

Toxic Dilation and Crystallizing Eloquence: some Coleridgean Home Truths

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THE FOLLOWING is an excerpt from Kathleen Coburn's report to her publisher, in 1951, which conveys something of the disordered state of Coleridge's notebooks as she had first found them:

The Notebooks run to rather more than a million words and the entries are in chaos. They need to be put in chronological order. There was no sort of system, chronological or topical; and the first and most difficult and most time-consuming task, after the transcription, is the dating and ordering of the entries. Some of the writing is difficult—faded pencil, rain and sea water stains, careless writing, one entry superimposed on another, entries in cypher, these are some of the difficulties. Other problems require the help of persons with special knowledge of recondite Greek, German, and Italian, and the history of science and theology. The resources of the largest libraries will be required.¹

Much of Coleridge's genius was not presentable. It has had to be unearthed from itself by the labours of convinced Coleridgeans. Think of all the unruly notebook contents awaiting conversion into the kind of cohesive poetry that is, in Tom Paulin's words, 'an energetic amalgam of matter and spirit'² Coleridge possessed, as Francis Thompson put it, 'the child's faculty of make-believe raised to the nth power', and played with the 'box of toys' that is the universe.³

I read every book that came in my way without distinction—and my father was very fond of me, & used to take me on his knee, and hold long conversations with me. I remember, that at eight years old I walked with him one evening from a farmer's house, a mile from Ottery—and he told me the names of the stars—and how Jupiter was a thousand times larger than our world—and that the other twinkling stars were Suns that had worlds rolling around them—and when I came home, he shewed me how they rolled round—. I heard him with a profound delight & admiration; but without the least mixture of wonder or incredulity. For from my early reading of Faery Tales, & Genii etc etc—my mind had been habituated *to the Vast...* (*Letters* I 354)

His upbringing had put into him some extra-terrestrial ferment which never ceased to drive him in search of ideals. His father had instilled in him a taste for the marvellous that had taken root in his soul and was now coming to a head in his solitary life. *Solitary*? His wife and children would signal for attention in the corners of his eyes.

Coleridge's idea-pot bubbled over. He followed with sincerity many by-

¹ *In Pursuit of Coleridge* (The Bodley Head, 1977) 112

² *William Hazlitt's Radical Style: The Day-Star of Liberty* (Faber, 1998) 75

³ *Shelley* (London, 1923) 45

paths along which his high-strung and exceptional temperament led him. Despite (or because of) his opium habit, Coleridge made his network of connections between experience and language peculiarly vascular with life and sensation:

...it [opium] leaves my sensitive Frame so sensitive! My enjoyments are so deep, of the fire, of the Candle, of the thought I am thinking, of the old Folio I am reading—& the silence of the silent House is so *most* & very delightful. (Letters I 539)

To his poor wife, Sarah, it must seem that he is obstinately declining to make the smallest effort towards locomotion. He is living on himself, feeding on his own substance, like a hibernating animal lying torpid in a hole all winter. Many people dismiss such activities as madness. Coleridge devoted his life to such activities. His wife, Sarah, would always be baffled. She would not always be tolerant.

'Kubla Khan' is, as we all know, set in an exotic land—Xanadu—but it has been said to have begun in quite a homely English place; not at home with the family, but in a lonely farmhouse on the edge of Exmoor. Coleridge's home, whether in actual fact at Nether Stowey, Greta Hall or Highgate (or, indeed, temporarily, at Ash Farm between Porlock and Linton), was at the centre of the dilated sphere of his intellectual being. Between the centre and circumference of that dilated sphere was a magical place for many auditors, as Seamus Perry's essay, 'Coleridge the Talker', richly illustrates. For example, Thomas Hood

had been carried, spiralling, up to heaven by a whirlwind intertwined with sunbeams, giddy and dazzled, but not displeased, and had then been rained down again with a shower of mundane stocks and stones that battered out of me all recollection of what I had heard, and what I had seen!⁴

and Keats

walked with him at his alderman-after dinner pace for near two miles I suppose. In these two miles he broached a thousand things.—let me see if I can give you a list. —Nightingales, Poetry—on Poetical sensation—Metaphysics—Different genera and species of Dreams—Nightmare—a dream accompanied by a sense of Touch—single and double Touch—A dream related—First and Second Consciousness—the difference explained between Will and Volition—so many metaphysicians from a want of smoking the second Consciousness—Monsters—the Kraken—Mermaids—Southey believes in them—Southey's belief too much diluted—A Ghost Story—Good morning. —I heard his voice as he

