

Spontaneous Overflows on the High Seas: Motion and Emotion among Voyagers to Hamburg in 1798

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*For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
Lay like a load on my weary eye*

COLERIDGE'S FIRST DIRECT EXPERIENCE of the high seas came on his three-day voyage to Hamburg in September 1798. This paper is largely devoted to the vessel that bore him, John Chester and William and Dorothy Wordsworth across the North Sea, and to the nature of their voyage. Despite extensive accounts in Coleridge's letters and publications, commentators seem to have given little attention to these days at sea, with the exception of Kenneth Johnston's speculations about secret agents on board.¹ I shall offer some new information about the voyage and make tentative suggestions as to its impact on the voyagers.

First I must introduce George Butler, on whose almost entirely unpublished journal I shall be drawing. Born in 1774, the son of a Chelsea schoolmaster, Butler became senior wrangler at Cambridge in 1794 (the year that STC finally went down) and gained a fellowship at Sidney Sussex College. Four years later, he set off for Germany, like our poets, to travel, learn the language and meet leading intellectuals. His manuscript tour journal extends to over 200 pages of closely written script.² Butler left Cambridge on Saturday 7 July 1798 after—as his journal tells us—'bidding farewell in a spare hour... to the Nereids of Cam and to every rose bud in our Garden'. This is, then, a classically-minded man, also one of some sensibility whose farewell to 'our', that is the College's, garden can only remind us of Wordsworth.³ At Yarmouth Butler waited some days to sail, spending much of his time engrossed in Virgil, as his journal entry for 10 July shows:

July 10. Tuesday. Rose before 7—wet morning. Wrote a letter to Holder—cleared up—spent almost the whole day with Virgil on Jetty, & then took a long even'g walk by the sea-side; bed bef. 10. Quarrel in wh. Officer struck a modest woman who lay therefore in fits. My Intercessn with the husband.

His account here of a Yarmouth officer who struck a modest woman uncannily foreshadows Wordsworth's witnessing a similar event in Hamburg

¹ Kenneth Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1998, 609-12. Since the presentation of this paper at the 2010 Coleridge Conference at Cannington, the account of the voyage given in *Satyrane's Letters* has figured in Julian Knox, 'Coleridge's "Cousin-German": Blackwood's, Alter-Egos, and the Making of a Man of Letters', *European Romantic Review*, 21.4, August 2010, 425-46.

² *Journal of a tour of George Butler B. A. of Sidney Sussex Coll. Cam. July to October 1798*, manuscript, private collection. The journal is unpublished save for passages dealing with encounters between Butler, Goethe and Schiller which appear in Karl S. Guthke, *George Butler and Goethe*, *Goethe Yearbook* 9, London, Camden House, 1999.

³ Wordsworth's *A Farewell* was composed in May 1802, just before he and Dorothy left Dove Cottage and its garden to fetch his bride from Yorkshire.

and described by him in Dorothy's journal (though, unlike Wordsworth, who remained an observer, Butler seems to have intervened in the quarrel):

September 28. Yesterday saw a man of about fifty years of age beating a woman decently dressed and about 37 years of age. He struck her on the breast several times and beat her also with his stick. The expressions in her face and attitude were half of anger and half of a spirit of resistance. What her offence had been we could not learn. It was in the public street. He was better dressed than she was, and evidently a stranger, and this brutal treatment did not excite the smallest indignation in the breast of the spectators. They seemed rather inclined to take the man's part.⁴

Butler embarked on 12 July, arriving in Hamburg three days later, after a voyage of much the same length as that of the Coleridge party. Like them he must have had a favourable westerly wind.⁵ He journeyed inland visiting, among other places, Goslar (though weeks ahead of the Wordsworths) and Göttingen (again well ahead of Coleridge). On the very day that the Coleridge party landed at Hamburg, he arrived in Weimar where he met both Goethe and Schiller. Butler returned to Hamburg on 29 October by which stage his journal had become a little perfunctory. Its final entry, for 30 October, reads, 'Tuesday, called on Klopstock'. This was Victor, the brother of the poet.⁶ A further parallel between Butler, Coleridge and Wordsworth is found in the fact that years later all three were to suffer at Byron's pen, Butler being castigated in *Hours of Idleness* as the pedantic new headmaster at Harrow School.⁷

