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ABSTRACT

Readers will draw their own conclusions from my essay, but one is incontrovertible: it describes how I arrived in editorial studies by accident, like many others of my generation. The fact that so many young people now are interested in editing is a mark of how the activity has changed. The job of editing Coleridge can profitably be done again in different ways, which I do not describe.

1. beside oneself

IN OUR LAST YEAR AS UNDERGRADUATES, EVERYONE RECEIVED A FORM LETTER from the university advisory service. We were invited to register details to assist employers scouting for trainees and, at the same time, to do a practice interview. Many of us supposed we might as well do this, in an aimless kind of way. The people in the advisory service gave practical advice on how to put the best foot forward, how to communicate confidence, resourcefulness, and so on. The interviewer's assessment of my situation seemed eccentric at the time but left me something to dwell on. He said that when I spoke my voice seemed to come from somewhere else. I made an adequate case for becoming a lieutenant of industry but something didn't ring true. I laughed at the time, denying that I had been beside myself, but I mention it now because the snap assessment hints at how I became a Coleridge editor.

How I arrived in the position in question, and whether I am still in it, is best approached through personal narrative. The method is unfortunately self-regarding, but the events possess a significance beyond my own case, I hope.

2. 'events having no necessary connection'

Things began to fall apart when I began to study English because my ambition as child and schoolboy was to become an architect. I spent my pocket money on slide rules and architectural books when others bought marbles. I thought of Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright as if they were football teams. I followed an irregular course of studies at school, combining maths and art, and won a government scholarship to pursue a degree course in architecture at Liverpool. Only then I learned that I was too young to go to university and must wait another year. I returned to the sixth form and concentrated on History and English to broaden my horizons. I was put down to try for an open scholarship at Oxford and, to everybody's surprise, I was awarded one which I then didn't have the courage to refuse. Looking at it now, I see the examiners thought they had captured some sort of elfin genius from the wilds of Exmoor, but I was no more than a callow youth out of his depth. I muddled through the English degree course in a disaffected way, and the only good thing that came out of it was that I met the person who became my wife:

There can be a brick
 In a brick wall
 The eye picks

So quiet of a Sunday
 Here is the brick, it was waiting
 Here when you were born

Mary-Anne.

This meeting prepared the way for stage two of my wayward progress.¹

Marianne is exceptionally clever, both at English and passing exams, so when she stayed on to do research under Helen Gardner, I stayed on too. Neither of us had much idea what the outcome would be, but it was a charmed life. After a year of occasional teaching and the kindness of eleemosynary funds, I was given a scholarship and drifted into a dissertation project on Coleridge. The basis of my choice was largely negative. Writers in whom purely literary ambition was foremost left me unsatisfied: Coleridge involved philosophy, science, theology, almost everything except architec-

1. See Mays 1989b for a brief account of my undergraduate years. The quotation is from George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* #21 in DAVIDSON 2002, 175.

ture (his blind spot) and music (mine).² So I potted along, uninterrupted in my course of study by my kindly supervisor, picking up what I could. Then Helen Gardner held a party, where I met Kathleen Coburn, and Kathleen was staying with Herbert Davis who had previously taught at Toronto, and Kathleen said why don't you come to Herbert's place tomorrow for a serious talk.³ So I went and the upshot was I got a Commonwealth Fellowship to work with the Coleridge manuscripts at Toronto while I finished my Oxford dissertation. Kathleen fixed me up with some teaching for extra money, and Marianne came too. After two years, I finished the dissertation and they gave me a permanent job. Marianne had a job at York University and we were on the pig's back.