⁴ *Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (ed. Lucy Newlyn, Cambridge, 2002) 217

came towards me—I heard it as he moved away—I heard it all the interval—if it may be called so.⁵

If Keats demonstrates Coleridge's variety, the literary lawyer Sir Thomas Talfourd emphasises his power of producing a sense of unity from dilation:

At first his tones were conversational; he seemed to dally with the shallows of the subject and with fantastic images which bordered it; but gradually the thought grew deeper, the stream gathered strength, seemed to bear along with it all things which opposed its progress, and blended them with its current; and stretching away among regions tinted with ethereal colours, was lost at airy distance in the horizon of fancy.⁶

Yet Coleridge's dilated sphere was also a sort of neuralgic area round which those close to him suffered, and round which his prodigious, self-indulging and self-torturing eloquence could crystallise. I think his poem, 'Psyche' (1808), has something to do with this:

... For in this earthly frame
Ours is the reptile's lot, much toil, much blame,
Manifold motions making little speed,
And to deform and kill the things whereon we feed.⁷

At Nether Stowey, which seemed happy enough in a fragile, skin-deep way—just the place to bring up the first baby, write some really important poems, and experience real unhappiness—he made notes about his growing son, Hartley—

Hartley fell down & hurt himself—I caught him up crying & screaming—& ran out of doors with him. —The Moon caught his eye—he ceased crying immediately—& his eyes & the tears in them, how they glittered in the Moonlight! (*Notebooks* 219)—

in order to transmute them into poetry:

He knows well
The evening-star; and once, when he awoke
In most distressful mood (some inward pain
Had made up that strange thing, an infant's dream—)
I hurried with him to our orchard-plot,
And he beheld the moon, and, hushed at once,
Suspends his sobs, and laughs most silently,
While his fair eyes, that swam with undropped tears,

⁵ *Letters of John Keats* [ed. Robert Gittings, Oxford, 1970] 237

⁶ *S.T. Coleridge: Interviews and Recollections* (ed. Seamus Perry, Palgrave, 2000) 211

⁷ *Poetical Works* (ed. E.H. Coleridge, 1912) 412, from hereon cited as *PW*

Did glitter in the yellow moon-beam!⁸

This is of course from Coleridge's conversation poem, 'The Nightingale', which would influence Wordsworth, who would, having received some of the blessings in its breezes and cadences, produce 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey'—with its 'sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused'—and, later, the defining autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*.

'The Nightingale' is a special poem because it vivifies—and, delightfully, not always without drollery—the mesh of emphasis and echo connecting the outer world of nature with the inner world of the mind:

'Tis the merry Nightingale
That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates
With fast thick warble his delicious notes,
As if he were fearful, that an April night
Would be too short for him to utter forth
His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul
Of all its music!

There is the heightened sense of how it feels to be alive, and in this world of mystery and plenitude. For Coleridge, pathways and processes beginning and ending in mystery seem to rework and re-energise themselves, as in the instance when a large number of nightingales

...answer and provoke each other's song,
With skirmish and capricious passagings,
And murmurs musical and swift jug jug...

The natural world can burst upon Coleridge's mind with an element of almost theatrical surprise: when the moon disappears behind a cloud, there is a pause of silence (apparently connected in some way to the moon's disappearance). The silence is like a sudden shell of stillness through which the familiar is reborn to Coleridge (and to the reader) as one of his strange and wonderful 'facts of mind':

What time the moon was lost behind a cloud,
Hath heard a pause of silence; till the moon
Emerging, hath awakened earth and sky
With one sensation, and those wakeful birds
Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy,
As if some sudden gale had swept at once
A hundred airy harps!

Home to Coleridge, when actually in Somerset in the 1790s, was—really—

⁸ *PW* 266-7

already what it would remain for the rest of his life: the centre of a sphere of echoes and sensations that could dazzle as it dilated. The young Hazlitt had been caught up in it:

...the organ was playing the 100th psalm, and, when it was done, Mr Coleridge rose and gave out his text, 'And he went up into the mountain to pray, HIMSELF, ALONE.' As he gave out his text, his voice 'rose like a stream of rich distilled perfumes', and when he came to the two last words, which he pronounced loud, deep, and distinct, it seemed to me, who was then young, as if the sounds had echoed from the bottom of the human heart, and as if that prayer might have floated in solemn silence through the universe...

