

Coleridge's Imperfect Circles

Patrick Biggs

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Abstract

This thesis takes as its starting point Coleridge's assertion that "[t]he common end of all . . . Poems is . . . to make those events which in real or imagined History move in a strait [sic] Line, assume to our Understandings a circular motion" (*CL* 4: 545). Coleridge's so-called "Conversation" poems seem to conform most conspicuously to this aesthetic theory, structured as they are to return to their starting points at their conclusions. The assumption, however, that this comforting circular structure is commensurate with the sense of these poems can be questioned, for the conclusions of the "Conversation" poems are rarely, if ever, reassuring. The formal circularity of these poems is frequently achieved more by persuasive rhetoric than by any cohesion of elements. The circular structure encourages the reader's expectations of unity and synthesis, but ultimately these expectations are disappointed, and instead the reader is surprised by an ending more troubling than the rhetoric of return and reassurance would suggest. Taking three "Conversation" poems as case studies ("The Eolian Harp," "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," and "Frost at Midnight"), this thesis attempts to explicate those tensions which exist in the "Conversation" poems between form and effect, between structure and sense.

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Note on Abbreviations

For the sake of readability and economy of space, my in-text citations to five of Coleridge's works use the abbreviations which are common to Coleridgean scholarship. These abbreviations, and the bibliographical entries to which they are keyed, are listed below.

- BL* Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. Ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983. Bollingen Series 75.
- CL* ---. *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Earl Leslie Griggs. 6 vols. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1956-71.
- CN* ---. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Kathleen Coburn. 5 vols. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957-1990; Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2002.
- PW* ---. *Poetical Works*. Ed. J. C. C. Mays. 3 vols. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001. Bollingen Series 75.
- SWF* ---. *Shorter Works and Fragments*. Ed. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson. 2 vols. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995. Bollingen Series 75.

All quotations from Coleridge's poetry refer to Mays' *Poetical Works* reading texts.

Introduction

In a letter to Joseph Cottle in 1815, Coleridge posited that

[t]he common end of all *narrative*, nay, of *all*, Poems is to convert a *series* into a *Whole*: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move in a *strait* Line, assume to our Understandings a *circular* motion – the snake with it's Tail in it's Mouth.

(*CL* 4: 545)

This statement of poetry's purpose as a unifying one, and the evocation of the geometrical images of the circle and the ouroboros, is quintessentially Coleridgean. We can find similar sentiments espoused time and again in his work. In the *Biographia Literaria*, for example, poetry is defined as

that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having *this* object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*.

(*BL* 2: 13)

In a subsequent paragraph, Coleridge describes the ideal poet as one who “diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power . . . of imagination” (*BL* 2: 16). He has, earlier in the *Biographia*, defined imagination, in contradistinction to fancy, as an “esemplastic power” capable of reconciling multiplicity into unity (*BL* 1: 295). On the topic of imaginative power in the *Notebooks*, we find the image of the ouroboros once more: “The Serpent by

which the ancients emblem'd the Inventive faculty appears to me, in its mode of motion most exactly to emblem a writer of Genius" (*CN* 1: 609).

In *The Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge again insists on the principle of unity when he outlines the difference between symbols and allegories. The symbol is superior, he writes, because it

is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative.

(*Lay Sermons* 30)

In his lectures, Coleridge offers Shakespeare, "the Spinosistic deity" (*Table Talk* 2: 86), as a poet who comes close to his ideal: "That law of unity which has its foundation . . . in nature herself [the unity of feeling], is instinctively observed by Shakespeare" (Foakes 55). When Coleridge examines one of Shakespeare's plays, he seeks to demonstrate Shakespeare's formal excellence by studying the relationship of the play's parts to its whole. Milton, too, is praised in Coleridge's lectures for his structural integrity, with *Paradise Lost* being extolled as the epic which "alone really possesses the Beginning, Middle, and End – the totality of a Poem or circle as distinguished from the ab ovo birth, parentage, &c or strait line of History" (*Lectures 1808-1819* 2: 389). With the phrase "Poem or circle," Coleridge effectively equates poetry with circularity and suggests that circularity is an inextricable element of the best poetry.

In sum – circularity, unity, and structural integrity are important aesthetic ideals in Coleridge’s system. Among Coleridge’s own works, it is his so-called “Conversation” poems which conform most conspicuously to these ideals as he outlined them in his letter to Cottle and elsewhere. Much of the earlier twentieth century criticism sought to establish the formal nature of these poems, beginning in 1928 with G. M. Harper, who noted in “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement,” in “Fears in Solitude,” and in “Frost at Midnight” “a pleasing device we may call the ‘return’” (192). Albert Gérard (1960) found in the poems “a widening and ascending movement,” and “within this general framework . . . a heartbeat rhythm of systole and diastole, contraction and expansion” (84-5). These two processes combine, in Gérard’s reading, to produce Harper’s “return.” For Max Schulz (1963), the structure of the “Conversation” poems constituted “two calm-exaltation-calm parabolas” (82). M. H. Abrams, in 1965, credited Coleridge as the progenitor of what he termed “the greater Romantic lyric” (77). This form of lyric begins loco-descriptively, in the manner of the topographical tradition. Observation of the landscape compels the speaker to a meditation, after which “the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began . . . but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation” (77). In 1972, Abrams described the structure of “The Eolian Harp” as a “double helix” (458), and George H. Gilpin, the following year, seemed to concur when he understood the effect of the “Conversation” poems “to be spiraling rather than merely circling” (640), by virtue of their retrogressive movements (Gérard’s systoles). John Beer, in *Coleridge’s Poetic Intelligence* (1977), reaffirmed the circularity of the poems, and the circle does seem the most popular way to image the poems’ structure, as well as the simplest and

the most accordant with Coleridge's own theoretical principles. That critics such as Schulz, Abrams, and Gilpin have attempted to devise various alternative geometrical models, however, should suggest to us that there is something not wholly satisfactory about Coleridge's circular frameworks. The critics' search for an alternative might suggest to us that the poems resist such easy formal classification.

It would not be easy to overstate the importance of circles to the "Conversation" poems, for not only does the geometrical circle lend these poems their shape, but they are furthermore *about* circles. Set in the domestic sphere, the speaker – who because of the overtly autobiographical nature of the poems we may understand to be Coleridge himself – typically addresses a member of Coleridge's private circle in the 1790s. Coleridge often images societies – domestic or otherwise – as circles. In his essay on "Individuality" (1826), he writes: "To the eye of the World your Establishment may appear a concentric Circle – © with many circumferential lines but only one center" (*SWF* 2: 1337). Writing to Thomas Poole in 1796, he imaged the society of *Watchman* readers as a circle when he complained that each subscriber, "instead of regarding himself as a point in the circumference entitled to some one diverging ray, considers me as the circumference & himself as the Centre to which *all* the rays ought to converge" (*CL* 1: 202). That Coleridge so frequently conceives of societies as circles means that we should not have too much hesitation about understanding the "Conversation" poems' domestic societies as circles, within which Coleridge finds his principal addressee.

In the "Conversation" poems, Coleridge usually presents himself at some distance from his addressee – out of the loop, so to speak – but his

crisis of alienation seems to be resolved by the time the poem concludes because he portrays himself as empathically identifying with his addressee and, in so doing, reinstating himself in the domestic circle. He is usually able to accomplish this by virtue of the poem's meditation, the product of which is Coleridge's realisation that – to quote his 1802 letter to William Sotheby – “every Thing has a Life of its own, & . . . we are all *one Life*” (CL 2: 864). We learn from Coleridge's other writings that he habitually employed the circle to emblematised this unity-in-multitude. In his manuscript of 1811, “Hints Respecting Beauty,” for instance, he writes, following Proclus, that “the *Triangle* is the first-born of Beauty, the *circle* the Ideal: . . . for the Triangle is the first & simplest form, in which multitude . . . is *unified* – while in the circle there is the greatest conceivable multitude of parts harmonized with most perfect *Oneness*” (SWF 1: 278-279). In 1814, in his *Essays on the Principles of Genial Criticism*, Coleridge again locates beauty in the circle, imagining himself and a companion encountered with “[a]n old coach-wheel . . . in the coach maker's yard, disfigured with tar and dirt” (SWF 1: 372).

Overlooking the wheel's surficial filth, Coleridge might say to his companion,

“there is Beauty in that wheel, and you yourself would not only admit, but would feel it, had you never seen a wheel before. See how the rays proceed from the centre to the circumferences, and how many different images are distinctly comprehended at one glance, as forming one whole, and each part in some harmonious relation to each and to all.”

(SWF 1: 372).

However dirty a wheel, it is nonetheless beautiful because its parts coexist in orderly relation so as to construct a unified whole. The “Conversation”

poems, then, are about circles in that they concern Coleridge's location of himself within a domestic circle, and in that they are celebrations of the greater circle of life, constituted by the interconnectedness of all things. As per Coleridge's theory of parts and wholes, the subject and structure work in tandem to produce what may be perceived to be a unified effect. As R. A. Durr succinctly asserts, "In Coleridge, structure, a poem's action, is its meaning" (522). Not only does Coleridge illustrate the one life in the "Conversation" poems, but in a sense he can also be said to demonstrate it. The circular structure mimics the motion of life as Coleridge understood it, and in this way his art imitates life, just as Coleridge felt art ideally should. In the spirit of Coleridge's own words in "Dejection: An Ode," the reader is made to *feel*, not merely see, how beautiful life is.

Beyond this, as though to place an even greater emphasis on the pre-eminence of circles, the poems frequently end with an image of one, be it Sara's "serious eye" in "The Eolian Harp" (49), the "mighty Orb" that is the sun in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" (73), the moon in "Frost at Midnight" and "The Nightingale," or even the circle of listeners gathered to hear *The Prelude* in "To William Wordsworth." The image of a circle with which Coleridge habitually leaves his readers lingers in his readers' minds, its resonance working to aid their apprehension of the poem as a rounded, unified work.

When Harper attached the label "Conversation Poems" to eight of Coleridge's poems in 1928 ("The Eolian Harp," "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement," "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," "Frost at Midnight," "Fears in Solitude," "The Nightingale," "Dejection," and "To William Wordsworth"), he attached to them a second label, "Poems of

Friendship" (189). Criticism of the "Conversation" poems has come a long way since Harper. A great deal of it has aspired to define the "Conversation" poems as a genre. Over the decades, the group of poems has been variously expanded and contracted. Critics have endeavoured, as abovementioned, to explicate the poems' structure, and they have also sought to describe the conversational idiom Coleridge adopts in the poems, to explain its sources and the reasons for its development. For Humphry House (1953) the conversation voice marked Coleridge's movement "from Miltonising towards Cowperising" (70). Schulz (1963) identified the style of Philip Massinger as another possible source. Abrams (1965) noted that "Conversation" poems are written in "a blank verse which at its best captures remarkably the qualities of the intimate speaking voice, yet remains capable of adapting without strain to the varying levels of the subject-matter and feeling" (80-81). Other critics have read the poems in the light of Coleridge's ever-shifting views on philosophy and religion. James D. Boulger (1965) recognised that the poems contained "a struggle between the unifying power of imagination and the analytic, abstract force of speculative reason" (692). Michael E. Holstein (1979) examined the "[t]he persona of the poet-priest" as it became manifest in the poems (209).

Nobody talks about "Poems of Friendship" anymore, but they nonetheless continue to be read as affirmations of Coleridge's affections for his friends and family, as affirmations of his ability to overcome his sense of loss or isolation by reaching out to another person, blessing them, and assimilating that other's vision into his own. It is a reading which I believe the poem's structure encourages, but it is a reading I have always had difficulty subscribing to.

My thesis was conceived as the result of an uneasiness I experienced while reading the “Conversation” poems. There seemed to me something vaguely disturbing about them. Partly it had to do with Coleridge’s overlooking of his auditors. His wife in “The Eolian Harp,” for example, is a faceless embodiment of Christian orthodoxy; nature-loving, “gentle-hearted Charles” in “This Lime-Tree Bower” bears little resemblance to the actual Charles Lamb (28); and Hartley, in “Frost at Midnight” is a *tabula rasa* onto whom Coleridge can project his ideal vision of a child of nature. Following from this, my unease stemmed partly from an uncertainty as to who each poem was truly *for*. The poems seemed to have an unstable sense of their own audience, speaking past their nominal addressees to some mysterious other. Partly, also, my unease stemmed from a feeling that the speaker was not really liberating himself from his solipsistic melancholy by reaching out to others, as he purports to do, but rather drawing those others into his solipsism. The crisis of alienation, then, did not seem adequately resolved. Overall, the “Conversation” poems’ insistence upon circularity and unity, their reassuring rhetoric of easy return, seemed to belie an essential disharmony.

My thesis, simply stated, aims to discover and to explain this essential disharmony, and to account for my initial response as a reader. I will take three poems as case studies – “The Eolian Harp” (1795), “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” (1797), and “Frost at Midnight” (1798). For each of these poems I will offer a reading which attempts to explicate those tensions which exist in the “Conversation” poems between form and effect, between structure and sense. My method will mostly be in line with the modern

critical trend which tends to treat Coleridge's poetry not so much on its own terms but as part of a larger historical and literary context.

Recent scholarship has been bifocal in that it has looked both at Coleridge as he was known in his own time and Coleridge as he has become knowable in ours. *Table Talk*, the *Letters*, the *Notebooks*, as well as the unpublished fragments, manuscripts, marginalia, and alternative versions of his most famous works, permit us an insight into the life and literature of Coleridge that was inaccessible to his contemporaries. In listening in on his conversations, in reading his private correspondence and notes, we can explore the recesses of his interiority. The Bollingen Series' *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, completed by Princeton University Press in 2002 with the publication of *Opus Maximum*, has become the standard reference text for scholars, and has made widely available all of Coleridge's known writings. Coleridge's *Letters* and *Notebooks* are the only omissions from the Princeton edition. The standard editions, for these texts, are those edited by E. L. Griggs and Kathleen Coburn respectively. Scholarly interest has also now extended to the public Coleridge, to those aspects of Coleridge which *were* knowable – and indeed were well known – in his lifetime but which were for a long time neglected in academia. This public Coleridge emerges in the articles he wrote regularly for Daniel Stuart's two newspapers, the *Morning Post* and the *Daily Courier*. It emerges also in the series of lectures he delivered in Bristol and in London. Scholarly attention is now paid to his fluid political reputation, his youthful support of the French Revolution and his retreat into conservatism brought about by age and public pressure. Scholars now place the works of Coleridge in their contemporary context and see how an understanding of the events which surrounded their

composition and publication bear upon their meaning, but as they do this, they are aided by the supplementary material that has become available in the intervening two centuries. Paul Magnuson (1985, 1998) and Jack Stillinger (1994) have both written extensively on the different texts and contexts of Coleridge's poems. The biographies of Rosemary Ashton (1996) and Richard Holmes (1989, 1998) clarify the backdrop against which Coleridge wrote. The interest in the public Coleridge has furthermore extended to the Romanticists within my own institution at Victoria University of Wellington. Nikki Hessel, in *Literary Authors, Parliamentary Reporters* (2012), has considered Coleridge's role as a journalist in the press gallery at parliament. Heidi Thomson, in "'Merely the Emptying out of my Desk': Coleridge about Wordsworth in the Morning Post of 1802" (2008) looks at the significance of Coleridge's writings in the *Morning Post* as they pertain to his relationship with Wordsworth.

In my readings of "The Eolian Harp," "This Lime-Tree Bower," and "Frost at Midnight," I, too, will take advantage of the privileges enjoyed by twenty-first century scholars, flitting between Coleridge past and Coleridge present as seems appropriate to my purpose. I believe so varied an approach can be justified when dealing with a writer as multi-faceted, as myriad-minded as Coleridge. Following my three chapters, I will attempt to draw general conclusions about the "Conversation" poems based on my findings. I will attempt to reconcile as satisfactorily as possible their visions, revisions, and divisions. They will be found to possess beauty, but a strange and eerie beauty – that is to say, not the beauty of Coleridge's ideal circle. The beauty of the "Conversation" poems does not emerge from their ability to realise unity in multiplicity and diversity, but rather in their ability to contain

oppositions and rival forces. They are, in the end, the contradictory creations of their contradictory creator.

