

‘A Sympathy in Streams’: The River Sonnets of Bowles, Coleridge, and Wordsworth

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COLERIDGE’S ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT WITH THE SONNET in the 1790s culminates in his contribution to the theory and practice of Romantic sonnets in the Preface of *Poems on Various Subjects*, as well as in the Introduction to the publication of the pamphlet *Sonnets from Various Authors* in 1796. Extensive literary scholarship, represented by the studies of M. H. Abrams, Stuart Curran, and Daniel Robinson, confirms the early influence of Bowles on Coleridge’s sonnets.¹ Through his association with Bowles, Donald Reiman argues, Coleridge is able retrospectively to claim his independence from Wordsworthian influence.² To contextualise Coleridge’s participation within the broader development of the river sonnet tradition, my essay refers specifically to Bowles’s ‘To the River Itchin’, Coleridge’s ‘To the River Otter’, and Wordsworth’s *The River Duddon: A Series of Sonnets*.³ The revival of sonnets in the late eighteenth century not only restores the sonnet form, but also ushers in a specific kind of sonnet devoted to the poets’ native streams.

In 1954 W. K. Wimsatt re-established a symbolic understanding of the natural world and poetic structure in relation to the Romantic theory of imagination.⁴ By placing the river—a common literary figure in Romantic lyric poetry signifying progression and continuity—within the framework of a sonnet, the poets reshape an imaginative affinity between the natural topography and poetic form. My essay analyses how the meditative lyric voice and consciousness are communicated through the sonnet form. I will examine the poets’ emphases on modes of thought and their efforts to unite the possibilities of colloquialism and elevation in these native river sonnets.

Building on Thomas Warton’s river sonnet structure, both Bowles’s and Coleridge’s sonnets adopt the descriptive-meditative lyric model that begins with a scene of the river landscape and concludes with a reflection of personal feelings. The poems exalt a beauty connected with youth and involve the

¹ See M.H. Abrams, ‘Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric’, in *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), pp. 76-108; Stuart Curran, ‘The Sonnet’, in *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 29-55; Daniel Robinson, ‘“Work without Hope”: Anxiety and Embarrassment in Coleridge’s Sonnets’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 39.1 (2000), 81–110.

² See Donald H. Reiman, ‘Coleridge and the Art of Equivocation’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 25.3 (1986), 325-350.

³ Works are quoted from William Bowles, ‘To the River Itchin’, in *The New Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry*, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth and Jessica Wordsworth (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 423-424; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘To the River Otter’, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971–2001), Vol. XVI: *Poetical Works I: Poems (Reading Text)*, ed. by J. C. C. Mays (2001), Part I, pp. 299-300; William Wordsworth, *The River Duddon: A Series of Sonnets*, in *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems, 1820-1845*, ed. by Geoffrey Jackson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 56-77.

⁴ See W. K. Wimsatt, ‘The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery’, in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp. 103-116.

speaker's melancholic meditations upon revisiting a specific riverscape known since childhood. In Bowles's 'To the River Itchin' (1789), the poet symbolically exhibits his love of childhood with his affection for the natural landscape. Returning to the River Itchin and beholding its 'crumbling margin', the speaker initially feels a 'shivering sense of pain' as he is reminded of his long-lost companions and the disillusionment of ageing. As the 'self-same tints' reflected on the surface of the river eventually offset his 'delusive gleams' of youthful hope, memories of 'happier hours' ease the speaker's sorrows.

Re-presenting the poetic subject and theme of Bowles's sonnet, Coleridge's 1796 poem 'To the River Otter' intensifies the affective and imaginative function of a river that Bowles promotes. Coleridge is more intent on describing the speaker's vivid past interactions with his native stream. In Bowles's poem, the 'silver breast' of the Itchin is a surface that 'the self-same tints still seem to rest'. The word 'seem' entails a sense of uncertainty, illusion, and ephemerality in the metaphorical resting place of the speaker's memory. The 'breast' of the Otter, on the other hand, is a symbolic gateway to the depth of the speaker's childhood impressions.⁵ As a 'careless child', the speaker 'skimm'd the smooth thin stone along thy breast, / Numbering its light leaps'. The speaker's memories of 'the sweet scenes of childhood' 'so deep imprest / Sink' into the river water like the stone, where the sinking movement is made visual by the line break. The depth of memory is manifested in the poem's interlocking irregular rhyme scheme, which, by a rippling motion, settles the rhyme from the first quatrain to the bottom of the poem's penultimate line. The tints that stay resting on the surface of Bowles's river are re-imagined as tints that 'rise' with the waters of Coleridge's stream; the 'various-fated years', along with the 'various dies' of gleams, resurfaced in the mind's consciousness to relieve the speaker's own despair of '[l]one manhood'.