(Selected Writings [ed. Jon Cook, Oxford, 1991] 212-13)

Coleridge uttered the words so thrillingly that the 17-year-old Hazlitt (until that moment despondent as a failed painter) was electrified into lifelong productivity as an essayist:

Poetry and Philosophy had met together. Truth and Genius had embraced, under the eye and with the sanction of Religion. This was even beyond my hopes. I returned home well satisfied... there was a spirit of hope and youth in all nature, that turned everything into good.

(*Selected Writings* 213)

In 'The Nightingale', the moon, the clouds, the birds, the trees and vegetation, and of course the human mind, are all inextricably, and inexplicably, part of the same (ecological and metaphysical) system:

And she [the moon] hath watch'd
Many a Nightingale perch giddily
On blosmy twig still swinging from the breeze,
And to that motion tune his wanton song,
Like tipsy Joy that reels with tossing head.

As was the case in 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', everything in nature (including human nature) is connected with everything else. But, whereas in 'The Rime' the Mariner wished to tell a third of the people he met the tale of how he once broke his bond with nature and paid a heavy price, the narrator of 'The Nightingale' remembers, light heartedly, as if merely in passing, that he is currently teaching his little boy to receive, and spiritually profit from, uplifting sensations from nature.

The patterns of connectedness between Coleridge's disparate poetic moments can rush and warp as flexibly as flights of starlings in the wind: in 'The Rime', the eyes of the dead crew-members may have glittered malignantly by the light of the moon, but Coleridge intuits unity beneath the endless flux of surface appearances, and the glittering-eyed Mariner's tale can quicksilver into

‘a father’s tale’. Coleridge reels spots of an underlying unity up to the brink of transcribability

(While his fair eyes that swam with undropt tears
Did glitter in the yellow moonbeam!),

and offers us through his art (though as if by chance during a chat) a privileged glimpse through the folds of familiarity with which our eminent forefathers (such as Milton, with his *melancholy* nightingale) draped the multidimensional, multifaceted, interconnected and interdependent universe.

With Milton in mind, Samantha Harvey has said that ‘In “The Nightingale,” first-hand experience trumps poetic tradition. A child trumps generations of poets, because his two silent, intuitive gestures are more direct, unmediated, and true than centuries of poetic tradition.’⁹ Coleridge re-visions the imaginative possibilities in the universe through his child’s non-verbal gestures; Coleridge’s antennae are achingly receptive to the hierarchies of energy (or, as Wordsworth would call them, modes of being) above or beyond the human mind, and the reality that the human mind is not all-knowing (though it can feel something of what it does not know). Coleridge’s conversation poem (and his conversation) reminded Wordsworth (temperamentally inclined to avoid psychological and philosophical abysses) that the physical is simply one level of reality; and child-assisted investigation of the physical can render detectable patterns in the ever-shifting infrastructure of thoughts and feelings symbolic of spiritual realities. Wordsworth would feelingly appreciate the Coleridgean diffuseness of thinking, but he would learn to control it within the precincts of his self-management as

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns

(or rising moons, as in ‘The Nightingale’).

The women in Wordsworth’s life—his sister and his wife—helped him create the micro-climate of solitude he needed. How on earth did Coleridge sustain such preoccupations? He prepared for his poems. His reading, his speculation, and his walks through the countryside all contributed to the vast Coleridgean echo chamber in which concepts and insights reverberated into unity. But at the time he was living in a small cottage in Nether Stowey, and the cottage was hot with the frictions of tightly packed life and reeking with emotions. And yet, in the realm of poetic imagination, he was using a shifting variety of approaches, twisting for different handholds on the protean mystery

⁹ *Coleridge Bulletin*, 34, Winter 2008, 17

of life.

