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(Coleridge Bulletin, New Series 21, Spring 2003, pp.20-33)

WHEN COLERIDGE BEGAN corresponding with John Thelwall in late April 1796,[\[2\]](#) he was conscious of squaring up to someone who valued commitment, principle, and action, a man who (in the words of Nicholas Roe) was ‘the most prominent and active member of the democratic reform movement in Britain’.[\[3\]](#) Thelwall had suffered for the cause as one of the British radicals tried for high treason, held for months in solitary confinement, his life under threat. ‘Citizen’ Thelwall was a stirring popular lecturer, ‘Tribune’ of the people, a figure who preferred, he said, the solid republican Doric order (as opposed to the decorative imperial Corinthian),[\[4\]](#) a plain speaker for whom reason and practicality went hand in hand. In his sonnet ‘To John Thelwall’, sent to his new friend in a second letter in early May, Coleridge pictured the radical activist in heroic pose ‘mid thickest fire’ leaping ‘on the perilous wall’, in contrast to those who fight imaginary battles in their closets. In its final couplet Coleridge hopes that his own verse will come to have Thelwall’s manly, republican plainness, ‘Blest if to me in manhood’s years belong/Thy stern simplicity and vigorous Song’.[\[5\]](#)

As well as this sonnet, Coleridge had sent Thelwall his newly published *Poems on Various Subjects*, and he was rightly apprehensive about how they would be received: ‘you will find much to blame in them—’ he conceded, ‘much effeminacy of sentiment, much faulty glitter of expression. I build all my poetic pretensions on the Religious Musings—which you will read with a POET’S Eye.’[\[6\]](#) But how would this Theseus respond to ‘the poet’s eye in a fine frenzy rolling’, particularly one that ‘bodies forth the forms of things unknown’?[\[7\]](#) Coleridge was optimistic in thinking that Thelwall, a materialist

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Godwinian atheist, might value his ‘Religious Musings’, a composition which he had subtitled ‘A Desultory Poem’—an odd concept on which to ‘build... pretensions’—and if Coleridge thought to make Thelwall growl, he succeeded. In his letter of 10 May (the only letter from his side of the correspondence to survive) Thelwall praised parts of the collection warmly; but—‘Of your favorite poem’, he wrote, ‘I fear I shall speak in terms that will disappoint you. There are passages most undoubtedly in the Religious Musings of very great merit... but this praise belongs almost exclusively to those parts that are not at all religious. As for the generality of those passages which are most so, they are certainly anything in the world rather than poetry... They are the very acme of abstruse, metaphysical, mystical rant, & all ranting abstractions, metaphysic & mysticism are wider from true poetry than the equator from the poles. The whole poem’, he added, ‘... is infected with inflation & turgidity’. But Thelwall was not finished yet, and he

went on to make a more detailed metrical point, which led to an exchange that I want to make the starting-point for this paper:

Before I wipe the gall from my pen, I must notice an affectation of the Della Crusca school which blurs almost every one of your poems—I mean the frequent accent upon adjectives and weak words—‘Escap’d the *sore* wounds’—‘Sunk to the *cold* earth’—‘Love glittering thro’ the *high* tree...’—‘When most the *big* soul feels’—‘Anon upon some *rough* rock’s fearful brow’... all occur in the first 8 pages. Instances of this kind... give me, at least, the earache... ‘Saw from her *dark* womb leap her *flamy* Child!’—*flamy* child!!!! ‘For chiefly in the oppressed *good* Man’s face’—etc.[\[8\]](#)

Responding to this on 13 May Coleridge found himself making a significant distinction:

Your remarks on the Della-crusca place of Emphasis are just in part—where we wish to point out the *thing*, & the *quality* is mentioned merely as a decoration, this mode of emphasis is indeed absurd—therefore I very patiently give up to critical vengeance *high* tree, *sore* wounds, & *rough* rock—but when you wish to dwell chiefly on the *quality* rather than the *thing*, then this mode is proper—& indeed is used in common conversation—who says—Good *Man*—? therefore *big* soul, *cold* earth, *dark* womb, & *flamy* child are [quite] right... [\[9\]](#)

It may seem just a matter of emphasis; but a principle is involved here too, and one that Coleridge refuses to concede. Adjectives need not, as Thelwall thinks,