Stage three is after Toronto, which wasn't all happy days. I was born and raised in the country, and still don't enjoy being in towns for very long. Toronto, through the long Canadian winters, became claustrophobic. Also, though I'd got stuck into a dissertation with a will, I began to feel the walls closing in when I found myself with a permanent job—doomed to teach Romantic and nineteenth-century literature with no respite till the end of my working life. I had a good offer from south of the border, but didn't even go and check it out. We packed up our possessions and left at the beginning of our fourth summer. Then, such were the times, within a week of arriving in Europe, we had a choice of jobs at Dublin and Liverpool, and chose Dublin because it (then) had less traffic. Denis Donoghue decided what I should teach, which was twelve-lecture series to huge, mixed ability audiences, separately on Bacon, Blake and T. S. Eliot. He rearranged the lecture schedule every year, expecting every member of his staff to prepare three new series. It was bruising but it had the advantage for me of rounding out the education I failed to gain from Oxford. The only topic I was never asked to lecture on was the Romantics, for which I was grateful. I wanted to think about Joyce and Beckett and everything else that made the modern world. And so to stage four.

Stage four is the re-entry of Coleridge into my working life. I was never Kathleen Coburn's graduate student, rather in theory her very junior colleague. We didn't talk about my dissertation specifically; she gave me jobs to do, I suppose as much to provide financial support as for any other reason: checking the text of her edition of the *Philosophical Lectures* against the original unpunctuated manuscript, preparing the text of Coleridge's marginalia on

2. Coleridge's "affectionate exhortation" to authors not to pursue literature as a trade in Chapter 11 of *Biographia Literaria* Chapter 11 (ENGELL and BATE 1983, 1: 223–31) is one I agree with wholeheartedly.

3. Herbert Davis is best known for his edition of *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift* (see DAVIS 1939–1974).

Tennemann for George Whalley's edition. She was very kind in Toronto—gave us old furniture, drove us out into the country, gave us meals and lent me books—although, though it hurts to say it, I thought she was a bit antiquarian. I had much greater admiration for others like Northrop Frye, whom I “assisted” to teach a Shakespeare course, and Marshall McLuhan, although it was a time when he began to overreach himself. After we moved to Dublin, Kathleen wrote and sent Christmas presents to our son, Sam, born on Friday the 13th and named after the much admired Beckett, not the other one. She came and stayed with us, as did George Whalley, but they appeared as friends from another life. Because I frequently went home to Devon to visit my widowed mother, I was developing an interest in Coleridge's father: I'd drive my mother off to visit relations and drop into churches to check parish records (rather different from the sterile record offices where I now spend time). In Ireland, I began a biography of Thomas MacGreevy, a key figure in Irish Modernism, such as it is, which I suppose caught my interest when I realised I was surrounded by a kind of nationalism I didn't much like. The point of recounting this part of the story is that I was taken by surprise when Kathleen said, on one of her visits, it was about time I came back to Coleridge. George Whalley was coming to the conclusion that he couldn't edit both the *Marginalia* and the *Poetical Works*. Would I take over the poems? I remember I felt flattered, even excited, but also rather depressed at the prospect. It was a bit like the Oxford scholarship business over again.

I had received replies from several publishers expressing an emphatic lack of interest in a book on Thomas MacGreevy, and Kathleen made her proposal seem like the jobs I had previously done for her. It would not take very long: she had gathered photocopies of some things that had come to light since the previous standard edition (in 1912); I would have to make trips to England and spend a summer in American libraries, and check on the improvements. George Whalley sent me his files (a lightly-corrected paste-up of the 1912 edition) and, beginning in 1976, I agreed that—well, if she thought so too—the job would be finished by 1979. The pair of them assured me that my ignorance was no obstacle. The resources of Bollingen would be at my back, and that's how it began. Introductions were arranged, doors opened, and vaults too, while I perched in lonely hotels in Massachusetts and Texas, a clueless youth and father of three.

The rest is history but we'll call it stage five. With frequent checks on my progress from Kathleen, I persuaded myself that the job was finished in 1981 (sic). It had turned out differently from what she and George had envisaged but they both seemed happy. Bart Winer, the Associate Editor of the series, approved it too, remarking it was a good thing I was British because otherwise

the British would complain that the excessive textual information was typically American. The problem was, my work was all in longhand: how was it going to be typed up? I had begun with a portable typewriter and scissors and paste, and progress was excruciatingly slow. Then Bollingen sent me an IBM PC, and after a shaky start with a math programme to do the Greek characters, I began to put the material into the machine. The series was still being set by hand but, as the decade wore on, the new technology kicked in. I progressed slowly, not knowing where it would end, and Richard Garnett, the designer, dropped out to make way for a more technological successor. In the course of the same decade (1980s), Kathleen began to become ill, the relation between the Bollingen Foundation and Princeton University Press had been renegotiated, Bart Winer died, and then Kathleen died too (in 1991).⁴ There were delays as other volumes moved through the press ahead of *Poetical Works*; the bonus was time to do at least three complete revisions of the whole typescript. The complete set of three two-part volumes was in print by 2002.