The Eolian Harp

Composed in 1795, the year of Coleridge's marriage to Sara Fricker and his settling in Clevedon, "The Eolian Harp" is the earliest of the "Conversation" poems, and has attracted considerable critical attention. Humphry House (1953) found the poem to be an expression of "the attunement of the human spirit to nature" and discussed how the revisions affected its balance (73). Albert Gérard (1960) developed a conception of the poem's structure as an alternation between systolic and diastolic movements, and, in 1961, traced the growth of Coleridge's mind which led to his insertion of the famous one life passage, a growth which principally involved the poet's increasing appreciation of metaphysics and the value of the symbol. Douglas Brownlow Wilson (1972) explicated the one life passage by reading it in terms of the distinction Coleridge drew between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. M. H. Abrams (1972) illumed the same passage by referring to Coleridge's readings of Newton, Schelling, Boehme, and the Bible. Ronald C. Wendling (1968) and William H. Scheuerle (1975) both attempted to modify the prevailing critical opinion that "The Eolian Harp" was internally inconsistent. Paul Magnuson (1985) read the poem in the light of its differing contexts, with a view to illustrating how each can alter our understanding of the poem's meaning. This chapter will be primarily concerned with the relationship of the poem's structure to its actual effect, and the poem's textual history, across which its emphases are dramatically shifted.

A brief plot summary of the poem might be a useful starting point for the discussion which follows. "The Eolian Harp" opens loco-descriptively with the speaker, Coleridge, sitting beside his Clevedon cottage at twilight,

his new wife Sara “reclined . . . [on] his arm” (1-2). The couple watch as the clouds darken and the evenstar begins to shine “[s]erenely brilliant” (8). They breathe in the air that is scented by the aromatic bean-field. All is silent, save the murmur of the sea and the “Lute” of line 12. The lute is of course the Aeolian harp of the title, whose “long sequacious notes” are suggestive – to Coleridge at least - of the “witchery of sound” made by the elves in “Fairy-Land” (18, 22). This sonic witchery, in its turn, leads Coleridge to consider “the one life within us and abroad” (26), a vision of cosmic harmony, of the vital, unifying force that pervades the world and its inhabitants. Coleridge rejoices in this universal interconnectedness, and finds it “impossible / Not to love all things in a world so filled” (30-31). At line 34, there is a break in the meditation as the poet pictures himself stretched on “yonder hill,” tranquilly musing upon tranquillity (35). The almost forced tranquillity does not last long, however, because soon he is revisited by Aeolian inspiration, and, once more, compelled to metaphysical speculation. This time he wonders if we are “but organic harps diversely framed” (45), that is to say, passive receptors, our thoughts and perceptions the result of our being acted upon by an external stimulating agency which is a manifestation of God. In the final verse paragraph, Coleridge is summoned back to mundane reality by his wife’s reproving eye. Apparently his philosophical overreaching has left him abashed. He is humbled and inspired by his wife’s simple virtue and obedience to traditional Christian precepts, and the poem ends with a chastened assertion of Coleridge’s own piety. The final line – “Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honoured Maid!” – brings the poem full circle, back to the pastoral quietude whence we began, and to Sara, the poem’s addressee.

This restorative return is not as reassuring as it might be, however. Despite the formal circularity of the “Conversation” poems, they are seldom circular in effect. We do not, at the end of the poems, seem to arrive at precisely the same point from which we left off, even though the rhetoric seeks to persuade us that we do. The structure and the sense do not work to achieve a common end, despite the pointers towards a common end, and the reader, caught between their conflicting forces, is apt to feel unsettled, confused, or even slightly disturbed. To elaborate on this idea with reference to “The Eolian Harp,” I must recourse to a closer examination of beginning and end.

What I would like to draw attention to in the first instance is the proximity of Coleridge and Sara at the outset of the poem. Their closeness is such that to describe the opening scene as epithalamial would not miss the mark by much. Sara’s cheek is reclined on Coleridge’s arm and the newlyweds’ bower is overgrown with myrtle and jasmine, emblematic, as we are informed, of “Innocence and Love” (5). They stargaze in the stillness, smell the flowers, and the initial description of the lute, when it comes, adds sexuality to the mix. The coy maid simile of line 15, and the suggestive diction surrounding it – “length-ways,” “clasping,” “caressed,” “half-yielding,” “sweet,” and “tempt,” as identified by Everest (201) – ensure that the scene is erotically charged. What we have in sum is a picture of marital intimacy and love.

But when we return to the Clevedon scene at the end of the poem – subsequent to the fanciful excursion into fairy land, the vision of the one life, and the inquiry regarding the receptibility of man – we find that the picture has been altered. A tension has emerged which has radically changed the

portrayal of the dynamic between Coleridge and his wife. The couple's physical proximity has now been severed and their contact is merely ocular. Even this ocular communication cannot be said to be positive, for far from the amorous glances we might expect from a couple recently married, Sara's eye is "serious," and from it darts "reproof" (49). It is striking, and a touch ironic, that their mutual gaze should now confirm a rift rather than a harmony between them, when, conventionally, eye contact is understood to affirm connection to and self-reflection in a beloved.

The distance between Coleridge and Sara is suggested also by the shift in register and address. When Harper coined the term, "Conversation" poems, he was following Coleridge's subtitling of "The Nightingale. A Conversation Poem," but he also had in mind the Horatian epigram to "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement," "*Sermoni propria*," which means "More appropriate to prose," or "Belonging, rather, to common speech" (*PW* 1: 260). Coleridge's more overtly political poems (such as "The Destiny of Nations," "Ode on the Departing Year," or "Religious Musings") tend towards a grander, more elevated style, often ventriloquizing Milton and the Bible, and his "supernatural" poems (such as "Christabel," "Kubla Khan," or "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner") are rhymed and balladic. In contrast, the blank verse of the "Conversation" poems produces the effect of common speech.

The roots of this style can be traced to such eighteenth century poets as Mark Akenside, James Thomson, and William Cowper. J. C. C. Mays identifies Thomson's *Ode on Aeolus' Harp* and *Castle of Indolence* as Coleridge's "chief literary source" in "The Eolian Harp," but the influence of Thomson's blank verse can be detected throughout the "Conversation" poems

(*PW* 1: 231). Similarly, Cowper is of particular importance to “Frost at Midnight,” but his “divine Chit-chat” was a crucial model for Coleridge’s conversational style (*CL* 1: 279). Readers such as Charles Lamb also assisted Coleridge in abandoning the gaudiness of his earlier verse. Lamb encouraged him in 1796 to “[c]ultivate simplicity Coleridge, or rather, I should say, banish elaborateness; for simplicity springs spontaneous from the heart, and carries into daylight its own modest buds and genuine, sweet, and clear flowers of expression” (Marrs 60-61). When first he read “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement,” Lamb expressed his admiration for its mode: “Write thus, & you most generally have written thus, & I shall never quarrel with you about simplicity” (Marrs 65). Conversational simplicity was also the basis of Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* experiment with Wordsworth. The poems in that collection, according to the 1798 advertisement, “were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure” (Wordsworth 116). “The Eolian Harp” predates the *Lyrical Ballads* collaboration, but is a significant antecedent to it, anticipating the vision of the landmark volume. Coleridge himself was well aware of the importance of “The Eolian Harp” in this respect, as evinced by his note at the beginning of the poem in a copy of *Sibylline Leaves*:

Let me be excused, if it should seem to others too mere a trifle to justify my noticing it – but I have some claim to the thanks of no small number of the readers of poetry in having first introduced this species of short blank verse poems – of which Southey, Lamb, Wordsworth, and others have since produced so many exquisite specimens.

(*PW* 1: 232)

Coleridge's own awareness of the conversational ease in his blank verse poems makes the break from the conversational mode in the final verse paragraph of "The Eolian Harp" striking, to say the least. The registral shift is most perceptible in the way Coleridge apostrophizes his wife. In the first line we have "My pensive Sara," an address which, with its possessive pronoun and first name, might conceivably be uttered in the course of a conversation. By line 50, however, we have the more exalted "O beloved woman!", followed by the characterization of Sara, beyond the sphere of the speaker's own influence, as a "Meek daughter in the family of Christ" (53). Finally, in line 64, Sara is a "heart-honoured maid", a lovingly respectful epithet but one which is unlikely to occur in a conversation.

Alan Richardson, in his study of the figure of apostrophe, writes:

Addresses to human beings become more noticeable as they become more abstract and as their objects become more removed from the poet or poetic speaker in intimacy, place, and time.

(69)

Richardson's observation can aid us in determining why the end of "The Eolian Harp" has the potential to be unsettling for readers. The closing apostrophes to Sara contrast strikingly with the earlier apostrophes (at lines 1 and 34) because of their impersonal formality, and, beyond that, because they are commonplaces of virtuous womanhood. The address is no longer familiar, but generic, no longer specific, but abstract. The addressee is no longer the corporeal wife of the speaker, but a faceless embodiment of Virtue. As a representative of the Christian orthodoxy which the speaker has challenged with his pantheistic speculations, Sara has been multiplied, or reduced to one of many, and so, in a sense, she has been made invisible, or, at

the very least, she, virtue incarnate, has been positioned very distantly from her husband who has just described himself as a sinner.

Coleridge purports to be reining in his thought, rejecting
 These shapings of the unregenerate mind;
 Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
 On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.

(55-57)

He purports to reject the employment of the rational faculty in favour of a blind faith in the "Incomprehensible" (59), and he purports to do this so as to reconcile the differences between himself and his wife and, by doing so, to restore the intimacy of the opening scene. But as he does this, he portrays himself as "[a] sinful and most miserable Man, / Wildered and dark" (62-63). This almost hyperbolic condemnation of himself, when set against his fulsome praise for Sara, draws attention to the gulf of distance between them, and between himself and the many Sara represents. It is a difference as stark as black and white, as virtue and vice. The explicit characterization of himself, away from the first person singular pronoun, in terms of Christian orthodoxy, also serves to widen the distance between himself and his wife.

While revising his position upon receiving his wife's reproving glance, his reluctant struggle to incorporate her vision is palpable. Rather than revert to the particularized, concrete, sensory impressions of the start of the poem, Coleridge continues to invoke abstract figures – as is commonplace in philosophical discourse – even as he is rejecting philosophy. He thus produces a friction between what he is saying and the way he is saying it. The level of abstraction in the diction also suggests that his mind still lingers in its meditative, philosophical mode, a departure from the initial conversational

mode which was evocative of Sara's physical presence in the speaker's sense-based appreciation of the outer scene. K. M. Wheeler, in *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry*, is particularly elucidating on lines 55-57, noting that, although he is ostensibly describing the things he is rejecting, the verse of these lines recalls the musicality of the earlier meditation and is thus quite different from the prosaic, awkward verse which afflicts the majority of lines 49-64. In addition to this, Wheeler finds in the "shapings of the unregenerate mind" an anticipation of his later "theory of mind as its own shaping process" (85). Coleridge, in 1795, would not read Kant for several years but perhaps the seeds of his appreciation for Kant's work were planted at this early stage. The "aye-babbling spring," meanwhile, uses one of Coleridge's favourite figures, the spring as an emblem of the creative mind.¹ "[A]ye" may be read as a pun on "I," recalling Coleridge's later philosophical basis of the "I AM" (*BL* 2: 247). As a pun on "I," the line might also be another subtle indicator of Coleridge's isolation despite his wife, his singularity in what should be a union.

Even in the final line ("Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honoured Maid!"), which explicitly echoes the poem's beginning, there are details which betray the newfound marital distance. While in line 3, Coleridge refers to "our cot" (twice), here, at the end, the pronoun which modifies the cottage is no longer the possessive "our," but the demonstrative "this." The striking

¹ For instances of Coleridge using the image of the spring, Wheeler points us to *The Statesman's Manual (Lay Sermons)*: "With them [believing students], the principle of knowledge is likewise a spring and principle of action" (20); "O that we would draw at the well at which the flocks of our forefathers had living water drawn for them, even that water which, instead of mocking, the thirst of him to whom it is given, becomes a well within himself springing up to life everlasting!" (31); "Now it [Christian Love] manifests itself as the sparkling and ebullient spring of well doing in gifts and labors; and now as a silent fountain of patience and long-suffering, the fullness of which no hatred or persecution can exhaust or diminish" (91).

enumeration of “Peace,” an abstraction in itself, “this Cot” and the “heart-honoured Maid” (who is deferentially addressed as “thee”) produces a rather incongruous trinity. “This” cottage now contains two characters who are defined by their differences, and any portrayal of unity happens at a distance of the speaker himself.

It is notable that the devices Coleridge uses to effect the formal circularity – apostrophe, phrasal repetition, evocation of setting – are the very same devices which most disrupt this circularity, ensuring that the poem’s ending is more tangential than its rondo structure led us to expect. Coleridge presents himself, finally, as a solitary figure, detached from the common Christian family, loving yet unloved. “The Eolian Harp” began as a seeming celebration of the union of two people, but, by the end of the final verse paragraph, one of those people has been made invisible, and the poem seems to be more an exercise of self-definition for its author, insofar as he highlights his difference from someone he claims to be close to. Not surprisingly, considering Coleridge’s lifelong desire to belong to a family of his choice, the speaker’s implied exclusion from the “family of Christ” also suggests a separation of sorts from Sara, a rather ominous start for a young couple embarking on family life themselves.

If authorial self-definition was the objective, we might well be led to ask, what was the point in having an auditor in the first place? Would it not have been more expedient to have a meditative poem without the domestic framework? One possible answer is that the self can only be defined in relation to another, forged through an interactive process, and that Coleridge needs to set up the poem with marital intimacy so that his essential solitude, when it is revealed to us in the return that is not a return, is thrown into

greater relief. Sara's presence in the poem might also be clarified with reference to his conception of absolute and commanding geniuses in the *Biographia Literaria*, particularly when we consider Coleridge's later revisions to the poem. The version of "The Eolian Harp" summarized above is the poem as it appeared with the addition of the *Sibylline Leaves* errata in 1817, contemporaneously with the *Biographia*. Coleridge had a tendency to conceive of and entertain notions long before he expressed them in print. The *Biographia* is the closest he came to the "last & great work" of syncretism he envisioned early in his career (CN 1: 1646).

In the second chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge challenges Horace's conception of poets as "Genus irritabile vatum," and, in doing so, expounds upon his understanding of poetic genius (BL 1: 30). This includes the distinction between the "absolute *Genius*" (31) and the "commanding genius" (32). The former is a genius detached from worldly concerns, whose mind is endlessly imaginative, "affected by thoughts, rather than by things" (31), and whose power is "creative and self-sufficing" (31). The latter genius, however, for want of imaginative power, must rely on "the immediate impressions of the senses" (30). Further, he must write in accordance with the dictates of his contemporaries, must "impress [his] preconceptions on the world without, in order to present them back to [his] own view with the satisfying degree of clearness, distinctness, and individuality" (32). The commanding genius, in short, is limited in his subject matter and permanently in need of an audience.

In constructing his persona in "The Eolian Harp," Coleridge seems to have formed an amalgam of the two kinds of genius, so that the speaker is at once both creative and commanding. It is with sensory impressions that the

poem begins – the touch of Sara’s cheek, the sight of the stars, the smell of the flowers, the sound of the harp – and these lead into the speaker’s meditation. The process is akin to that found in topographical poetry such as John Denham’s “Cooper’s Hill.” Of John Denham, Samuel Johnson wrote:

He seems to have been, at least among us, the author of a species of composition that may be denominated *local poetry*, of which the fundamental subject is some particular landscape [sic], to be poetically described, with the addition of such embellishments as may be supplied by historical retrospection, or incidental meditation.

(Johnson 238)

In following this tradition in “The Eolian Harp,” Coleridge “established, in epitome, the ordonnance, materials, and style of the greater lyric,” later refined in his other “Conversation” poems (Abrams, *Correspondent Breeze* 80). The movement from landscape observation to “incidental meditation” owes much to Denham, but it is also indebted Coleridge’s reading of associationist philosophers David Hartley and Joseph Priestley, and is consistent with his idea of the commanding genius who is reliant on sensory impressions.

