers, Wedgwood, Tobin, Charles Lloyd, the Coleridges as a family, Hazlitt.

Yet of course there was time for reading: Wordsworth thanked Tobin for sending him a copy of the eighteenth-century play *Gustavus Vasa*, ‘very acceptable to me in this solitude’ (6 March 1798, *EY* 210).

He begged for books of travels, he wanted Godwin's *Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*, and determined to make more time in the day by getting up earlier:

He gets up between seven and eight in the mornings and I dare say will continue it for he is fully convinced of the relaxing tendency of lying in bed so many hours.

(Dorothy Wordsworth to Mary Hutchinson, 5 March 1798)

And there was time to move into the inside world, the imagined world of the solitary and abandoned: Wordsworth wrote at Alfoxden 'The Discharged Soldier', 'Old Man Travelling' (later 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'), 'The Thorn', 'The Mad Mother', 'The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman', 'The Idiot Boy', that tale of a child who was solitary because he was locked into his own mind, and, uniquely for Wordsworth's solitaires, was positively and innocently happy; he resurrected 'The Female Vagrant' from *Salisbury Plain*, expanded *The Ruined Cottage* and engaged in his long study of the alienated, isolated and criminal Peter Bell. The *Alfoxden Journal*, incidentally, does not indicate that all this – and more – composition and revision took it out of Wordsworth. Only once does Dorothy comment: 'William all the morning engaged in wearisome composition. The moon crescent; Peter Bell begun' (20 April 1798). A letter of the time tells us more: 'William was very unwell last week, oppressed with languor, and weakness', she told Mary Hutchinson, 5 March 1798, and certainly, from comments in the *Grasmere Journal*, we know that Wordsworth was often sleepless and unwell during periods of composition and particularly of revision. Freedom from this in the *Alfoxden Journal* is no doubt owing to the first editor, William Knight's omissions in 1897 of such details as he considered ill-suited to the *gravitas* and dignity of his Victorian subject. Intimate glimpses of the solitary poet's physical discomforts at home were not welcome.

The Alfoxden experience confirmed Racedown's: the solitary experience comes largely from within; the outer experience was often shared and cheerful. Occasionally, shared direct experience and shared conversation could find fairly immediate transference into writing: in Dorothy's case, on 25 January 1798, we have her description of that night's sky. As a writer she conveys her pleasure in the moon's sudden untrammelled presence in a clear sky only, after passive verbs and participles, by making use of an emphatic main verb, 'She [the moon] sailed along'. Wordsworth wrote characteristically too of the same experience, using many of the same words and phrases; in his poem 'A Night-Piece', he turned the shared experience into a solitary one, giving it to a 'musing man' and having this dramatic character register and ponder upon the complex excitement of the moon's sudden and brief sailing out from behind clouds and into an open sky. The shared looking and the shared conversation have become, despite similarities of vocabulary, the expressions of individual and separate minds; in both cases there has to be a move to mental solitude.

It is difficult to think of either Wordsworth or Dorothy as 'at home' in Goslar, Germany, from the end of 1798. Dorothy, having been mistress of two houses, and having had the child Basil Montagu to care for, was suddenly in that excessively cold winter of 1798-9 left with little to do and found it even difficult to walk out because of cold. The Wordsworths had almost no society – an émigré Priest who was French, an apprentice of the house who sat with them in an evening, and 'one dear and kind creature', but so 'miserably deaf' and without teeth, that, far from speaking the language, 'we could only play with him games of cross-purposes'. They had no money to entertain and little spoken German was learnt; there was no *en pension* arrangement and, wrote Wordsworth, 'we have been compelled to be alone together at meal-times &c' (5 February 1799). It was confining. They had only their very few books. Wordsworth wrote at length to Coleridge about the poet Bürger, Dorothy learnt some German from a grammar book, and Wordsworth told Coleridge, 'I have been obliged to write in self-defence (14 or 21 December 1798). Stress was a consequence of this writing, of course: 'an uneasiness at my

stomach and side, with a dull pain about my heart', but, retreating into his boyhood, Wordsworth evoked in over 400 blank verse lines the Lake District and the momentous experiences of his early life. Accounts of woodcock-snaring, of hooting to the owls, boat-stealing, becoming lost on Penrith Beacon, and of other seminal memories were composed and they later formed Part I of the 1799 Two-Part *Prelude*. Most of the passages were concerned with the boy solitary in his relationship with the natural world. Short poems were also written in Goslar and these included the meditative Lucy poems, explorations within a fiction of a solitude and a withdrawal so perfect that the poet (and the reader) comes to understand that, beyond loss, there is a comfort in being dead, in being beyond the senses, being able neither to hear nor see, having forever, in the words of another Lucy poem, 'the silence and the calm / Of mute insensate things' ('Three years she grew'). The dead have this calm, and the living know about it, and thus can keep the dead – or even the living who have gone, or largely gone, out of one's life, as by 1798 had Annette Vallon for Wordsworth, unchanging and permanent in the memory. And it is memory, whether particular, as in the childhood passages, or abstractly as in the Lucy poems, that was behind Wordsworth's creative energy in solitary Goslar. Memory had been the new force behind 'Tintern Abbey', written not long before the Wordsworths left for Germany, and memory continued to inspire.

Few of the poems written at Goslar were directly connected with the Wordsworths' outer life there; they rose from the inner world. Though scarcely 'at home', Wordsworth was even at a superficial level the solitary poet in Goslar; there was no talking to Coleridge, nor even in one sense too significantly to Dorothy; she had been in Halifax from the age of six and had not shared Wordsworth's Lake District boyhood experiences. In a sense she was sharing them now in Germany, for Wordsworth, in writing the passages, was telling her what it had been like for him to be a boy among those hills. A 'dearest maiden' is indeed addressed in a version of one passage about childhood, the poem 'Nutting', and a 'Lucy', a name, certainly at a later date, that could refer to Dorothy, in another, so there is little doubt that at this stage Dorothy Wordsworth, or rather an aspect of her, was the Muse for these poems. (It was later, for the expanded *Prelude* that Coleridge took over this role.) In Goslar, Dorothy, though outside Wordsworth's past, was alert to it, writing passages into notebooks as frequently as Wordsworth himself. She was equally alert to the real presence of the 1798-9 brother who must himself have been preoccupied by composition, and withdrawn into the separate world of his own past. Something of two worlds, evoking a past and a present, is perhaps caught in Dorothy's picture of Wordsworth returning from his own self-communing: 'William's foot is on the stairs', she wrote to Coleridge. 'He has been walking by moonlight in his fur gown and a black fur cap in which he looks like any grand Signior' (14 or 21 December 1798, *EY* 242).

Wordsworth walked alone in daylight too. In his grand Signior cloak,

. . . & a dog's skin bonnet such as was worn by the peasants I walked daily on the ramparts, or in a sort of public ground or garden in which was a pond. Here I had no companion but a Kings fisher, a beautiful creature that used to glance by me. I consequently became much attached to it. During these walks I composed . . . The Poet's Epitaph.– (*Fenwick Notes*, 38)

Both on the ramparts, the half-open, half-covered city walls, and in the public gardens Wordsworth would be able to pace backwards and forwards, moving, yet going nowhere, immersed in the physical and rhythmic regularity that allowed him most freedom to think and compose. Dorothy noted this activity frequently in Grasmere. But it was in Goslar, walking in the public gardens, that Wordsworth, having been thinking about his early Lake District experiences, produced 'The Poet's Epitaph', that description of the poet that combines the outer world and the inner solitary one:

The outward shews of sky and earth,  
Of hill and valley he has view'd;  
And impulses of deeper birth  
Have come to him in solitude.

In common things that round us lie  
Some random truths he can impart,  
The harvest of a quiet eye  
That broods and sleeps on his own heart. ('The Poet's Epitaph', 44-51)

The truths in common things that the poet can impart come from an eye that has indeed viewed the 'outward shews', but one, too, that becomes quiet, and 'broods and sleeps' on the heart, on feeling. The brooding and sleeping is the solitary component.

Dorothy Wordsworth was finely attuned to Wordsworth's needs as a poet by the time they made their home in Grasmere. Wordsworth at once had to be active. He was in Grasmere scarcely three days when he wrote to Coleridge on Christmas Eve 1799, 'I have procured a pair of skates and tomorrow mean to give my body to the wind'. Rydal Water had frozen. And besides activity, Wordsworth had to have quietness and some solitude. The house settled down and a pattern of fairly brief periods of solitude in the midst of domesticity and community emerged. Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journal* charts the day-to-day irregular manifestation of this pattern, and Wordsworth's poem *Home at Grasmere*, begun in 1800, aims higher, towards a portrayal of Grasmere as a true, indeed a paradisaical community; but the idea could not be sustained, and the poem was unfinished. Dorothy, on the other hand, wrote a realistic account of how days contained for Wordsworth – and for herself – times for being together or in society, and times for being alone. Her entry for 26 November 1800 is typical:

Well in the morning – Wm very well. We had a delightful walk up into Eastdale. The Tops of the Mountains covered with snow – frosty & sunny – the roads slippery A letter from Mary. The Lloyds drank tea. We walked with them near to Ambleside, a beautiful moonlight night – Sara & I walked before home, – William very well & highly poetical.