During this final stage, I hadn't given up my interest in what I discovered in Ireland. I published essays and chapters on Irish writers I found congenial: Joyce, Beckett, Flann O'Brien, among prose writers; McGreevy, Devlin, Coffey, and others among poets; some modest editions, too. I didn't write or publish anything I wasn't asked to write, so the record isn't quite representative of my interests. In particular, it omits a number of American writers I don't suppose I shall ever write about now. However, what was incidental at the beginning turned out to be a blessing afterwards, when promotion came to depend on publication, and I progressed up the ladder. I applied for a job in Cork in 1989, which I failed to get but, as a result (like a character in a Somerville and Ross story), ended up with a better job in York. It took an effort to settle back into living in England, which I hadn't quite managed when I returned to Dublin as head of department in 1994. There I stayed until 2004, when, under the rules of compulsory retirement at sixty-five, I gladly withdrew to a few sylvan acres and swampy meadows in Wicklow.

3. mainly Kathleen

My story is ordinary and part of the world of its time. Now, when so many graduates are desperate to find a life in teaching and research, I feel shame that what they aspire to was handed to me on a plate and that I didn't hold it of much account. I can only claim that, after maybe denying a better per-

4. I describe how these unfolding events affected the progress of the edition in MAYS 2003b.

son a scholarship at Oxford, I did what else was expected of me, in my way. But I promised to progress to the general question, of editors and writers choosing each other.

As I've explained, I chose Coleridge in the first instance for negative reasons and, the dissertation finished, would have been happy enough to leave him behind as a stage in my education. I certainly didn't choose to be an editor and it's more interesting to speculate on why Kathleen Coburn fixed on such a dodgy individual. There must have been others eager to take on the job and there were certainly many others better qualified. When we moved to Canada, we lived in a co-op: did that make her think I was a Pantisocrat? The essays I wrote when I moved away from Toronto were all on Irish writers: I didn't publish anything on Coleridge and had no plans to do so. When I abandoned Victoria College, which is (was) the most congenial institution I have ever been a member of, it was obvious that a regular career was not our first priority: we wanted to go somewhere where we could have a large dog. Did such perversity convince Kathleen that I was the man for the job? The only reason she later gave me was that I was young and therefore a good bet to complete the task before I died.

My guess is that Kathleen had a profound aversion to the professional academic life. She was extremely loyal to her college and its traditions, she was passionate about the work she was doing, but she maintained a distance from administrative duties and the university English department—in effect, the graduate school. She avoided taking on PhD students: only two of them in her whole career and each of them a special case whom she knew before supervision began. She was committed to Coleridge because the work involved values she believed in: there was no separation of interests. She was suspicious of a certain kind of careerism, and could speak against it angrily. It was obvious that I was wholly unprepared for the task she proposed, but she trusted me to learn. The only condition in our agreement was not written down: I would tell her if I lost my respect for Coleridge.

As I've said elsewhere (2003b), Kathleen understood her project as putting to rest, conclusively, all the old charges of plagiarism, of idleness and failure. The Bollingen editions were to make sound texts available with proper annotation—showing what had been borrowed and how—nothing less and nothing more. Her thinking about text was simple. The published *Notebooks* do not assume any interest in the materiality of text or the process of writing, unless to note some picturesque detail. The larger part of the *Collected Works* is filled with single-version texts. Yet she was quick to agree that *Poetical Works* would have to be done differently from what she initially imagined if the edition was to be taken seriously.