Once the meditation begins, however, the speaker more closely resembles the absolute genius. In associating the lute with the fairy land, and the fairy land with the one life, the speaker demonstrates “a more than usual rapidity of association, a more than usual power of passing from thought to thought, and image to image” (*BL* 1: 44n*). Subsequent to the one life passage, there is a brief return to the living scene as Coleridge pictures himself “on the midway slope / Of yonder hill” (34-35), separate from Sara (“self-sufficing,” perhaps (*BL* 1: 31)). There is a metacognitive interlude

followed by another meditation, this time on the “intellectual breeze” that animates all of nature (35-47). The apparent ease with which the speaker moves between terrestrial and intellectual realms suggests that he “rest[s] content between thought and reality, as it were in an intermundium,” which, in the *Biographia Literaria*, is the precise position of the absolute genius (1: 32).

As the poem returns upon itself, so too does the commanding genius return, for in recalling Sara the speaker registers his need for an auditor. The situation is complicated, however, by the disparity between speaker and auditor aforementioned. In the *Biographia*, the commanding genius must have his utterances affirmed by his audience. The audience is authoritative, and if the commanding genius’ assertions run contrary to the audience’s outlook, the assertions must either be changed or ceased. On the face of things, this is what happens in “The Eolian Harp,” with Coleridge rejecting the shapings of his unregenerate mind as a result of his wife’s “reproof” (49). The deeper implication, though, is that Coleridge is not at all content with revising his position. Instead, as mentioned above, he distances himself from his wife and the Christian orthodoxy she is a representative of. In this way, the resolution of the poem, like the resolutions of the other “Conversation” poems which succeeded “The Eolian Harp,” is self-excluding. Though Coleridge remains physically present at the Clevedon scene, mentally and emotionally he is elsewhere, more committed to the meditative realm than the domestic, still seeking an appropriate audience.

The textual evolution of the poem illustrates my point. Stillinger identifies sixteen distinct versions of “The Eolian Harp.” I will here be focussing on only the first four *printed* versions, from the 1796, 1797, 1803,

and 1817 publications of Coleridge's work. A survey of these versions should suffice to illustrate the main stages in the poem's evolution.

"The Eolian Harp" was initially published in 1796, in *Poems on Various Subjects*. It was there entitled "Effusion XXXV." Coleridge explains this labelling in the preface to the collection:

Of the following Poems a considerable number are styled "Effusions,"
in defiance of Churchill's line

Effusion on Effusion *pour* away.

I could recollect no title more descriptive of the manner and matter of
the Poems . . .

(*PW* 1: 1196)

If we read the poem while taking into account its original title and the prefatory remarks to the volume in which it was first published, we might then be inclined to notice the poem's effusive qualities, the sense in which it can be read as a spontaneous outpouring of inspired trivialities, rather than as a serious meditation. Lacking the final version's lines 26-34, such a reading is certainly valid. As Paul Magnuson notes in "'The Eolian Harp' in Context" (8), the passage concerning the "organic harps" is contained within the same verse paragraph as the passage concerning the "idle flitting phantasies," suggesting that the pantheistic speculation, tentatively posed as a question, is merely one of those indolent fantasies, irreverent and irrelevant. The frivolous, playful air about this first version of "The Eolian Harp" results in Sara's reproof having "unavoidably comic aspects" (Stillinger, *Textual Instability* 37). It would almost seem absurd to talk about the end of "Effusion XXXV" as I have talked about the end of "The Eolian Harp" above. To suggest darker nuances lurking beneath the surface would

be to disregard entirely the light spirit in which the verse was composed. The closing apostrophes, in “Effusion XXXV,” are hyperboles employed for comic effect, and few could be convinced that they conceal something more disturbing.

Charles Lamb, writing to Coleridge in May 1796, alluded to “Effusion XXXV” while discussing “Religious Musings”:

The conclusion of your R. Musings I fear will entitle you to the reproof of your Beloved woman, who wisely will not suffer your fancy to run *riot*, but bids you walk humbly with your *God*. (Marrs 11)

Five sentences later he continued:

[O]f what is new to me among your poems next to the Musings, that beginning “*My pensive Sara*” gave me most pleasure: the lines in it I just alluded to are most exquisite – they made my sister & *self* smile, as conveying a pleasing picture of hearing you indulge when *among us*. It has endeared us more than any thing to your good Lady; & your own *self-reproof* that follows delighted us. Tis a charming poem throughout. (Marrs 11-12)

Lamb’s response to the conclusion of “Religious Musings” recognises Coleridge’s habitual tendency to prefer riotous fancy to the kind of modest, pious behaviour endorsed by Micah 6:8. The remark might suggest to us that the kind of divergent thinking we find in “The Eolian Harp” is not exclusive to that poem but part of a Coleridgean pattern, and this, in its turn, might imply what I suggested in my analysis of the poem’s “return” above, that the self-reproof is not an actual renunciation of waywardness but placatory rhetoric intended to mollify Sara while making it clear to everyone else that he and his wife are discordant and perhaps incompatible. Nonetheless,

Lamb's response to "Effusion XXXV" confirms that he did not read the poem so cynically, and found it instead a cheerful and amusing poem about Coleridge's thoughts being checked by his more sensible wife. This sanguine interpretation is also aided by Coleridge's note to line 60 in his 1796 *Poems on Various Subjects*. He quotes Madame Roland's defence of her husband in her *Appeal to Impartial Posterity*. Joseph Johnson's English translation read:

The Atheist is not, in my eyes, a man of ill faith: I can live with him as well, nay, better than with the devotee; for he reasons more; but he is deficient in a certain sense, and his soul does not keep pace with mine; he is unmoved at a spectacle the most ravishing, and he hunts for a syllogism, where I am impressed with awe and admiration. (qtd in *PW* 1: 234-235n60)

Stillinger writes that "[a]t first glance, we might suppose that Coleridge cited it for its description of the atheist as one who reasons but is deficient in feeling" (*Textual Instability* 38). In this way, the note can be read as a vindication of himself. K. M. Wheeler, however, suggests that, actually, the note might be a criticism of Sara, since, due to its syntactical ambiguity, "it is not clear whether the elaboration is about the *dévo*t or the *athée*" (86). Either way, Madame Roland calls to mind the idea of the dominated husband, for she held unusually large sway over her husband Jean-Marie. To show that Coleridge was aware of this, Stillinger directs us to *The Fall of Robespierre*, and to "the uxorious dotard Roland, / The woman-govern'd Roland" (3:181-182). Without further comment from Coleridge, it is impossible to know what he intended his note to signify, but given the context of "Effusion XXXV" of 1796, it seems likely that it is meant merely as

both a clever and topical double illumination, firstly of the “Faith that inly feels” (60), and secondly of the situation in which the wife reproves the errant husband. If the apostrophes are comic hyperboles, then perhaps a humorous touch can be found moreover in Coleridge’s implication that a mild domestic disagreement and the French Revolution are in some tangential sense analogous.

A final point about the 1796 “Effusion XXXV”: If we read the poem alongside those other poems with which it was published, as Magnuson encourages us to, we find that “Effusion XXXVI,” later to become “Lines on an Autumnal Evening, begins “O Thou wild FANCY, check thy wing!”. As “Frost at Midnight” might be read as an extension of the sentiment expressed in the poems which precede it in *Fears in Solitude*, so “Effusion XXXVI” might be understood to be related to “Effusion XXXV.” Read this way, “Effusion XXXVI” reaffirms for us that, in the original context, Coleridge’s meditation in “Effusion XXXV” is not serious; it is possible to read it as an idle speculation, happily dispensed with upon a look from his wife.

In October 1797, the poem was republished in a volume which contained, in addition to Coleridge’s, poems by Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd. The volume does not feature a series of effusions, and so “Effusion XXXV” is retitled “Composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire.” The new title suggests that domesticity is a principal theme of the work, and that the poem is preceded by “Lines Written at Shurton Bars,” and followed by “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement” supports this idea. Both preceding and succeeding verses concern domesticity, but it is worth noting that both look at domesticity from an outsider’s viewpoint, and both deal with themes of isolation and difficult sacrifice, as does “Composed at Clevedon,” albeit in a

less obvious way. As was the case with “Effusion XXXVI” in the previous year’s *Poems*, “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement” appears to begin with an allusion to the previous poem, with “Low was our pretty cot” recalling the “cot” of the final line of “Composed at Clevedon.” If Coleridge’s yearning to flee his domestic situation is implicit in “Composed at Clevedon,” then it may be said to become explicit in “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement,” in which Coleridge announces his need to depart from hearth and home. Although it is apparently alluring to him, it pampers “the coward Heart / With feelings all too delicate for use” (47-48), and it must therefore be exchanged for a more public existence, wherein he would be able “to fight the bloodless fight / Of Science, Freedom, and the Truth in CHRIST” (61-2).

In 1803, the third edition of *Poems* was published by Charles Lamb in Coleridge’s absence. The poem is removed from its place among the poems about domesticity. It is still immediately followed by “Reflections” but the preceding poems seem more or less arbitrarily selected, the result being that “Composed at Clevedon” “appears to be simply another poem by Coleridge” (Stillinger, *Textual Instability* 38). The 1803 text omits eight lines from the earlier versions, most notably the fairy land passage. However, it includes four lines which, by 1817, will be revised into the latter half of the one life passage:

Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a World like this,
Where e’en the Breezes of the simple Air
Possess the power and Spirit of Melody!
(*PW* 2: 323)

The 1803 poem moves directly from the human interaction to what we retrospectively understand as the one life vision. In later versions of the poem, belonging to *Sibylline Leaves* and the *Poetical Works*, the fairy land passage acts as something of a buffer. As Everest puts it: “The elfins and birds of paradise serve to dematerialize the sexual situation” (202). As we follow Coleridge into his fairy land, our focus is forcibly removed from the marital intimacy Coleridge and Sara shared only a few lines ago, and this intimacy, once dematerialised, is never really regained by them in the poem. Gérard notes in the birds of paradise lines Coleridge’s usage of “swift motor imagery” (“Systolic” 82), such as “[f]ootless and wild” (24), “[n]or pause, nor perch” (25), “hovering” (25), and “untamed wing” (25). In this imagery we might get a sense of Coleridge’s desire to escape the domestic bower, and quickly. We do not get this impression in 1803, however. Instead, the universal love of all things develops out of the human love of the opening scene. This makes for a kinder poem to Sara in some ways. In one of his Bristol lectures, Coleridge declared that “Jesus knew our nature – and that expands like the circles of a Lake – the Love of our Friends, parents and neighbours lead[s] us to love of our Country to the love of all Mankind” (*Lectures 1795* 163). The process by which love is extended from domestic affections to omnibenevolence seems better represented in the 1803 version of “Composed at Clevedon” than in its successors. In later versions, when Coleridge proclaims his love for all of creation, it is a generous enough gesture, but it might equally be said that it is another way in which Sara is distanced from her husband. The union of two at the beginning of the poem has been supplanted by a union of all. If Coleridge loves “all things” equally (31), then he cannot love his wife especially, and, as at the end of the poem,

Sara is reduced to one of many – she is only one of the innumerable people and things that Coleridge professes to love. In the later “Eolian Harp,” the one life passage follows the dematerialising fairy land passage abruptly, and its connections to the fairy land passage and to the epithalamial opening are difficult to follow. But, in 1803, the one life notion is developed from the initial marital scene in such a way that Sara seems credited as the necessary starting point without which the vision would not be possible. In 1803, then, Sara is included in the speaker’s vision in a way the other versions do not permit. For all this, it is worth bearing in mind that we are not certain how much Coleridge actually had to do with the 1803 version of his *Poems*. Lamb supervised its publication, it is anomalous among the sixteen versions, and there is no biographical reason to think that Coleridge was any more enamoured of his wife in 1803 than he had been earlier. On the contrary, the strength of his marriage had been severely tested in recent years and he had become infatuated with Sara Hutchinson.

The 1817 version, which appears in *Sibylline Leaves*, is the first of the versions to be entitled “The Eolian Harp.” The poem is situated in a section called “Meditative Poems in Blank Verse,” which also includes “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement,” “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” “To a Gentleman,” “The Nightingale,” and “Frost at Midnight” – the “Conversation” poems, in other words. This new context suggests that Coleridge’s meditation is at the poem’s core, and not merely a sally of fancy to be reproved (as seemed to be the case in 1796). The new title, which names the instrument which instigates the meditation, further attests to the meditation’s significance. The note referring to Madame Roland is omitted in 1817 (which alters our understanding of the “dialogue” between Coleridge

and Sara), and, in the errata, the one life passage is added. The one life passage finds its way into the text proper in 1828. There is, by 1817, “no longer any contextual influence to inhibit a reading of *The Eolian Harp* as a serious philosophical statement” (Stillinger, *Textual Instability* 39).

Coleridge’s revisions to “The Eolian Harp,” then, radically shift the poem’s focus from married life to metaphysics. The revisions reflect the changes in his personal circumstances. In 1796, he was a young newlywed; by 1817, he had been long separated from his wife, obsessed with metaphysics, and keen to incorporate into his earlier works the ideas he was setting forth in the *Biographia Literaria*, which he was working on at the same time as *Sibylline Leaves* was being prepared. Over the course of the text’s life, its sense of its own audience has been unstable. As Abrams has written, it is only the earliest published version of the poem which “justifies the usual description of “The Eolian Harp” as a wedding or honeymoon poem” (“Light” 459). Even that is debatable, however. Coleridge was always in search of a satisfactory audience and can be said to turn away from Sara at the end of the poem when she proves an unfit auditor. The poem is offered, then, to an audience outside the closed domestic circle. It is offered to us as readers and so it becomes a public poem rather than a private one. In the later versions of *Sibylline Leaves* and the *Poetical Works*, it is certainly not a private poem. The presence of his estranged wife is retained, but it is the larger, intelligent literary audience Coleridge is actually aiming to reach.

The one life passage is a useful gloss to similar passages in other “Conversation” poems. It elucidates the experiences of Lamb and Hartley as they are presented in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” and “Frost at

Midnight,” for example. It is also another articulation of the Mariner’s epiphany when he realises that

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

(“The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” (1978))

Furthermore, the passage’s emphasis on unity and the imagination as a transformative faculty can be seen as a poetic expression of the ideas espoused in the *Biographia*. It is, indeed, a very great complement to a very great number of Coleridgean works. To the work it is actually *in*, however, it is disruptive. The “idle flitting phantasies” of line 40 can refer, in the earlier versions, to the fairy land passage, and make perfect sense in doing so. But it is not so easy to dismiss the one life as a trivial fantasy, yet “idle flitting phantasies” remains in its place, referring to whichever lines precede it. William Scheuerle argues that it is only the pantheistic speculation about animated nature being as organic harps that is rejected in the final paragraph (596). By 1817 Coleridge had dismissed the associationist notion elsewhere, too, for example in his oft-cited marginal note to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*:

The mind does not resemble an Eolian Harp, nor even a barrel-organ turned by a stream of water, conceive as many tunes mechanized in it as you like – but rather, as far as Objects are concerned, a violin, or other instrument of few strings yet vast compass, played on by a musician of Genius. (*Marginalia* 3: 248)

The lute and pantheistic speculation are dismissible in the final “Eolian Harp,” but the one life is not, and if the one life is permitted to stand, “the coda is rendered inconsequent as well as anticlimactic” (Abrams, “Light” 475). The poem’s domestic framework fits uneasily around the metaphysics in the earlier versions but in the later versions it is harshly discordant with them. In this way, the poem reveals the uneasy accommodation of what it professes to endorse by its structure.

This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison

As in “The Eolian Harp,” we find Coleridge’s condition at the beginning of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” characterised by remoteness and confinement. And, much like in the earlier poem, Sara Coleridge is the implied culprit for this state of affairs. While she is portrayed as being intellectually disabling in “The Eolian Harp,” in “This Lime-Tree Bower” she prevents Coleridge from walking for the duration of the visit of “some long-expected Friends” in “the June of 1797” (*PW* 1: 350). The long-expected friends were William and Dorothy Wordsworth, and Charles and Mary Lamb. Because Sara had “accidentally emptied a skillet of boiling milk on [his] foot” (*CL* 1: 334), as he explained to Robert Southey, Coleridge was forced to miss out on his friends’ ramble in the Quantocks one afternoon. During their absence, he composed “This Lime-Tree Bower” in Thomas Poole’s jasmine arbour.