Back, now, to the Yarmouth packet boat. The English mail service was by this date very well established and regulated. Packet boats were relatively small vessels of between 50 and 80 tons with partitioned-off sleeping berths for passengers opening out of one large central cabin. By 1798 Yarmouth was the only port in the south of England from which regular communication with the northern Continent was possible, all other routes having been closed by the war. At first mails had reached the Continent via Holland but after the revolutionary armies overran the Low Countries, communication had to be via Hamburg and its down-river port, Cuxhaven, at the mouth of the Elbe. To service this route, the boats which had plied from Dover or Harwich in peacetime were all transferred to Yarmouth. In the year 1798 no fewer than eleven operated out of Yarmouth: *King George*, Capt P. Deane, jun.; *Prince of Wales*, Capt Hearne; *Prince of Wales*, Capt Sutton; *Prince of Wales*, Capt A Deane; *Prince*

⁴ *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth* ed. Ernest De Selincourt, London, Macmillan, 1941, I, 19. This entry is written in William Wordsworth's hand.

⁵ Coleridge had warned Poole in a letter written just before embarkation that 'We may be only 2 days, we may be a fortnight going', such was their dependence on sailing conditions (CL I 415). Their passage almost due east to Cuxhaven turned out to be about the shortest possible in duration.

⁶ Like Coleridge and Wordsworth, Butler had first met Friedrich Klopstock's brother, Victor, soon after arriving in Hamburg and recorded that 'with him I talked German'. Klopstock promised Butler a letter of recommendation for Kiel, though in the event he did not go there.

⁷ In *On a Change of Masters at a Great Public School* and *Childish Recollections*. There was later a reconciliation between poet and headmaster.

of *Orange*, Capt Bridge; *Carteret*, Capt Hammond; *Courier*, Capt Flynn; *Diana*, Capt Philip Deane; *Diana*, Capt Osborne; *Earl of Leicester*, Capt Thompson; *Express*, Capt Dell. Some names are repeated, as a result of the transfer of identically-named vessels from Dover and Harwich, coupled with the virtual impossibility of changing the name of a ship. It was a strongly held superstition among seamen that this was bound to bring ill fortune—like killing an albatross!⁸

There were twice weekly sailings to Cuxhaven, leaving each Sunday and Thursday. The service was controlled by the Post Office's local agent Mr Robert Warmington, a Yarmouth storekeeper and wine merchant.⁹ Individuals like the travellers we are considering would have preferred using the official packet boats to private vessels, for reasons of economy, reliability and safety. Having said that, I'm afraid Mary Moorman was wide of the mark in writing that 'Our command of the sea... made the voyage perfectly safe from all human interference.'¹⁰ On the contrary, in recent years privateers, encouraged by the French, had succeeded in capturing no fewer than four of the Yarmouth packet boats serving this route: in 1795 the *Princess Royal*, in 1796 the *Prince of Orange*, and in 1797 the *Dolphin* and the *Union*. And there was to be a further capture by the French in June 1800, once again of the *Dolphin*. Sometimes the packets crossed the North Sea in convoy, perhaps in company with a naval vessel.¹¹ But it was far from being 'perfectly safe'. Passengers must have felt anxiety about possible capture in addition to any concern they might have regarding the *natural* hazards of a sea voyage, which themselves were not inconsiderable.