By 1802, Coleridge would feel damaged enough by his actual home life to write to Tom Wedgwood as follows:

If any woman wanted an exact & copious Recipe, 'How to make a Husband completely miserable', I could furnish her with one—with a *Probatum est*, tacked to it. —Ill-tempered Speeches sent after me when I went out of the House, ill-tempered Speeches on my return, my friends received with freezing looks, the least opposition or contradiction occasioning screams of passion, & the sentiments, which I held most base, ostentatiously avowed—all this added to the utter negation of all, which a Husband expects from a Wife—especially, living in retirement—& the consciousness, that I was myself growing a worse man / O dear Sir! no one can tell what I have suffered. (Notebooks 876)

Consider Coleridge's attempt to explain to his wife that she inhabits only one dimension in his dilated sphere:

I owe duties, & solemn ones, to you, as my wife; but I owe equally solemn ones to Myself, to my Children, to my Friends, and to Society. Where Duties are at variance, dreadful as the case may be, there must be a Choice. I can neither retain my Happiness nor my Faculties, unless I move, live, & love, in perfect Freedom, limited only by my own purity & self-respect, & by my incapability of loving any person, man or woman, unless I at the same time honor & esteem them. (Letters II 887)

If Coleridge's dilated sphere is, like the universe itself, multidimensional, here he lets Sarah know that her place is confined to the neuralgic dimension. To critics like Molly Lefebure and Norman Fruman, this reveals Coleridge's rather commonplace male ego—expansive and (despite the attempted tact) fundamentally tactless.

The household tension and the frequent quarrels had already often shaken Coleridge's nerves at home, but they also sharpened his focus on the science of his wife's behaviour:

Nothing affects her with pain or pleasure as it is but only as other people say it is—nay by an habitual absence of *reality* in her affections I have had a hundred instances that the being beloved, or the not being beloved, is a thing indifferent; but the *notion* of not being beloved—that wounds her pride deeply. (Notebooks 979)

By the time Hartley was 5 years old, his father was talking and writing explicitly about his domestic difficulties, but even by then Coleridge must have wordlessly infused his son with the doubts and fears of the contemplative temperament denied the very peace, denied the very solitude in which great poetry can be written; as long as he remained in Sarah's influence, he would be

denied love and friendship as he required them, and as he would formulate it in a later poem, 'Youth and Age':

Flowers are lovely; Love is flower-like;
Friendship is a sheltering tree... *(Poetical Works 440)*

He needed whoever loved him to be there for him, beautiful for him, sheltering him, and *quiet* for him. Just as Wordsworth's lines written upon Westminster Bridge indicate that Wordsworth's appreciation for the city of London increases the less people he has to be bothered with, so Coleridge's 'Frost At Midnight' reveals a poet feeling much more inclined to do the work he knows he is supposed to be doing—when he is at home in his nightly dukedom of solitude:

The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness.

This is how he needs those close to him in his special way of being alone: present, so he does not feel guilty about not doing his duty ('Mark you Southey, I will do my duty!'), but unconscious, or at least unconnected to him by family ties that he feels keep him on the unpoetic alert. When the inmates of Greta Hall are awake, the frictions of family life make him 'half-wish..' that his own children 'never had been born!'—as Coleridge confessed in the earliest draft of 'Dejection: an ode', addressed as a letter to Sara Hutchinson in April 1802 (*Letters II 797*).

I want to flash forward now to Coleridge at Highgate (and free of the Fricker baggage). Think of Mrs Ann Gillman's remote presence—just what Coleridge had wanted at Nether Stowey and at Greta Hall. Her unobtrusiveness reassures him. It is his favourite kind of presence: flower-like and sheltering—and quiet. (It is not like the presence of his wife, who sometimes signalled for attention in the corners of his eyes, and was sometimes—as Coleridge elaborated with some bitterness in some of his letters—confrontationally unimaginative.) Here is an example of what Coleridge wrote at Highgate:

Of late, in one of those most weary hours,
When life seems emptied of all genial powers,
A dreary mood, which he who ne'er has known
May bless his happy lot, I sate alone;
And, from the numbing spell to win relief,

Call'd on the Past for thought of glee or grief.
 In vain! bereft alike of grief and glee,
 I sate and cow'r'd o'er my own vacancy!
 And as I watch'd the dull continuous ache,
 Which, all else slumb'ring, seem'd alone to wake;
 O Friend! long wont to notice yet conceal,
 And soothe by silence what words cannot heal,
 I but half saw that quiet hand of thine
 Place on my desk this exquisite design.
 Boccaccio's Garden and its faery,
 The love, the joyaunce, and the gallantry!
 A Idyll, with Boccaccio's spirit warm,
 Framed in the silent poesy of form.