The plot of the poem is fairly straightforward. The speaker in his bower, deemed a “Prison” (2), is regrettably unable to join his friends on their excursion. He imagines the route they might be walking along, describing the sights they might see on the way as they descend into “a roaring dell, o’erwooded” (10) before emerging “[b]eneath the wide wide Heaven” (20), which grants them a spectacular view of the setting sun. Charles Lamb is singled out and apostrophised, for it is he who the speaker feels will benefit most from experiencing the glories of nature, having patiently suffered and “pined / And hunger’d after Nature, many a year, / In the great City pent” (28-30). The speaker’s empathic connection with Lamb permits him to look on his “little lime-tree bower” afresh (47). He is now able

to appreciate, as he was unable to before, the natural wonders the garden harbour contains. They now seem imbued with symbolic value, telling of life beyond themselves. This revelatory experience has amply compensated the speaker for his absence from his friends, and he is able to conclude by bestowing a blessing upon a rook.

The scholarship about “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” has to a great extent focussed on the variety of genres Coleridge drew upon in the creation of his poem, along with the assorted religious and philosophical influences which also played their part. James Engell writes, in “Imagining into Nature” (1990), that the critics’ “varied observations are not contradictory but attest to the active, brilliant mixing of generic elements” in “This Lime-Tree Bower” (81). Engell reviews the core criticism up to 1990 and my own review of the literature, below, takes its guidance from his.

John Gutteridge (1981) looks at the intertextual relevance of several materials Coleridge drew on and examines the manner in which he used them. He traces the sunset passage to a notebook entry (CN 1: 157), shows how it improved stylistically as a result of Cowper’s influence, and how it gained in metaphysical significance as a result of Berkeley’s influence. Gutteridge also considers the poem’s intertextual relationships with Wordsworth and Southey, how two of Southey’s poems are echoed in the sunset and rook passages, and how the moral of “This Lime-Tree Bower” might be read as an answer to Wordsworth’s “Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree.” This last textual relationship is also the focus of Lucy Newlyn’s discussion in *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion* (2004, 18-24). Avery F. Gaskins (1975) explores the ways in which the formal structure of seventeenth-century meditative verse informs the

“Conversation” poems, showing how, in each, we can find a “composition of place,” an “analysis,” and a “colloquy” (627). Beyond formal exposition, Gaskins writes also of the development of Coleridge’s thoughts about nature, his gradual alignment with Wordsworth’s conception of nature as “a spiritual force” (634). Michael E. Holstein (1979) argues that the speaker’s encounter with nature in the “Conversation” poems results in the emergence of a poet-priest persona. The religious experiences the speakers undergo lead to an anxiety due to the disparity which exists between the universal vision and the actual surroundings of the speaker. To resolve this uneasiness, Coleridge develops the poet-priest persona, which “mediates between the human world and newly discovered orders of existence” (217). For Holstein, it is the voice of this poet-priest we hear in “This Lime-Tree Bower” at line 60 and following (“Henceforth I shall know,” et cetera). Ann Matheson (1981) has written on the debt, both stylistic and thematic, Coleridge owed to William Cowper. On the subject of “This Lime-Tree Bower” specifically, Matheson notes that Cowper’s influence can be detected in the verse style but also in the light and shade imagery, and in Coleridge’s championing of the country life.

Anne K. Mellor (1979) discusses the various portrayals of landscape in the poem, and how these permit the poem to be read as “a paradigm of the historical movement in England from an objective to a subjective aesthetics at the end of the eighteenth century” (253). Read this way, “This Lime-Tree Bower” charts a course from the picturesque to the beautiful, finally arriving at the sublime. Thomas McFarland (1985) surveys the connections between Romanticism and the pastoral tradition. As pertains to “This Lime-Tree Bower,” the poem celebrates the “*solitude of identity*” (16), which involves

the retreat from city to rural life, a moving away from the urban multitude in an attempt to rediscover individual identity through solitude in nature.

McFarland notes towards the end of his essay that the dell and the solitary humble bee may have their roots in Theocritan pastoral.

Kathleen Wheeler (1981) explores the connections between “This Lime-Tree Bower” and the supernatural poems, “Kubla Khan” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” She also examines the connections between domesticity and exoticism in the poem with reference to Coleridge’s theories of mind and imagination as expounded in the *Biographia*. The remainder of her chapter focusses on the mini-preface and Coleridge’s revisions from manuscript to publication. R. A. Durr (1959) is chiefly interested in the action “of multēity coming into unity or the universal into the particular” (514). Durr illustrates how this is the central action of “This Lime-Tree Bower,” how the disconsolate speaker is ultimately able to be consoled and redeemed by an act of imagination, through which he is able to lose his initial sense of separateness in the process of discovering that he is a part of – and in harmony with – the one life. Durr shows that this empathic realisation is a recurrent action in Coleridge, found throughout his work and correspondence. James D. Boulger (1965) contends that the “Conversation” poems are “essentially about the maker and especially the making of poetry” (693). As such, they concern Coleridge’s inner struggle to organise his ideas about God, Nature, Hartley, Berkeley, and Christianity. William A. Ulmer (2007) argues that, contrary to popular consensus, Coleridge mainly intended “This Lime-Tree Bower” as a comfort to Lamb, rather than to himself. Following his mother’s death, Lamb asked Coleridge to offer him religious comfort and also to make him a Berkeleian (Marrs 44-45, 88-90).

These requests, Ulmer posits, look forward to “This Lime-Tree Bower,” which places Lamb in a scene where he can witness the workings of the one life. The one life, Ulmer reminds us, originated in Coleridge’s Unitarianism and was a powerful consolatory tool because it affirmed general goodness.

Christopher R. Miller (2002) attends to the temporal shape of “This Lime-Tree Bower,” and the problem it poses in “the inability to be two places at once” (520). Miller discusses some of the strategies Coleridge employs to handle the poem’s temporal complexities, including dramatic presentation and the use of grammatical cues.

Michael Simpson (1999) offers an account of Coleridge’s revisions to “This Lime-Tree Bower,” suggesting that they were motivated partly by his relationship with Robert Southey (which had soured with the collapse of the Pantisocracy scheme), partly by Coleridge’s shifting philosophical views (from Hartleianism to Kantianism), and that the two partial motivations are in fact interrelated.

To reiterate Engell’s remark above, the diverse critical foci confirm the richness of the poem, and the eclecticism of Coleridge’s influences and creativities. The mingling of the poem’s myriad facets attest to Coleridge’s totalising tendencies, his compulsive drive to unify. In “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” as in the “Conversation” poems in general, he strove to achieve a work of art which was both unified in and of itself and expressive of unity. The poem’s basic movement from self-pity and confinement to elation and freedom, from the bower outwards and back again with a new perspective borne of unifying empathy, can be represented geometrically as a circle, the emblem of wholeness and integrity.

My reading of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” will seek to demonstrate, as my reading of “The Eolian Harp” did as well, that the poem’s formal circularity does not neatly correspond with its sense. Miller contends that poems such as “This Lime-Tree Bower” “move on two simultaneous tracks – the internal melody of thought and the external harmony (or disharmony) of phenomenon” (521). On the face of things, Coleridge resolves the plot of these poems by merging these two tracks, with the speaker empathically dissolving his sense of self into his sense of otherness through an act of imagination. Although the speaker of the poems begins at a mental remove from his surroundings and his family or friends, by using his imagination to empathically identify with one or another external element, he is able to recognise that all things are connected, bound by the one life, and his recognition of this grand unity allows him to close the initial remove. In this chapter I draw attention to the ways in which the internal melody of thought in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” does not fully align itself with the external harmony of phenomena, to the ways in which the self cannot so easily be blended with all that lies outside the self, and to the ways in which the poem does not do what it purports to do.

We begin with the complaints of the dejected poet, whose sufferings have been caused by loss and division. If Miller is correct in his assertion that “This Lime-Tree Bower” “[i]n the simplest terms . . . concerns the inability to be two places at once” (520), then the opening line “Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,” succinctly presents this problem to the reader. While Coleridge is in “[t]his Lime-Tree Bower,” his friends are in “that still roaring dell” (2, 9). Pronoun oppositions – they/I, this/that – are placed in close proximity in order to emphasise division. Coleridge’s account of his loss,

meanwhile, does not fall far short of self-mocking melodrama. In the original version of the poem, he was “[l]am’d by the scathe of fire, lonely & faint” (*PW* 2: 481), and, in all versions, he refers to his friends as those “whom I never more may meet again” (6). He regrets missing out on the “[b]eauties and feelings” he might have gained from the walk because in the distant future they may have comforted him in “blindness” (3, 5).

Coleridge’s hyperbole here may seem unwarranted, but to understand its intensity we need only remember that he was primarily drawn to domesticity and to rustic retirement because of the communal experience it offered. Pantisocracy had, after all, been founded not only on political and philosophical ideals, but also, and more importantly, on an ideal conception of friendship. As Nicholas Roe puts it: “For Coleridge . . . its [Pantisocracy’s] equalitarian principles were not wholly political or economic, but religious and emotional as well” (113). The friendship in the Pantisocratic society would emanate from that centre and would eventually regenerate the entirety of mankind. The scheme failed for a number of reasons (the principal reason, to Coleridge’s mind, was that Southey had been “lost to Virtue” (*CL* 1: 163)), but Coleridge had told George Dyer that he wished “we could form a Pantisocracy in England” instead (*CL* 1: 155), and although the letter does not express any serious intention to do so, he nonetheless came to believe his retreat to Nether Stowey constituted precisely that. Friendship and communitarianism, then, were values Coleridge set great store by. It was, however, primarily male friendship he valued. In a chapter on gender in the *Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, Julia Carson writes:

Most of Coleridge’s comments on gender supported the social conservatism that usually follows from essentialist claims. They

positioned women in the private sphere, viewed love as women's primary preoccupation, and characterised femininity as maternal, nurturing, dependent, and domestic. (203)

However accidental Sara's actions might have been when she scalded her husband's foot, Coleridge might well have seen the injury at the hands of his wife and his male friends' subsequent abandonment of him as a personal affront. Certainly, the denial of a shared experience with the future benefit of cherished memories is painful to him. The lime-tree bower is only a prison because he is alone there. At the end of the poem, when he has come to feel that actually he is in close proximity to his friends regardless of their location (by virtue of the one life), he no longer feels pent up. His liberation is not without its complications, however, as we will see.

As he is thinking about those friends he might not meet again, Coleridge ponders their whereabouts. His attempt to locate them in the dell may be seen as an attempt to place *himself* in the dell and, despite his lamented absence, involve himself in any way he can in their ramble. The ash tree which "from rock to rock / Flings arching like a Bridge" is suggestive of Coleridge's desire to bridge the spatial divide between himself and his friends (12-13).

Coleridge, perhaps in an effort to take control of the situation as best he can, plays the role of his friends' tour guide. The dell is the dell "of which I told" (9). Although when he wonders about his friends' location he is at first tentative (they "wind down, perchance" (8)), he soon abandons his hesitance and, by line 16, seems to have gained confidence in his speculations. "[A]nd there my friends / Behold the dark green file of long lank Weeds" has none of the earlier uncertainty (16-17). This may be because he has taken his role as a

tour guide one step further and is now actively dictating his friends' movements. Anne K. Mellor has pointed out that the verbs from lines 17 to 21 can function in the imperative as well as the indicative mode. Coleridge may be instructing his friends as to what they should "[b]ehold" (17), where they should "emerge" (20), and, having emerged, what they are to "view again" (21). "This syntactic undercurrent," writes Mellor, "strengthened by the prominent position (and capitalization) given to 'Behold,' suggests an almost Biblical revelation of an intense aesthetic delight" (260). If this is the case then we find this passage accords with the subsequent passage describing the sublime sunset, which is plainly a religious vision telling of the one life.

Simpson also explores the possibility that this passage operates in the imperative and apostrophic mode. In such a reading, for Simpson, lines 10 to 26 would constitute direct speech. Coleridge mentions in line 9 "that still roaring dell, of which I told," then elaborates on precisely what was told. Simpson also connects the passage with the sunset description – not only are both evocative of religious experience, but both, also, are apostrophic. Reading lines 10 through 26 in the imperative mode would also make "This Lime-Tree Bower" accord with the other "Conversation" poems I look at in this thesis. Coleridge's assertion of what his friends think and do is comparable to his assertion, in "Frost at Midnight," of what Hartley will do in future years. Hartley "shalt wander like a breeze" through the Cumbrian countryside and "shalt . . . see and hear / The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible" of God's eternal language (54, 58-9). The passage in "This Lime-Tree Bower" might also be compared with Coleridge's interpretation of Sara's look in "The Eolian Harp" as one of "reproof" and uncompromising piety (49). Sara is told that she has bid her husband to "walk humbly" with his

God, and has “holily dispraised / These shapings of the unregenerate mind” (54-55). All she has actually done, however, is look at him. If the “Conversation” poems contain conversations at all, they can be said to be one-sided conversations, and the extent to which Coleridge’s family and friends participate in the conversations is very much directed and dictated by Coleridge, who, overlooking the particular traits and qualities of his audience, imposes actions upon them, interprets their thoughts and feelings, and forces them into roles relative to his own. By willing his addressee into complicity with himself, Coleridge demonstrates that although he likes the idea of a community, the community he wants is a community on his terms. Disparate persons whose thoughts or feelings might be contrary to his own are difficult for him to accommodate, and so these persons are, in the “Conversation” poems, moulded into a mindset compatible with Coleridge’s own.

The central addressee in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” is Charles Lamb. Coleridge describes the phenomena Lamb encounters and then interprets Lamb’s response to them. Coleridge’s friends

wander on

In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,

My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined

And hunger’d after Nature, many a year,

In the great City pent, winning thy way

With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain

And strange calamity!

(26-32)

That Lamb had suffered calamity is certainly true, for his sister Mary had recently murdered their mother, but that is about where the passage's truthfulness in depicting Lamb ends. Coleridge casts Lamb into a role where his perspective is sympathetic – identical, even – with his own. Coleridge's wishful fantasy of how Lamb had "pined / And hunger'd after Nature" was entirely unfounded (28-29). Lamb was known to enjoy city-dwelling and had encouraged Coleridge to live in London rather than retire to Nether Stowey. In October 1797 he expressed his dismay at Coleridge's new wild scheme to live in the countryside:

I grieve from my very soul to observe you in your plans of life, veering about from this hope to the other, & settling no where. Is it an untoward fatality (speaking humanly) that does this to you?, a stubborn irresistible concurrence of events? or lies the fault, as I fear it does, in your own mind? You seem to be taking up splendid schemes of fortune only to lay them down again, & your fortunes are an ignis fatuus that has been conducting you, in thought, from Lancaster Court, Strand, to somewhere near Matlock, then jumping across to Dr. Somebody's whose sons' tutor you were likely to be, & would to God, the dancing demon *may* conduct you at last in peace & comfort to the "life & labors of a cottager." (Marrs 51-52)

Lamb's impression of Coleridge as a hapless follower of the will-o'-the-wisp of mad schemes is an amusing one, but a discerning one as well, given the propensity of Coleridge's schemes to fall through, and for Coleridge, undaunted, to pursue the very next. But whatever the letter says about Coleridge, it makes clear that Lamb wants no part in a scheme of rural retirement. In a letter written to Thomas Manning not long after the visit to

Coleridge immortalised in “This Lime-Tree Bower,” Lamb wrote: “For my part, with reverence to my friends northward, I must confess that I am not romance-bit about *Nature*” (Marrs 248). Lamb then proceeds to list the various pleasures he finds in London. In general, Lamb did not feel that he was “[i]n the great City pent” (30). The phrase *does*, however, look forward to “Frost at Midnight,” and to Coleridge’s recollection of himself at Christ’s Hospital (where he first met Charles Lamb), “reared / In the great city, pent ’mid cloisters dim” (51-52). It is clear that in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” Coleridge projects himself onto Lamb, attributing to him his own disposition.