In the harsh winter of 1799 the packet boat *Prince of Wales*, which accompanied a naval frigate, *Prosperine*, from Yarmouth went aground near the mouth of the Elbe. The *Prosperine* herself also became trapped and eventually destroyed by ice: the entire ship's company, including the Foreign Secretary's brother Thomas Grenville, had to make a perilous six-mile journey over unstable sea-ice to reach an island off Cuxhaven. Thirteen people died.¹² The *Prosperine* story demonstrates the perils of the crossing especially, but not only, in winter: severe storms in the North Sea can occur at any time of year. Moreover, the dangers of grounding on the shifting sands at either end of the voyage were ever-present: packet boat captains, despite the regularity of the trips they were making, routinely employed local pilots to guide them. An element of fear inevitably mingled with hope and excitement in the minds of travellers on these boats.

When Butler left Yarmouth on 12 July, his journal tells us it was on the *Carteret*, commanded by Captain Hammond, one of the boats transferred from

⁸ Vivien J. Sussex, *Continental Mail Service 1793-1815, especially by Yarmouth Packet Boat*, East Anglia Postal History Society, London, 1978. A more general survey is Arthur H. Norway, *History of the P.O. Packet Service 1793-1815*, London, 1895.

⁹ C.J. Palmer, *Perlustration of Great Yarmouth*, Great Yarmouth, 1872.

¹⁰ Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: A Biography: The Early Years, 1770-1803*, Oxford, 1957, 409.

¹¹ Howard Robinson, *Carrying British Mails Overseas*, London, 1964.

¹² William O. S. Gilly, *Narratives of Shipwrecks of the Royal Navy between 1793 and 1849*, London, 1850.

Dover, which was named after Lord Carteret, Postmaster General for 16 years up to 1787. Captain Hammond had been making the Channel crossing regularly for years and was a sailor of experience and tenacity. In 1794 he was the one to bring news of the French advances in Holland and their preparations for the bombardment of Flushing, from which he had extracted his boat only just in time. In 1796, bound for Cuxhaven, Hammond had been forced to cut away the ship's sails to prevent her being dismasted in a ferocious storm.¹³

Until now the identity of the boat on which Coleridge's party crossed the North Sea has not been known—biographers have followed STC and Dorothy Wordsworth in simply using the term 'the packet boat'. I can reveal that, like Butler, the Coleridge party sailed on the *Carteret* with Captain Hammond. This is shown in detailed accounts maintained by the Yarmouth agent, Mr Warmington, now in the Post Office archives: only one packet boat left Yarmouth on 16 September 1798 and that was the *Carteret*. The agent's accounts show that she carried 14 passengers paying the full fare and three paying half fare. The total of 17 corresponds to Coleridge's listing of the passengers in his letter of 18 September to Sara Coleridge:

Chester was ill the whole voyage, Wordsworth shockingly ill, his Sister worst of all—vomiting and groaning, unspeakably! And I neither sick nor giddy, but gay as a lark. The sea rolled rather high, but the motion was pleasant to me. The stink of a sea cabin in a packet, what from the bilge water, & what from the crowd of sick passengers, is horrible. I remained chiefly on deck. —We left Yarmouth, Sunday Morning, Sept 16th, at eleven o'clock—/ Chester & Wordsworths ill immediately—Our passengers were †† Wordsworths † Chester, S. T. Coleridge, A Dane, Second Dane, Third Dane, A Prussian, an Hanoverian & † his Servant, a German Taylor & his † Wife, a French ††† Emigrant, & † french Servant, † two English Gentlemen, and a † Jew. —All those with the prefix † were sick; those marked †† horribly sick.¹⁴

One has to explain there being three servants travelling at half-price when Coleridge specifies only two. That is readily done, because although Coleridge initially thought there were two servants, one man, nicknamed 'Nobility', proved to be notably servile and may have indeed counted as a servant to the comical Dane (who latched on to and had much conversation with Coleridge) and been charged accordingly. The accounts tell us that the agent collected £8. 5s. from the fares charged to this group of passengers, but had to meet the standard fee of £1.10s for the pilotage of the ship through Yarmouth inshore waters. The agent's records also help to pin-point the date of the

¹³ *The Times*, 2 August 1794 and 3 December 1796. The *Carteret* which plied out of Yarmouth is not to be confused with an identically named packet boat which did the Atlantic run out of Falmouth.