(*Poetical Works* 478)

Sheltered, soothed, and garlanded by his female friend's flower-like presence, Coleridge melts, in imagination, into Boccaccio's garden. This contrasts starkly with many of Coleridge's utterances as a parent. For example, the following excerpt, from a letter to Derwent (reminding the boy of his duty to his mother), reveals a Coleridge all too readily connected with something energetic and sulphurous in himself, and at odds with supernal elevation:

she gave *you* nourishment out of her own Breasts for so long a time, that the Moon was at it's least and it's greatest sixteen times, before you lived entirely on any other food, than what came out of her Body; and she brought you into the world with shocking pains, and yet loved you the better for the Pains, which she suffered for you; and before you were born, for eight months together every drop of Blood in your body, first beat in HER Pulses and throbbed in HER Heart. So it must needs be a horrible wicked Thing ever to forget, or wilfully to vex, a Father or a Mother: especially, a Mother. God is above all: and only good and dutiful Children can say their Lord's Prayer, & say to God, 'OUR FATHER', without being wicked even in their Prayers... *always to tell the Truth...* to tell a Lie... is such a base, hateful and wicked Thing, that when good men describe all wickedness put together in one wicked mind, they call it the Devil, which is Greek for a *malicious Liar*... Never, never, tell a Lie—even tho' you should escape a whipping by it: for the Pain of a whipp[ing] does not last above a few minutes; but the Thought of having told a Lie will make you miserable for days—unless, indeed, you are hardened in wickedness, and then you must be miserable for ever. (*Letters* III 1-2.)

Derwent was six.

Most of us know the sorry story of Coleridge's marriage—how he agreed, in a fever-fit of Pantisocratic idealism, to marry Southey's sister-in-law, only to regret it for the rest of his life. On the face of it, it looks like an unfortunate, or even wanton, accident that Coleridge allowed himself to get married.

Consider the letter that Coleridge wrote to Southey shortly before marrying Sarah:

...to marry a woman whom I do *not* love—to degrade her, whom I call my Wife, by making her the Instrument of low Desire—and on the removal of a desultory Appetite, to be perhaps not displeased with her Absence! Enough! These Refinements are the wildering Fires that lead me into Vice. Mark you, Southey!—I *will do my Duty*. — (*Letters I* 145)

Profoundly, perhaps he deliberately chose a step that he knew would preclude marriage in the future.¹⁰ Just as the ‘person on business from Porlock’ provided the puncture necessary for the transfusion of Xanadu from dream to paper, perhaps Coleridge needed for a time to use marriage to Sarah Fricker as an alibi for his poetic calling, which demanded of him singleness of soul. He needed a home, a nest, in which to produce his eggs—even if something told him that the Coleridge/ Fricker family tree was not going to shelter him from himself.

He suffered from his wife’s behaviour towards him, but he perhaps suffered more from the self-knowledge from his own behaviour towards her. His analyses of his wife’s behaviour could be devastating. Here is one of them. We are told that when Coleridge had some sort of breakdown, the fears of widowhood came upon Mrs Coleridge, and so she made her biggest effort yet to more soothingly become her husband’s Platonic approximation of a wife:

Mrs Coleridge was made *serious*—and for the first time since our marriage she felt and acted, as becomed a Wife & a Mother to a Husband, & the Father of her children—She promised to set about an alteration in her external manners, & looks & language, & to fight against her inveterate habits of Thwarting & unintermitting Dyspathy—this immediately—and to do her best endeavors to cherish other *feelings*. I on my part promised to be more attentive to all her feelings of Pride, etc etc and to try to correct my habits of impetuous & bitter censure. We have both kept our Promises... I have the most confident Hopes, that this happy Revolution in our domestic affairs will be permanent...

(*Letters II* 913-14)

I wonder if there is not sadism behind this? (Remember Coleridge’s ‘consciousness’—as he told Tom Wedgwood in 1802—‘that [he] was growing a worse man’ in the sphere of his wife’s influence. And remember his pre-nuptial fretting to Southey about wildering fires and vice.) Is there not relish which the author feels in laying bare the secret exigencies of his intimate enemy, the trapped shrew? Is there not relish in this anatomising of Sarah’s impostures in which she has become embroiled—a little bourgeois mouse (of

¹⁰ In her *Erotic Coleridge: Women, Love, and the Law Against Divorce* (Palgrave, 2005), Anya Taylor has shown clearly how difficult it was to get a divorce at this time.

whom Bath would have approved) caught in a trap? Did Coleridge *need* the fraught domestic atmosphere? Perhaps the touch of sadism was by no means only a superficial tendency in his temperament, but rather an inseparable part of the very nucleus of his inspiration—a part about which he was not particularly pleased.