Lamb also disliked being labelled “gentle-hearted”. On 6 August 1800 (the year of the first published edition of “This Lime-Tree Bower”), he wrote to Coleridge: “For God’s sake (I never was more serious), don’t make me ridiculous any more by terming me gentle-hearted in print, or do it in better verses. . . . [T]he meaning of gentle is equivocal at best, and almost always means poor-spirited” (Marrs 217-218). A week later, he repeated the request: “In the next edition of the Anthology, . . . please to blot out *gentle hearted*, and substitute drunken dog, ragged-head, seld-shaven, odd-ey’d, stuttering, or any other epithet which truly and properly belongs to the Gentleman in question” (Marrs 224). Lamb’s response to Coleridge’s poem is self-satirizing, but there is undoubtedly a certain seriousness in the jest. That Lamb goes on to write, “*Now* I am convinced it was all done in Malice, heaped, sack-upon-sack, congregated, studied Malice” (Marrs 224), would point to such seriousness. Lamb resisted Coleridge’s use of him as a prop in his scheme. The correspondence alerts us to the fictionality of Coleridge’s constructions of friendship and domesticity in the poems. They are very

much idealised, often bearing only the thinnest of resemblances to reality, wholly reliant on the persuasiveness of Coleridge's unanswered rhetoric for their existence. Lamb's responses to Coleridge's poem, writes Ulmer, "encourage us to recognize that, while the poem in some ways looks back from 1797 to Coleridge's earlier friendship with Lamb, in other ways it looks ahead to the lapsing of that friendship in the months following its composition" (22). It was a brief and singular break but it may nonetheless have had its roots in Coleridge's inability, or refusal, to see Lamb properly around this time.

Following the address to Charles is the address to the "glorious Sun" (33). The scene Coleridge describes, in the words of R. A. Durr, "is all active now: . . . the heath-flowers *shine*, the clouds *burn*, the groves *live* in the yellow light, the ocean *kindles*" (526-527, Durr's emphasis). This is a marked contrast to the dell Coleridge earlier described. In the dell description of the opening verse paragraph the word "still" appears three times, at lines 10, 15, and 19. The stagnation is now supplanted by this vision of the one life, which Coleridge presents Lamb as taking pleasure in. Coleridge instructs nature to appear to Charles at the height of its sublimity

So my Friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when he makes
Spirits perceive his presence.

(37-43)

If it was not yet obvious that Coleridge is using Lamb as a surrogate for himself, the phrase “as I have stood”² should remove any lingering doubt that this is in fact what is happening. Coleridge would have us believe that this is an example of empathic identification rather than self-projection, but Lamb’s dismissal of the one life notion as an “unintelligible abstraction-fit” would lead us to believe otherwise (Marrs 224). The speaker’s elated response to his own image of Burkean sublimity was his exclusively, and not Lamb’s. Lamb did not find the landscape “[l]ess gross than bodily” (41), that is, he did not apprehend its essential vitality, nor did he necessarily perceive in it the omnipresence of the “Almighty Spirit” (42). While Coleridge purports to reach out to Lamb and identify with him, Coleridge is not so much taking himself to Lamb as bringing Lamb to himself. What we end up with, then, is self-definition with no reciprocal connection to another person. The speaker may be supposed to overcome his sense of isolation in this poem by losing his self in all, as the rhetoric of the poem seems to suggest, but to the reader it looks a lot like the speaker is losing all in himself, merely attaining a grander kind of solipsism. Lamb is Coleridge, and the action of the poem is a working out of Coleridge’s own philosophical concerns and psychological needs. Any seeming reciprocity is a rhetorical illusion.

The result of all this is that the internal melody of thought is not really becoming attuned to external phenomena, which undermines the conviction of the final part of the poem, the “return,” in which Coleridge is able to look

² Coleridge signed the poem in the *Annual Anthology* (1800) “ESTEESI,” which “signifies – *He hath stood* – which in these times of apostacy [sic] from the principles of Freedom, or of Religion in this country, & from both by the same persons in France, is no unmeaning Signature, if subscribed with humility, & in the remembrance of, Let him that stands take heed lest he fall” (CL 2: 867). The phrase, “as I have stood,” if we read the poem in the spirit of Magnuson and Ulmer, might therefore be read as a subtle invitation for Lamb to align himself with Coleridge’s religion, radical politics, and philosophy. This consideration adds another dimension to the passage but does not alter the fact that the characters of Lamb and Coleridge are uneasily blended in the poem.

on his lime-tree bower with a newly acquired perspective. Now, we are told, the speaker has discovered “much that has sooth’d [him]” (48). When we compare the closing paragraph to the opening paragraph we find that the darkness has been replaced with light and transparency, with a luminosity of sorts. At the beginning, Coleridge spoke of his eyes being “dimmed . . . to blindness” (5), of the dell being “only speckled by the mid-day Sun” (11), of the ash tree being “[u]nsunn’d” (14), of the weeds being “dark” (17). At the close, however, the foliage is “[p]ale” and “transparent” (48-49), a leaf “sunny” (50), the shadow and stem of a leaf “[d]appling its sunshine” (52), a walnut tree “richly ting’d” (53). On the ivy there lies a “deep radiance” (53), and the elms now “gleam a lighter hue” (56). Although the poem opened in the middle of the day and we have now reached twilight, the scene is brighter at the latter stage. Robert Penn Warren, writing about “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in 1946, argues that Coleridge’s sun represents “the light of practical convenience” (240) while his moon represents “the modifying colours of the imagination” (235). If the increased luminosity towards the close of day in “This Lime-Tree Bower” seems at all unusual it can most likely be explained with reference to Warren’s study. The speaker’s imagination has by this point in the poem become fully operational, capable of transforming the bower from a prison into a garden whose elements are symbols for the nature and divinity beyond. At line 60 the fine particularity of the scene gives way to the moral of the story:

Henceforth I shall know
 That Nature ne’er deserts the wise and pure,
 No Plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
 No waste so vacant, but may well employ

Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
 Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes
 'Tis well to be bereft of promised good,
 That we may lift the Soul, and contemplate
 With lively joy the joys we cannot share.
 (60-68)

Coleridge has learned that he cannot hope “from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within,” as he puts it in the later poem (“Dejection” 45-46). Although he does not have an abundance of visual stimulation in his lime-tree bower, he has learned to appreciate what little he does have. He is able to see the larger whole to which that little belongs. Because he is wise and pure, he can see the universal in the particular, can comprehend with his esemplastic imaginative power the ways in which multiplicity come into unity.

We may note that, as at the end of “The Eolian Harp,” Coleridge has resorted to abstractions rather than particular, concrete language. In “The Eolian Harp,” he wrote in abstractions while rejecting the “shapings of the unregenerate mind” (55), so that, in effect, he was using the abstract language of philosophy to reject philosophy (and to imply, all the while, that actually he was not rejecting it at all). In “This Lime-Tree Bower,” this does not seem to be the case. The progression from the particularity of the “solitary humble Bee” (59) to the larger concepts of “Nature,” “Love and Beauty” (62, 65) do not seem especially strained and might indeed demonstrate that Coleridge has awakened his ability to step outside himself and find, through imaginative effort, the great in the small or universal in the particular. But it might also suggest that the internal melody of thought has

not yet become fully reconciled with external phenomena. There remains a juxtaposition of modes, and, within this, a continued emphasis on himself and his original situation – “I shall know,” “the wise and pure,” “bereft of promised good,” “the joys we cannot share” (60, 61, 66, 68) – which suggests that, even though he has ostensibly recognised his place in the one life, and has lost himself in all, he yet remains distinct as an individual and at a persistent remove from all others. Coleridge has declared universal harmony but continues to exclude himself from the harmony he proclaims.

The lines, “’Tis well to be bereft of promised good, / That we may lift the Soul, and contemplate / With lively joy the joys we cannot share” (66-68) are especially likely to trigger unease in a reader. Durr finds in these lines a suggestion of “*felix ruina*” (520). Coleridge is retrospectively delighted that he was lamed by the scathe of fire because in being denied the experience of walking through the Quantocks he was permitted instead a richer spiritual experience, an opportunity to exercise the imaginative faculty so as to arrive at a profound joy for the connectedness of life. Simpson goes a little further than Durr and suggests that it is possible to read “share out” for “share,” rather than the conventional reading of “share in.” This would imply that, as Coleridge could not share in the experience of Lamb and the Wordsworths, so they cannot share in his superior experience. This “almost comically vengeful gesture,” as Simpson calls it, would be “consistent with the oscillation between indicative and imperative moods in the account of the dell” (32). And it would furthermore be consistent with the poet’s resentment at being neglected at the beginning of the poem, his sense that the group’s communitarian spirit has been betrayed, as well as with the emphasis on the self at the end.

Coleridge's compulsive need for self-assertion is compromised by his equally pressing need for the presence and approval of others. In the absence of others, he attempts to bring his friends close to him through an imaginative act. If he can do this, then his lonely experience in the lime-tree bower will be lent some substance. But Coleridge cannot create for himself a shared experience because he refuses to truly empathise with others – instead he fills them with himself – and so, in the end, he merely achieves an act of self-assertion in the bower, which, for all his rhetoric of unity, is a concession of division.

At line 69 is another apostrophe to the “gentle-hearted Charles,” who Coleridge tells of his blessing of “the last Rook,” which Coleridge expects Lamb was also charmed by. Given what has already been said about Lamb's indifference to nature, it is unlikely that he was charmed by it. Rather, it is another of Coleridge's suspicious gestures of generosity. The blessing of the rook is comparable to the mariner's blessing of the water snakes. Though the rook is not so vile a creature as a water snake, it is, all the same, associated with ill omens, and “would not normally call forth blessing upon its head as might, say, a skylark or nightingale” (Durr 530). What Coleridge has done, then, is select a commonplace creature and instilled it with a value that far exceeds that usually attributed to it. By this gesture, he presents himself as someone who appreciates all creatures great and small as crucial participants in the great circle of life. The rook “[b]eat[s] its straight path along the dusky air / Homewards” (70-71), back to its point of departure, and the idea of circular return is again evoked in the image of the “mighty Orb” (73).

At the time of writing “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” Coleridge was the closest he ever came to his ideal domestic situation. When first he

arrived in Nether Stowey, Coleridge seemed, by his own account, enamoured of his new life in the countryside. Evidence of this can be found in his correspondence of early 1797. In a letter to Estlin on 6 January, for example, he merrily describes his house (“better than we expected”), the “clear brook” and “nice *well*” outside. “We have a very pretty garden,” Coleridge continues, “. . . and I am already an expert gardener” (*CL* 1: 213-214). Never mind that the wet, freezing conditions in the month of January in England are not really conducive to much gardening. Coleridge concludes a fairly lengthy letter to Thelwall on 6 February by describing the health and joy of Hartley, and the final paragraph reads:

I raise potatoes and all manner of vegetables, have an orchard, and shall raise corn with the spade, enough for my family. We have two pigs, and ducks and geese. A cow would not answer the keep: for we have whatever milk we want from T. Poole.

(*CL* 1: 220)

His notebook entries, too, may be offered as evidence of the relish with which he took to rustic retirement, particularly his homely recipes for ginger wine (*CN* 1: 162) and beef stew (*CN* 1: 173). Coleridge was drawn to domesticity for its promise of security and of intimate community, but he found himself dissatisfied with the reality of domesticity. The shared experience domesticity offered him was incompatible with his yearning to be distinct from others, and not merely one of a crowd. Apparently he was unwilling to coexist on a level plane with those in his community, intent instead on rising above them and having them occupy designated roles relative to his own. “This Lime-Tree Bower” was a poem prompted by Coleridge’s friends and family’s lack of cooperation in his scheme. It is a poem which represents

Coleridge's somewhat desperate attempt to regain control, and to compensate himself for their defiance. It is a poem prompted by solitude which ultimately asserts solitude, despite its pretences to the contrary.

Coleridge's sense of isolation is always apparent in his searches for an ever-elusive audience. Of the three poems I look at in this thesis, none seems less sure of its audience than "This Lime-Tree Bower." Stillinger identifies twelve distinct versions of the poem, three of which do not differ substantially from other versions in the series, and one which Coleridge himself was unlikely to have been responsible for. By Coleridgean standards, "This Lime-Tree Bower" has a relatively simple textual history, but enough changes exist across the successive version to allow slightly variant readings and provide insights into the development of Coleridge's philosophical thought. Here, my focus is how an intertextual awareness can aid us in recognising in the poem an instability of audience.

The first version of the poem appeared in Coleridge's letter to Southey on 17 July 1797 (*CL* 1: 334-36). In the stead of the advertisement of the printed editions, the poem is introduced with a brief account of Lamb and Wordsworth's visit, the injury which befell Coleridge during their stay, and his composition of the poem during the walk he could not participate in as a result of this injury. Though Lamb is directly addressed in the poem – "Thou, / My gentle-hearted CHARLES" (10-11 in the letter) – certain readings unique to this initial version suggest Coleridge may have had Southey as reader in mind. At lines 48 and 54, for instance, Coleridge refers to his "Sister." Coleridge had no living sister (his one sister, Nancy, recalled in "Frost at Midnight," died in 1791) and is here referring to his wife, but in calling her his sister he is employing Pantisocratic terminology, which would

have carried meaning for Southey but for few others. The poem, as it appears in the letter, has three footnotes which do not feature in other versions – a synonym (“elastic”) is offered for “springy,” the “plumy ferns” (or “long lank Weeds” of later versions) are described in greater detail, and Southey is reminded that Coleridge is a “Berkleian.” To return to “Sister,” however: Coleridge revised the penultimate line of the poem several times. Beginning with “you [Lamb], my Sister & my Friends,” he moved to “you, my Sara & my Friends” in the second version of the poem, contained in a letter to Charles Lloyd, and then, finally, to “thee, my gentle-hearted Charles” in the first published version. For Southey, Coleridge uses Pantisocratic terms; for Lloyd, Sara is named; and, for publication, the sole addressee is Lamb.

What Stillinger identifies as the third version of “This Lime-Tree Bower” again appears in a letter, this one to John Thelwall. Only seven lines are quoted (a seven line equivalent of lines 38-43 in the received text), and the extract is apparently inserted as an illustration of the profound spiritual experience that attends Coleridge’s observation of natural phenomena. Prior to his quotation of the poem, Coleridge wrote to Thelwall:

I can *at times* feel strongly the beauties, you describe, in themselves, & for themselves – but more frequently *all things* appear little – all the knowledge, that can be acquired, child’s play – the universe itself – what but an immense heap of *little* things? – I can contemplate nothing but parts, & parts are all *little* – ! – My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something *great* – something *one & indivisible* – and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty! – But in this faith *all things* counterfeit infinity! (CL 1:348)

The letter to Thelwall has proven useful to scholars as a gloss to “This Lime-Tree Bower,” for it is essentially an explication of the overall meaning of the poem as a setting forth of Coleridge’s doctrine of unity. But in attaching this quotation to his musings to Thelwall, Coleridge again destabilises our sense of the poem’s audience. That “This Lime-Tree Bower” participates in the conversation Coleridge and Thelwall had regarding religion suggests that Coleridge, in this instance, intended his poem to function in relation to Thelwall in a similar manner to “Frost at Midnight” – that is, it was intended to contribute to Coleridge’s attempt to convert Thelwall to Christianity. Earlier in the letter, Coleridge had jokingly (or perhaps only half-jokingly) called Thelwall an “atheist reprobate” (*CL* 1: 348). Judith Thompson, in “An Autumnal Blast, a Killing Frost,” explores how, in “Frost at Midnight,” Coleridge offers Thelwall a Christian consolation for his suffering in the vision of Hartley/Hampden communing with divinity in nature. Here, Thelwall is not being offered consolation, but he is being offered a theist’s reinterpretation of his experience of natural phenomena, and this is provided so that he might see the error of his ways and turn to godliness. So, in sending this portion of the poem to Thelwall, Coleridge removes the lines from their standard context and adds another addressee. The poem thus takes on a missionary, propagandistic role, and complicates, meanwhile, our understanding of who the poem is for and the reason it was written. A case has been made for “This Lime-Tree Bower” as poem intended to recruit Lamb as an ally in Coleridge’s radicalism. Thelwall did not need Coleridge to make him more any more radical, but the religious aspects of the poem might well have been composed with the readership of an atheist reprobate in mind.