¹⁴ CL I, 416-8. For an unexplained reason, the number of passengers was revised by Coleridge to 18 when his letters were modified to form *Satyran's Letters* in *The Friend*, but the official record supports his original computation.

Wordsworths' return from Germany to England: the chronologies and biographies generally express this as having been 'on or about' 1 May 1799. It becomes certain from the Yarmouth accounts that they did indeed land on that very date, having travelled as two of only three passengers aboard the *Prince of Wales* commanded by Captain Sutton, which sailed from Cuxhaven on 28 April. Unfortunately it is impossible to work out in similar fashion the exact date of Coleridge's return in July 1799.¹⁵



In his letter to Sara, Coleridge provides a vivid account of the degree of seasickness suffered by each fellow-passenger. Little distinction is drawn between the two Wordsworths: both are put in the 'horribly sick' category and, like Chester, are described as becoming 'ill immediately' after sailing. A letter of 3 October enlarges on this: 'Miss Wordsworth retired in confusion to the Cabin—Wordsworth soon followed.'¹⁶ Dorothy's Journal provides corroboration: 'Before we heaved the anchor [an interesting choice of verb in the circumstances—Coleridge uses 'raised'; and 'weighed' was also normal usage] I was consigned to the cabin, which I did not quit till we were in still water at the mouth of the Elbe on Tuesday morning at 10 o'clock'—almost 48 hours later. And now let's look at Butler's experience. He writes:

We set sail about 11½ & were out of sight of land about 2 or 3. Sea sick, for first time See *Virgil Aeneid Book V. line 776* Necessity of securing a good side birth immed'ly on getting into the Packet; Eat nothing till hungry, & walk about or lie down if inclined to be squeamish without

¹⁵ The British Postal Museum & Archive, POST 4/25, Agents' accounts 1794-1850, Harwich and Great Yarmouth.

¹⁶ CL.I 421. The illustration: 'Interior of a Packet' is a watercolour by Anne Mills, 1820, private collection.

vomit but if not without, sooner over the better & then lie down.¹⁷

And on the second day out his journal has:

Rose about 3, & lay down & very restless & sickly again all day—but fine passage: spent the time much as yesterday in talk, Virgil & seasickness. Bed early.

For Butler, then, it was the *Aeneid* to which he continued to turn in order to occupy his mind between his bouts of sickness. The passage from Virgil that he called to mind and its somewhat embellished translations by Pitt and Dryden (which were familiar to both Coleridge and Wordsworth) are these:

stans procul in prora pateram tenet extaque salsos
proicit in fluctus ac vina liquentia fundit.¹⁸

Crowned with a graceful olive wreath he stands
High on the prow; a charger in his hands;
Hurls the fat entrails o'er the foamy brine,
And stains the silver waves with sable wine.¹⁹

High on the deck the godlike hero stands;
With olive crown'd; a charger in his hands;
Then cast the reeking entrails in the brine
And pour'd the sacrifice of purple wine.²⁰

One cannot help speculating whether Coleridge, with his long-standing intimate knowledge of Virgil, might, like Butler, have called the passage to mind. If not of Aeneas casting the reeking votive entrails into the brine from a charger, Coleridge at least wrote of the 'Sight of the Basons from the Cabin containing green and yellow specimens of the inner Man & brought up by the Cabin boy every three minutes'. Coleridge's now obsolete, though then commonplace, spelling of the word 'Basons' afforded Kenneth Johnston the opportunity for an enjoyable editorial joke: in quoting Coleridge's sentence, after 'Basons' Johnston chose to insert the word '*sic*'.²¹

It is Virgil who again comes to mind when Butler realises that he is truly on the high seas, that is entirely out of sight of land:

Good effects of easy affability, - very unlikely when supported by good sense to fail of respect with strangers and promotes their gratitude & philanthropy. Nothing now but water all around, vid. *Aeneid* V.8.