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always be ‘*weak* words’, mere modifiers; they may be inherent in the nature of the *thing* as the poet perceives it, and a quality may itself be the essence of an idea. A fine point, perhaps, but a sign of the two men’s more fundamental differences in philosophy and religion. In his *Essay, Towards a Definition of Animal Vitality* (1793), the materialist Thelwall had asserted that ‘*qualities* have no separate existence, nor can they even be conceived in the imagination, otherwise than as connected with the things of which they describe the shades or attributes: they are, in fact, solely and purely, modifications of matter...’[\[10\]](#) On this subject of poetic ‘qualities’, therefore, more was at stake than *metrical* stress: other strains would be evident too, other qualities tested, and other modifications attempted and resisted. In his early correspondence with Thelwall Coleridge delights in exposing the yawning gulf between his friend’s materialist emphasis and his own Berkeleian idealism. Sometimes he is even standing on the edge waving a flag and telling Thelwall to step across. But what I want to focus on in this essay is the poetic divide, particularly the limitations Thelwall placed on the poetic imagination at a time when his friend was approaching the writing of ‘Kubla Khan’. While Thelwall was demanding that verse, no less than prose, should have a clear and paraphrasable meaning, Coleridge, far from working his way towards his friend’s ‘stern simplicity’ and plainer poetic statement, appeared to be becoming

increasingly rarefied, abstract, and mystical, trusting too much to semblances and airy nothings, which he, Thelwall, needed to puncture. We shall see him doing this gleefully—not with Coleridge directly, but through the verse of his surrogate, William Lisle Bowles, ‘heart-honour’d’ Bowles, the figure Coleridge repeatedly associated with that organ of tender feeling, and who became during his correspondence with Thelwall the touchstone of their opposed views of poetry. The break between the two men, when it finally came in late 1797-early 1798, had a poetic dimension too, and Thelwall inscribed his response into the volume that had been Coleridge’s own gift.

By 19 November 1796 it is evident that poetry will not be a bridge between the two men. Coleridge writes: ‘[Y]ou & I, my dear Thelwall! hold different *creeds* in poetry as well as religion’. A few lines later the nature of this *creed* (not the most neutral word to use to Thelwall) becomes clearer: ‘Bowles’, continues Coleridge, ‘(the bard of my idolatry) has written a poem lately without plan or meaning—but the component parts are divine...’ (*idolatry*, *divine*—more incendiary words). An impression that Coleridge was taunting him can only have been reinforced by what follows—twenty lines from Bowles’ ‘Hope: An Allegorical Sketch’, ending with the phrase ‘[Hope] almost faints with Joy amidst the broad Day-light!’. The letter continues with a declaration that ‘Metaphysics, & Poetry, & “Facts of mind”—(i.e. Accounts of

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all the strange phantasms that ever possessed your philosophy-dreamers...) are my darling Studies’; and to illustrate his mood he offers Thelwall some of his new verses:

Oft o’er my brain mysterious Fancies roll
That make the Present seem (the while they last)
A dreamy Semblance of some Unknown Past... [\[11\]](#)

Now, anyone who had read Thelwall would have known that *dreamy Semblances* were not his cup of tea, and his reply to Coleridge (not extant) was evidently forthright, since in his next letter of 17 December 1796 (Griggs, pp. 276-87) Coleridge accepts his friend’s challenge with the words ‘And now, my dear fellow! for a little sparring about Poetry’. Thelwall had apparently demanded to know just what his *dreamy Semblance* was, so Coleridge tells him: ‘By “dreamy semblance” I *did* mean semblance of some unknown Past, like to a dream—and not “a semblance *presented* in a dream.”’ This *semblance*, Coleridge explains, is the *déjà vu*, a sudden intrusion of the past, acting ‘so as to make Reality appear a Semblance’. It is nonetheless *real*, though it makes present reality seem dreamlike; ‘this thought is obscure’ (he adds patronisingly). Such usurping of a present reality by a shadowy past was something Thelwall had inveighed against in *The Tribune*—what he had there called the ‘malignant retrospective principle’, with its tendency to bring ‘despondency and lethargy’. For Thelwall this invasion by images of the past was a symptom of ‘that debility into which persons sink from contemplating nothing but their own sensations’.[\[12\]](#)

Coleridge continues his 17 December letter unabashed, and after announcing ‘I am a Berkleian’ (thus allying himself with the philosopher’s denial of material

substance)[13] he goes on to answer what must have been an attack by Thelwall on the metrics of that ‘exquisite’ line of Bowles: ‘As to Bowles, I affirm, that the manner of his accentuation in the words ‘broad day-light, (three long syllables) [original metrical markings are above the text] is a beauty, as it admirably expresses the Captive’s *dwelling* on the sight of Noon—with rapture & a kind of Wonder’. The quality of the emotion, in other words, was primary here. With this point established, Coleridge makes it clear that he feels any attack on Bowles is wounding to himself: ‘But that Bowles, the most tender, and, with the exception of Burns, the only *always-natural* poet in our Language, that *he* should not escape the charge of Della Cruscanism/ this cuts the skin & *surface* of my Heart’. On the next page Coleridge goes on to praise ‘the *heart* and fancy of Bowles’ (his italics), and near the end of the long Saturday-night letter he reveals to Thelwall

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that he has just edited a sheet of sonnets by himself and his friends to be bound up with those of his beloved Bowles—and a copy is on its way to him.[14] But about another volume of poetry he hesitates: ‘(Shall I give it thee, Blasphemer? No. I won’t—but) to thy Stella I do present the poems of my [Bowles] for a keep-sake.—Of this parcel I do intreat thy acceptance’. And so, in the Victoria and Albert Museum is the 1796 fourth edition of Bowles’s *Sonnets, and Other Poems*, inscribed on the fly-leaf: ‘Dear Mrs Thelwall – I entreat your acceptance of this Volume, which has given me more pleasure, and done my heart more good, than all the other books, I ever read, excepting my Bible... Samuel Taylor Coleridge’.[15] In deliberately presenting it to Thelwall’s wife, Coleridge implies that she, unlike her husband, will have a heart sensitive enough to appreciate it.