The thing that made her a great editor was, I think, her openness to the larger scheme of things as well as her perseverance as an annotator. Livingston Lowes provided the model for the latter but otherwise it was typical of her to treasure Ivor Richards as a mountaineer and explorer as much as for his forays into criticism. Those who stood behind her in the Coleridge project were the likes of Herbert Read and Geoffrey Grigson, as well as the arctic explorer and poet in George Whalley. They represented qualities that helped win over both the Coleridge family and the Bollingen Foundation: a spirit of adventure, fun, and wider horizons. It also has to be conceded that the downside of the same qualities almost sank the enterprise in her last years. She worked alone with the help of a succession of very able secretaries and later with the help of Bart Winer, who came from outside academic walls. There was no editorial or advisory board, with the result that the project was rudderless during the period when she became ill and following her death. In this respect, I used to look across at the team Steve Parrish assembled to produce the Cornell editions of Wordsworth and Yeats. His enterprise perhaps lacks the flair and variety of the Collected Coleridge, but all the checks and fall-back positions are in place.⁵ Each Cornell series has developed over time, but they are more consistent in their purpose. There has never been, at any stage, a danger that they would not be completed.

I return briefly to my own part before I end. I think my detachment from the project kept me sane, if sane is the word. My understanding was and is that, just as the “new poetry” of Wordsworth and Coleridge was not assimilated by the reading public until some decades after it first appeared, and then in a way conditioned by altered circumstances, so in our own time there have been poets who satisfied the taste of the educated public and others whose time was yet to come. I have seen writers come in from the cold during my time—Mina Loy, Basil Bunting, Ian Hamilton Finlay—and seen their shine fade in the warm glow of welcome. It seems important to me to preserve a sense of newness when something has striven to be new, to preserve the edge of its point. There are other ways, too, that the ecology of the literary present holds lessons for reading the past.⁶

5. I should explain, since I have edited a couple of the Yeats volumes and am a member of the Editorial Board, that I became involved as a result of meetings with Stephen Parrish at the Grasmere (Wordsworth) Library over many years. Collaboration with a wise old friend has been a great pleasure and it is convenient for the Yeats edition to have a Dublin agent.

6. Some other ways of the ecology of the literary present are described, with Irish examples, in a lecture published as *N11 a Musing* (MAYS 2005), although my comments there refer to a present that is fast being overtaken.

The road not taken in architecture has always been present to my mind. I tried to explain my sense of the relation between the three *Poetical Works* volumes in an essay published in the *TEXT* 16, “The Wobbling Pivot” (MAYS 2006). The balance is a complicated mobile symmetry, which may have only a private significance but I held onto it like a talisman. Otherwise, my sense of the relation between form and function, my sense of tradition—I returned to John Summerson’s *Heavenly Mansions* (1949) with particular attention—, most of my understanding deep down has a background in thoughts about architecture rather than literature. The case I made for Denis Devlin in an edition of his poems (MAYS 1989a), for example, owes everything to the controversy between Betjeman and Pevsner in the pages of the *Architectural Review* my mother used to send me at school: you can guess whose side I was on.⁷ Thinking about the Coleridge edition as it progressed, slowly and with delays, I remembered a site-visit when I was a student at Oxford to the first major post-war hospital to be built in England after the war, the Princess Margaret Hospital at Swindon. The building was ahead of its time when it was conceived and already beginning to lag behind when it was completed.⁸ Like so many large structures, *Poetical Works* has also been overtaken by unforeseen demands placed upon it and the advent of new technology that opens new possibilities, long before the patients came in to be healed or to expire. At other times, I thought I might have let Liverpool go too easily because my interest in spatial form was conflicted. My daughter, who trained as an architect, says I wouldn’t have been a good architect anyway. She is almost certainly correct. Being an editor is more like restoration work than creating anew, so maybe I found my niche in a way.

As reported, I am now retired from official duties. I’m glad to write about things I consider important. I’m happy to be reading Coleridge again at large, and all the books he sends me on to read. I’m on stand-by to assist the Cornell Yeats through to completion. I really would like to finish the project I began before Kathleen Coburn interrupted me thirty years ago, that is, on Coleridge’s father.⁹ In pursuit of that end, I visit old haunts in Devon whence I came, and

7. I might add that Timothy Mowl’s version of the Betjeman-Pevsner story in *Stylistic Cold Wars* (2000) does not do justice to our hero, and I wrote more about the way architecture shaped my reading of poetry in “Coming Off the Beano” (MAYS 2003a).