It had been a shared day of walking and talking, Sara Hutchinson staying, a letter coming from Mary, the Lloyds drinking tea, but then, coming back from walking almost to Ambleside with the Lloyds, Sara and Dorothy walked on ahead, 'walked before', leaving Wordsworth to come alone, and 'highly poetical'. A year later, and this time it was Mary who was staying, Wordsworth was already walking alone 'upon the Turf between John's Grove & the Lane' when Mary and Dorothy followed, and joined him 'among the Rocks'; but they then left before he did, for 'Mr Olliff passed Mary & me upon the Road Wm still among the Rocks'. Later the same day the roles were reversed: Dorothy and Wordsworth 'walked out before tea – The Crescent moon – we sate in the Slate quarry I sate there a long time alone. Wm reached home before me – I found them at Tea. There were a thousand stars in the Sky' (12 November 1801). Walking to Greta Hall in Keswick could entail the same balance of separation and companionship: 'William, Mary & I set off on foot . . .', but going up the Raise Wordsworth stayed behind, joined Mary and Dorothy 'opposite Sara's rock' – perhaps half-way along the Wythburn Valley – 'he was busy in composition & sate down upon the Wall. We did not see him again till we arrived at John Stanley's' (now the King's Head Inn at Thirlspot, 28 December 1801). An unfortunate consequence of Wordsworth's solitary preoccupation with composition during this walk was that he first lost his gloves, and then left his Spenser (a kind of jerkin) behind. Mary turned back and found this, but the gloves had already disappeared.

Even when Coleridge was with them Wordsworth could take a little time to be alone. Walking on the slopes of Nab Scar by Rydal, 'Coleridge & I pushed on before', wrote Dorothy on 23 April 1802. 'We left William sitting on the stones feasting with silence.' After a time Wordsworth came to them and repeated poems.

Wordsworth had his favourite places close to Dove Cottage where he liked to compose – in his head, not on paper. Frequently he walked backwards and forwards in the orchard (where he had of course built a small terrace for the purpose) or in the Hollens wood right next to the garden/orchard. Dorothy could sit 'in the house writing in the morning while Wm went into the Wood to compose' (12 October 1800); but often she too walked backwards and forwards with Wordsworth: in John's Grove, on the White Moss path, in Brothers Wood, in Easedale, on the road 'between our house & Olliffs' (28 April 1802). It was then more probably a time for talking, a return to the long stretches of talking and pacing every evening at Fornsett Rectory in 1791.

Time went on and Dorothy was taken up with baby John, born in June 1803; there was less walking with Wordsworth and a good deal with Mary and the baby. Dorothy was not unhappy about this. She tells Catherine Clarkson in February 1804:

William, which is the best news I can tell you, is chearfully engaged in composition, and goes on with great rapidity . . . . He walks out every morning, generally alone . . . . The weather . . . has been very wet in general, he takes out the umbrella and I daresay, stands stock-still under it during many a rainy half-hour, in the middle of road or field.

(13 February 1804, *EY* 440)

Wordsworth's solitude in the middle of road or field in 1804 became more familiar as the years went by. The Rev. Hardwicke Rawnsley, collecting *Reminiscences of Wordsworth* from the local country people in 1882 clearly enjoyed their dialect accounts – and undoubtedly himself shaped and sharpened the stories, but they nevertheless yield that essential aspect of Wordsworth on his home ground: his being a domestic sort of man and an isolated one.

'Did you ever see Mr. Wordsworth out walking – round Pelter-bridge way?'

'Ay, ay, scores and scores o' times. But he was a lonely man, fond o' goin' out wi' his family, and saying nowt to noan of 'em. When a man goes in a family way he keeps together wi' 'em, and chats a bit wi' 'em, but many's a time I've seed him a takkin' his family out in a string, and niver geein' the deariest bit of notice to 'em; standin' by hissel' and stoppin' behint agapin', wi' his jaws warkin' the whoal time; but niver no cracking wi' 'em, nor no pleasure in 'em, — a desolate-minded man, ye kna. Queer thing that, mun, but it was his hobby, ye kna. It was potry as did it. We all hev our hobbies — some for huntin', some cardin', some fishin', some wrustlin'. He never followed nowt nobbut a bit o' skating, happen. Eh, he was fond of going on in danger times; — he was always furst on t' Rydal howiver; but his hobby, ye mun kna, was potry. It was a queer thing, but it would like eneuf cause him to be desolate; and I'se often thowt that his brain was that fu' of sic stuff, that he was forced to be always at it whether or no, wet or fair, mumbling to hissel' along t' roads. (*Reminiscences of Wordsworth among the Peasantry of Westmoreland*, Hardwicke Drummond Rawnsley, 1968, 32)

And now, in Grasmere in the early 1800s, so content in his outer world, Wordsworth's thoughts of death even, were different from those he had had in wintry Goslar. There is no emphasising now the movement, the being 'rolled round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees', no sense

of being like the Lucy figure who ‘neither hears nor sees’. The new concept of death would seem to involve remaining still in the one loved place, the being fully aware, conscious, being able even to hear, and to feel safe. Death, it appears, would be like a kind of ultimate being at home, and it would satisfy Wordsworth in the way his home did, fulfil his two-fold need – that for solitude and that for loved society. When he and Dorothy, as Dorothy Wordsworth recounts it in her Journal for 29 April 1802, lay in John’s Grove separately, and ‘unseen by one another’ as they listened ‘to the waterfalls and the birds’ and Wordsworth heard Dorothy ‘breathing & rustling now & then’, he thought, as he must afterwards have told her, ‘that it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the *peaceful* sounds of the earth & just to know that ones dear friends were near’. Dorothy records but does not comment upon this near-perfect image of separateness and society.

Home, beginning with Dorothy and then including Mary and soon her sister Sara, was unfailing to Wordsworth. As Dorothy created it at Grasmere from 1800, it gave him both support and freedom. He could be the solitary poet, but he need not be. At the simplest level, he did not have to concede to any household regularity: the poem, ‘Children gathering Flowers’,

. . . was not quite finished & it kept him long off his dinner. It is now done he is working at the Tinker, he promised me he would get his tea & do no more but I have got mine an hour & a quarter & he has scarcely begun his. I am not quite well – We have let the bright sun go down without walking – now a heavy shower comes on & I guess we shall not walk at all – (28 April 1802)

A hint, to her Journal at least, of a shade of resentment here. Two days later, having begun the poem of the Celandine and after walking backwards and forwards, ‘he got to work again & would not give over – he had not finished his dinner till 5 o’clock’. Both Wordsworths took sleep as their need arose, though Dorothy clearly liked Wordsworth to begin the day respectably: ‘It is now  $\frac{1}{4}$  past 10 & he is not up’ (15 May 1802). She herself could be thoroughly excessive: ‘I lay in bed to have a Drench of sleep till one o’clock’ (10 January 1803). There was a total acceptance by Dorothy that the work came first and that Wordsworth reacted physically to composition, particularly to the indoor writing and revision. She sympathised when he ‘wished to break off composition, & was unable, & so did himself harm’ (2 February 1802), when ‘he was worn out’ (11 February 1802), ‘very ill’ (28 February 1802), ‘worn to death’ (3 March 1802), ‘wearied to death’ (9 May 1802), ‘had injured himself with working a little’ (17 June 1802). It could get to the point where he had to be protected from himself: ‘his stomach is in bad plight’, she told Coleridge (22 May 1801, *EY* 335). ‘We have put aside all the manuscript poems and it is agreed between us that I am not to give them up to him even if he asks for them’. Sleeplessness afflicted Wordsworth most, and he was subject to small sleeps during the day: ‘We have now dined. My head aches – William is sleeping in the window’ (12 May 1802). ‘After dinner I worked bread then came & mended stockings beside William he fell asleep’ (14 May 1802). Sometimes Dorothy soothed him to sleep by reciting his poems, and once by reading Spenser. It was a relaxed household.

Wordsworth, not surprisingly, was quite happy with his domestic situation. Summing it up for Wrangham in January/February 1804, well over a year after his marriage, he wrote with some amused wryness:

I have a Son; and a noble one too, he is as ever was seen. He is a great Comfort and pleasure to us in this lonely place. My Sister continues to live with me. I read walk, doze a little now and then in the afternoon, and live upon the whole what you may call a tolerably rational life, I mean as the world goes. (*EY* 436)

Coleridge was less present in Wordsworth's home-life after marriage, but Sara Hutchinson was often there, and the domestic scene was a development of, rather than a difference from, the home-life before: Wordsworth writing – the fifth Book of the *Prelude* in 1804; sitting with baby John upon his knee, and, 'a very nice nurse and a very happy Father' commented Dorothy (21 November 1803); Wordsworth working in the garden, 'and walks daily. Today Mary John William and I had a walk together in Bainriggs, and after we left him he wrote twenty lines in the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an hour before dinner' (29 March 1804). This last comment, indicating Wordsworth's old habitual need both to walk with the loved group and be left alone in the wood to compose, is of course from a letter of Dorothy's (29 March 1804). The Journal had ceased in January 1803, some four months after the marriage. Letters rarely contain the intimacies of diaries, but as far as we can see, life at Town End had many of the characteristics it had before. The concern for physical illness certainly continued. Wordsworth, during that same month, March 1804, spoke of a 'kind of derangement in my stomach and digestive organs which makes writing painful to me, and indeed almost prevents me from holding correspondence with any body' (6 March 1804, *EY* 453). He hastened to inform De Quincey in this same letter that 'the unpleasant feelings . . . connected with the act of holding a Pen' had led to his delay in writing.