In his missing reply, it seems that Thelwall asked Coleridge in his direct way whether he and Bowles were friends. Coleridge replied on 31 December (Griggs, pp. 293-5): ‘You imagine that I know Bowles personally—I never *saw* him but once; & when I was a boy, & in Salisbury *market-place*’. Once again Thelwall could see the idea outrunning the actuality. But as if to re-emphasize his commitment to his poetic mentor Coleridge then transcribes some lines beginning: ‘Such Verse as Bowles, heart-honour’d Poet, sang...’ (the *heart* again).[16] By this time Thelwall may have begun to wonder why he was having Bowles repeatedly thrust at him. It could be that in a correspondence that seemed increasingly to be reaching across a divide, Coleridge felt he needed a poetic ally. Or perhaps he hoped Bowles would convert Thelwall away from his atheistic materialism, and lift his heart to what mattered?

Before we turn to that ‘keep-sake’ volume of Bowles’s verse, and what Thelwall did to it, the crisis of the friends’ ‘sparring’ relationship must be rapidly sketched. (It is a story that Gurion Taussig has told in his recent book, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship*.[17]) In July 1797 Thelwall came to stay for ten days at Nether Stowey, a man uprooted, vulnerable, isolated, holding to his democratic principles but now seeking refuge. Writing to his wife from Alfoxden on the 18th, he suggests ‘I have had serious tho[ughts] of a Cottage—Do not be surprised if my next should inform you that I have taken one’.[18] The verses he wrote the day he left Stowey, his ‘Lines written at Bridgewater’, are subtitled ‘in quest of a peaceful retreat’.[19] But for

Coleridge, Poole, and the new star Wordsworth, Thelwall's plan to settle nearby was out of the question, and Coleridge's letters of August and October 1797

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represented 'a rejection that went beyond their intellectual differences'.^[20] Looking back, Thelwall saw this period as a time when 'Friendship (the last stay of the human heart)... has shrunk from its own convictions'.^[21] Coleridge's letter of 14 October (Griggs, pp. 349-52) deals with practical matters first: 'I would to heaven', he tells Thelwall, 'it were in my power to serve you—but alas! I have neither money or influence... You have my wishes, & what is very liberal in me for such an atheist reprobate, my prayers'. From that point on, the letter becomes insensitively blithe and idealising, quoting from 'This Lime Tree Bower my Prison' the lines about imagining 'such Hues/As cloath th'Almighty Spirit, when he makes/Spirits perceive his presence',^[22] and boasting to the materialist Thelwall: 'It is but seldom that I raise & spiritualize my intellect to this height'. Even worse is what follows: 'I should much wish, like the Indian Vishna, to float about along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the Lotos, & wake once in a million years for a few minutes—just to know that I was going to sleep a million years more'. In face of Thelwall's commitment to virtuous action in the world, Coleridge's disembodied drifting was the ultimate denial of Thelwall's 'vivifying principle'—a material electric stimulus to thought and action, that animates human life.^[23] Keeping the eyes focused on the real world before you was the conviction that drove Thelwall's politics, and he measured actions and words, prose and verse, by the same standard. As he wrote in one of his *Tribune* lectures (1795-6): 'all virtue must be of an *active*, not of a *passive* nature, and, therefore,... it is the duty of every individual to keep his eye steadily fixed upon that which is before him'.^[24]

At least four months after his stay with Coleridge at Nether Stowey Thelwall picked up his wife's volume of Bowles's poetry, pen in hand, and began to read, mark, and annotate. The annotations are undated, but were evidently done after November 1797 because they include a line from the second of Coleridge's 'Nehemiah Higginbottom' sonnets, published that month.^[25] Thelwall's markings and annotations begin on page 28 with Bowles's 'Sonnet XVII. To the River Cherwell' and they continue through the rest of the volume's opening section of twenty-seven sonnets, through the 'Elegy, Written at the Hotwells, Bristol' (pp. 41-6), the elegy 'On the Death of Mr Headley' (pp. 49-51), and the 'Verses on Reading Mr Howard's Description of Prisons' (pp. 55-62). After this point the annotations peter out, but there are a few markings to subsequent poems.

