

Ambitious Abjection: Coleridge's method of poetic activation through inertia

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THERE SEEMS TO BE A SPECIAL CONSENSUS in Coleridge studies that accounts for a conspicuous divide between the poet's early and late achievements. More than this, it insists that the latter phase of his poetic output is marked by a distinct artistic signature – a peculiar mode of invention through negation. Critics generally hold Coleridge's 'unproductive productiveness' to be a defining feature of his 'late style'.¹ This sense of a pivotal transformation is carefully explored in Morton Paley's concentrated study of the later verse, which focusses on the verbal strategies that Coleridge employs to cope with feelings of absence and the conscious loss of his creative powers in the latter half of his poetic career.² Paley considers how Coleridge 'must have known intuitively that his most triumphant poetic accomplishments were behind him'³ by 1806 and attributes a fundamental turning point in his method of composition to 'To a William Wordsworth' (PW 401) with its almost elegiac note of praise for the 'ever-enduring' permanence of Wordsworth's imaginative powers. In his essay focussing on a similar practice in 'Dejection: an ode,' Andrew Keanie points to the poet's 'eccentric reactivation of his negated imagination.'⁴ Here, Keanie poses a common question, 'how should Coleridge's wealth of poetic activity in later years be regarded, given that he pronounced "The Poet...dead in [him] in 1801?', and proceeds by suggesting that the 'Dejection' ode 'involves the first conscious, explicit and formal enactment of...Coleridge's capable negativity.' While Keanie and Paley offer original and persuasive arguments, and there is little cause to doubt a general shift in Coleridge's vision of himself as a poet in the first decades of the nineteenth century, there is a case to be made for the development of related formal processes in many of his early compositions. The same curious capacity to create out of a self-proclaimed loss or deficiency that we find in the 'Dejection' ode and the dedication to William Wordsworth, though altered in tone and form, is richly evident in his more prolific years.

In fact, a remarkable number of Coleridge's pre-1801 poems begin with a declaration lamenting his dwindling sensitivity to the world of shapes and sounds. Although not composed with quite the same degree of self-conscious reflection on the misapplication of his creative powers that we find in the later poems, several early works present the disconsolate poet giving utterance to what appears to be a perceptible crisis: the apparent failure of the shaping spirit of his imagination. The key stylistic indicator of this ostensible intellectual indolence and artistic immobility is the recurring motif of a lifeless or

¹ This phrase was applied to Coleridge by Nora Jackson at the 2008 Coleridge Conference in her paper entitled 'Elements of Coleridge's late style'.

² Morton D. Paley, *Coleridge's Later Poetry*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1996.)

³ *Ibid*, 1.

⁴ Andrew Keanie, 'Coleridge's Capable Negativity in "Dejection: an ode"' in *Romanticism*, Volume 13, Number 3, 2007, 281-292.

motionless atmosphere uncondusive to expressive output. Many of Coleridge's most formidable poems of the 1790s, even those pertaining to the spirit of organic expression, begin in almost repressive silence and stillness with the notable absence of motion necessary for the production of spontaneous verse. In 'Dejection: an ode' the night will 'not go hence' because it is 'unroused by winds that ply a busier trade', resulting in 'A stifling, drowsy, unimpassion'd grief, / That finds no natural Outlet, no relief,' (PW 293) but a similar pathetic fallacy occurs at the outset of 'Frost at Midnight' in which 'The Frost performs its secret ministry, / Unhelp'd by any wind,' and an enigmatic calmness, 'vexes meditation with its strange / And extreme silentness' (PW 171). Similarly, 'Fears in Solitude' begins in an unusually motionless state, 'O'er stiller place / No singing sky-lark ever pois'd himself,' (PW 175) while in 'Ode to the Departing Year' the poet employs the strophe to claim, once again, that he starting from a 'silent sadness' (PW 142).