Coleridge's creative interaction between the conscious poet and nature exemplified in his sonnet is illuminated in his imaginative engagement with the river metaphor. As he brings up his unfulfilled project, 'The Brook' in *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge lends a natural wholeness to the river imagery:

I sought for a subject, that should give equal room and freedom for description, incident, and impassioned reflections on men, nature, and society, yet supply in itself a natural connection to the parts, and unity to the whole. Such a subject I conceived myself to have found in a stream, traced from its source in the hills among the yellow-red moss and conical glass-shaped tufts of bent, to the first break or fall, where its drops became audible, and it begins to form a channel; thence to the peat and turf barn, itself built of the same dark squares as it sheltered; to the sheep-fold; to the first cultivated plot of ground; to the lonely cottage and its bleak garden won from the heath; to the hamlet, the villages, the

⁵ See Michael O'Neill, 'The Romantic Sonnet', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, ed. by A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 185–203; Wimsatt, 'The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery'.

market-town, the manufactories, and the seaport. [...] Many circumstances, evil and good, intervened to prevent the completion of the poem, which was to have been entitled "THE BROOK." (BL I 195-6)

Tracing the course of the stream from its source to the sea, Coleridge presents the all-encompassing quality and the idea of natural connectedness in the river imagery. The poetic fragments of this unfinished project in Coleridge's Notebooks confirm the sense of unity among men, nature, and society that the poet has summarised in *Biographia Literaria*:

The swallows interweaving there mid the paired
Sea-mews, at distance wildly-wailing.—

The æ brook runs over Sea-weeds.—

Sabbath day—from the
Miller's mossy wheel
the waterdrops dripp'd
leisurely—

On the broad mountain-top
The neighing wild-colt races with the wind
O'er fern & heath-flowers—

A long deep Lane
So overshadow'd, it might seem one bower—
The damp Clay banks were furr'd with mouldy moss

Broad-breasted Pollards with broad-branching head. (CN I 213)

Coleridge's river flows from a completely natural landscape, possibly the 'broad mountain-top', untainted by human activities, through the rustic abode of shepherds, millers, and farmers, to the structured urban establishments, before finally reaching the sea. Running on a self-sufficient but accommodating system of its own, the riverscape conceives an intensity of feelings. The subject of the poem is thus displaced; less the river itself and more the speaker's harmony with the natural landscape and his corresponding re-imagination of the essential philosophy evoked by the river imagery. This idea of an enclosed wholeness Coleridge observes in the river imagery manifests itself in the lyric voice of his local descriptive-meditative poem, and is transferred on to the poet's understanding of the sonnet form as well as the mind's imaginative unity.

Coleridge's sonnet, reworked from a longer poem, 'Recollection', suggests the poet's deliberate purpose to accommodate his intimate dedication and sentiments within the structure of a sonnet.⁶ For Coleridge, the 'lonely feeling' that he sees inherent in the formal closure of the sonnet attributes a sense of 'totality' to the 'small poem':

⁶ A version of lines 1-11 was first published on 2nd April, 1796 as part of the poem 'Recollection' in *The Watchman*.

The Sonnet then is a small poem, in which some lonely feeling is developed. It is limited to a *particular* number of lines, in order that the reader's mind having expected the close at the place in which he finds it, may rest satisfied; and that so the poem may acquire, as it were, a *Totality*,— in plainer phrase, may become a *Whole*. (PW 1, 2, 1205)

Here in his Introduction to *Sonnets*, Coleridge elaborates on the indispensable quality of the 'oneness of thought' (PW 1, 2, 1196) he ascribes to the sonnet in his 'Preface'. The sonnet form is a representation of imaginative closeness, unity, and completeness. Coleridge, as a result, unlike Bowles, did not frame his river poem into a sequence, but as an individual poem dedicated specifically to his native stream. Coleridge sees past the sonnet as a set of formal rules and defines it as a characteristic: a genre rather than a form.⁷ Generally, Coleridge does not conform to a strict Italian or Shakespearean form. In the Introduction, he asserts that the fourteen-line structure of a sonnet is not compulsory, but a 'lonely feeling' is required to deem a poem a sonnet: 'Poems, in which no lonely feeling is developed, are not Sonnets because the Author has chosen to write them in fourteen lines: they should rather be entitled Odes, or Songs, or Inscriptions' (PW 1, 2, 1205). To determine the characteristics of a sonnet, Coleridge stresses the importance of the passion and mood evoked over any strict formal or metrical rules; he considers the pattern of rhymes to be a 'defect' (PW 1, 2, 1206) of the Italian language and disapproves such employment of the Italian model on English sonnets. Although Coleridge uses the sonnet as the primary poetic mode in *Poems on Various Subjects*, he styles the poems as 'effusions' rather than referring them as 'sonnets', as the poems lack the manner and expression of unity that he regards to be an essential quality of a sonnet.