Distaste for writing became pronounced as Wordsworth grew older, and the family's worries about his eyesight meant that more and more were Mary, Dorothy, Sara, and others too – Dora and John Carter – brought in as amanuenses. Dorothy and Mary of course had always helped with fair copies, and in 1804 they even tackled the 8,000 lines of all Wordsworth's poems as a book of comfort for Coleridge who took it with him to Malta. They also made an extra book for the family. It required, said Dorothy, Wordsworth's 'almost constant superintendance' as the originals were in a 'wretched condition' (25 March 1804, *EY* 459). The solitary poet, whose work, right up to the *Excursion* of 1814, was full of solitaires, had at home a very full and reliable back-up system.

Wordsworth's distaste came to comprehend not just writing but reading. The desire for newspapers at Racedown becomes, because of his eyes, a desire in the 1820s to have newspapers read to him. Mary Wordsworth expresses an impatience with newspapers. She seizes a moment to write a letter to her cousin Thomas Monkhouse on 25 June 1824: 'I literally have not seemed to have  $\frac{1}{2}$  an hour before me quietly to sit down to *write*, and I have *this* opportunity thanks to Dorothy, who took the newspaper out of my hands which I was reading to Wm. Those everlasting Newspapers!' (25 June 1824, *Letters of Mary Wordsworth*, 108). The poet at home, as ever, needed newspapers or magazines, and the women clearly felt he might have been more serious. 'William wasted his mind in the Magazines', Dorothy had early commented in her Journal of 27 February 1802. But, she and Mary wrote faithfully for him and increasingly read to him. Indeed, Coleridge as early as 1803, just one year after Wordsworth's marriage, confided to Poole his worried, yet no doubt envious, view of Wordsworth at home:

I saw him more & more benetted in hypochondriacal Fancies, living wholly among *Devotees* – having every the minutest Thing, almost his very Eating & Drinking, done for him by his Sister, or Wife – & I trembled, lest a Film should rise, and thicken on his moral Eye . . . (14 October 1803, Coleridge, *Letters*, II, 1013)

Wordsworth's moral eye seems to have been clear enough in fact to see him through the good portion of the *Prelude* that was still to be written; and though he did not ever manage the *Recluse*, surely contentment at home was not solely responsible for 'the multitude of small Poems' and sonnets that were, in Coleridge's view, 'hurtful to him'. The opposite state, unhappiness at home, did not after all, for Coleridge, foster the finishing of 'Christabel'.

There is a comic picture of the Wordsworths at home in late life. Dorothy was ill and quite unable to read to Wordsworth; Sara Hutchinson was dead; Dora, Wordsworth's daughter, happened to be away,

and in any case was soon to be married; the reading fell largely upon Mary. Wordsworth, in a letter dictated to Mary in May 1838, explained to Julius Hare why he knew so little about new books and was losing his familiarity with old ones:

Nor have I any one near me who can read *much* aloud even when my Daughter, who has long been about, is at home . . . [*Here, Mary Wordsworth adds in the margin: This is not quite the fact – Mrs W can read but listening sends her husband to sleep. MW*] . . . (28 May 1838, *LY*<sup>2</sup> III, 593)

It could sometimes be a relief to Wordsworth not to be composing, or even listening to reading:

My Brother has laid his poetry aside for two or three months. He has enough of new matter for a small volume, which we wish him to publish; but I think he *will not*, he so dislikes publishing. A new Edition of his poems will soon be called for. He has lately been busied day after day out of doors among workmen who are making us another new and most delightful Terrace . . . (Dorothy Wordsworth to Crabb Robinson, 22 April 1830, *LY* II, 243)

Rydal Mount garden is still a monument to Wordsworth's passion for terraces, but the small volume had to wait until 1835: *Yarrow Revisited*.

Wordsworth, instead of preparing a publication, threw himself into the 'gaities of the neighbourhood', as he called the regattas upon Windermere presided over by Professor John Wilson of Elleray and Edinburgh, and the numerous dinners given during that same summer of 1830. He then attended his son's wedding to Isabella Curwen, went to Derbyshire – on horseback – to Coleorton, Cambridge and London. The next year, 1831, was, reported Wordsworth,

. . . brilliant also for its Regattas, Balls, Dejeuners, Picnics by the Lakeside, on the Islands, and on the Mountain tops – Fireworks by night – Dancing on the green sward by day – in short a fever of pleasure from morn to dewy eve . . . . In the room where I am now dictating, we had, three days ago, a dance – forty beaux and belles, besides Matrons, ancient Spinsters and Greybeards – and to-morrow in this same room we are to muster for a Venison feast . . . (9 September 1831, *LY* 425-6)

And after all this, Wordsworth set off to Scotland with his daughter Dora to visit Sir Walter Scott at Abbotsford.

It seems a far cry from those first years at Dove Cottage, beginning in 1800, where the solitudes were brief but intense and the company unbelievably special – that of his brother John, his sister Dorothy, Coleridge, and Mary and Sara Hutchinson. The people he loved deeply were near, a 'happy band', Wordsworth called them in *Home at Grasmere*, and he realised that it was in them that his 'wealth' lay, at least as much as in the valleys, crags and woody steepes, the Lake and its one green Island. The community as a whole he found flawed. He found man

But little differing from the man elsewhere,  
For selfishness and envy and revenge . . . (*Home at Grasmere*, 435-6)

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<sup>2</sup> *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt; *The Later Years, 1821-1850*, re-edited Alan G. Hill, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1978-88); hereafter *LY*.





That loneliest place stood indeed for an essential aspect of Wordsworth, yet his poem goes on to place in conjunction and in balance the other strand of his being:

And she who dwells with me, whom I have loved  
 With such communion, that no place on earth  
 Can ever be a solitude to me,  
 Hath said, this lonesome Peak shall bear my Name.  
 ('There is an Eminence', 14-17)

Such communion, as the Journals and the poetry make clear, at the intimate domestic level and at the imaginative was a constant, even when Dorothy was ill and it was for Wordsworth to maintain the communion: despite anxiety for his eyes, for example, he read to her essays from Charles Lamb's *Last Essays of Elia*, 1833: 'read . . . to my poor Sister this morning, while I was rubbing her legs at the same time.– She was much pleased', he told Lamb when thanking him for the book (17 May 1833, *LY*, II, 620).

Communion also at a more investigative level was part of Wordsworth's nature: 'I love a public road . . .'

the lonely roads  
 Were schools to me in which I daily read  
 With most delight the passions of mankind.  
 (*Prelude* 1805, XII, 163-5)

He watched and questioned those he met, and sometimes wrote their stories:

There I heard,  
 From mouths of lowly men and of obscure  
 A tale of honour . . . (*ibid.*, 181-3)

The Muse, said Burns, 'nae Poet ever fand her / Til by himsel' he learn'd to wander, / Adown some trottin' burn's meander'. Wordsworth found the Muse variously: certainly in wandering by 'some trottin' burn', both alone and in company; in experiencing that wandering both in fact and in memory; in wandering along a public road as well as in the solitary places, finding himself one of a community of strangers; he found the Muse simply by being at home in a community of loving people, and in carrying at the same time within himself the 'lonesome Peak' of his own singleness. Dorothy, as the rock image came to be developed in the *Prelude*, is envisaged as planting 'its crevices with flowers, / [hanging] it with shrubs that twinkle in the breeze'. Like the domestic and social poet, the rock belonged also to others, but its basic being was its solitary self,

A rock with torrents roaring, with the clouds  
 Familiar, and a favorite of the Stars:  
 (*Prelude* 1805, XIII, 231-2)

## Pivotal Points in Coleridge's *Opus Maximum*

By RICHARD S. TOMLINSON

This essay was first presented orally to members of the Charles Lamb Society in London on 6 March 2004.