More often than not, such peculiar stillness is equated with a certain perceptive deficiency in which the speaker or subject is situated outside the vital order of things. 'The Wanderings of Cain,' for instance, opens with the narrator being led along a barren and darkened path by his son Enos, crying out in desperate response to his fate, 'O that man might live without the breath of his nostrils. So I might abide in darkness, and an empty space' in a statement that matches the landscape: 'The scene around was desolate; as far as the eye could reach it was desolate; the bare rocks faced each other' (PW 176). Correspondingly, the first part of *Christabel* (drafted in 1798) presents a disconcerting atmosphere of sterile silence:

The Night is chill; the Forest bare;
Is it the Wind that moaneth bleak?
There is not Wind enough in the Air
To move away the ringlet Curl
From the lovely Lady's Cheek —
There is not Wind enough to twirl
The One red leaf...

(PW 176, 43-49)

Putting aside the narrative technique of creating suspense through the Gothic trope of unnerving suspension, we become aware of a special mindfulness on the part of poet for the peculiar strangeness in a vexing quiet. More pointedly perhaps, is the knowledge that this quiet is part of a larger torpor embedded in the scene where the cock crows 'drowsily' and moon appears 'small and dull'. For K H Wheeler, the reappearance of this mode in Coleridge's early verse represents 'an effort to establish either intense silence, a trance-like stillness, or a mood of solitude, as the atmosphere surrounding the speaker of the poem'⁵ but the implications of this intense silence as an intended catalyst for creative output is yet to be properly considered. In the above examples, and they are

⁵ K.H. Wheeler, *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1981), 68.

just a few of many, the poet begins with the articulation of some form of oppressive enervation that is reflected in the landscape: bereft of an essential vitality required for composition and suspended in the grip of a poetic deadlock, the speaker bemoans his inability to generate poetry instinctively. Yet time and again, this profound and often unexplained inertia seems to be the postulated condition for the awakening of the creative perception.

Paul Magnuson, like M.H. Abrams before him, considers the recurrence of a conscious passivity precipitating vital activity in Coleridge's conversation poems to be the demonstration of an acute receptivity in the speaker that is part of a larger pattern of engagement: 'Most of the poems begin with the poet in a state of repose, receiving sensations from nature. Receptivity changes to active speculation on the relation of the poet to nature and society, and activation of the imagination...' ⁶ In this way, the initial stillness in these poems represents a serene and trance-like meditation upon the harmony of the environment that can be converted into mental and emotional action. An almost mesmeric contemplation of the innate vitality in natural tranquillity evokes a reciprocal participation in that activity, which in turn arouses an outpouring of the imagination. It is the sort of heightened sensitivity to the dormant 'Life of Things' that Coleridge frequently records in his notebooks:

The rocks and Stones put on a vital semblance; and Life itself thereby seemed to forego its restlessness, to anticipate in its own nature an infinite repose, and to become, as it were, compatible with Immoveability. ⁷

While Coleridge's singularly intense yet delicate perception of form and energy is certainly to the point here, I am really more interested by the ways in which the primary inactiveness of his early poems reflect a conscious and effective displacement on the part of the poet that sets him up for vigorous mental and emotional engagement. They seem to me to be less about a silently active receptivity, than the mindful ruminations of a speaker who uses the latency of his own incapacitating nonconformity to the natural world as a means of engendering verse. Take, for instance, 'The Nightingale' (1798), one of his earliest attempts at the conversational mode which begins, not in repose, but with a profound visual deficiency:

No cloud, no relique of the sunken day
Distinguishes the West, no long thin slip,
Of sullen light, no obscure trembling hues.

(PW 180, 1-3)

The pictorial murkiness of the scene – its undifferentiated stillness enforced by the repetition of the negative adjective 'no' – marks the foundations for a

⁶ Paul Magnuson, 'The Conversation poems' in Lucy Newlyn (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 34.

⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Notebooks: A selection*, ed. Seamus Perry (Oxford University Press, 2002), 25.

spiritual numbness and sensory defectiveness that is fundamental to the mechanics of the poem at large. For it is only in confronting the strange calm of the site (and a reflexive deflection to idle literary conceits) that the speaker is able to surrender his 'whole spirit' to 'the influxes/ Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements.' A special attention to the hazy torpor of the environment sets him up for the spirited movement that is to follow.