In both the Introduction to *Sonnets* and *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge, accordingly, has lodged such quality of unity in his specific remarks of Bowles's sonnets. The Introduction confirms Coleridge's highest admiration of Bowles, asserting that 'the Sonnets of BOWLES derive their marked superiority over all other Sonnets'; 'they domesticate with the heart, and become, as it were, a part of our identity' (PW 1, 2, 1206). As Coleridge approaches the subject of the sonnet in his *Biographia Literaria*, he shifts from celebrating Bowles's sonnet model and his role in restoring the status of such poetic form in the English language to acknowledging Bowles's personal influence on his taste for sonnets. Coleridge recognises a natural harmony in Bowles's work: 'a style of poetry, so tender, and yet so manly, so natural and real, and yet so dignified, and harmonious' (BL I 17). Bowles's 'moral Sentiments, Affections, or Feelings, are deduced from, and associated with, the scenery of Nature' (PW 1, 2, 1235), such that his sonnets are able to combine 'natural thoughts with natural diction' (BL I 25), unifying the poet's state of mind with the external landscape to create 'a sweet and indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world' (PW 1, 2, 1206). Coleridge evaluates Bowles's works in his

⁷ See Curran, *Poetic Form*, p. 37.

letter to Sotheby in 1802: 'The poet's heart and intellect should be *combined*, intimately combined and unified with the great appearances of nature, and not merely held in solution and loose mixture with them' (CL II 864). Sensitive to Coleridge's remark, Curran notes that nature would supply 'counters, context, balance to the mind' through 'linking or even merging the individual and universal, the ideal and real, conception and perception, mind and matter' (Curran, 37). In light of Coleridge's imaginative principles of synthesis and his philosophical understanding of the concept of organic unity, the totality of the sonnet structure and the all-embracing quality depicted by the river imagery both strive towards a tendency to re-union. A communion is achieved within and beyond the self-sufficient sonnet form, attaining a perfect reconciliation between the active, creative imagination and the passive, associative power of the mind. To borrow Bowles's words, Coleridge's native river sonnet observes a 'unity of sentiments' that could 'reconcile the heart with the head' (BL I 25).⁸ By liberating the sonnet from any specific formal characteristics, Coleridge, therefore, connects the spirit of the sonnet with that of the natural river imagery, and the resolving power of the river could thus resonate with the completeness and unity exemplified by the sonnet.

Bowles's sonnets not only enable Coleridge to associate the consolatory function of his native river with the sonnet form, but also contribute to the structure of Wordsworth's river sonnet sequence. Wordsworth commences his river-writing shortly after his visit to Seathwaite in 1804 and published *The River Duddon* sonnet series as part of a collected work in 1820. As Wordsworth records in the 'Postscript', his series 'was the growth of many years;—the one which stands the 14th was the first produced; and others were added upon occasional visits to the Stream, or as recollections of the scenes upon its banks awakened a wish to describe them' ('Postscript', 76). Wordsworth's idea of forming a sonnet sequence on the subject of river based on his imaginative reminiscence of the interaction with his native stream was evidently not entirely original.⁹ As Wordsworth mentioned in a letter to Samuel Rogers, he has read Bowles's *Fourteen Sonnets* of 1789 and was possibly inspired by his loco-descriptive style as well as his presentation of travel sonnets in a sequential pattern.¹⁰ Wordsworth's sonnet sequence, like that of Bowles, is a collection of thematically-unified sonnets that can be read as a whole but each individual poem retains a functioning and self-sufficient structure when it stands alone. For example, although there is no obvious

⁸ William Lisle Bowles, 'Introduction to the Edition of 1837', in *The Poetical Works of William Lisle Bowles, Canon of St Paul's Cathedral, and Rector of Bremhill.: With Memoir, Critical Dissertation, and Explanatory Notes*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, 1868), Vol. I, p.2.

⁹ According to Mark Reed's Wordsworth chronology, the first sonnet of the series ('O Mountain Stream! the Shepherd and his Cot') was possibly composed between 27th September and early October 1804, shortly after Wordsworth and Dorothy visited Seathwaite in the Duddon Valley and spent a night at the Tyson's in September 1804. See Mark L. Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Middle Years, 1800-1815* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 271.