In the essays of *The Friend*, for example, one may detect, from time to time, steaming between the lines, something more sulphurously combative than central disinterestedness would emit. When Coleridge discusses Britain's tribe of weak readers, those 'persons troubled with asthma to read', he pursues the metaphor—'those who labour under the more pitiable asthma of a short-witted intellect'—with energy more intense than that of mere recreational drollery.¹¹

The same could be said, to give just one more example, of his transfixing pen portrait of William Pitt the Younger, who had become Prime Minister in 1783, at the age of 24:

At college he [Pitt] was a severe student... That revelry and that debauchery, which are so often fatal to the powers of intellect, would probably have been serviceable to him; they would have given him a closer communion with realities... The influencer of his country and of his species was a young man, the creature of another's [Pitt's father's] predetermination, sheltered and weather-fended from all the elements of experience; a young man, whose feet had never wandered; whose very eye had never turned to the right or to the left; whose whole track had been as curveless as the motion of a fascinated reptile!

(EOT I 220.)

Coleridge announced his intention to snap his squeaking baby-trumpet of sedition, but he really broke the connection between himself and his family, because it was through this blood flow that the nastier part of him—that Lefebure and Fruman have depicted with the opposite of nostalgia—could be called and stirred to arms. He really wanted emotionally non-toxic (in the end, non-family) circumstances in which to fine-spin, if not crystallise, his eloquence. He required mental spaciousness—back-dropped and floodlit on his own 'selfish' terms—in which to theatrically play out his role as poet and sage.

Hazlitt would become bitter and say that Coleridge ended up swallowing doses of oblivion. Hazlitt was right in that Coleridge swallowed doses of everything. Here is Coleridge (in a letter of 1825 to Mrs Gillman, addressing her as 'My dear Friend') at play in a palace of sentences, in the pleasure dome of his twilight years, in caverns measurable perhaps only to himself:

I have often amused myself with the thought of a self-conscious Looking-glass, and the various metaphorical applications of such a fancy—and this morning it struck across the Eolian Harp of my Brain

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that there was something pleasing and emblematic (of what I did not distinctly make out) in two such Looking-glasses fronting, each seeing the other in itself, and itself in the other. —Have you ever noticed the Vault or snug little Apartment which the Spider spins and weaves for itself, by spiral threads round and round, and sometimes with strait lines, so that it's Lurking-parlour or Withdrawing-room is an oblong square? This too connected itself in my mind with the melancholy truth, that as we grow older, the World (alas! how often it happens, that the less we love it, the more we care for it; the less reason we have to value it's Shews, the more anxious are we about them!—alas! how often do we become more and more loveless, as Love, which can outlive all change save a change with regard to itself, and all loss save the loss of it's *Reflex*, is more needed to sooth us & alone is able so to do!)

What was I saying?—O—I was adverting to the fact, that as we advance in years, the World, that *spidery* Witch, spins it's threads narrower and narrower, still closing in on us, till at last it shuts us up within four walls, walls of flues and films, windowless—and well if there be sky-lights, and a small opening left for the Light from above.

(*Letters* V 414)

As De Quincey said, Coleridge 'spun daily, and at all hours, for mere amusement of his own activities, and from the loom of his own magical brain'.¹² Does the above passage record a spidery act of completion or depletion? Whatever it is, it is wonderful, and it puts the sorry story of Mr and Mrs Coleridge's lack of talent for household happiness in a different context: the sphere that dilates can also—equally compellingly—contract, the poet having consumed the poisons in himself and kept only their quintessence. He continues the letter to Mrs Gillman by contracting—or is that dilating?—into verse:

I speak in figures, inward thoughts and woes
 Interpreting by Shapes and outward Shews.
 Call the World Spider: and at fancy's touch
 Thought becomes image and I see it such.
 With viscous masonry of films and threads
 Tough as the Nets in Indian Forests found
 It blends the Waller's & the Weaver's trade[s]
 And soon the tent-like Hangings touch the ground—
 A dusky Chamber that excludes the Day,
 But cease the prelude & resume the lay. (Letters V 415-16)

¹² *Recollections of the English Lake Poets* (ed. David Wright, Harmondsworth 1970) 8