In one of his principal pre-1801 productions, 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' we are once again presented with the image of the brooding poet consigned to immobility and spatial imprisonment: 'they are gone, and here I must remain' (PW 156). Yet again physical arrest is equated with mental obstruction as Coleridge announces his resulting visionary stagnation and the incapability for instinctive receptiveness by claiming that he has 'lost beauties and feelings'. However, as he laments this injustice it allows him to construct a poetic experience by entering imaginatively into the excursion of his friends and describing, in great detail, the beauties they will encounter. As they follow the route set out by the now inoperative narrator, he is able to achieve what he set out to do in writing the poem: to move from one crippled by an uncomfortable stasis, to a mobile and sensitive receiver of impressions through a peculiarly vicarious presence. While the speaker describes the imagined experience of the walkers, it is really he that gazes 'till all doth seem/ Less gross than body; and of such hues/ As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes/ Spirits perceive his presence.' In this way he is again able to create and recreate through a necessary displacement, for as he exclaims in swift exuberance: 'A delight/ comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad/ As I myself were there!' By the very act of deliberating upon his circumscribed seclusion and loss, the poet paradoxically begins to transcend that loss.

This pattern of an initial debilitating disharmony supplanted by imaginative output is established well before the supposed pivot of 1801. It is evident in the youthful 'Sonnet: Composed in Sickness' in which Coleridge sets the dislocation of grief and ill health – 'I see the crowd, whom Youth and Health inspire,/ Hear the loud laugh, and catch the sportive lay,' – against poetic productivity, 'Then sigh and think – I too could laugh and play/ And gaily sport it on the festive lyre,/ Ere Tyrant Pain has chas'd away delight' (PW 15). It is there again in 'Ode on the Departing Year' where the speaker offers something of a blueprint for the dynamic I am talking about: 'Starting with my silent sadness/ Then with no unholy madness,/ Ere yet the entered cloud forbade my sight,/ I rais'd th' impetuous song, and solemnized his flight' (PW 142). The religious undertones of this simultaneously impulsive and chastening motion are self-evident – promoting a poetics of spontaneity without sacrificing the ceremony of reflection – but it is in the shrewd awareness of a gloomy muteness given way to lyrical rapture that we see the powers of Coleridge's 'capable negativity' at work. If not a deliberate stratagem, it is certainly a conscious process playing at impulse.

Two early autobiographical anecdotes bear witness to the origins and development of Coleridge's peculiarly sentient formation through negation: the

self-compromising creativity that would inform so much of his future poetic output. The first is a well-known episode in which the young boy, aged six, quarrels with his brother Frank, is seized upon by his mother, but manages to struggle free and run away to hide on the banks of the Ottery where the townsfolk search for him through the night. The act itself does not hold as much significance as the poet's recollection of the powerful response it produced in him in a letter to Tom Poole:

There I stayed; my rage died away; but my obstinacy vanquished my fears – & taking out a little shilling book which had, at the end, morning & evening prayers, I very devoutly repeated them – thinking at the same time *with inward & gloomy satisfaction*, how miserable my Mother must be! I *distinctly remember* my feelings when I saw a Mr Vaughan pass over the Bridge, at about a furlong's distance – and how I watched the Calves in the field beyond the river.⁸ [my emphasis]

The intricate set of displacements at work in this anecdote characterise and underwrite much that was to be most distinctive in Coleridge's early poems. In this we observe the young poet's first conscious acknowledgement of his ability to gain presence through absence, to produce an evocative effect through a self-inflicted dislocation. The 'inward and gloomy' satisfaction is borne out of his recognition that he has garnered notice by exclusion. It dramatizes his instinctive tendency to construct or reconstruct experience through self-damaging modes of engagement, and to create action out of a disconcerting stillness. Tim Fulford rightly draws attention to the shame-induced failure of the critical faculty in many of Coleridge's poems, which often display 'an intense dramatization of the powerlessness into which guilt plunges the interpretative faculty.'⁹ A fitting example would be the debilitating self-reproach expressed in 'The Pains of Sleep': 'For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,/ My own or others still the same/ Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame!' But the reverse of this is also true, and there are numerous instances where the perceptive and creative faculties are empowered by a form of isolating self-condemnation. Gregory Leadbetter strikes upon the matter in his work on the transnatural in the poet when he suggests that 'Coleridge himself – as if a character in one of his own myths – was often cast as an anomaly in terms that place him outside the natural order.'¹⁰ This notion is further emphasised when he argues for the ways in which Coleridge's 'formative sense of his own psychic deviancy' works to unite 'poetic realisation with his active convergence with autonomous forces beyond the self.'¹¹ Leadbetter's appreciation for a metaphysical agency beyond the natural order of things is incisive, but if we are to put aside the conviction of religious aberrance that so

⁸ Coleridge's *Poetry and Prose*, 620.