A preoccupation of the markings is the question of metrical stress about

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which he and Coleridge had differed in their correspondence during 1796. Thelwall marks certain lines to indicate what he takes to be their stress pattern, drawing particular attention to examples of the 'Della-crusca place of Emphasis'. Again and again he notes pairings of adjective and noun in which the adjective carries weight. It seems Thelwall

cannot read Bowles without feeling the insistent way in which the qualities of things, their colour, temperature or emotive potential, are being aurally registered. A typical example is his marking of the final lines of Bowles's 'Sonnet XXIV. May 1793':

[shrubs and laurels]
 Shall put forth their green shoots, and cheer the sight!
 But I shall mark their hues with sick'ning eyes,
 And weep for her who in the cold grave lies!

Thelwall is an alert reader. He marks the two phrases that represent the sonnet's final ironic juxtaposition of life and death, and in doing so he shows he is sensitive to the metrical echo of a speaker caught between *green shoots* and *cold grave*. However, given his argument to Coleridge in his letter of 10 May 1796, it is clear that Thelwall regards the adjectival stress as unwarranted (after all, most shoots are green and most graves are cold). Where Bowles offers a subjective impression, Thelwall sees only a commonplace observation. There is no marginal annotation here, but elsewhere in the volume Thelwall's accompanying notes reinforce this impenetrable barrier between the poet and his reader. We see him repeatedly resisting Bowles's subjective and affective register in favour of the objective and factual.

It becomes clear that for Thelwall the adjectival emphasis is only the symptom of a more radical weakness about Bowles's poetry. We begin to sense this in his response to the mysterious opening of 'Sonnet XX. November 1792':

There is strange musick in the stirring wind,
 When low'rs the autumnal eve, and all alone
 To the |dark|wood's|cold|covert|thou art|gone,

The heavy tread of the third line with its four successive stresses ('dark wood's cold covert') is of course a measured poetic effect, and Thelwall responds to it. He feels the slowness of the line, which he seems to hear as seven metrical feet rather than five. But his concern here is not just a technical one. As he reads, it is obvious that something else is troubling him, which the metre insists on emphasising. The very suggestiveness of Bowles's affective metrics, the way the poet lets the *dark* and *cold* weigh the line down, is part of the sonnet's deliberately disembodied opening, in which intangible qualities of mood and atmosphere are being evoked. The reader is made to feel the scene as vaguely *strange* and *stirring*, involving an unidentified ghostly 'thou'. The lines play on the reader's suggestibility and his readiness to have his imaginative sympathies

aroused without the demands of fact and reason. It is therefore revealing (and typical of his annotations generally) that Thelwall underlines the word *thou* and writes in the margin, 'Who?'. It is a small word, but an eloquent one. In a practical situation one

would indeed want to know *who* had disappeared into the wood—it would be a sensible and necessary question for the rescue services.

The degree of Thelwall's resistance to Bowles, his rejection of the imaginative and emotional sympathies on which Bowles's poetry relies (and which Coleridge seemed so eager to grant), is evident in the rough handling he gives to 'Sonnet XIX. October 1792'. In this sonnet, which is entitled 'To a Friend' in later editions, the friendship bond itself becomes the model for the poet-reader relationship; but Thelwall will have none of it. He is too busy noticing other things. He underlines questionable phrases with a dotted line and footnotes them as follows:

Go then, and join the distant city's throng!
Me thou dost¹ leave to solitude and tears,
To busy phantasies, and boding fears,
Lest ill betide thee:² but 'twill not be long,
And³ the hard season shall be past: adieu! 5
Till then;—yet sometimes this forsaken shade
Rememb'ring, and these trees now left to fade:⁴
Mayst thou, amidst the scenes of pleasure new,⁵
Think on thy absent friend: in heaviness
To me the hours shall roll, weary and slow, 10
Till mournful autumn past, and all the snow
Of winter pale!⁵ the glad hour I shall bless,
That shall restore thee from the croud again,
To the green hamlet in⁶ the peaceful plain.

1. While feeble expletives their aid do join!
2. So very simple sweet simplicity!!!
3. And for *ere*
4. Shrubs that she had to water I suppose.
5. Inversions that might break the neck of sense:
6. The green hamlet in the plain? Qy and?

In the first note Thelwall draws his comment from Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (a slight misquote [26]), and he predictably marks without comment the double emphasis of 'glad hour' in line 12. But it is notes 2 and 4 that catch the attention and hint at a deeper and more complex disenchantment, not merely with Bowles but with sympathetic friendship itself.