8. Planning began in the early 1950s, construction in 1957, and the building was completed in 1965. The architects were Powell and Moya, whose “matchbox on a muffin” design was much admired: see the January 1960 review in *Architectural Review* (ANON. 1960). The gigantic replacement Great Western Hospital is unimaginative and oppressive.

9. A lecture on John Coleridge I gave at Columbus, Ohio, in spring 1976, remains unpublished. For the lecture I gave at a conference at Cannington, Somerset, in

then return happily to the place that never will be home. It seems I have always lived slightly beside what I have found myself doing, as the man in the advisory service said. Things are probably better that way: Lucky Jim! I can echo what Wordsworth said about *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: if there is any psychic connection it must be because the story has described someone with no distinct character, either in his profession or as a human being, someone not acting but continually acted upon; or again, it may be only because the events in the story have no necessary connection, and my manner of speaking is somewhat laboriously accumulated, that my tale is not a tale at all, at all.

4. supplement: ‘never give all the heart’¹⁰

At this stage, now the audience has packed its bags and departed, I will add a few more words. Limits of time prevented me from broadcasting them at large and, besides, they have a more personal than professional application. Speed Hill urged me to explain, “What drives—has driven—you? What’s your brand or make of neurosis?”¹¹ I don’t believe I am fuelled by anything as expensive as a neurosis, but I admit that I maintained a distance from his questions. Shy people are prone to a kind of ventriloquism, and my cheery tale needs a spoonful of ballast to help it ring true. If it does not completely “reveal the inner Jim to the outside world”, as Speed hoped, that is only because the inner Jim contains levels beyond his own unaided understanding. At the time during my final undergraduate year, when I received the invitation from the university advisory service, an Indian friend urged me to go to India to teach in the English College at Delhi. The cause was worthy, I had no alternative future in mind, I was assured of a warm welcome, yet I backed away in panic. Even to remember the opportunity causes a fright as if I was already in the Malabar Caves with Forster’s Mrs. Moore. I couldn’t withstand a full frontal confrontation of my inadequacies even now.

summer 2002—“Was Coleridge’s Father as Simple as a Child?”—see MAYS 2003c. This essay represents a stage when I was just picking up with the subject after a long interval and I am afraid a number of details are incorrect. The reference at the close of this paragraph is to William Wordsworth “Note to the Ancient Mariner” in his *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems* (1800, 1: 214).

10. I wrote my talk to conclude with the previous section and supposed this supplement would circulate among the other panellists alone. However, it turned out there was time to deliver it on the day and I include it now as I spoke it. The section-heading is the title of a poem by Yeats from the volume, *In the Seven Woods* (1904) in FINNERAN 1991, 79.

11. W. H. Speed Hill to JCCM, email 8 March 2006.

Those who know Coleridge's writing will be familiar with what he has to say about a sense of diffidence or detachment, a cold speck that complicated relationships throughout his life:

Ah but even in boyhood there was a cold hollow spot, an aching in that heart, when I said my prayers—that prevented my entire union with God—that I could not *give up*, or that would not give *me up*—as if a snake had wreathed around my heart and at this one spot its Mouth touched at & inbreathed a weak incapability of willing it away.¹²

Kathleen Coburn's comment is understated—"A rich entry for the psychiatrists" (1974, 12)—, typical of her inclination to allow a deftly chosen passage to make its own impression. The spot in Coleridge's heart led him into the impossible situation of marriage to a woman he did not love and love of another woman he could not marry.¹³ It led him to philosophise about the abyss of being and eventually to achieve a peculiar understanding of Trinitarian Christianity. Whatever sympathy I share with him hasn't led to so much anguish, nor been so productive. I mention it simply because it connects with the sense of detachment I cited at the outset of my lecture. This did not originate in the change of direction when I abandoned architecture, or when I educated myself out of the possibility of making a living in the place where I was born, as I might have suggested. It has always been with me and, though somewhat tempered or disguised by age, is probably ineradicable.