The fourth version of “This Lime-Tree Bower” is the first to appear in print, in the *Annual Anthology* of February 1800. A prefatory “Advertisement” explains the circumstances of the poem’s composition. The full title reads: “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison, / A Poem, / Addressed to Charles Lamb, of the India-House, London.” In all other versions, the identity of “gentle-hearted Charles” is unspecified. The specificity of the title address was also censured by Lamb in his letter to Coleridge on 14 August 1800. It may seem strange to readers that, although the poem is inscribed to Lamb, the first line contains the phrase, “they are gone.” Lamb is among “those” who are gone, and so we have the rather unusual event that the person to whom the poem is addressed is referred to in the third person in the opening line. “This Lime-Tree Bower” is an expression of unity, gradually, through the closure of the distance between Coleridge the speaker and Lamb, but Coleridge the poet’s decision to begin with “they are gone” does come across as a bizarre overlooking of his addressee. And, to those familiar with Lamb and his character, the middle and end of the poem may also strike them as bearing little upon Lamb. The lack of apostrophe to Lamb at the opening of the poem might be explained in several ways. Firstly, Coleridge might have felt that an opening such as “CHARLES LAMB! why e’er hast thou forsaken me / To languish in this lime-tree bower my prison” would have been unnecessarily abrasive, and, had Coleridge in any way anticipated Lamb’s eventual response to the poem, he might have felt that such an opening would breach the limits of Lamb’s patience. Secondly, the unusual absence of the addressee at the beginning might serve to enhance our sense of Coleridge’s isolation at the start of the poem. But thirdly, and most relevantly here, the absence of an apostrophe might be intended to

welcome those audiences which, though not named, were intended. We might infer from Coleridge's decision to delay the address to Lamb for twenty-eight lines that he was aware of other, unacknowledged audiences for whom the poem might carry meaning.

Coleridge's annotations to his copy of the *Annual Anthology* constitute the fifth version of "This Lime-Tree Bower." The sixth version is that which Coleridge likely had nothing to do with – a printing in Mylius' *Poetical Class-Book* of 1810. Versions 7, 8, and 9 are the *Sibylline Leaves* texts, while Versions 10 through 12 are those of the *Poetical Works*. These versions, however, do not reach out to additional addressees as do the versions discussed above.

In the multiple versions of "This Lime-Tree Bower" we may detect multiple audiences and intended recipients. As in the other "Conversation" poems, there is a turning away from the auditor and both a turning towards others and a turning inwards away from all others.

Frost at Midnight

A product of the *annus mirabilis* that was 1798, “Frost at Midnight” is widely recognised as the finest of the “Conversation” poems. Its beauties have been universally admired since the time of its composition to the present day. The earliest review of the *Fears in Solitude* quarto, in which the poem was first published, appeared in the *Analytical Review* of December 1798, and it remarks that “Frost at Midnight” does “great honour to the poet’s feelings, as the husband of an affectionate wife, and as the father of a cradled infant” (Jackson 44-45). The *Monthly Review* of May 1799 (supposed to be authored by clergyman C. L. Moody) likewise praises Coleridge’s sentiments, describing “Frost at Midnight” as a “pleasing picture of virtue and content in a cottage” (Jackson 47). The *British Critic* (June 1799), in a similar vein, commends the poem’s “expressive tenderness” (Jackson 49), while, for the *Critical Review* (August 1799), “Frost at Midnight” is “very beautiful” (Jackson 50). Humphry House, whose analysis of the poem in his *Clark Lectures* (1953) remains valuable, acknowledged that “it is much loved; it is certainly much praised; but even so I doubt whether it is adequately appreciated as the perfectly achieved work of art which it is” (78). Its chief virtues, for House, were its unity and its rondo structure. The formal circularity prized by House was further codified in 1965 by M. H. Abrams, for whom it was “one of the masterpieces of the greater [Romantic] lyric” (81). Until halfway through the twentieth century, then, “Frost at Midnight” was enjoyed for its portrayal of domestic contentment, and for its aesthetic merits, principally its unity and its circular structure. The poem’s virtues in these regards continue to be extolled, but there has, since the 1990s, been an

increased inclination towards contextualisation and historical close analysis. This began with Paul Magnuson's 1991 essay on the "Politics of 'Frost at Midnight'," which proposed that the poem was published, and perhaps composed, in response to accusations of Jacobinism levelled against Coleridge and his publisher Joseph Johnson – particularly damning accusations in the oppressive political climate of the 1790s. Judith Thompson (1997) built on Magnuson's work, arguing that "Frost at Midnight" can be read as part of the correspondence between Coleridge and John Thelwall, as a work shaped by "a private debate which paralleled and echoed the public one" (428-429). Jerrold E. Hogle (1998) examined the poem's relationship to the period's gothic vogue. As Matthew Vanwinkle notes, studies such as these, which seek to place "Frost at Midnight" in a particular context and read it accordingly, "have proven valuable by reinvigorating our sense of 'Frost at Midnight' as a *conversation* poem, as a text intricately engaged with the broad social and cultural questions of its day" (584). This chapter aims to reassess both the poem's representation of domesticity and its structural unity, revealing, in the end, that "Frost at Midnight" does not contain an especially favourable portrait of the domestic life, nor is it as unified a creation as it at first glance might appear. I will, in the course of my discussion, refer to those critics whose inclinations have been contextual, and will refer moreover to Coleridge's letters, notebooks, and biographies.

"Frost at Midnight" is set in Coleridge's Nether Stowey cottage. The speaker is alone beside his sleeping infant on a silent winter's night. The silence is so extreme that it frustrates his ruminations and renders all the activity of the external world imperceptible. A fire fluttering on the grate of the fireplace reminds Coleridge of his schooldays at Christ's Hospital in

London, where he would dream of his birthplace, Ottery St. Mary, by night, and, by day, wish to be visited by a familiar face. Returning to the present moment, Coleridge addresses his son and predicts that he will be better acquainted with nature than was his father, that he will comprehend the divine language detectable in nature, and that he will have his spirit moulded by God. Coleridge further predicts that the seasons will be sweet to Hartley, and the poem ends with the image of icicles “[q]uietly shining to the quiet Moon” (74). The poem returns, that is, to the frost and the silence of the opening, but with the suggestion that there has been a change in the interim, for in the icicles returning the light they receive we are reminded of the reciprocal relationship Hartley is to enjoy with God in nature.

The inadequacies of the domestic niche are intimated in the opening scene of “Frost at Midnight” in two principal ways. Firstly, the landscape description the passage contains does not represent mere topographical detail, but functions additionally to produce a metaphor of the speaker’s mind, which, the reader may infer, is a mind dissatisfied with its lonely, homely confines. Secondly, and relatedly, in delineating the domestic domain Coleridge looks beyond it and registers a larger, external presence which constitutes a threat to it. My main point is that Coleridge suggests a) that the domestic circle is an isolating trap for the individual man, and b) that the domestic circle cannot, however isolating, be a self-contained unit at a complete remove from the outside world. The first five and a half lines of the poem read:

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet’s cry
Came loud – and hark, again! loud as before.

The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
 Have left me to that solitude, which suits
 Abstruser musings . . .

(1-6)

In accordance with M. H. Abrams' definition of the greater Romantic lyric, "Frost at Midnight" opens with a defined setting, with specification about location, context, and weather (*Correspondent Breeze* 77). Yet, in addition to these loco-descriptive parameters, we also immediately get a sense of the speaker's own mood and frame of mind. Although it is not explicitly stated, we are aware that Coleridge's account of the weather doubles as a kind of self-portrait. He employs the pathetic fallacy, finding in the frost's action an "[e]cho or mirror" of his own (22). "[S]ecret" carries connotations of his solitariness and alienation, qualities which characterise Coleridge as he whiles away a dark night in search of a "companionable form" (19). "[S]ecret" also suggests inscrutability, a distressing condition for Coleridge, whose writings frequently indicate a yearning to be understood. An 1808 Notebook entry, for example, apostrophises the Notebook:

Ah! dear Book! Sole Confidant of a breaking Heart . . . [E]very generous mind . . . feels its *Halfness* – it cannot *think* without a symbol – neither can it *live* without something that is to be at once its Symbol, & its *Other half* . . . Hence I deduce the habit, I have most unconsciously formed, of *writing* my inmost thoughts – I have not a soul on earth to whom I can reveal them . . . and therefore to you, my passive, yet sole, true and kind, friends I reveal them.

(CN 3: 3325)

He felt, then, in 1808, that he was utterly friendless. Long before that moment, however, he had decided that he was unable to make himself understood to Sara, his wife. The intellectual inequality within his marriage already troubled him in 1795, as I attempted to show above in my chapter on “The Eolian Harp,” and he reiterated his emotional and intellectual incompatibility with Sara for the rest of his life. In his 1802 verse letter to Sara Hutchinson (rewritten as “Dejection: An Ode” and published on Wordsworth’s wedding day and his own unhappy seventh wedding anniversary), he complained of “those habitual Ills / That wear out Life, when two unequal Minds / Meet in one house . . .” (“A Letter to -----” 243-245). Being misunderstood – or not understood at all – dismayed Coleridge, and formed the main threat to his own sense of identity. If he did not feel understood, he did not feel loved, and if he did not feel loved, then the whole purpose of domesticity was defeated.

The frost’s self-sufficiency, the fact that it is “[u]nhelped by any wind,” suggests that the speaker is suffering from imaginative lack, not being aided by any creative correspondent breeze within. It is, as we learn, “so calm, / that it disturbs and vexes meditation” (8-9). But “[u]nhelped” also strengthens our sense of the speaker’s solitude, our sense that he is unassisted by anybody within his domestic circle. The “owlet’s cry,” the sole sound in the heavy silence, fulfils a similar purpose, representing a distant sound from a world from which he is removed.

“The inmates of my cottage, all at rest, / Have left me” is reminiscent of the declaration which begins “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” “Well, they are gone, and here must I remain.” Significantly, Coleridge does not simply tell us that his family have gone to bed, but that they have “left” him.

The fact that they have retired (as it is midnight, hardly unreasonably) is a parenthetical insertion. The emphasis on selfhood and solitude is marked, and it is here, too, that we are given – again reminiscent of “This Lime-Tree Bower” – the sense of the domestic circle as an isolating trap. Coleridge’s usage of “inmates” is primarily the now archaic usage, merely referring to the fellow occupants of a dwelling, but it seems plausible that the term should carry a hint of our modern understanding of the word, which generally indicates the fellow occupants of a prison. With the following lines Coleridge reaches beyond his domestic cage, as a prisoner might, and sketches the features of a life he is not a part of:

Sea, hill, and wood,
 This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
 With all the numberless goings on of life,
 Inaudible as dreams!
 (10-13)

At this point, Coleridge turns to the film on the grate, the central image of the poem. Having shown how Coleridge makes metaphors for his mind from his surroundings, I wish now to re-visit the beginning of the poem as a passage freighted with political meaning, with a view to showing how the domestic circle, though difficult to escape from for those on the inside, is vulnerable to possible attack from the outside as well.

Paul Magnuson, in *Reading Public Romanticism*, encourages “historical close reading” (5), in which poems are to be examined in the context of their original publication. In “The Politics of “Frost at Midnight”,” he provides just such a reading for the poem. “Frost at Midnight” was initially published in the *Fears in Solitude* quarto of 1798, alongside the eponymous

poem and “France: An Ode.” Magnuson contends that, if “a lyric’s location determines its significance” (“Politics” 52), then “[t]he public and dialogic significance of “Frost at Midnight” in the fall of 1798 was that it presented a patriotic poet whose patriotism rested on the love of his country and his domestic affections” (59). In the fall of 1798, Coleridge had little choice but to pen such an affirmation of his patriotism because he was, at this time, a marked man. He told Cottle in May, with a hint of self-congratulatory exultation, that “to a large number of persons my name *stinks*” (CL 1: 412). His besmirched name was principally the result of his controversial activities in Bristol before his retreat to Stowey. His polemical *Lectures on Politics and Religion* had earned him notoriety in 1795, and he added to this notoriety the following year by publishing ten issues of his radical political journal, *The Watchman*. Even in Stowey, where he moved on the last day of 1796, he continued to arouse suspicion through some of his more innocuous activities.

In August 1797, Wordsworth and Coleridge came under the surveillance of James Walsh, the “*Spy Nozy*,” as Coleridge later dubbed him, punning on Spinoza (BL 1: 194). The incident is described in Rosemary Ashton’s *Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (110-111), and in Nicholas Roe’s *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (248-262). My summary here is derived from their accounts. A French expeditionary force had landed near Fishguard in February 1797 and been captured. Wordsworth and Coleridge, who had often been sighted walking along the Pembrokeshire coast while writing in notebooks, were reported to the Home Office, suspected of aiding the enemy. Walsh was deployed to keep watch on the two poets and, on arrival, was alarmed to hear news that none other than the radical John Thelwall had visited Coleridge and Poole. Indeed, Thelwall had

very recently left. Although Walsh identified the Somerset group as “a mischievous [sic] gang of disaffected Englishmen” (qtd in Roe 258), he could not find any evidence of treachery sufficient to press charges on them. The business did have its repercussions, however, as the dubiety of Wordsworth’s character led to his landlady refusing to renew his lease on his residence in Alfoxden, and her refusal contributed to Wordsworth’s resolve to leave for Germany in September 1798 – a journey he made with his sister Dorothy and his new friend Coleridge.

Coleridge had initially been supportive of the French Revolution. It had seemed to him, as to many English radicals, to herald a new age of liberty, fraternity, and egalitarianism. Kelvin Everest highlights its relevance for England: “The importance of the Revolution for English radicals lay fundamentally in the possibilities it opened out for change in England” (21). Coleridge became disheartened, however, by the carnage of the Reign of Terror, France’s expansionist militarism, and particularly her invasion of Switzerland. Therefore, while continuing to admire the abstract principles for which the Revolution had originally stood, he withdrew his support for the Revolution itself – or “snapped [his] squeaking baby-trumpet of sedition, and . . . hung up its fragments in the chamber of Penitences,” as he wrote to Charles Lloyd senior (*CL* 1: 240) – and asserted his patriotism in such poems as are published in *Fears in Solitude*.

Following “Fears in Solitude” and “France: An Ode” in the quarto, “Frost at Midnight” can be read as an extension of the sentiments expressed in the two poems which precede it. It is true that, when Coleridge found the poem among political verses while reviewing the proofs for *Sibylline Leaves*, he protested in the margin, “How comes this Poem here? What has it to do

with Poems connected with Political Events?” (qtd in Stillinger, *Textual Instability* 56). By 1817, though, Coleridge had become fiercely pro-government and was very keen to disassociate himself from his Jacobin past. It is quite possible, therefore, that he wanted “Frost at Midnight” to be read simply as a meditative verse, rather than as a meditative verse fraught with political connotation, which is the way that a number of critics in recent times have been inclined to read it.

The poem may be a quiet assertion of patriotism, but it is a very defensive assertion for the reasons aforementioned. The dangers of being accused of sedition for *not* being sufficiently patriotic were very real. James Montgomery, minor poet and the author of the *Sheffield Iris*, a radical journal not dissimilar to *The Watchman*, had in 1796 been jailed for criminal libel. Thelwall was tried for treason in 1794 but was acquitted. Coleridge had his own “Spy Nozy” experience. When he wrote “Frost at Midnight,” then, he was under the weight of great political pressure, and, to a certain extent, it can be said that his role as a potential target of a paranoid and oppressive governmental regime is covertly expressed in the poem.

Judith Thompson has speculated that the frost which opens the poem might not be as tranquil an image as it at first glance appears. Instead,

the voiceless secrecy of its operations and its separation from the beneficial and open agency of the wind, combined with the images of disturbing calm, extreme silence and inaudible voices that follow, suggest that it may be a pernicious force, an aguish killing frost that freezes honest hearts, minds and voices against feeling for others, thoughts of freedom and expressions of patriotism.