Bowles's 'Lest ill betide thee' (line 4), a relatively harmless antique phrase with a Spenserian cast,[27] evokes in Thelwall the gleeful comment: 'So very

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simple sweet simplicity!!!'. This is the final line from Coleridge's own sonnet 'To Simplicity', the second of his burlesque 'Sonnets attempted in the manner of contemporary writers' published in the *Monthly Magazine* for November 1797. The three

exclamation marks reveal the obvious relish with which Thelwall drives his point home in Coleridge's very own words. But perhaps he saw an extra appositeness in the fact that the 'Nehemiah Higginbottom' sonnets were indebted to his own poetic 'sparring' with Coleridge during 1796-7 (they may even have been conceived, as Duncan Wu suggests, during Thelwall's July 1797 visit to Nether Stowey).^[28] It makes his point even more neatly. But why did that specific phrase in Sonnet XIX make Thelwall recall Coleridge's 'To Simplicity'? The answer may be that both sonnets are about the precariousness of friendship, and Bowles's concern for his friend, *Lest ill betide thee* ('lest evil should befall you'), evidently brought to mind Coleridge's mocking lines about a lost friend:

but should a friend and I
Grow cool and *miff*, O! I am *very* sad!
And then with sonnets and with sympathy
My dreamy bosom's mystic woes I pall;
Now of my false friend plaining plaintively,
Now raving at mankind in general;
But, whether sad or fierce, 'tis simple all,
All very simple, meek Simplicity!

In its original context, that final line mocks not just a stylistic weakness, but a naive dependence on a 'false friend'. With this added association, the text of Bowles's sonnet XIX offers uncomfortable echoes to someone in Thelwall's situation in the Winter of 1797-8: "twill not be long,/And the hard season shall be past: adieu!/Till then;—yet sometimes this forsaken shade/Rememb'ring, and these trees now left to fade;/Mayst thou, amidst the scenes of pleasure new,/Think on thy absent friend' (4-9). Recovering what was in Thelwall's mind as he annotated Bowles's poems can be nothing more than conjecture; but in light of this his response to line 7 of the sonnet is intriguing. The *trees now left to fade* are for him obvious evidence of neglect. He notes: 'Shrubs that she had to water I suppose'. With his practical emphasis, Thelwall cuts through the words to the action—if the trees fade, then someone hasn't been looking after them.

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Thelwall is of course having fun, and he delights in subjecting Bowles's melancholy to gleeful burlesque. In 'Sonnet XVIII', where Bowles sadly hears 'the carol of the matin bird/Salute his lonely porch', Thelwall's marginal note suggests a more plausible alternative: 'The carrol of a bird saluting his perch'. Throughout his reading Thelwall strongly resists anything that sacrifices clear description to vague evocation, and he particularly dislikes images of evanescence, liminality, or transience. Since these are Bowles's speciality the annotator's frustration shows. He repeatedly demands that the text should explain itself and make clear what is going on—what is there and what isn't. When Bowles describes the rocks of the Clifton Gorge as they 'meet the earliest sunbeam of the sky', Thelwall responds: 'How funny it would have been if they had met the sunbeam of the earth'. Bringing Bowles down to earth is his aim. Any passage

that evokes faint or fleeting impressions will be ruthlessly interrogated. A poem, therefore, like the elegy ‘On the Death of Henry Headley’, where ideas of the fading and insubstantial are appropriate (he died of consumption) is given a hard time. The line, ‘Despair upon his fading smile was seen’ is challenged: ‘Despair upon a fading smile’? There is a similar response a few lines later: ‘Breath’d a sad solace on his aching heart’? Affection breathing solace *on* a heart will not do. Thelwall dislikes this playing over the surface of things. On the next page of the poem he records two characteristic phrases, ‘seem’d to smile’ and ‘seem’d to suit’, noting ‘What a seeming poet this is’.

Thelwall demands clear and forceful images, and he enjoys testing out their mettle, seeing what they’re made of. Spoiling for a fight, he will sometimes wrestle a poetic image to the floor until it begs for submission. This happens with the first poem in the volume to carry his annotations, ‘Sonnet XVII. To the River Cherwell’:

CHERWELL, how pleas’d along thy willow’d edge
 Erewhile I stray’d, or when the morn began
 To tinge the distant turret’s gleamy fan,
 Or Evening glimmer’d o’er the sighing sedge!
 And now reposing on thy banks once more,
 I bid the pipe farewell, and that sad lay
Whose musick on my melancholy way
I woo’d: amid thy waving willows hoar
 Seeking awhile to rest—till the bright sun
 Of joy return, as when Heaven’s beauteous bow
Beams on the night-storms passing wings below:
 Whate’er betide, yet something have I won
 Of solace, that may bear me on serene,
 ’Till Eve’s last hush shall close the silent scene.[\[29\]](#)

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This sonnet to the river of Bowles’s youth, like its partner ‘To the River Itchin’, evokes atmospheric memories that are suggestive rather than distinct. Thelwall crowds the foot of the page with his comments, rather like a headmaster demanding an explanation from an obtuse schoolboy:

The gleamy fan of a turret?—Does he mean the sail of a windmill? Wooing the music of a sad lay? The lay then makes the music, or perhaps the lay & the music are the song, & the same, & he woo’d the tune only because the song itself was sad stuff, & not worth remembering. Heaven’s beauteous bow beaming on the wings of the night-storm!!! (This must have been a lunar rainbow in spite of the bright sun.) A hush closing a scene!!!