⁹ Tim Fulford, *Coleridge's Figurative Language* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 67.

¹⁰ Gregory Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37, 55.

frequently accompanies Coleridge's self-identification in such moments, and concentrate on the spectacle suggested by the image of the young boy actively garnering a special affected bearing through absence, we might see the beginnings of an artistic strategy – a poetics of conscious detachment.

In the second representative account Coleridge's recalls the peculiar spirit of his childish imagination:

I took no pleasure in boyish sports – but read incessantly... and I used to lie by the wall and *mope* — and my spirits used to come upon me suddenly, & in a flood — & then I was accustomed to run up and down the church-yard, and act over all I had been reading on the docks, the nettles, and the rank-grass.¹²

On one level this is little more than a reflection on the delights of reading and the power of the youthful imagination. But it also serves as an important signifier for the creation of a personal mythology that depends upon giving into morbid isolation and loneliness so that one might produce a series of compensatory inventive leaps. The dual implications of the term 'mope' to mean both gloomy dejection and 'an abstracted or stupefied state' (O.E.D.) in which one abandons oneself to ennui is important to the formation of that mythology. In this sudden fluctuation from sullenness to manic elation we perceive a quality that would become an identifiable hallmark of the poet's thought and work: a self-fashioned and highly self-conscious catharsis that depends on an initial incapacitation. It is perhaps best exemplified by the inmate in 'The Dungeon' who is imagined by the poet to be exposed to nature, 'Till he relent, and can no more endure/ To be a jarring and dissonant thing/...But, bursting into tears, wins back his way' (PW 153). The transformation from a state of encumbering fixity, in which 'Each pore and natural outlet' is 'shrivell'd up' by a 'friendless solitude,' to one of emotional release exhibits the poet's deepest aesthetic wishes. Further along in the same letter Coleridge signals his awareness of a disembodied power in such processes by describing how, after his father burnt his books, he 'acquired an indisposition to all bodily activity.' In this we see the beginnings of a carefully orchestrated personal myth, a deliberate and manufactured effect, in which the poet was, paradoxically, able to engender by interacting, with an atmosphere of creative paralysis at a vicarious remove.

In his lectures on Shakespeare, Coleridge makes poetic claims for an underlying philosophical belief in the essential innocence and untainted curiosity of the poet: 'The poet is one who carries the simplicity of childhood into the powers of manhood; who, with the soul unsubdued by habit, unshackled by custom, contemplates all things with the freshness and wonder of a child,'¹³ but in his preface to the 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton,' he argues that poetry is 'well-calculated to give an innocent pleasure.' These two

¹² Coleridge's *Poetry and Prose*, 619.

¹³ *CW*, V, *Lectures 1908-1819: On Literature*, ed. Reginald A. Foakes, ii, 503.

episodes intimate towards a greater complexity in the perception of the contemplating child. For all his desire to see Hartley united with the 'lovely shapes and sounds intelligible/ Of that eternal language,' there is a tacit acknowledgement that the poet himself remains out of harmony with the natural world and is therefore dependent on other forms of aesthetic engagement for his creativity. Such morbid lyrical reflections are often directed towards to an intense and self-conscious probing of his own creative limitations and owe their genesis to his ability at reconciling a debilitating and 'causeless anxiety' with his determination for artistic enterprise: 'God forbid that I should perish... without effort and without renown.'¹⁴

Although Coleridge claimed that he was 'eaten up by anxiety' he was also acutely aware of his power to produce from the same forces as those by which he felt consumed. The importance of these autobiographical representations extends beyond the self and into the realms of imaginative process and composition. The first memoir, in which a boyish Coleridge gazes silently as the local residents search for him in the night, reveals a young boy discovering the faculty of manipulation necessary for writing poetry; that he can look upon a scene, however ominous it may be, with a secret satisfaction that it is his creation. The second recollection of his childish moments of moody release is a lesson in artistic method, in the manner by which emotional shortcomings precipitate a surge of inventiveness. Both acts possess curious powers of creativity and form part of a cycle played out over and over again in life and art, a mode that Coleridge could turn to when faced with frustration or failure; witnessed in his absconding from Cambridge to join the dragoons; in his rendering of himself as a 'sinful and most miserable man' of 'dim and unhallowed thought'; in his mythologizing of a forlorn childhood; and in his writing out of the supposed 'Valley of Seclusion'.