(438)

To support this claim, Thompson refers to *Conciones ad Populum*, where Coleridge had also invoked images of coldness and stagnancy to communicate the effects of governmental oppression:

We have breathed so long the atmosphere of Imposture and Panic, that many honest minds have caught an aguish disorder; in their cold fits they shiver at Freedom, in their hot fits they turn savage against its advocates; . . . Thus every man begins to suspect his neighbour, the warm ebullience of our hearts is stagnating: and I dread, lest by long stifling the expressions of Patriotism, we may at last lose the Feeling.
(*Lectures* 1795 60)

The word “secret,” in the first line, evokes notions of stealth and concealment, while “ministry” has governmental associations. Taken together, a “secret ministry” sounds like the kind of work which might be performed by a spy. In both nature and politics, the actual activity imperceptibly leads to results which are seemingly unconnected with the starting point: water turns into ice, revolution turns into oppression.

The oppressive silence is broken by the owl, which, in Western culture, is traditionally connected with both wisdom and death. The owl is the symbol of Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom, while the Roman poets of antiquity commonly invoke the bird as a harbinger of doom. The cry of an owl portends Dido’s death in the fourth book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, for example, while, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Ascálahus is turned by Persephone into “an odious bird, the prophet of doom and sorrow, / the indolent screech-owl, a dreadful portent to all mankind” (5, 549-550). As a symbol of wisdom, the owl might be suggestive in “Frost at Midnight” of the “[a]bstruser musings” Coleridge is attempting to pursue (6). If Magnuson is correct in his opinion

that “[a]bstruser musings” “sounds suspiciously like the kind of abstraction and metaphysics that Burke saw as part of the origin of the Revolution,” it is little wonder that they should be vexed by the night’s oppressive calmness, which operates as a figuration of the political climate (“Politics” 67). As a bird of evil omen, the owl might also augur the death of liberty and free thinking, an aural complement to the chilling and killing frost, and to the “deep calm” (45), which, in the original publication, was the “dead calm” (*PW* 2: 573).

Though I do not wish to get ahead of myself, it is relevant to the present topic of discussion to consider at this point the end of the poem, where Lucy Newlyn has noted another possible allusion to espionage. The seventieth line is metrically peculiar. While all other lines in the final verse paragraph conform to a regular iambic pentameter (albeit with the occasional trochaic inversion) –

Thērefōre āll sēasōns shāll bē swēet tō thēe,
 Whēthēr thē sūmmēr clōthe thē gēnerāl ēarth
 With grēennēss, ōr thē rēdbrēast sīt ānd sīng
 (65-67)

– the seventieth line, by contrast, consists of dactyls and spondees:

Smōkes ĩn thē sūn-thāw; whēthēr thē ēave-drōps fāll

Newlyn notes the similarity of “eave-drops” to “eavesdrop”: “As well as the acoustic resemblance, there is a close etymological connection between the compound noun and the verb” (*Companion* 4). If anything, Newlyn understates the closeness of the etymological connection. Etymologically the words are identical, the verb a derivative of the noun. In the *OED*, the noun “eavesdrop” is defined as “The dripping of water from the eaves of a house; the space of ground which is liable to receive the rain-water thrown off by the

eaves of the building” (“eavesdrop | eavesdrop, *n.*”). And the definition of the intransitive verb: “To stand within the ‘eavesdrop’ of a house in order to listen to secrets; hence, to listen secretly to private conversation” (“eavesdrop, *v.*”). According to the same entry, “eavesdrop” can also be rendered “eave-drop,” which is Coleridge’s spelling.

Newlyn’s analysis of the seventieth line in her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* continues:

It seems likely that Coleridge, fascinated as he was by the power of puns, was evoking the idea of a private rumination ‘listened in on’, a conversation overheard. The poem’s mood has by this stage moved onto a plane of tranquil resolution; and yet, subliminally, there is a sense of privacy disturbed – perhaps by the reader, perhaps by a wary and watchful public world. Perhaps even by a spy.(4)

From start to finish, “Frost at Midnight” acknowledges a presence which exists outside the Nether Stowey cottage but which in some mysterious way, like the frost itself in the metamorphosis of water, is able to penetrate the domestic circle and disturb its inhabitants. This external presence is implicit in the dual significance of many of the poem’s elements. Although the “action” of the poem is contained within the cottage, the poem also turns away from home and casts a furtive glance at the outside world looking in. Coleridge’s thwarted quest to find a companionable form is complemented (or muddled) by the tacit recognition of a public audience which is unsympathetic, even hostile, towards the speaker. It is worth remembering that one of the poem’s other (more personal) implied audiences is John Thelwall. Thelwall, to a greater extent than Coleridge, had met, up close and personal, with the hazards of radicalism and was acutely aware of the

political anxieties “Frost at Midnight” subtly calls to mind. In writing “Frost at Midnight” as a response to Thelwall’s “To the Infant Hampden,” Coleridge “is in effect answering him, sympathizing with the situation of the beleaguered reformer, and comparing it to his own” (Thompson 435).

The “cradled infant slumber[ing] peacefully” by Coleridge’s side is, in the end, the form Coleridge finds most companionable within his domestic domain (7). Beforehand, however, an attempt is made to find “dim sympathies” with a piece of soot (18). The soot does not prove much of a companion but Coleridge does succeed in making it a plausible “[e]cho or mirror” of himself (22), for in “that film, which fluttered on the grate, / Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing” Coleridge finds an apt, multi-layered metaphor through which to convey his condition and consciousness (15-16). The metaphor can be said to consist of a single vehicle but several tenors, each an aspect of Coleridge. As the remains of a fire, it is first of all emblematic of his mood, depressed and suppressed. Situated behind the bars of the grate it moreover speaks of Coleridge’s sense of imprisonment, trapped by domesticity and trapped also by the political pressures of the times. Finally (or at least thirdly), for Coleridge, it is a symbol of loneliness. In a 1798 footnote to the poem: “In all parts of the kingdom these films are called *strangers*, and supposed to portend the arrival of some absent friend” (*PW* 2: 570). Alas, the absent friend, the companionable form, never turns up in Coleridge’s experience, as we learn in the school-days reminiscence to follow, which the stranger serves as a gateway to.

Coleridge revised this passage extensively. In the early version, Coleridge’s attitude to the film does not seem dissimilar to Cowper’s treatment of the stranger in the fourth book of *The Task*. Cowper writes:

Nor less amused have I quiescent watch'd
 The sooty films that play upon the bars
 Pendulous, and foreboding in the view
 Of that superstition prophesying still,
 Though still deceiv'd, some stranger's near approach.
 (91-95)

"In Cowper's poem," writes Everest, "the tone is playful, relaxed, and unserious," and so it was for a time in Coleridge's poem, too (262). In his commentary on the ten versions of "Frost at Midnight," Stillinger writes that the stranger passage of 1798, "emphasizes the playfulness of the interaction of the speaker's mind with the objective world" (*Textual Instability* 53). The final 1829 passage, however, places its "emphasis on the triviality of the experience and the bizarre, solipsistic character of the . . . idling spirit" (*Textual Instability* 53). Stillinger believes that "Frost at Midnight" is more "dynamic" for the final revision (*Textual Instability* 60), as, in the final version, the diminished spirit at the beginning of the poem contrasts more strikingly with the functioning spirit at the end of the poem than it does in the other versions. Furthermore, the revisions attest to Coleridge's interest in unifying his canon, for the progression from imaginative failure to imaginative success mirrors the same progression in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and "relates to similar concerns with the imagination in other works," among which, presumably, are the other "Conversation" poems (*Romantic Complexity* 181).

The film functions as Proust's madeleine which summons childhood memories, an accidental stimulus for meditation. Coleridge recalls his schooldays at Christ's Hospital in London, where, as now, he would "watch

that fluttering *stranger*,” and would yearn to be visited by someone he knew (26). Lines 42-44, “For still I hoped to see the *stranger’s* face, / Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved” are especially illustrative of Coleridge’s isolation at this time. He looked forward to seeing familiar persons, yet he refers to them as strangers, even italicising the word so as to emphasise his solitude. Poignant also is his recollection of Ottery St. Mary, whose bells sounded to him “[m]ost like articulate sounds of things to come” (33). Even though, in early childhood, the suggestion of future promise in the sound of the bells seems to have sufficed in itself, it is implied that the “things to come,” like the stranger’s arrival, never eventuated. What emerges chiefly from this passage is a sense of disappointed hopes, of dreams that never came to fruition and companionships that were never formed. The speaker’s prophecy for the “[d]ear Babe,” which immediately follows, can thus be read as well-meaning but ironical all the same (44). It is difficult for the reader to believe that the speaker can sincerely entertain any hopes for his child when his own hopes have been dashed repeatedly ever since childhood.

The paragraph is furthermore important because it highlights how Coleridge was uprooted from his home and family at an early age and abandoned at a dull, grey institution to be “reared / In the great city, pent ’mid cloisters dim” (51-53). It is not surprising that Coleridge’s superb autobiographical letters to Thomas Poole (*CL* 1: 302-303, 310-312, 346-348, 352-355) dwell so extensively on his early experiences. He knew them to have been formative, and mostly believed them to have been formative for the worse. It is telling that in justifying the letters’ composition he writes:

To me the task will be a useful one; it will renew and deepen *my* reflections on the past; and it will perhaps make you behold with no

unforgiving or impatient eye those weaknesses and defects in my character, which so many untoward circumstances have concurred to plant there. (*CL* 1: 302)

He felt that his childhood excused or explained to some extent what he had become. The *Biographia Literaria*, while rather scant on autobiographical detail overall, dwells relatively extensively on Coleridge's early experiences as well. He was a successful student, but he was nonetheless a lonely one, as he indicates in sentences such as these:

In my friendless wanderings on our *leave-days*, (for I was an orphan, and had scarce any connections in London) highly was I delighted, if any passenger, especially if he were drest in black [a clergyman], would enter into conversation with me. (*BL* 1: 16)

Although he was not literally an orphan (his mother survived until 1809, and Coleridge did not attend her funeral), Coleridge identified himself as one, having had very little to do with his family from the age of nine onwards. In the poem he wrote to his favourite brother, he again presents himself as someone in whose childhood lay the foundations of permanent isolation. Comparing his brother's lot in life with his own, Coleridge writes that he had been

Too soon transplanted, ere my soul had fix'd
Its first domestic loves; and hence through life
Chacing chance-started Friendships.
(“To the Reverend George Coleridge” 18-20)

Here, as is often the case, Coleridge is his own most insightful critic, aware of his behavioural patterns and their causes. His premature departure from Ottery St. Mary permanently affected him and in a way which is directly

relevant to the “Conversation” poems. His idealisations of domesticity likely stem from his perceived childhood loss. Having only experienced family life for a brief time, Coleridge never fully observed or appreciated the way it works. In that respect he was not necessarily any different from many of his male contemporaries, most of whom would have been sent away to boarding school at an early age, but his biographers have convincingly shown a tension existed between Coleridge’s inflated expectations for domesticity and the effort he was willing to put in in order to realise those expectations. As a father and a husband he was largely a failure, and it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that this was in no small part due to the fact that, in his adult domestic pursuits, he wanted more to relive (or to live for the first time) the experience of being a child rather than to occupy roles of responsibilities. Coleridge routinely tried to be adopted by other families, but, as is pointed out by Neil Vickers (86), of all the families he tried to be adopted by – the Evanses, the Frickers, the Pooles, the Wedgwoods, the Wordsworths, the Morgans, and the Gillmans – it was only his adoption by the Gillmans that proved successful, and it was successful precisely because he was there permitted to be an invalid child. As the Sage of Highgate, he was able to be paraded as a prodigy as he had been as a child, and he was looked after and cared for because of his opium addiction. The other families he was a part of were less successful, especially his own family with Sara Fricker, as a result of the gap between Coleridge’s idealised expectations for domesticity and the realities of each domestic situation. His conception of the ideal domestic circle, ultimately, was rooted in psychological lack, and cemented by his philosophies of friendship and unity.

The schooldays meditation is interrupted by Hartley's "gentle breathings" which "[f]ill up the interspersed vacancies / And momentary pauses" of Coleridge's thought and, in the stead of the soot, Coleridge turns to his son as the new companionable form (45-7). Hartley, we are told, "shalt learn far other lore" than did his father, "[a]nd in far other scenes" (50-51). He

shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags:
(54-58)

Hartley will be schooled not by a "stern preceptor" (37), but by the "Great universal Teacher" that is God (63). He "shalt . . . see and hear / The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible / Of that eternal language, which thy God / Utters" (58-61). Lines 55-58 quoted above are so tidily balanced that they bear resemblance to the parallelistic verse found in the Hebrew Bible, as might befit a religious prophecy such as this. Their balance is also suggestive of the reciprocity of giving and asking, which is requisite to a participation in the one life. Hartley will find the elements of the nature to function as a Berkeleian symbolic language and in perceiving them he will be able to further perceive the divinity of their creator and the vital force which unifies all things.

Coleridge owns to a sense of bewilderment which approximates displeasure upon the birth of his children. Following the birth of Hartley he admitted to Poole that "[w]hen I first saw the Child, I did not feel that thrill &

overflowing of affection which I expected – I looked on it with a melancholy gaze – my mind was intensely contemplative & my heart only sad” (*CL* 1: 236). (He does, however, go on to say that his opinion changed when he saw Hartley being breastfed and held by his mother.) The Notebook entry immediately following the birth of Sara *fille*, meanwhile, reads simply: “Conductor & *thunder-rod* of my whole Hatred—/” (*CN* 1: 1331). Despite this, Coleridge did, particularly with the earlier-born of his children, display great interest in their upbringing. To Charles Lloyd senior in January 1797 he expressed his desire that they

should be bred up from the earliest infancy in the simplicity of peasants, their food, dress, and habits completely rustic. . . . [I]f I live in cities, my children . . . will necessarily become acquainted with politicians and politics – a set of men and a kind of study which I deem highly unfavourable to all Christian graces (*CL* 1: 240)

Rosemary Ashton reports:

Both [Coleridge and Wordsworth] observed their children minutely, taking an interest in every aspect of their development and education in the spirit of the educational philosophies of Rousseau and Hartley. . . . They were passionately concerned not to bring up their children oppressively. A country upbringing, miscellaneous rather than censored reading, minimal punishment, and open-minded teaching were the goals they set themselves as fathers and teachers. (96)

Even after his departure to Germany, Coleridge continued his avid reading of child development theorists, and wrote such implorations to his wife as “I pray you, my love! read Edgeworth’s *Essay on Education* – read it heart and soul – & if you approve of the mode, teach Hartley his *Letters*” (*CL* 1: 418).

The passage in “Frost at Midnight” which concerns Hartley’s education amid nature, then, is a reflection of one of Coleridge’s central preoccupations at the time of the poem’s composition. We cannot doubt that he wanted the best for his son, yet the beauty of the final passage’s sentiment is undermined by the schooldays meditation which precedes it, in which Coleridge tells us that his hopes, expectations, and predictions are seldom realised. The repetition of “shalt,” evenly spaced at lines 50, 54, and 58, and the bold “Therefore” at line 65, seem, on reflection, a vain attempt to will the prophecy into fulfilment. The last sentence of the poem, held together with conjunctions such as “whether,” “or,” and “or if,” hints at the insecurity of what is being foretold. As Matthew Vanwinkle puts it: “The insistent qualifications of the conditional accentuate the unpredictability of what is to come” (592). In this apparently resolute prophecy for his son, then, Coleridge recalls the anxieties of the earlier part of the poem, the uncertainties of the period’s politics and of life in general, and these recollections make the neat circularity of the poem seem a little less assured.

That the circularity of the poem is an artful construction, a crafted imposition, is attested to by Coleridge’s revisions to the poem which were designed to heighten the impression of return. The most popularly anthologised version of the poem ends with the image of the icicles, “Quietly shining to the quiet Moon” (74). In the version originally published in 1798, however, the poem continued for another six lines:

Like those, my babe! which ere tomorrow’s warmth
 Have capp’d their sharp keen points with pendulous drops,
 Will catch thine eye, and with their novelty
 Suspend thy little soul; then make thee shout,

And stretch and flutter from thy mother's arms
As thou would'st fly for very eagerness.