COLERIDGE'S *OPUS MAXIMUM*, never published before appearing in 2002 as the final volume of the *Collected Coleridge*, was the labor upon which Coleridge said he had been working for more than 30 years, the work upon which he expected his posthumous reputation would rest.<sup>1</sup> As well as considering several of the work's central ideas, it is also interesting to touch upon Charles Lamb's connection with the *Opus*. Indeed, the earliest recorded reference still extant to Coleridge's *magnum opus* is in a letter of 9 January 1797 from Lamb to STC:

Are you a Berkleyan? Make me one. I rejoice in being, speculatively, a necessitarian.—Would to God, I were habitually a practical one. Confirm me in the faith of that great & glorious doctrine, & keep me steady in the contemplation of it. You sometime since exprest an intention you had of finishing some extensive work on the Evidences of Natural & Revealed Religion. Have you let that intention go? Or are you doing anything towards it?<sup>2</sup>

Most interesting here, first, is that Coleridge seems to have been contemplating 'some extensive work' on religion very early in his intellectual life, a work that he would come to refer to as his 'Assertion of Religion'. That this work was ever a coherent whole or that it was an undertaking of extended duration has been frequently questioned by critics and commentators, despite Coleridge's allusions to such a work in more than 75 of his letters as well as in a number of his public writings. Of note in attempting to understand the work, itself, is that what has been given the name, *Opus Maximum*, is a work which is extraordinarily conservative, both philosophically and theologically, inasmuch as it is nothing less than a Theognosy—a knowledge of God, to which all other knowledges are said to lead up.

Coleridge came to such a sharply focused or to what some in his own time and since would characterize as a limited vision of the realities beyond religion honestly, for as Lamb notes in his essay, 'Recollections of Christ's Hospital', Coleridge, the 'Blue-coat boy', always suffered from 'an over-belief in matters of religion'. Lamb added, however, that Coleridge's 'over-belief' would soon correct itself when coming out into society . . .'. Of course, other than during his early and transitory flirtation with what some would call the 'irreligious' influence of Godwin, Hartley, and Priestley, Coleridge experienced no such 'correction'—indeed, religion, of the unabashedly supernatural, metaphysical variety became and remained the central, most enduring concentration of his thought. For his part, Lamb investigated both Unitarianism and Quakerism and referred to himself at the end of his life as both 'a one-Goddite' and 'half a Quaker'. Indeed,

<sup>1</sup> The *Opus Maximum* in the *Collected Coleridge*, published in August of 2002, was initially undertaken by G. N. G. Orsini c. 1971. My own edition of the work was submitted as a D. Phil. Thesis at the University of Oxford in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Edwin W. Marris, Jr., ed. *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, 3 vols. (Cornell: Cornell UP, 1975 - ) 1: 89.

as early as the Spring of 1818, Lamb famously said, in a letter to another Blue-coat boy, John Chambers: 'I am determined that my children shall be brought up in their father's religion, if they can find out what it is'.<sup>3</sup>

Lacking what Lamb might have characterized as his own rather levelheaded reaction to religion, Coleridge almost certainly acquired his own attraction to the realm of the metaphysical even before entering Christ's Hospital. As I have written elsewhere, Coleridge's father, John, published an article, '*Observations on the Mosaic Account of Creation*', in a 1725 issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. The piece included a discussion of Philo Judaeus, the first century neo-Platonist Bishop, and Philo's account of the Divine Logos, an idea that would become the philosophical fulcrum of Coleridge's *Opus*. It is not difficult to imagine Coleridge, while still a young boy, developing a taste for the grand perspective that became central to his entire body of thought, the tendency which he describes, as early as 1797, as having led to his '. . . mind . . . [becomng] habituated to the Vast . . .'. He understood, he claimed, even while still young, that the finest human minds must have '. . . a love of "the Great", & "the Whole"'.<sup>4</sup> In the letter to Thomas Poole from which the preceding remarks originate, Coleridge goes on to credit his later capacity to avoid the limited vision of most individuals to his own youthful exposure to 'the Vast'. In his letter to Poole, he says of most other individuals,

Those who have been led to the same truths [about the major questions of Being] step by step thro' the constant testimony of their senses, seem to me to want a sense which I possess—They contemplate nothing but *parts*—and all *parts* are necessarily little—and the Universe to them is but a mass of *little things*.<sup>5</sup>

These lines are important because they indicate the idea underlying one of Coleridge's central aims in the *Opus*, to formulate a systematic philosophy that would accomplish nothing less than reconciling philosophy and religion. As he says in the *Opus*, itself,

As we commenced this work with defining religion as the whole scheme of revealed faith, that it is distinguished from history on the one hand and from philosophy on the other by being both at the same time; even so may we define it, in its other and subjective form, as an energy operating in the individual soul—that it is the union of the True and the Good, and yet, so as not to confound the two, yet so as to permit the subordination of the former to the latter—and so that while both are self subsistent, yet the good alone is self-originated.<sup>6</sup>

Of such thinking, in which Coleridge talks of 'the divine energy within the human soul', Lamb would criticize Coleridge, in a letter from October of 1796:

<sup>3</sup> E. V. Lucas, ed, *The Complete Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 3 vols. (London: Dent, 1935) 2: 231 (Spring 1818, to John Chambers).

<sup>4</sup> Earl Leslie Griggs, ed. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956-71) 1: 210 (hereafter *CL*). Also see my article, 'The Primary Imagination Re-visited', *The Wordsworth Circle* 21.2 (1990): 81-5.

<sup>5</sup> *CL* 1: 210 (16 Oct. 1797, to Thomas Poole).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas McFarland, ed., *Opus Maximum, Collected Coleridge* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 2002) 150-1; all citations will be from this edition for ease of access by readers.

. . . when you talk in a religious strain,—not but we are offended occasionally by a certain freedom of expression, a certain air of mysticism, more consonant to the conceits of pagan philosophy, than consistent with the humility of genuine piety. To instance how in your last letter [which has not survived]—you say, . . . ‘that God hath given finite spirits both evil and good . . . a portion as it were of His Omnipresence!’ Now, high as the human intellect comparatively will soar, and wide as its influence . . . can extend, is there not, Coleridge, a distance between the Divine Mind and it [the human intellect], which makes such language blasphemy?<sup>7</sup>

Lamb is challenging the quite direct linkage Coleridge had made, and would continue to make, often, between the Divine Mind and the reason of the individual, human person. Coleridge is already beginning to reflect upon the relationship between the Divine Mind and the human reason that he would eventually refer to as the Divine Logos, the principle of intelligibility that he would describe, by the time of the *Opus Maximum*, as the ground and guarantor of reality itself.

Having received another letter from Coleridge (no longer extant), Lamb follows up on the same point in his correspondence:

I am not ignorant that to be a partaker of the Divine Nature is a phrase to be met with in Scripture: I am only apprehensive, lest we in these latter days, tinctured (some of us perhaps pretty deeply) with mystical notions and the pride of metaphysics, might be apt to affix to such phrases a meaning, which the primitive users of them, the simple fishermen of Galilee for instance, never intended to convey.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, Lamb rather pointedly concludes this part of his letter to Coleridge with the down-to-earth admonition, ‘Let us attend to the proper business of human life . . .’<sup>9</sup>

Of course, Coleridge could never accept such advice or make the move away from religion that Lamb suggested Christ's Hospital boys were ultimately bound to make. As a result, the *Opus Maximum* would become among the most difficult of Coleridge's works to understand clearly. First, the four volumes or fragments that survive, in total nearly 700 manuscript leaves, were dictated over a number of years during the 1820s. Again, Coleridge described this work as the culmination of his intellectual life, so he must have thought of it as his virtuoso performance; hence, his diction and syntax are, not surprisingly, extraordinarily complex, even for him, and, due to his reliance on dictation to at least two amanuenses, the punctuation is sparse, when present at all.

Moreover, the intellectual matter is predictably multifaceted and, although fragmentary, what has survived is, nonetheless, a veritable compendium of many of the ideas central to Coleridge's intellectual history. For instance, the intellectual backdrop of the work is, not surprisingly, the Enlightenment, and Coleridge's central aim is to confirm the validity and truth of Trinitarian Christianity. Of the French *philosophes*, he says, in 1816, that

<sup>7</sup> Marris, *Lamb Letters* 1: 53 (24 Oct. 1796).

<sup>8</sup> Marris, *Lamb Letters* 1: 56 (28 Oct. 1796).

<sup>9</sup> Marris, *Lamb Letters* 1: 56.

. . . about the middle of the last century, under the influence of Voltaire, D'Alembert, Diderot, say generally of the so-called Encyclopaedists . . . the Human Understanding, and this too in its narrowest form, was tempted to throw off all show of reverence to the spiritual and even to the moral powers and impulses of the soul; and usurping the name of reason openly joined the banner of Antichrist, at once the pander and the prostitute of sensuality, and whether in the cabinet, laboratory, the dissecting room, or the brothel, alike busy in the schemes of vice and irreligion.<sup>10</sup>

Although a slightly awkward construction, Coleridge's point here is that the rationalism of the eighteenth century had displaced the piety prevalent in earlier eras by relying on the powers of the understanding rather than those of reason. To counter such excessive reliance on the understanding, Coleridge intends to demonstrate that external evidence for the acceptance of Christianity, is unnecessary, when he says,

I fear that the mode of defending Christianity, adopted by Grotius first; and latterly, among many others by Dr. Paley, has [actually] increased the number of infidels—never could it have been so great, if thinking men had been habitually led to look into their own souls, instead of always looking out, both of themselves, and of their nature.<sup>11</sup>

As well as reason, in the *Opus*, itself, Coleridge says flatly of internal evidence in proving the existence of God,

Man, with all finite self-conscious beings, knows himself to be because he is a man, but he is a man because God is and hath so willed it. It is the great 'I am' only, who is because he affirmeth himself to be, and affirmeth himself to be, because, or, rather in that, He is. Thus, in like manner, because we have a conscience, we know that there is a God, i.e. that God is the reality of the Conscience, on the principle that the necessary condition of a certain truth must itself be true.<sup>12</sup>

So, Coleridge is attempting to argue that conscience, as the internal agent of morality, is a connection between mankind and God and is, itself, actually a source of hope, not only as a moral guide but also to corroborate God's existence. Furthermore, also in the *Opus*, he claims that conscience is actually the foundation of consciousness. Specifically, he says,

Paradoxical as it may sound to describe the conscience as the ground of all proper consciousness—antecedent, therefore, to it in the order of thought, i.e. without reference to time—we yet doubt not of establishing the truth of the position and of displaying the importance and fruitfulness.<sup>13</sup>

In his defense of Christianity, Coleridge will go on to argue that the individual conscience is indicative of a cosmic teleology, evidence that there is a Final Intelligent Cause as well as

<sup>10</sup> R. J. White, ed., *Lay Sermons, Collected Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 75.