¹⁷ George Butler, *op cit*. The reference to Virgil appears as a side-note (one of many throughout the journal) on the verso of the preceding leaf against the entry recording his first sea-sickness.

¹⁸ Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book V, lines 775-6.

¹⁹ Tr. Rev. Christopher Pitt, 1763.

²⁰ Tr. John Dryden, 1772.

²¹ Kenneth Johnston, *op cit*, 610.

Thoughts thereon—much interrupted by my sea sickness.

The lines he recollects this time are:

ut pelagus tenuere rates nec iam amplius ulla
Occurrit tellus, maria undique et undique caelum.²²

These lines in Book V were very slightly altered from an equivalent couplet in Book III and these in turn were modelled on Homer. Thus, the original source is to be found in the *Odyssey*, Book XII at lines 403-6. Both the originals and English translations were well known to Coleridge and Wordsworth:

The island left so far that land nowhere
But only sea and sky had power t'appear.
Homer, *Odyssey*, tr. George Chapman, 1616

Past sight of shore, along the surge we bound,
And all above is sky, and ocean all around!
Homer, *Odyssey*, tr. Alexander Pope, 1726

Now o'er the deep the rapid gallies fly
And the vast round was only wave and sky
Virgil, *Aeneid*, tr. Rev. Christopher Pitt, 1763

Now seas and skies their prospect only bound;
An empty space above, a floating field around
Virgil, *Aeneid*, tr. John Dryden, 1772

Coleridge's own metrical exercises include his adaptation from lines of Schiller, which he probably encountered soon after landing in Germany in mid-September 1798:

Schwindelnd trägt er dich fort auf rastlos strömenden Wogen
Hinter dir siehst du, du siehst vor dir nur Himmel und Meer.²³

Proudly it drives us along thro' leaping & limitless Billows
Nothing before and nothing behind but the Sky & the Ocean.²⁴

We should probably also take note at this point of Wordsworth's much later (and less satisfactory) attempt:

But when along the Deep our Gallies steer'd
And the last speck of land had disappear'd

²² Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book V, 8-9.

²³ F. Schiller, *Der epische Hexameter, Musen-Almanach für das Jahr 1797*, Tübingen, 1796.

²⁴ S.T. Coleridge, *The Homeric Hexameter described and exemplified, adapted from Schiller*, ?1798/9 (first version).

And nought was visible, above, around,
Save the blank sky, and ocean without bound.

Virgil, *Aeneid*, tr. William Wordsworth, 1824-6 ²⁵

Virgil's lines, recalled by Butler, and their Homeric antecedents, also underlie Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* lines with which this paper began: as John Livingston Lowes wrote, 'The *Odyssey* must have hovered in the background of his mind.'²⁶

The 'easy affability' that Butler commends in his journal underlay also the socialising on deck that Coleridge so expansively describes in notebook and letters:

I talked and laughed with the Passengers—then went to sleep on the deck—was awakened about three o'clock by the Danes who insisted I should sit down and drink with them... Every now and then I entered into the feelings of my poor Friends below, who in all the agonies of sea-sickness heard us most distinctly, spouting, singing, laughing, fencing, dancing country dances... The Swede... was very humane & attentive to Miss Wordsworth, performing all the most disagreeable offices for her with the utmost delicacy and gentleness.