In spite of its turn from past to future (a turn Wordsworth would make more confidently in ‘Tintern Abbey’[\[30\]](#)), Bowles’s sonnet seems unable to leave the lingering mood of sadness behind. It is not hard to see his gentle nostalgia becoming for Thelwall

the embodiment of what he called ‘the desponding, listless, melancholy misanthropy of the retrospective principle... the system of brooding over the past’. For him, retrospection is not an innocent subjective mode, but a *system*, an interlocking fabric sanctioned by the Burkean romance of prejudice and ‘Superstition, with her hood and cowl’.^[31] In his confrontation with Bowles, Thelwall aims for something like the radical ‘transparency’ of meaning that John Whale has identified in Paine’s *Rights of Man*.^[32] In his iconoclastic annotation he strips away all Bowles’s non-material modifiers of mood, colour, and sound, to expose the no-meaning behind the elegiac tinges, the gleams and glimmers, the hushed sighings.

With relish Thelwall dis-organizes this intangible system into its component parts. At the foot of page 45 containing four stanzas from the *Elegy, Written at the Hotwells, Bristol*, he itemises some of their phrases so that they become an incongruous bundle: ‘Lawns of early life, and springtide plains, and transports bland, & hearing bells for the last, and detaining glistening tears.—Drivelling enough for one page, at any rate’. Thelwall knows how to destroy Bowles because he understands the tenuous nature of his meanings; he sees that they depend on a finely (thinly?) spun mood, which can be easily cut through, and which relies on the reader’s sympathetic attunement to sustain its effect. Bowles’s early poems are about granting, and accepting, sympathy (this is frequently their subject), and with this in mind they deliberately make themselves vulnerable (‘smokeable’ would be Keats’s word). In one of those problematic stanzas from the Hotwells elegy Bowles watches the consumptives

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emerge for their morning walk, and he recalls his dead friend, the poet Thomas Russell, whom he last saw there:

He heard the whispering winds that now I hear,
As, boding much, along these hills he pass’d;
Yet, ah! how mournful did they meet his ear
On that sad morn he heard them for the last!

heard them for the last. In isolation the phrase is nonsense (though Thelwall’s ‘& hearing bells for the last’ conflates this with the next stanza where Bowles contrasts the ‘merry bells’ of their Oxford days); but in context the silence into which the curtailed phrase moves is eloquent—at least, it is to a reader prepared to hear what isn’t there.

Thelwall refuses this trust in the impalpable. It is the ‘heart’ of Bowles, and in the Autumn of 1797 it was becoming the heart of Coleridge too. Between the pair of chilling letters to Thelwall of 21 August and 14 October putting him off from settling at Stowey, Coleridge was spiritualising his intellect: he discovered the delights of floating on the Lotos-flower; he wrote ‘Kubla Khan’; and on 6 September, perhaps not incidentally, he walked to Shaftesbury in Dorset to visit William Lisle Bowles. Clambering on the barricades with Thelwall and matching his ‘stern simplicity and vigorous Song’ was no longer on the agenda. It was at this time, as Nicholas Roe has argued, that Coleridge began the process of effacing the ‘realities’ (about himself and

the world) that Thelwall represented to him,^[33] and from Thelwall's notes in the presentation-copy of Bowles we pick up hints of the bitterness and disillusionment that were generated during the Autumn and Winter of 1797-8. Underlying Thelwall's mockery of the bard of Coleridge's 'idolatry' is an aversion from a disembodied poetic language that appears to privilege things that 'seem' over things that *are*. In putting Bowles to the test, Thelwall was continuing his argument with Coleridge, whose friendship had finally shown, in Gurion Taussig's words, 'a disconcerting gap between the Idea and its embodiment'.^[34] Thelwall detects in Bowles's verse a lack of robustness, an inability to take the pressure. The poet's weightlessness is exposed as an inability to carry weight.

One annotation, however, suggests that resisting the 'heart-honour'd' Bowles may not have been so easy for Thelwall, and that his reading was a test for him too. In the wake of the treason trials and the gagging acts, political apostasy might come, not from disenchantment, but from enchantment—a more subtle and tempting enemy. The danger would be to indulge in private sympathies, and default on future action by cherishing personal retrospection, to 'consume our faculties in unavailing lamentations, which can never undo the acts that are past, but which have too powerful an influence to unfit us for

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what is to come'.^[35] One passage in the Bowles volume that tempted Thelwall to indulge his own sensibilities is from the 'Verses on Reading Mr Howard's Description of Prisons'. Given Thelwall's experience in 1794 its picture of the reformer John Howard visiting a man in solitary confinement might be expected to have struck a sympathetic chord:

Despairing, from his cold and flinty bed,
 With fearful muttering he hath rais'd his head:
 "What pitying spirit, what unwonted guest,
 Strays to this last retreat, these shades unblest?"
 From | life and | light | shut | out, | beneath this cell
 Long have I bid hope's cheering sun farewell..."