To argue that these methods are premeditated or tactical may be slightly overstating the point, but there is certainly a degree of structural familiarity in this mode. In fact, Coleridge draws conspicuous attention to an artifice of sorrowful expression in 'The Nightingale' when he admonishes himself for echoing Milton's famous conceit, 'most musical, most melancholy bird':

In nature there is nothing melancholy.
But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
(And so, poor Wretch! fill'd all things with himself
And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,
First named these notes a melancholy strain.
And many a poet echoes the conceit. (PW 180 11.14-23)

In the repudiation of a mythological or literary convention that is, by

¹⁴ *CL*, I, 41.

Wordsworthian standards of natural spontaneity, essentially false, Coleridge's tone borders on the playfully self-condemnatory. Not only is he sporting with a reflexive pandering to that analogy (which is further reiterated by Coleridge's humorous summary of the poem in a letter to Wordsworth in which he suggests that his 'Bird's Tail's a tail indeed') but it is really he, through his *Ancient Mariner* of the same year, who has perfected the art of filling 'all things with himself' and making all 'sounds tell back the tale of his own sorrow.' This critical act then serves as a gently ironic reassertion of the very constraints his didactic stance is meant to rise above in the first place. It demonstrates Coleridge's familiarity with an impulse to be most musical when most melancholy, and once again displays his capacity to produce from a position of strange stillness – to find, as the poem promises in first stanza, 'A pleasure in the dimness of the stars.'

As McGann points out, by the time Coleridge gets to writing (and rewriting) *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, he is retelling a wider cultural tale of tragic pleasure and morbid delight.¹⁵ But it also one that he has made his own and this allows him to charge the myth with a richer and deeper import. In the *Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge discovers a pre-text, a folkloric precursor that has rehearsed aspects of what he wishes to do. Even at this early stage in his poetic career there are signs of a ritualized representation of suffering that engenders art: of expressive power emerging from an isolating displacement. With this in mind, the inexplicable killing of the Albatross makes greater sense for it is an act which ultimately empowers the Mariner. His deed is essentially a destructive one, bringing suffering and death upon the crew (it is he who 'killed the bird/ That made the breeze to blow'), but it also provides the him with a means of dialogue that is more suitable to his disposition than the lyrical flow of a surging airstream. Like many of the poems in this period, it places him in a static conundrum that needs to be overcome: and it is out of a state of motionless incapacitation that he initiates a verbal facility:

Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,
 'Twas sad as sad could be;
 And we did speak only to break
 The silence of the sea! (PW 161, 107-110)

The loss of natural motion is emphasised by the artificial internal rhyme (speak/break) that creates the space for simulated discourse, establishing a medium that is in the words of Anne Williams, 'extravagantly disunified'.¹⁶ More than this, the Mariner's perverse slaying of the Albatross, like the episode in which he struggles with Frank, gives him a necessary presence,

Ah! well a-day! What evil looks

¹⁵ Jerome K. McGann, "The Meaning of "The Ancient Mariner"" in *Spirits of Fire: English Romantic Writers and Contemporary Historical Methods* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990), 208-39.

¹⁶ Anne Williams, 'An I for an Eye: Spectral Persecution in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*' *PMLA*, vol 108, No.5, Oct 1993, p.1115.

Had I from old and young!
 Instead of the cross, the Albatross
 About my neck was hung. (PW 161, 139-142)

Despite the shameless blasphemy and self-alienation contained in his tasteless and debilitating conduct, it is a conscious act which gives the Mariner/poet the attention he desires. This is not a longing after the 'One Life' of sacramental unity. His ambition is to be witnessed, and the only way for him to be witnessed is to remain out of harmony with the natural world. It is a deeply compromising creativity, but a creativity nonetheless, and one which drives the narrative:

Forthwith this frame of mine was wrench'd
 With a woeful agony,
 Which forced me to begin my tale
 And then it left me free.