<sup>11</sup> *CL 2*: 1189 (4 Oct. 1806, to George Fricker).

<sup>12</sup> *Opus Maximum* 67.

<sup>13</sup> *Opus Maximum* 59-60.

proximate causes for phenomena, and if such an Ultimate Cause is present, that Cause implies a world design which is, by Coleridge's reckoning, intelligent and the ultimate creator, the Trinitarian deity. Through such thinking, which was profoundly conservative, even at the time, Coleridge intends to counter the views of Locke, Hume, and Bishop Paley, as well as those of the French 'sensualists', all of whom Coleridge is certain had usurped the name of reason.

Coleridge's look back to the distant past in search of material upon which to establish a foundation for his 'Assertion of Religion' is characteristic of the fundamental mode of his mind, of the massive erudition that led to his reputation as 'a library cormorant'. However, it is also based upon his desire to find and to offer some unchanging reality that could strengthen belief in the Christian deity. This had become necessary since those who were learned in both natural science and philosophy seemed to be using those disciplines, once employed in Christianity's defense, against it by Coleridge's time. But, no such unchanging reality existed in the learning of the period in which Coleridge found himself.

Consequently, Plato became the first source to which Coleridge turned since the realm of Platonic ideas was a bastion that seemed to stand in opposition to change and subjectivism. As early as 1806, Coleridge would say, in a letter to Thomas Clarkson,

All *our* [Humankind's] Thoughts are . . . *inadequate*: i.e. no *thought*, which I have of which I have of any *thing* comprises the whole of that Thing. I have a distinct Thought of a Rose-Tree; but what countless properties and goings-on of that plant are there, not included in my *Thought* of it?—But the Thoughts of God, in the strict nomenclature of Plato, are all IDEAS, archetypal and anterior to all but himself alone: therefore consummately *adequate* and therefore . . . incomparably more *real* than all things besides, & which do all depend on and proceed from them in some sort perhaps as our Thoughts from those *Things* . . . .<sup>14</sup>

Thus, all that is within the temporal sphere is ultimately an illusion. This view is crucial because Coleridge considers modernity's acceptance of the shifting forms of the material world as an immense threat to humanity, particularly as it tended to lead to pantheism, materialism, and necessitarianism. Pantheism, of course, found no place whatsoever for a principle of a sustaining, Ultimate Cause within the natural world; hence, Coleridge understood that this left human experience, indeed, life itself, without reason, and, therefore, without meaning. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of pantheism for Coleridge, as its most powerful adherent, Spinoza, argued it was its failure to provide a means for maintaining a moral system. Key in Spinoza's system is his explanation of human perception, an explanation that advocates achieving tranquility through one's quiet surrender to the objects of experience. Of course, for Coleridge, this means that man, as a moral being, loses not only his absolute superiority as a creation of God, but he also ceases to remain a free moral agent. In 1829, for instance, Coleridge makes the following comment:

For try to conceive a *man* without the ideas of God, eternity, freedom, will, absolute truth, of the good, the true, the beautiful, the infinite. An *animal* endowed with a memory of appearances and of facts might remain. But the *man* will have vanished, and you have instead a creature, 'more subtle than any beast of the field but likewise cursed above

<sup>14</sup> CL 2: 1195 (13 Oct. 1806).

every beast of the field; upon the belly must it go and dust must it eat all the days of its life'.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, without the capacity to confront the vagaries of experience, individual persons are no longer endowed with what, in Coleridge's view, is central to their humanity, the capacity for free moral choice based on reason and conscience.

When describing reason, Coleridge regularly speaks of two spheres: of the Divine Reason and of the individual reason, the latter of which Coleridge says, in the *Opus Maximum*, partakes of the former as idea:

And it is this which the eldest Sages of all nations have struggled to express in the various terms of Self-subsistent Light, living Light, . . . a Light at once intelligent and intelligible, and the communicative medium.<sup>16</sup>

The trope of light to represent reason is, of course, an ancient one. One of its most well known uses is found in the Gospel of John at 1.9 where it is said to be the sole—

. . . true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

Coleridge's develops this idea of 'the true light' throughout the *Opus*, but he illustrates the idea perhaps most succinctly through the contrast he draws between man's 'reason exclusively' and his use of the phrase, 'by the light of reason' (or the Divine Logos). He says,

There is one point on which we are particularly anxious to prevent any misunderstanding. This respects the difference between the two (possible) assertions, 'such a truth may be known as truth by the light of reason' and 'the same truth was discovered, or might have been discovered, by men by means of their reason exclusively'. We may assert the former, and in the course of this work shall find occasion to assert it without involving, nay, we altogether disbelieve and deny, the latter.<sup>17</sup>

Again, the idea of the Divine Logos is actually the fulcrum of the extant portions of Coleridge's philosophical system. In the preceding citation, he confirms it to be the means through which humans may have knowledge that is reliable. The Logos notion was a perfect concept for Coleridge's intellectual constitution since it aided, incalculably, with his aim to harmonize the wisdom of the past with the knowledge of his own time, and, of course, it accommodated his devotion to systematic reflection and to the formulation of far-ranging conclusions. Moreover, the concept represented for Coleridge another way of articulating an idea that had been pivotal in his earlier thought, the concept of 'the one life'. However, when eventually described as the Divine Logos, the 'one life' notion might be argued outside the limits of pantheism, a problem that had plagued the earlier formulation as Coleridge's views were becoming increasingly

<sup>15</sup> John Colmer, ed., *Constitution of Church and State, Collected Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976) 47n; cf. Genesis 3.1, 3.14.

<sup>16</sup> *Opus Maximum* 223.

<sup>17</sup> *Opus Maximum* 12.



orthodox. Through the Logos Doctrine, however, the idea of a Divine Presence, within man and in nature, could be argued comfortably within the framework of Christian theism.

The Divine Logos idea has two distinct traditions, one philosophical and one theological. The former, the philosophical, involves an especially complex series of meanings, is Platonic in its origins and referred, initially, to the intelligible regulating forces (the laws) governing the sensible world. This came to be applied to mean, in much of the ancient world, both the instrument of God's creative activity and the ground of the ultimate intelligibility of reality. Then, in Christianity, it came to refer to the Word of God as it was said to act within the agency of creation. Theologically, this latter meaning is used in the New Testament to denote both its original sense as the rational principle within the cosmos ('the light of reason') and, simultaneously, that same rational principle when it reenters both the world and mankind through its incarnation in Christ. It is this latter meaning to which Coleridge repeatedly refers in his regular references to the Gospel of John in the later years of his own life. His descriptions of the *Opus Maximum* and his outlines of the work all involve the Johannine Logos; in several such summaries, he even adopted the title of *Logosophia* for the work as he was planning it.

Coleridge uses this Logos idea in a number of ways, including his claim that it is the source and guarantor of rationality, itself, as well as employing it to account for the creative force within Christian mythology. In the Christian myth of creation, on the first day, by the Will of God, the Divine Logos creates the intelligible world, the realm of the ideal (within man as well as in Nature). On the second day, God, also through the medium of the Logos, begins to create the sensible world. Thus, what comes into being in the sensible world reflects a paradigm derived from the intelligible world. God's act of creation can, therefore, be seen as analogous to the intellectual act of an artist who designs and then builds a citadel (the intelligible world) based on his preconceived plan (that is, God's Idea). The basic cosmological pattern is, as a result, that the sensible world is created as a copy of an archetype existing in the intelligible world, the realm of divine ideas.