(*PW* 2: 572)

The first recorded omission of these lines occurs in a copy of *Fears in Solitude* which Coleridge annotated approximately a decade after the quarto's publication— as dated by B. Ifor Evans – in “1807 to 1808” (Stillinger, *Textual Instability* 52). Coleridge justified the exclusion thus: “The last six lines I omit because they destroy the rondo, and return upon itself of the Poem. Poems of this kind & length ought to lie coiled with its tails round its head” (*PW* 1: 456). The omission, then, was motivated by aesthetic considerations. Humphry House, many years ago, remarked that “[t]he decision to stop at line 74 was one of the best artistic decisions Coleridge ever made,” and this sentiment has now been echoed so many times that it seems all but a critical consensus (82). It would be difficult to argue a case to the contrary, but the excluded lines nonetheless remain of interest to the present study.

Omitting the last six lines imposes a formal circularity on the poem which it was originally lacking. In the 1798 version, the extended meditation on Hartley, and on what Hartley will do the next morning when he sees the icicles, represented for House, “a stopping rather than an end; for once the vista of new domestic detail was opened there was no reason why it should not be indefinitely followed with increasing shapelessness” (82). In returning the poem upon itself, Coleridge provided a definite conclusion and achieved structural excellence. The meaning of the poem, however, was changed as an additional consequence.

Like the revisions to the passage concerning the film on the grate, Coleridge's revision of the poem's conclusion emphasises Coleridge's solipsism. It does this by leaving the reader with the image of "the secret ministry of frost" (72), which (despite the frost's new creative powers, demonstrated in its formation of icicles) the reader must associate with the speaker's frame of mind at the start of the poem, where the external world was painted in the solipsistic Coleridge's image. It is, on the face of things, a more negative way to end the poem than with the joyful Hartley rushing from his mother's arms, and it is a confirmation that, despite the affinity with nature Coleridge predicts for his son, there can be no real consolation for Coleridge, whose misery is likely to endure. Julie Ellison has observed that "[t]he wish for vicarious gratification, in poems written throughout Coleridge's career, produces stories of self-exclusion" (xii). To some degree or other, all the "Conversation" poems can be said to support Ellison's claim, but "Frost at Midnight" seems an exemplary case in point.

Lucy Newlyn has described the structure of the poem as "a kind of trap" (*Language* 37). The Chinese box arrangement tells of "an imprisoned man, recalling his imprisoned childhood, recalling another childhood in which he was free" (*Language* 37). That earlier childhood of freedom the imprisoned man now prophesies for his son, but, by ending the poem at line 74, he reminds us that, whether or not the prophecy for Hartley will be fulfilled, he, still, will be imprisoned. To continue the poem to an eightieth line, to open a vista of new domestic detail and pave the way to shapelessness, would be to build an escape route into the structural trap, to shift the reader's focus from the solipsistic shell of the speaker to a child's joy.

But the original ending, though it compromised the captivating structure, was not entirely without its intimations of imprisonment, principally expressed through the contrast between the speaker and his son. Whereas Coleridge has thus far been unresponsive to nature, Hartley is able to rejoice in the icicles, whose source, for Coleridge, only emblematises entrapment. In flying from his mother's arms, Hartley is able to live out his father's flight fantasy, while Coleridge's position remains fixed. We might also note the difference between Hartley's departure from his mother, as represented in the poem, and Coleridge's own departure from *his* mother in 1782. Whereas Hartley's leaving is self-generated, a free choice to flee to natural phenomena, Coleridge had been forcibly expelled from the domestic fold, sent in the direction of gloomy urban containment. Hartley's flight is therefore more liberating, a natural departure from the maternal embrace, prompted by natural wonders in which are written the symbolic language of God – an infinitely more instructive read, one supposes, than the books Coleridge "[f]ixed with mock study" at Christ's Hospital (38).

Finally, the word "flutter" connects Hartley with the fluttering film on the grate. We have already learned that Coleridge can find no companionship in a piece of soot, and in the verbal association of the son with the soot, it is implied that Coleridge will again find no companionship in Hartley. Father and son are separate entities, the former unable to find any comfort or new lease of life through the latter.

"Frost at Midnight," although it is the most artfully rounded of the "Conversation" poems, is not wholly unified in its effect. The speaker's solipsistic pessimism prevails throughout and consequently the prophecy for Hartley, undermined as it is by the frustrated hopes of yesteryear, is shot

through with irony and does not carry the antistrophic force that it might. As with “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” we find in “Frost at Midnight” an instability of audience which challenges our sense of the poem as a homely, domestic verse, contained by the parameters of the Stowey setting.

Throughout, the ideal domestic circle is shown to be an illusive concept, even as the formal circularity attempts to reify that illusion.

Conclusion

To some extent the “Conversation” poems enact the central struggle in Coleridge’s life: his fruitless attempt to reconcile his boundless idealism with the realistic challenges of actual experience. The poems are set in real West Country locations and are populated by real people who formed part of Coleridge’s inner circle. They are imbued in the “Conversation” poems with a value which is decidedly *unreal* – that is to say, idealistic – but they also retain a degree of their reality, and these properties mingle to disquieting effect.

Domesticity, as Coleridge understood it and as it is represented in the “Conversation” poems, is a hopelessly idealistic construct. It represents a last-ditch effort to achieve what might have been achieved on the banks of the Susquehanna, or, perhaps, what might have been achieved in revolutionary France. Coleridge’s investment both in Pantisocracy and in the French Revolution had chiefly been due to his belief that strong communitarianism could lead to widespread goodwill. His investment in the idea of domesticity was motivated by similar beliefs. Coleridge confided to Southey in 1795 that “domestic bliss is the greatest of all things sublunary,” but it was never to be an end in and of itself; rather, it was envisaged as a stepping stone, a gateway, to a more universal happiness, which did, in practice, not require any particular effort or sustained commitment by Coleridge himself (*CL* 1: 158).

This idealised domestic sphere was, for Coleridge, at the centre of a series of concentric circles. Happiness in the central sphere would emanate outwards, and in time infuse all human society with goodwill. This notion is

formulated several times in his writings. Take, for a start, his Hartleian description of the process in another letter to Southey, this in 1794:

The ardour of private Attachments make Philanthropy a necessary habit of the Soul. I love my Friend – such as he is, all mankind are, or might be! Philanthropy (and indeed every other Virtue) is a thing of Concretion – Some home-born Feeling is the center of the Ball, that, rolling on thro’ Life collects and assimilates every congenial Affection.

(CL 1: 86)

In Bristol, while refuting Godwinianism, he claimed that “Jesus knew our nature – and that expands like the circles of a Lake – the Love of our Friends, parents and neighbours lead[s] us to love of our Country to the love of all Mankind” (*Lectures 1795* 163). In *Conciones ad Populum*, he wrote that “general benevolence is begotten and rendered permanent by social and domestic affections. . . . The intensity of private attachments encourages, not prevents, universal Benevolence. . . . The paternal and filial duties discipline the Heart and prepare it for the love of all Mankind” (*Lectures 1795* 46). Coleridge sought a community of likeminded people alongside whom he could, by gradations, literally change the world. He sought this community through Pantisocracy, later through *The Friend*, and later still through his theory of a “clerisy,” a small, learned group who would enlighten the multitude. Because of his perceived childhood deprivation, what he wanted above all in domesticity was acceptance in a family which would compensate him for the loss of his earlier one. Engell points out in his introduction to *The Early Family Letters* that the “pattern of a pair of brothers bonded to a pair of women, especially sisters, was first established when he and Frank were at home with their mother and the dear nurse Molly” (15). Perhaps in an

attempt to retrieve that time, he married Sara Fricker, the sister of whom was married to Robert Southey, and, later, fell in love with Sara Hutchinson, the sister of whom was married to William Wordsworth. He attached himself to numerous families throughout his life, but, as mentioned in the previous chapter, they did not, for the most part, satisfy him because the responsibilities they imposed upon him were greater than he was prepared to fulfil. Coleridge, generally, was hostile to the concept of “duty” towards those close to him. Vickers writes that “[t]he few letters Coleridge wrote to [his mother] – he seems to have stopped in the 1790s – emphasize duty rather than love” (70). Coleridge’s antipathy towards duty is evinced also in the 1794 letter to Southey about his reluctance to marry Sara Fricker but his sense of obligation to do so regardless. He writes: “To marry a woman whom I do *not* love, to make her the Instrument of low desire – and on the removal of a desultory Appetite, to be perhaps not displeased at her absence! . . . Mark you Southey! – *I will do my Duty*” (CL 1: 145). Charles Lamb remarked that Coleridge “ought not to have a wife and children; he should have a sort of diocesan care of the world, no parish duty” (Morley 289). Lamb’s witty synopsis of Coleridge’s problem is highly perceptive, for it was only ever the idea of intimate communities Coleridge enjoyed. He was unwilling to practically apply himself to the maintenance of such communities and perform the duties they required of him.

Nonetheless, understanding Coleridge’s idealised conceptions of friendship and community as he articulated them in his lectures and letters in the mid- to late 1790s is crucial to understanding the workings of the verse he was writing concurrently, most especially the “Conversation” poems, his “Poems of Friendship.” The conception explains why the one life vision

figures so prominently in these poems, and why this vision must involve another, chosen, person in the domestic sphere. Coleridge's yearning to identify with another person might stem from the psychological lack detailed above, but it is also true that Coleridge's conception of friendship as the starting point for social reform necessitates empathic identification and a shared vision.

What goes on within the intimate space of the "Conversation" poems is steered towards an exterior world, and the inhabitants of this space are archetypal companions whose primary purpose is to forge a bond with the speaker through which universal benevolence is able to be dispersed. In this sense, the place and the people of the poems are idealised, but there is also a sense in which they are real, and this reality (predominantly an unfortunate one for Coleridge's vision) is simultaneously registered in the poems.

My thesis explores the tension between the idealized poetics which underlie Coleridge's choice of addressees in the Conversation Poems and the unease which the poems register at the same time because of this choice. Conversation, in the "Conversation" poems, is not what perhaps it ought to be, for the auditors are never given leave to speak for themselves. Almost every account of Coleridge as a talker emphasises the one-sidedness of any given exchange with the poet. Madame de Staël's remark that "[h]e is very great in monologue, but he has no idea of dialogue" is typical (Perry 148). This anecdote is emblematic of the larger issue at stake: what could be perceived as dialogue, is actually a monologue. Coleridge's desperate need for reciprocity, but his unwillingness or inability to actually accommodate the interlocutor, is to some extent disguised in the portrayal of social interaction, as he does in the "Conversation" poems. Madame de Staël's astute

observation has something of the boy's decrying the emperor without clothes. Coleridge's disappointment and desire to be "understood" are indicative of his own lack of awareness about reciprocity.

Coleridge's uninterrupted stream of discourse, in the "Conversation" poems, points up the fact that it is Coleridge's vision, singular and uncompromising, that is being set forth, and although it is a vision of a shared experience, it is a shared experience on Coleridge's terms only. The auditors are not given an opportunity to speak, lest they contaminate the purity of the vision.

All of the auditors are in some way unsatisfactory for Coleridge, as I hope to have established in the course of this thesis. That the poems' sense of their own audience is so unstable reminds us that Coleridge is continually searching for a likeminded friend, one who is able to embody the role he designates, and that such a friend is yet to be found. The implicit tensions between speaker and auditor are grimly prescient of the series of broken relationships in Coleridge's life outside the text. The stand-off which ends "The Eolian Harp" looks forward to the dissolution of his marriage. The overlooking of Charles Lamb in "This Lime-Tree Bower" anticipates the temporary severance of that friendship which occurred not long after the poem's publication. And perhaps even his strident assertions about the future of his babe in "Frost at Midnight" hint at Coleridge's eventual estrangement from Hartley, whom he failed as a father. These rifts emerged chiefly due to Coleridge's selfishness, a selfishness which figures in the "Conversation" poems in the form of the solipsistic realm of the speaker's thoughts, into which the auditors are drawn. Despite the fact that they are idealised constructions, Coleridge does at times suggest (most explicitly in

“The Eolian Harp,” but elsewhere, too) that his auditors might be opposed to such absorption, and this is a mark of their reality, but the auditors’ assertions of autonomy are ultimately subsumed into the speaker’s adaptation of them.

The reality which threatens the idealism is registered in the portrayal of the auditors, but it is registered also in the way Coleridge describes the domestic setting. The elements of these settings, like the auditors, are both ideal and real. On the one hand, every aspect of the landscape described operates in a symbolic capacity, pointing to something eternal and permanent outside and beyond itself. This is in line with Coleridge’s conception of the symbol as he defined it in *The Statesman’s Manual* and also consistent with the theme of the one life, in which things have a life in themselves and a life of interconnectedness. On the other hand, however, the aspects of landscape described are physical and material and Coleridge is highly attentive to their concreteness, minute in his observations. In a famous and amusing passage in the *Notebooks*, Coleridge complains of his tendency to dwell on fine details at the expense of his general argument:

Now this is my case - & a grievous fault it is / my illustrations swallow up my thesis – I feel too intensely the omnipresence of all in each, platonically speaking – or psychologically my brain-fibres, or the spiritual Light which abides in the brain marrow as visible Light appears to do in sundry rotten mackerel & other *smashy* matters, is of too general affinity with all things / and tho’ it perceives the *difference* of things, yet is eternally pursuing the likenesses, or rather that which is common / bring me two things that seem the very same, & then I am quick enough to shew the difference, even to hair-splitting – but to

go on from circle to circle till I break against the shore of my Hearer's
 patience, or have my Concentricals dashed to nothing by a Snore –
 that is my ordinary mishap.

(*CN* 2: 2372)

Coleridge's habit of allowing his illustrations to swallow up his thesis is evident in the "Conversation" poems as much as it was in his conversation. Within the context of this thesis, it may be said that when Coleridge focusses on particularities in these poems, it is often when he is delineating the home space, and when he does this, it often seems he is demarcating the boundary of what he regards a domestic prison. In "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" his sense of solitude in shackles is insinuated rather strongly. In "Frost at Midnight," the speaker's establishment of the topography suggests that he would like to be out there amid "the numberless goings-on of life" (12), and the most minute description in the poem is reserved for a piece of soot, emblematic of loneliness. In short, only when Coleridge is expressing the *idea* of domesticity does he find it desirable; when he narrows in to consider the little things that comprise the domestic landscape, the picture is less than halcyon. Nonetheless, he would have us believe that the whole is somehow greater than the sum of the parts.

In the close readings I have offered in the foregoing chapters, I have attempted to show how the individual elements of the "Conversation" poems sometimes jar with their circular superstructure. I have done this with a view to explaining why the reader can be left feeling uneasy after reading the poems, despite their reassuring formal perfection. I hope that, having done this, I have in my small way contributed to the literature that has grown up around the "Conversation" poems in recent times, which has not been

content with perpetuating the conventional reading of these poems as poems of friendship, but has instead searched for new meanings by placing them in their differing contexts, studying their textual variants, and frequently discovering in them the speaker's solitary malaise, which runs counter to the communitarian spirit the poems purport to promote.

Whatever bewilderment a reader might feel after reading the "Conversation" poems, as a result of the contention between the polar forces of idealised unity and realistic division, none would gainsay that these are great poems. The disparity between the expectations the form sets up and the actual effect these poems tend to have on readers must be considered among the poems' virtues. The confused frustration the reader feels is, in the end, Coleridge's own. The "Conversation" poems present an unrelenting drive for totality (with the abundance of circles and the rhetoric of return, they insist on this unity), all the while acknowledging the impossibility of such unity by repeatedly disrupting the illusion of wholeness, before insisting on it once again with renewed vigour. No other poet in the literary canon could have written the "Conversation" poems. They are uniquely Coleridgean, not only in their frame of reference but also in their thematic concerns and in their complex dynamism borne of his life's crises. Despite the divisiveness of his experience, Coleridge was always steadfast in his constancy to an ideal unity, and for this reason the "Conversation" poems are in many ways his truest monument.

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