Thelwall homes in on the vivid penultimate line, but only to resist its emotional appeal. Where Bowles stirs recollections of Milton's blindness ('Nature's works to mee expung'd and ras'd,/And wisdom at one entrance *quite shut out*')^[36] Thelwall marks up the 'Della Cruscan' emphasis. But he is also irritated by the last three words:

How did the prisoner get *beneath* his cell to bid farewell to anything? But I forgot he tells us in the same line that he is shut out from life (i.e. *is dead*) & then to put him (i.e. to bury him) under the cell was a cheap way of disposing of him: but after being so disposed of, it was very civil of him to make such a speech to Mr Howard?

The obtuseness of this is startling. No poetry can survive such literalization of meaning, such a withholding of imaginative sympathies. But perhaps Thelwall is right: how could a good poet possibly write *beneath this cell*?

An answer had already been given by Thelwall himself at the climax of his speech to the jury when on trial for his life:

‘I have been destined to the vilest dungeon of Newgate—a miserable hole almost impervious to a ray of light... a charnel house, whose ragged walls, and old hereditary filth might persuade the wretched inhabitant that he was already buried’.^[37]

Thelwall knew too well the import of Bowles’s line—the sense of being not just *in* a cell, but *beneath* it.

In annotating the ‘keep-sake’ volume of Bowles, Thelwall was putting to the test a principle which had guided him as a public figure, and which had defined the oppositional nature of his friendship with Coleridge: ‘the opinions

[33]

of six moments and of six thousand years... stands precisely upon the same basis, the basis of reason and argument; and, therefore, must be brought to the same test of experimental investigation’.^[38] What he demanded of poetry was what he demanded of himself, and of others. ‘This empirical basis for ‘reason and argument’ remained his watchword at a time when Coleridge’s development, and developments in poetry, were turning elsewhere.

^[1] An early version of this essay was presented at the Coleridge Summer Conference, Cannington, 18-24 July 2002. The work of Gurion Taussig has prompted, and helped to shape, this discussion, and I am grateful for our many conversations on the subject of Coleridge’s friendships.

^[2] Of their earliest correspondence in April-May 1796, two of the four letters are extant. Coleridge’s introductory letter of late April (Griggs, pp. 204-5) with a presentation copy of his *Poems*, was followed by a missing ‘voluminous’ reply from Thelwall; Coleridge then sent him his sonnet ‘To John Thelwall’, which was acknowledged in Thelwall’s letter of 10 May, the only item to survive from his side of their correspondence. This was first printed by Warren E. Gibbs in *Modern Language Review*, 25 (1930), 85-90.

^[3] Nicholas Roe, ‘Coleridge and John Thelwall: The Road to Nether Stowey’, in *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland*, ed. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 60-80 (p. 63).

^[4] John Thelwall, ‘On the Moral and Political Influence of the Prospective Principle of Virtue’, lectures 1 and 2 (*The Tribune*, 1795-6, I, 147-63, 222-36), in *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall*, ed. Gregory Claeys (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 88-116 (p. 97).