The Divine Logos is, thus, the Being in Whose image man was fashioned and through Whom (not what) the Christian God has made both man and the sensible world. The Logos stands between God and man, and as such, is both the intermediary of God and the model for human reason. Hence, man's reason is the copy or image, not of God Himself, but of his Logos. One key dimension of this paradigm which Coleridge could use to restore the influence of religion was that the Divine Logos could be said to be an intelligible intermediary of God Who retained a fragment of the divine *plērōma* (the mind of God) and Who, again, also served as the metaphysical ground for the ultimate intelligibility of rationality itself. This formulation allows Coleridge to evoke Philo to claim that man has come into being as a fragment or effulgence of the Divine Nature. Specifically, as Philo had said,

Every man, in respect of his mind, is allied to the divine Reason,  
having come into being as a copy or fragment or effulgence<sup>18</sup>  
of that blessed nature, but in the structure of his body he is allied  
to all the world, for he is compounded of all the same things . . . .<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cf. C's image in 'The Destiny of Nations': 'him [God] First, him Last to view / Through meaner powers and secondary things / Effulgent, as through clouds that veil his blaze', J. C. C. Mays, *Poetical Works, Collected Coleridge*, 3 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP) 1: 281, ll. 15-17 (1795-1797).

Based upon this claim, Coleridge is able to argue that every person's soul is nothing less than a fragment of the Divine *plērōma* (again, the fullness of the Divine Mind). Philo had been the major figure in establishing the link between the Platonic Logos and the Fourth Gospel, the primary foundation of Coleridge's most mature ideas on the Logos; it is for this reason that Coleridge alludes to Philo as frequently as he does in his later thinking. Finally, Philo was the first philosopher known to state, explicitly, that the Platonic model of the intelligible world was God's creation, rather than the effect of necessity or accident. Philo achieved this by integrating the Greek idea of the Divine Mind from Plato's *Timaeus* with the Christian concept of the Divine Logos included in John. As a result of this amalgamation, the Logos can be considered not only as the Deity's spoken word but also as His mental activity during thought and creative activity, a fusion of great importance for Coleridge's *Opus*.

Coleridge frequently declares his intention to complete 'a full and detailed commentary on the Gospel of John', a work he says will serve as 'the crown of the *Opus*'. John is the scriptural book toward which Coleridge's mind most naturally inclines, both in the early and, in particular, in the mid- and later years of his life. For instance, its systematic development sets it completely apart from the three synoptic gospels since it is the result of a far more rigorous tradition of theological 'reflection'; consequently, its intellectual framework is very different from the background of ideas associated with the other gospels. John is also highly literary and symbolic: indeed, symbol is central to two of the book's four basic structural components. Finally, contrary to some early Biblical scholarship, Coleridge considered the Logos doctrines of Philo and John to refer to the same principle. As he states in his *Notebook* entry of 1823,

The Logos of . . . John differs from [the logos] of Philo, as the Truth and nothing but the Truth from the same truth . . . .<sup>20</sup>

So, how might Coleridge hope to describe the detailed workings of the Divine Logos, which he seems to assume that his readers will understand? Again, Philo would provide help:

. . . God's shadow is His Word, which he made use of like an instrument, and so made the world. But this shadow, and what we may describe as the representation, is [also] the archetype for further creations.<sup>21</sup>

In the *Opus*, itself, Coleridge says that the Divine Logos manifests itself to human individuals as 'Idea':

First, then, what conception do we attach to *Idea*? Or, rather, as whatever this conception may be, it must, in our present scheme of reasoning, derive itself from the divine Ideas, what do we wish to convey by this? I know of no other answer than that a divine Idea is

<sup>19</sup> Philo Judaeus, *Works*, trans. F. H. Colson et al, *Loeb Classical Library*, 12 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1929-1953) 1: 115 and *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (1854-1855; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) 21. Colson translates Philo's '  $B\upsilon\beta(\forall\Phi:\forall$  as 'ray', Yonge as 'effulgence'.

<sup>20</sup> Kathleen Coburn et al., eds., *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957-2002) 4: 5071 (Dec. 1823); hereafter *CN*.

<sup>21</sup> Philo Judaeus, 'Allegorical Interpretation, III', *Works, Loeb Classical Library* 1: 365.

the Omnipresence or Omnipotence represented intelligentially in some one of the possible forms, which are the plenitude of the divine Intelligence, the Logos or substantial adequate Idea of the Supreme Mind; and that as such the Ideas are necessarily immutable, inasmuch as they are One with the (co-)Eternal Act, by which the absolute Will self-realized begets its Idea as the other self.<sup>22</sup>

In this highly abstract formulation, Coleridge is emphasizing that all ideas are derived from the plenitude or fullness of the Divine Mind and must, therefore, remain infinite and omnipresent. Ideas thus affect the individual human consciousness within a sphere much like what the noted zoologist and philosopher Sir Julian Huxley calls the noösphere, 'the space occupied by the totality of ideas collectively available to man'. Specifically, Huxley describes the noösphere as 'an intangible sea of thought' that functions in the same way, Huxley says, 'that fish exist and have their being in the material sea of water'. Thus, Huxley claims, man is able to discover

. . . the daring speculations and aspiring ideals of man long dead . . . the hoary wisdom of the ancients, [even] the creative imaginings of all the world's poets and artists.<sup>23</sup>

In 1805, in one instance of such a continually evolving idea, Coleridge finds himself saying, while gazing at and describing the objects of nature he sees beneath his window,

. . . I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing any thing new. Even when the latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phænomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten or hidden truth of my inner Nature / It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! It is  $\delta \cong (\cong H)$ , the Creator! (and the Evolver!)<sup>24</sup>

Here, Coleridge is emphasizing an idea very similar to Huxley's description of how even the most ancient ideas manifest an everlasting presence, of how they can exert a vital influence on man's consciousness.

This idea of the Divine Logos, particularly as he adapted it from the Johannine gospel, was important not only to give historical authenticity to the claims Coleridge intended to make for the legitimacy of the metaphysical realm but also because it was an important source for his idea of 'personëity'. What he calls Divine and human personëity are concepts that are absolutely central to Coleridge's personal faith and for his philosophy of religion. Both are ideas to which he returns on a number of occasions in the *Opus*; in particular, divine personëity was crucial to combat pantheism, as great a threat to legitimate faith and to personal redemption as the excesses of mechanical empiricism of which Coleridge was also contemptuous. Specifically, if in pantheism God is everything, the meaning of free will and the idea of evil become highly problematical. Furthermore, by Coleridge's reckoning, if God is not personal, He has little continuing value to man. In the *Opus*, Coleridge contends that a living god cannot be merely a

<sup>22</sup> *Opus Maximum* 223.

<sup>23</sup> Julian Huxley (1887-1975), 'Evolution after Darwinism: The University of Chicago Centennial', *Issues in Evolution*. eds., Sol Tax and Charles Callender. 3 vols. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960) 3: 253-4.

<sup>24</sup> CN 2: 2546 (14 Apr. 1805).

'crude anthropomorphism', only a hollow phantom. Instead, believers must have faith that they may establish a personal bond between themselves and their god.

By contrast, the pantheist is left with a mere 'conceptual abstraction'. In the *Opus Maximum*, Coleridge asks,

What wonder, then, if this constant dependence, or rather this habitual referring, of the Divine Idea to Nature should at length lead to an identification of the one with the other: if it should at length appear, what, indeed, it actually would be, had this been the true ground and origin of the Faith and a conception abstracted from Nature and then personified by that most common of artifices, the sudden transformation of an effect into a cause by repeating the same number of facts under the form, and the terms, of agency. . . . this and Polytheism in general are in effect the popular side of Pantheism.<sup>25</sup>

Coleridge is rejecting pantheism because he believes that it can, in particular, seduce the inchoate intellect. Elementary philosophical and theological thinking typically follow a form which is truncated, one that can never lead to a higher understanding of, or faith in, the Christian deity, Who was, by Coleridge's reckoning, the only true deity or First Cause deserving of mature reflection or of belief. To illustrate this point, in the *Opus*, he says,

Few, I grant, have been so far able to de-naturalize themselves as to contemplate the doctrine [of Pantheism] in the rigid and naked form as it is here represented. But how often have I not observed men of ardent Minds, in the early glow of self-thinking and in the first supposed emancipation from the prejudices of the popular faith, shrink from the use of the personal as spoken of the Deity, and disposed, in a more than Poetic interpretation, to substitute [only a remote force] for the living Jehovah the Creator of the Heaven and the Earth . . . .<sup>26</sup>

Against the purely formal first cause postulated by pantheists, Coleridge lodges his concept of personēity. This he develops from the idea that, in the Prologue to the Johannine Gospel, the Logos is identified as having become incarnate in Christ and is thus, in this new form, a personal mediator between the Trinitarian Father and humanity. This conceptualization emphasizes, of course, Christ's human nature in his role as the Son of Man, the humility entailed in what Coleridge calls God's 'Divine Condescension'. As Coleridge says, in May of 1825:

The most important speculative Theorem in the theology of a Christian is beyond doubt the Personēity of the Godhead, & the consequent Personality of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit: and the moral correspondent of this is the *Holiness* of God.<sup>27</sup>

Not surprisingly, given this assertion, Coleridge adopts Will as a prime human modality; in the *Opus*, he observes,

<sup>25</sup> *Opus Maximum* 111.

<sup>26</sup> *Opus Maximum* 113.

<sup>27</sup> CN 4: 5222 (May 1825).