Since then at an uncertain hour,
 Now oftimes and now fewer,
 That anguish comes and makes me tell
 My ghastly adventure.

I pass, like night, from land to land;
 I have strange power of speech; (PW 161, 582-587)

In this we see how the execution of an original disruptive act precipitates the potential for relentless repetition, a somewhat grim parody of writerly profligacy. In the habitual telling and retelling of his tale of woeful agony, the Mariner, like Coleridge, displays a compulsive re-enactment that both creates and empowers. It is a deliberate art playing at spontaneity, an internalised mode but also a self-consciously fashioned effect.

I am not disputing the merits of reading an altered tone in Coleridge's later verse, but to propose that 'the wholeness of his vision is lost'¹⁷ after his return from Malta, as Morton Paley does in *Coleridge's Later Poetry* is to take his notion for an agreeably inter-related order of things in 'The Eolian Harp' and elsewhere at face value. In truth, that order, even in the fertile years of 1797 and 1798, is almost always directed towards another. In his concluding remarks on the achieved unity of 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison,' R.A. Durr suggests that the poet finds an answer to his quiet detachment in the love of others: 'For in Coleridge, isolation is never a romantically realised condition but it is that which must be overcome or transcended in the achievement of unity through emphatic love.'¹⁸ The moments of organic harmony in the poetry

¹⁷ Coleridge's *Later Poetry*, 37.

¹⁸ R.A. Durr, "'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison' and a Recurrent Activity in Coleridge.' *ELH* Vol 26, No.4, Dec 1959, 517.

of Coleridge's productive years presents no final curative recovery – no source of ultimate participatory accord – only a projection of resolution upon another person. In 'The Nightingale' it is a crying Hartley whose sobbing is suspended and turned to laughter by the sight of the moon, while in 'Frost at Midnight' it is the same child and not the poet, who will profit from the harmonising and enlightening powers of nature. In like manner, it is only when the Ancient Mariner turns his attention from himself to the sea-snakes that he is freed from his static dilemma in a blessed moment of release which, as Richard Holmes describes, 'comes like a fresh, stiffening wind, in a maritime image of renewed potency and creative power.'¹⁹ (140). That there is no personal promise of settlement in these poems, only a move away from the self to an imaginary recipient of love is fundamental in explaining the source of Coleridge's inventive powers both early and late.

While much has been made of Coleridge's organic ideals as they are established in his discursive writings, he was quick to recognise a vital discrepancy between the formation of those ideals and their application to a troubled sense of self: 'I profess a deep conviction that Man was and is a *fallen* creature, not by accidents of bodily constitution, or any other cause... but diseased in his *Will*' (AR 136). Seamus Perry has meticulously captured the tussle between self-assertion and self-negation in *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* by eloquently alerting us to a new way of reading Coleridge's dualistic capacity for entertaining seemingly incompatible notions. It is a particular aspect of this dualistic facility that I am arguing for here by claiming that there is a definitive link between his notion of the poet as 'the sole unquiet thing' and 'the sole unbusy thing'; and by trying to show that this link is not necessarily the product of a belated post-1801 anxiety over his faltering powers. The nature of that relation is certainly transformed in the years following the 'Dejection' ode where Coleridge was prone to confront his shortcomings in a more direct manner. A case in point is 'The Garden of Boccaccio' which faces up to the predicament of spiritual and imaginative loss in the first lines: 'Of late, in one of those most weary hours,/ When life seems emptied of all genial powers/ ...I sate alone;/ And from the numbing spell to win relief,/ Call on the past for thought of glee or grief' (PW 682), before gaining a sense of renewal by interacting with an illustrated scene from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In like manner, he uses 'To William Wordsworth' to tackle depressed feelings of inadequacy front on and win relief by proxy: for as he 'listened with a heart forlorn/ the pulses of [his] being beat anew:/ And even as life returns upon the drowned/ Life's joy rekindling roused a throng of pains.' But the foundation for these moments of imaginative catharsis – when he demonstrated a deepening and enlarging of his creative powers by engaging with a stifling atmosphere of artistic defectiveness – were set in some of his earliest poetic efforts.

¹⁹ Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 10.