- [5] The adjective 'perilous' in the text sent to Thelwall (Gibbs, p. 85) is omitted from the Cottle MS version first published by E.H. Coleridge.
- [6] Coleridge - Thelwall, [late April 1796] (Griggs, p. 205).
- [7] *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.12-15.
- [8] Thelwall - Coleridge, 10 May 1796 (Gibbs, pp. 87-8).
- [9] Coleridge - Thelwall, 13 May 1796 (Griggs, p. 216). Anya Taylor, in 'Coleridge and the Pleasures of Verse', *Studies in Romanticism*, 40 (Winter 2001), pp. 547-69, memorably characterises Coleridge's sensitivity to metre: 'Meter pulls Coleridge back from the chasm of idealism to the vivacious body that his spirit filled. Meter draws its power from both the disciplined will and the body's rhythmical energy; it spans the intersection of mind and body and reconciles head and heart, specifically the heart-beat' (p. 548). This suggests that Bowles's responsive metrics were an important part of his poetry's appeal to Coleridge.
- [10] John Thelwall, *An Essay, Towards a Definition of Animal Vitality* (1793), reprinted in Nicholas Roe, *The Politics of Nature: William Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 101-119 (p. 117). In this essay Thelwall denies the existence of a non-material 'spirit' that can modify matter: 'such *Spirit*, however subtle, however refined, must still be material' (p. 116). All 'modifications', for Thelwall, are material.
- [11] Griggs, pp. 255-62.
- [12] 'Prospective Principle of Virtue', lectures 1 and 2 (Claeys, pp. 90, 108).
- [13] Coleridge is being doubly aggressive here. It is clear from Thelwall's 10 May letter that he regards Coleridge's recent anti-Godwinian article in *The Watchman* (17 March) as an attack on himself. The article, 'Modern Patriotism', is a selection of points from Berkeley's 'Maxims Concerning Patriotism' (see *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton, Princeton, 1970, pp. 98-100). In these circumstances it seems Coleridge's remark also has a political edge to it.
- [14] *Sonnets from Various Authors*. In his preface Coleridge praises the memorability of the sonnet, and of Bowles's in particular: 'they domesticate with the heart, and become, as it were, a part of our identity'.
- [15] Victoria and Albert Museum, Dyce 8o 1298 (Copy A). For the inscription, see Griggs, p. 287.
- [16] Part of 'Fragments of an Epistle to Thomas Poole'. See *Poetical Works*, ed. J.C.C. Mays, I, 246-7.
- [17] Gurion Taussig, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship, 1789-1804* (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2002), pp. 177-213. See also the account by Nicholas Roe, 'Coleridge and John Thelwall' (note 3 above).
- [18] MS Pierpont Morgan Library MA77 (17).
- [19] Printed in Thelwall's *Poems chiefly written in Retirement* (London and Dublin, 1801), pp. 126-32.
- [20] Roe, 'Coleridge and John Thelwall', p. 76.
- [21] 'Prefatory Memoir', *Poems chiefly written in Retirement* (1801), p. xxxiv.
- [22] A version of 'This Lime-Tree Bower', lines 41-3.
- [23] Thelwall, *Animal Vitality* (Roe, *The Politics of Nature*, p. 119).
- [24] 'Prospective Principle of Virtue', lecture 1 (Claeys, p. 90). Judith Thompson has explored Thelwall's capacity 'to generate anxieties in Coleridge about the status and worth of his metaphysical interests relative to his friend's pragmatic activism'. See 'An Autumnal Blast, a Killing Frost: Coleridge's Poetic Conversation with John Thelwall', *Studies in Romanticism*, 36 (Fall 1997), pp. 427-56 (pp. 440-1).
- [25] See note 28 below. An earlier dating would be possible if during his visit Coleridge had shown Thelwall his sonnet-parody in manuscript.

[26] While *Expletives* their feeble Aid *do* join' (Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, 346).

[27] Cf. 'Lest worse betide thee' (*Faerie Queene*, II.iv.36).

[28] Coleridge told Cottle that one of their targets was the 'misplaced accent on common-place epithets' (Coleridge – Cottle, [c. 20 Nov 1797?]; Griggs, p. 357), and indeed the first sonnet opens with a glaring example: 'Pensive at eve on the *hard* world I mus'd'. Duncan Wu has made the intriguing suggestion that 'it is possible that the Nehemiah Higginbottom sonnets were written at Thelwall's instigation, as the final repudiation of a rhetoric that Coleridge had outgrown—with Thelwall's encouragement. They could have been completed by the time Thelwall left, 27 July, and sent off to the *Monthly Magazine* in time for publication a few months later' (Duncan Wu, 'Coleridge, Thelwall, and the Politics of Poetry', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, N.S. 4 (Autumn 1994), 23-44; p. 41). If the 'Higginbottom' sonnets were conceived during Thelwall's July visit, it is possible that his annotations of Bowles predate the sonnets' November publication.

[29] In his jottings on this sonnet, Thelwall marks the alliterations, which he evidently thinks excessive, e.g. 'sighing sedge', 'woo'd ... waving willows', 'beauteous bow / Beams', and 'silent scene'.

[30] On Bowles's riverbank sonnets as precursors of 'Tintern Abbey', see David Fairer, "'Sweet native stream!": Wordsworth and the School of Warton', in *Tradition in Transition: Women Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-Century Canon*, ed. Alvaro Ribeiro, SJ, and James G. Basker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 314-38.

[31] 'Prospective Principle of Virtue', lecture 1 (Claeys, pp. 92, 90).

[32] Whale explores 'Paine's literalism—his fundamentalist belief in a single, contained, and transparent epistemology' in his *Imagination under Pressure, 1789-1832: Aesthetics, Politics and Utility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 42-67.

[33] Roe, 'Coleridge and John Thelwall', pp. 78-9.

[34] Taussig, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship*, p. 212.

[35] 'Prospective Principle of Virtue', lecture 1 (Claeys, p. 90).

[36] *Paradise Lost*, III, 49-50.

[37] John Thelwall, *The Natural and Constitutional Right of Britons to Annual Parliaments, Universal Suffrage, and the Freedom of Popular Association: Being a Vindication of the Motives and Political Conduct of John Thelwall, and of the London Corresponding Society, in General* (London, 1795) (Claeys, p. 60). The speech, on his counsel's advice, was not delivered in court.

[38] 'Prospective Principle of Virtue', lecture 1 (Claeys, p. 89).