. . . we become persons exclusively in consequence of the Will, that a source of personality must therefore be conceived in the Will, and lastly that a Will not personal is no idea at all but an impossible conception.<sup>28</sup>

So, the individual, human person has a moral will, but there is also another form of will for Coleridge, the Absolute Will, which, as he says, 'is essentially causative of all reality'.

Another way in which Coleridge develops his concept of personëity involves a principle that he calls the 'I-Thou'. In yet another rather difficult syntactic formulation, he says,

Now this equation of *Thou* with I, by means of a free act by which we negative the sameness in order to establish the equality—this, I say, is the true definition of Conscience.<sup>29</sup>

So, the condition of personëity involves one being able to respond to human individuals, not as 'others', alone, but to experience a religious feeling for them sufficient to discover within another being a sense of oneself, even within what Coleridge acknowledges as their 'alterity'. The religious sense upon which this feeling is to be based is found in the model of the bonds that exist between the father & son and a mother & child. As he puts it in *Opus* of the Filial Word, the Father:

. . . he is both the absolute mind and the intelligible reciprocal: as the Father knoweth the Son, even so the Son knoweth the Father. Hence the synonymes for the Logos, namely the truth and the true one . . . and by Philo Judaeus, in writings anterior to and certainly independent of the New Testament, the Logos which we are anxiously forbidden to consider as attribute, personification, or equivalent term, is described as God the other and the same.—<sup>30</sup>

The archetype of the Father and Son's reciprocity, 'God the other and [yet] the same' becomes a principle essential to the 'I-Thou' idea. Of this reciprocity, Coleridge says further, also in *Opus* volume 2,

. . . God is love. But how can there be love without communication? And how can there be a communication without presupposing some other with the communicant?<sup>31</sup>

One last aspect of the way in which Coleridge's mature thought is recorded in the *Opus Maximum* involves another dimension of the relationship God, through his Logos, maintains with humanity. In Book II of the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth describes what he refers to as 'the progress of our being':

Bless'd the infant Babe,  
(For with my best conjectures I would trace

<sup>28</sup> *Opus Maximum* 165.

<sup>29</sup> *Opus Maximum* 76.

<sup>30</sup> *Opus Maximum* 199-200.

<sup>31</sup> *Opus Maximum* 199.

The progress of our being) blest the Babe,  
 Nurs'd in his Mother's arms, the babe who sleeps  
 Upon his Mother's breast, who, when his soul  
 Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul,  
 Doth gather passion from his Mother's eye!  
 Such feelings pass into his torpid life  
 Like an awakening breeze . . . .<sup>32</sup>

It is interesting to compare these lines with Coleridge's description of God's relation to mankind through the imagery of mother-and-child in the *Opus Maximum*. Specifically, Coleridge is noting how a child first begins to sense, however slightly, its alterity, its unique separateness, from its earthly mother:

The infant follows its mother's face as, glowing with love and beaming protection, it is raised heavenward, and with the word 'GOD' it combines in feeling whatever there is of reality in the warm touch, in the supporting grasp, in the glorious countenance. The whole problem of existence is present as a sum total in the mother: the mother exists as a One and indivisible something before the outlines of her different limbs and features have been distinguished by the fixed and yet half vacant eye, and hence, through each degree of dawning light, the whole remains antecedent to the parts, not as composed of them but as their ground and proper meaning, no[t] otherwise than as the word or sentence to the single letters which occur in its spelling.<sup>33</sup>

Two pages later, Coleridge emphasizes what, elsewhere,<sup>34</sup> he calls the principle of 'individuation', when he says,

. . . many a parent [has] heard the three years child that has awoke during the dark night in the little crib by the mother's bed entreat in piteous tones, 'Touch me, only touch me with your finger.' A child of that age, under the same circumstances, I myself heard using these very words in answer to the mother's enquiries, half hushing and half chiding, 'I am not here, touch me, Mother, that I may be here!' The witness of its own being had been suspended in the loss of the mother's presence by sight or sound or feeling. The father and the heavenly father, the form in the shape and the form affirmed for itself are blended in one, and yet convey the earliest lesson of distinction and alterity.<sup>35</sup>

One last point about the *Opus Maximum* concerns the question of why it was never published. There are surely several reasons: for instance, there would have been no market for publication during Coleridge's lifetime, as he, himself, acknowledged, since even his earlier, less

<sup>32</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark Reed, 2 vols. *The Cornell Wordsworth* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) Book II: ll. 237-45.

<sup>33</sup> *Opus Maximum* 131.

<sup>34</sup> 'Hints Towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life' (1816), H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson, eds., *Shorter Works and Fragments, Collected Coleridge*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton, UP, 1995) 1: 481-557.

<sup>35</sup> *Opus Maximum* 132.

abstract prose works, other than *On the Constitution of Church and State*, had not been widely influential. In addition, whatever whole existed of what Coleridge claimed was to have been his 'compleat system' was passed on to Joseph Henry Green, the work's primary amanuensis, who found the remains of the *Opus Maximum* to be daunting to say the least. Finally, in the last century, even the four extant fragments ended up at two widely-separated sites, the Huntington Library in California and the E. J. Pratt Library in Toronto.

Nonetheless, despite the near certainty that the *Opus* is unlikely to be widely read,<sup>36</sup> particularly in the fragmentary form in which it exists, it constitutes the fruit of Coleridge's mature theological and philosophical thought. Consequently, perhaps it should be given more consideration than it is likely to receive from critics and commentators, now or in future, a situation that Coleridge accepted in his own time but hoped would not hold true after his passing, for it was the *Opus Maximum* which, as early as 1815, Coleridge said was '. . . the Work, on which I would wish to ground my reputation with Posterity . . .'.<sup>37</sup>

As a postscript to Coleridge's extraordinary, even unwavering focus on humankind's religious impulse, Mary's Wedd's wonderful lecture on the 'Immortality Ode', given at the Wordsworth Winter School in February 2004 and reprinted in an earlier issue of this journal, is very much to the point:

. . . as long as people have to die, there will be attempts to envisage immortality and as long as people experience some kind of mystical presence they will persist in thinking that there is a force greater than themselves or the material world.<sup>38</sup>

*Richland Community College,  
Decatur, Illinois*

<sup>36</sup> The print run was only 1275 copies.

<sup>37</sup> *CL* 4: 591 (7 Oct. 1815, to Daniel Stuart).

<sup>38</sup> Mary Wedd, 'Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood"', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* N. S. 126 (2004): 42.

## Reviews

CONSTANCE PARRISH. *Isabella Lickbarrow: Collected Poems and a Biographical Study*. The Wordsworth Trust, 2004. Pp. 236. ISBN: 1870 787 927. £10.<sup>1</sup>

AMONG THE WOMEN POETS OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD who have been rediscovered, after a long disappearance from print, is the Cumbrian Isabella Lickbarrow. Her collection *Poetic Effusions* (1814) was reprinted in the Woodstock facsimile series in 1994. (Incidentally, it was also in this admirable edition that the Lambs' *Mrs. Leicester's School* was again made available to us.) In *The Wordsworth Circle* of Spring 1996 (vol. 27 no. 2), among several articles about Lickbarrow, was one by Duncan Wu tracing the partnership between her and *The Westmorland Advertiser, or Kendal Chronicle*, which regularly printed her poems and sponsored *Poetical Effusions*. The article states that 'We know very little about her beyond what she reveals in the Preface to *Poetical Effusions*'.

Reading this, many of us would think, 'What a pity!' but do nothing about it. Not so our member, Constance Parrish, a fellow inhabitant of Cumbria, who comments, 'It seemed necessary that the details of her life in Kendal should be found'. So she set off on voyages of discovery to several County Record Offices and to other institutions or individuals who might be able to supply information, working on the project patiently over a long period. The results of her research can now be seen in a volume of Lickbarrow's *Collected Poems* prefaced by a detailed study of her life and including many newly discovered poems. Congratulations to the Wordsworth Trust for publishing this fascinating volume.

A distinguished don whispered to me, when this passion for resurrecting women poets was at its height, that 'they had been forgotten for good reasons'. While I think maybe the critical fashion of the day may have dredged up some unworthy examples, Isabella Lickbarrow was not one of them. Her poems come over as both technically sophisticated and yet full of feeling and an infectious identification with the beauty of her Lakeland surroundings, in which she had grown up. It does not seem important whether she was influenced by Wordsworth's poetry or not. She must, surely, have known some of it, he being such a near neighbour, but they each expressed like themes in his or her individual way. As she says in her Preface to *Poetical Effusions*, 'She wishes to disclaim any idea of plagiarism' . . . but 'she may unwittingly have borrowed the expressions of others, or made use of similar language naturally arising from the contemplation of similar subjects'. She does not have Wordsworth's greatness but she has a strong appeal to the reader's affections and the view of life is vividly her own. One of the interesting details in this book is the List of Subscribers to her *Poetical Effusions* which includes not only Wordsworth himself but a number of his friends and connections.