¹⁰ Samuel Rogers, *Recollections of the Table-Talks of Samuel Rogers*, ed. by William Maltby and Alexander Dyce (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856), p. 258.

connection between each individual sonnet throughout the sequence, Sonnet IX and X are thematically and syntactically connected. The latter sonnet, titled 'The Same Subject', continues from the previous description of people passing the river to a scene where a young couple crosses the stepping-stones. Sonnet XXXI and XXXII form a pair of sonnets to juxtapose the stately Thames with the ordinary Duddon, connected by a thematic disjunction (as suggested by the opening 'But' in Sonnet XXXII) and syntactic conjunction. As a consequence of Bowles's possible influence, Wordsworth adds to Milton's self-contained Petrarchan sonnet form the element of a strong, complex narrative and an ongoing, consistent persona in his lyrical sonnet sequence.

Interestingly, Wordsworth has never acknowledged Bowles nor formally recorded his reading of Bowles's work. He, however, admits that his inspiration comes from a method of organising poetry that Coleridge devised during the summer and autumn of 1797 at Nether Stowey. Wordsworth addresses in the 'Postscript' the constraints he would face when adopting the sonnet form but at the same time justifying himself in borrowing Coleridge's idea:

In this manner I had proceeded insensibly, without perceiving that I was trespassing upon ground preoccupied, at least as far as intention went, by Mr. Coleridge; who, more than twenty years ago, used to speak of writing a rural Poem, to be entitled "The Brook," of which he has given a sketch in a recent publication. But a particular subject cannot, I think, much interfere with a general one; and I have been further kept from encroaching upon any right Mr. C. may still wish to exercise, by the restriction which the frame of the Sonnet imposed upon me, narrowing unavoidably the range of thought, and precluding, though not without its advantages, many graces to which a freer movement of verse would naturally have led.

May I not venture, then, to hope, that instead of being a hindrance, by anticipation of any part of the subject, these Sonnets may remind Mr. Coleridge of his own more comprehensive design, and induce him to fulfil it?—There is a sympathy in streams, "one calleth to another;" and, I would gladly believe, that "The Brook" will, ere long, murmur in concert with "The Duddon."
(*Postscript*, 76-77)

On the understanding that the frame of the sonnet is a 'restriction' to his poetic eloquence, Wordsworth establishes a 'sympathy in streams' and asserts that *The River Duddon* would be a complement rather than a replacement of Coleridge's unfulfilled project. Wordsworth's awareness of the metaphorical formal confinement (such as the Nuns' 'narrow room', the hermits' 'Cells', and the students' 'Citadels') intensifies a mode of self-consciousness and gives his sonnet shape and regularity for various meditative processes to take place.¹¹ In 'Scorn Not the Sonnet', Wordsworth re-establishes the literary status of the

¹¹ William Wordsworth, 'Nuns fret not at their Convent's narrow room', in *The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 286.

sonnet form by drawing on the flexibility of its strong tradition.¹² The sonnet is used to express a diverse repertoire of subject matters, ranging from Petrarchan love tradition in the sixteenth century, to Milton's political declarations in the seventeenth century. In terms of the rhyme scheme, nearly all of the sonnets in *The River Duddon* are in the Petrarchan form that Milton used. They are constructed clearly into octave and sestet with two rhymes in the octave, followed by a third and fourth, sometimes a fifth rhyme in the sestet while the sestet breaks into two tercets, or occasionally into three couplets. Wordsworth compresses a diverse collection of rhymes within the confined space of a sonnet, where an energetic movement of sounds crowds into the 'narrow room' of such verse form. The strict rules of the Petrarchan form represent a freely chosen confinement through which the poet could 'find brief solace' to deter the pressure of excess 'liberty'. Wordsworth blurs the binary distinction between engagement and withdrawal in the sonnet form by dispelling the thought of imprisonment, affirming the sonnet's compact potential to imply and integrate.

To conclude, by adopting the framework of a sonnet to honour a less-celebrated scenery of the country, Romantic river sonneteers combine the intricate formal characteristics with the metaphorical qualities of a natural phenomenon. The poets bring their respective native landscape to a wider readership, intensifying the strength of feelings to become more in touch with the sympathy in streams and in the sonnet tradition. They proceed from loneliness to wholeness, ultimately achieving a more integrated sense of belonging and connectedness between the internal and external, between the poetic structure and the natural imagery.

¹² Wordsworth, 'Scorn Not the Sonnet', in *The Major Works*, pp. 356-357.