This passage in the letter to Sara Coleridge of 3 October was somewhat modified for inclusion in *The Friend* in 1809 (F II 187-96) and again later, as a filler, in *Biographia* (BL II 160-73). Although 'every now and then' he 'entered into the feelings' of his poor friends below, it is clear that, surrounded by foreigners and novel experiences, Coleridge was enjoying himself too much to pay the Wordsworths much attention. Indeed, Dorothy had to rely on a stranger, the Swede, to minister to her during her long hours of suffering. In Coleridge's accounts of shipboard occupations: laughter, fencing, dancing, grappling with foreign languages and so on, we see in microcosm the life that he was to maintain during his months at Ratzeburg and Göttingen. Moreover, Coleridge's close attention to marine phenomena (such as phosphorescence) may have had repercussions. His note to *Sybilline Leaves*, accounting for a revision of line 104 of the *Ancient Mariner* probably relates, as the Bollingen editors of *Biographia* suppose (BL II 168), to this North Sea crossing rather than the voyage to Malta with which it has sometimes been connected. And his notebook entry in October 1803 expressing delight at Wordsworth's having 'bidden farewell to all small Poems' and 'devoting himself to his great work' proceeds to a striking nautical metaphor which surely owes something to the North Sea experience: 'now he is at the Helm of a noble Bark; now he sails right onward—it is all open Ocean, and a steady Breeze; and he drives before it

²⁵ The Wordsworth translation of early books of the *Aeneid*, made in 1824, is notable for having been sent to Coleridge for comment and advice – long after the estrangement between the two. Coleridge's detailed critique (limited to Book I) is called by Bruce Graver 'the final chapter in the literary relationship of the two men.'

²⁶ John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, London, Constable, 2nd edition, 1951, 286.

unfettered by short tacks... '(CN I 1546)²⁷

And what about Wordsworth? I want to suggest that the days he endured cooped up, while being driven eastwards by the strong wind, may have had far-reaching consequences. First, while the poets' differing economic circumstances no doubt did induce their separation as they both were to assert—the Wordsworths could not afford the Ratzeburg lodgings Coleridge and Chester were to take up—there is still mystery about the readiness with which they so quickly relinquished the plan for a small 'colony' in Germany where they would carry on the fruitful collaboration which they had so much enjoyed for the past year in Somerset. Lamb's comment 'I hear that the Two Noble Englishmen have parted no sooner than they set foot on German Earth, but I have not heard the reason—perhaps to give Moralists an handle to exclaim "Ah me, what things are perfect!"' has been called malicious, but I see only amused puzzlement here.²⁸ Their unexpected willingness to part company was, I suggest, engendered by their enforced separation and markedly different experiences on board ship, which probably led each man to a very different perception of how his months ahead might most profitably be spent.

The physical pains Wordsworth regularly suffered in the task of composition are well-documented and several letters associate the process with consequential disturbance of his digestive organs. Maybe the reverse is also true. Unlike Coleridge who was being 'as gay as a lark' and unlike Butler, comforted by immersing himself in the classics, Wordsworth's internal turbulence and mingled hopes and fears during the voyage may have driven his thoughts in on himself, and to recollection of past episodes when he had experienced something akin to what he was now feeling. Commenting on the fragments of Manuscript JJ, which were to find their way eventually into *The Prelude*, Stephen Parrish tells us that 'The preamble drafts express in images of wind and storm the turbulence that marked a surge of creative energy.' Jonathan Wordsworth, echoing the poet's own language, says of the boat-stealing episode that the child's brain 'worked like the compulsive swelling of a sea' and describes the youthful poet in the snare-setting episode as 'hasting between snares like a boat or a cloud with the wind at its back.' Duncan Wu, writing of the very slightly later passage on the drowned man of Esthwaite, says that 'It is as if, having made his descent, the man has been vomited back into his proper realm.'²⁹ The proto-*Prelude* lines composed just weeks after this voyage, when Wordsworth was once more entrapped by external conditions and suffering physical discomfort and isolation at Goslar, may, I propose, owe a greater debt to his time aboard the good ship *Carteret* than has hitherto been recognised.

²⁷ The notebook entry in slightly abbreviated form also appears in a letter to Poole (CL II 1013).

²⁸ *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb 1796-1817*, ed. Edwin W. Marris, Jr., Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1975-8, vol I, 152.

²⁹ *The Cornell Wordsworth*. General Editor: Stephen M. Parrish, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, *The Prelude, 1798-1799*, ed. Stephen Parrish, 1979, 6; Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982, 47 and 43; Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth, An Inner Life*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002, 125.