Isabella's father was a Quaker schoolmaster (so she did not lack education though she said she was 'self instructed') and she had three younger sisters, one of whom died in childhood. Her mother died when Isabella was five-and-a-half and her father when she was twenty. After that there followed a long struggle, considering the limited possibilities then of work for women, for

<sup>1</sup> Ms. Parrish's work can only be obtained from The Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage, Grasmere, LA22 9SH. The Book Shop's e-mail address is [shop@wordsworth.org.uk](mailto:shop@wordsworth.org.uk); its phone number is +44 15394 63528. There is a fee of £1.88 for P&P.



the sisters to support themselves and the two younger ones both spent some time in the Lancaster Asylum suffering from 'Hereditary melancholia'. One cannot help thinking of Mary Lamb and that soul-destroying needlework. But Isabella, as Constance Parrish says, 'was not able to deny herself the indulgence of', as she herself put it, 'wooing the Muse after the domestic employments of the day'. The regular appearance of her poems in the local paper also contributed a little to the family's finances. In 1814 the Branthwaites, who then owned the *Westmorland Advertiser*, published by subscription a volume of her poems, *Poetical Effusions*, and in 1818 a Liverpool publisher brought out her *Lament on the Death of Princess Charlotte and Alfred—A Vision*.

The Lickbarrow sisters were given some help by relations and by the Quaker and Unitarian communities in Kendal, though their cousin John Dalton's legacy of £900 came too late for Isabella, who died before she could feel the benefit of it, but it must have transformed the life of her surviving sisters. She also seems to have been fortunate in her friends, as several poems on friendship show. There is something almost heroic in the devotion to her poetic calling of a woman living in such destructive circumstances of drudgery and penury, stealing from the hours of exhausted sleep the time to write. She seems also to have found moments for the consolation of walks in the countryside. Nor are the poems simple scribblings. They are shaped with understanding of a literary tradition and with skilful technique. Her admiration for Milton, Gray and Campbell, for example, is apparent in her writing and her use of verse-forms is varied, from couplets and blank verse to ballad metre, sonnets and virtuoso pieces such as *The Prophecy of the Weird Sisters, or the Sorrows of England* (An Imitation of an Ode by Gray) or *Song of the Spirit of the Rock or Reply of the Wood Nymph*, with their long and beautifully structured stanzas. Incidentally, she pre-dated by several years Keats's 'stout Cortez' when she wrote in 'The Naiad's Complaint' of another explorer:

No greater pleasure could Columbus feel,  
When first beyond the Trans-Atlantic deep  
His won'dring eye beheld another world,  
Than I, when in my wand'rings I have found  
Some sweet sequester'd spot, unknown before.

Though her poems on the recurring subject of dreary Winter suggest a certain tendency to depression, she also had a puckish sense of humour, as seen in 'The Disappointment' or 'On the Fate of Newspapers'. Isabella did have concern about the wider world and political issues, as the subjects of her second volume indicate, as well as other occasional poems such as one 'On the Slave Trade' and her sonnets 'On the Accession of Queen Victoria' and 'For the Coronation', as well as 'Verses in Imitation of Hohenlinden'. She also feels for joys and sorrows not her own, as in 'The Mother' for example.

Yet perhaps those readers whose heart lifts at the first sight of the Cumbrian fells or whose memory of the Howgills stays forever bright will particularly cherish the poems in which Isabella celebrates her deep sense of unity with these places, as in 'Reflections on leaving the Vicinity of Penrith':

Ye towering mountains, clad with hovering mist,  
The rugged guardians of these lovely plains . . .

. . . In your lone caves and wild romantic glens  
Are the abode of some kind unseen Power,  
That Power will I invoke, when far remote,  
To visit me, and make these scenes arise.

Or 'Written on Leaving H-':

Ye dusky mountains crown'd with heath,  
With dark and rugged glens between,  
And mossy pastures spread beneath,  
A wild, yet varied pleasing scene . . .  
. . . Shall long in my remembrance dwell.

In her poem 'To an Opening Rose' she ends:

I, like the wild flowers of the mountains,  
Which unknown – unheeded die,  
Like them, must leave a name unhonour'd,  
And like them – forgotten lie.

I do hope not. The labours of Constance Parrish and the initiative of The Wordsworth Trust in publishing this book should keep her memory alive.

Mary Wedd

## Society Notes and News from Members

### CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

#### *The Annual General Meeting*

The Society's AGM was held on 2 April 2005 at Swedenborg Hall, following a fascinating lecture by Richard Lines, Secretary of the Swedenborg Society, on Charles Augustus Tulk, friend of Coleridge, Blake and Flaxman.

The meeting re-elected the Officers and Council of the Society, passed the annual account for 2004, and heard the Chairman deliver the following Report on 2004.

'I shall try to make my report for 2004 sound different from that for 2003, but it's not easy!  
The Society has four sides to its charitable and educational activities:

1. Publishing the *Bulletin*
2. Making financial grants for educational purposes
3. Arranging a programme of lectures and events
4. Maintaining and enhancing our collections of Eliana

I will briefly give an account of all four aspects during 2004. The order in which I mention them is deliberate – it reflects the amount of money we expend annually on each of the activities, with the *Bulletin* being our biggest item of expenditure, and so on.

So starting with that, during 2004, our members and subscribers all over the world received four issues of the *Bulletin* as usual, containing a total of 108 pages of editorial matter, and a variety of articles and information about Lamb and his circle and about the Society. Several of the articles were first heard as lectures to the Society, and it was particularly satisfying to have in print the pieces by Mary Wedd, Felicity James, Francis á Court.

Many of you know that I have been and remain somewhat concerned about the *Bulletin*. There appears to be something of a dearth of good material for one thing, and the *Bulletin* is thinner than it used to be (though not, in fact, than it was when I joined the Society – though twenty years ago its scale was chiefly constrained by financial considerations). Despite these reservations, I believe the *Bulletin* continues to offer very good value for money, and I would like to express my thanks not only to Rick Tomlinson, the editor, but also to all those who serve on its Editorial Board for their work during 2004. It should be a matter of satisfaction that the Society continues in this way to make Lamb known to a very large number of readers, greater than one might initially think because such a large proportion of the subscriptions to the *Bulletin* are maintained by Libraries.

The cost of the *Bulletin* in 2004 was, as you can see from the Accounts, just over £4,000. I should mention that the figure for the preceding year is not truly comparable as that included an extra issue paid for late within that accounting year. Roughly, then, it costs us about £1,000 per *Bulletin*. As I say, that is much the biggest part of our overall expenditure, but it is right in my opinion that this should be so, since the *Bulletin* is what carries our message to the bulk of the membership who cannot possibly take part in our other activities.

Our educational grants in recent years have been to Manchester University by way of our Bill Ruddick Memorial Bursaries. We made a donation of £2,000 towards these in 2004, and have

just paid over the same amount for 2005. As you may remember, the English Department deploys this money in providing doctoral students with bursaries towards the ever-increasing cost of attending academic conferences, giving priority to the Romantic period. That this aid is much appreciated is clear. We receive letters of thanks regularly, and I have circulated some of these today.

The programme of lectures and events in 2004 opened with the birthday luncheon at the RCGP following the usual pattern, with a lovely meal, and yet another account of that perennial favourite, the Immortal Dinner, from Professor John Barnard. Our AGM was accompanied by a most entertaining account of his *Elian Theatricalia* by David Wickham; and the year also saw excellent lectures from Felicity James, and Duncan Wu, the last given on a memorable afternoon in the historic rooms at the Murray publishing offices in Albemarle Street. In addition to all of this, several of our members enjoyed participating in the Friends of Coleridge study weekend at Kilve (last year devoted to the poems *Christabel*, *Kubla Khan* and *The Pains of Sleep*), which has become a regular feature in our programme—this event and the Wordsworth Winter School continue to be valuable recruiting grounds for the Society.

The net cost of our programme of events is quite moderate, especially as our lecturers are kind enough to charge no fees, though we do buy them a meal. I would like, later, to hear people's views about the ticket price for the luncheon, as it really ought to go up again but I am keen not to deter people from joining in this important annual celebration.

Finally, we come to the Society's collections. In 2004 we made an addition by purchasing a part of the Rees/Ireland archive at a cost of £656.50. We have, of course, spent very little on enhancing or conserving the collections for some years, and I was happy to accept David Wickham's recommendation to make this acquisition given that we already held most of this particular archive. We have not been able to make progress on the production of the Library catalogue, but I hope we shall in the coming year.

Overall, then, another successful year. I must not omit to thank the Officers and Council of the Society for their work. Without help in all sorts of directions we could not carry on. Let me mention particularly Duncan, whose commitment to the Society despite his manifold other duties we greatly value; also, Caroline, Tony, Veronica, David and Cecilia, all of whom give practical help in so many ways. One of the real problems, as you will all recognise, is one we share with many organisations these days, namely the small numbers who turn out to come to meetings, so let me conclude this report on the year by thanking each one of you for doing so, and encouraging you to try to think of friends whom you can bring along to swell our number and increase our enjoyment of these occasions.

I have commented briefly on the accounts in relation to our various heads of activity, and do not propose to say more than that about them, as they do not disclose anything very exceptional. I hope you will feel happy to approve this report and the annual accounts for 2004'.