In Coleridge's case, the sense of withholding surely had something to do with the relationship between his parents and the difficult lives they led before they were delivered into the relatively comfortable surroundings of Ottery St Mary. The couple were close and when old John Coleridge unexpectedly died, his widow appears immediately to have withdrawn into a depression in which she abandoned her responsibilities and clung to her strongest son for support. The cold speck in Coleridge had always been there, as he said, but the sudden flaring of its cause came at a crucial stage in his own development. The situation was one that he fictionalised in poetry and subsequently absorbed as the

12. see COBURN, CHRISTENSEN, and HARDING 1957–2002, 4: 5275. It is a familiar theme: compare COBURN, CHRISTENSEN, and HARDING 1957–2002, 2: 2454, *Aids to Reflection* (BEER 1993, 24), *This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, etc.

13. Coleridge's marital situation was not at all as simple and capable of a mechanical solution as Anya Taylor suggests (2005). Can one imagine Coleridge thriving in a marriage with either Mary Evans or Sara Hutchinson? The dilemma he created for himself was cruel but it exactly balanced the impulses between which he was caught, as he appears to have understood throughout.

Esteesian paradigm on which his logic stood. However, these were only stays against confusion. That hollow spot remained a weakness he strove to overcome, and to that extent a sense of a profound flaw was hugely productive. Coleridge's energy in resolving the sense of inadequacy—not repressing but exploring, absorbing and transforming it—is indeed extraordinary.

The details of my own family background are not important. Suffice to say that my parents were generous towards each other to a fault, and towards me to the end; I was their only pride and joy. However, my father was away at the war during my earliest years and his place in the household was occupied by my mother's father, and I have since wondered if the tensions involved in that situation communicated themselves to me. My grandfather was the odd one out in a village full of great aunts and great uncles on my mother's side, mentally distanced from the dolmens round my childhood. He was a difficult, selfish man who sent away his only child, my mother, to be brought up by his wife's sisters living nearby.¹⁴ Either a sense of duty or a sense of his pathos must have compelled my parents to abandon the lives they had begun to create elsewhere when they were married, so as to return to care for him when he found himself alone.

I did not understand the early rejection of my mother in a direct way but I must have intuited the strain of the family situation. I was afraid of my grandfather and kept my distance, and I think his self-centredness communicated itself too. He was a respected but solitary figure in the village; he was interested in local history and encouraged me to read beyond my comics, but he spread a chill within the household. The impact on me, for all my mother's efforts, was a sense of apartness as a child, a withholding that made it difficult to give myself over entirely to affection. It probably abetted my interests in solitary pursuits, my ability to shut out the world and to spread my interests in a concentrated way; but it also left me shipwrecked, standing beside myself, defensive and uncharitable, speculating on the worth of what I was doing. That is, before the partial rescue:

Not for anything we did, she said
Mildly, 'from God'. She said
What I like more than anything
Is to visit other islands . . .¹⁵

14. My mother's middle name was Thirza, as was her father's mother's. The name must originally have been chosen in memory of Zelophehad's youngest daughter (Num 26:33; Josh 17:3), but it difficult in my mother's case not to think Blake's line in *To Tirzah*: "Then what have I to do with thee?"

15. The closing words of *Ballad*, the final poem in Oppen's volume *Of Being Numerous* (see DAVIDSON 2002, 208).

Some such formative experience is all I can claim to share with Coleridge. It is something I have only begun to understand recently, many years after I began to read him and after I finished editing his poems. Perhaps my grandfather is not to blame and, as Coleridge suggested, the shared experience is in some way a condition of us all.

I have one further crumb to offer Speed Hill, this one concerning a sense of discomfort with the outer as much as the inner self which may have eased my labours as a harmless drudge. An entry in Coleridge's notebooks begins, "It is a most instructive part of my Life the fact, that I have been always preyed on by some Dread, and perhaps all my faulty actions have been the consequence of some Dread or other on my mind" (COBURN, CHRISTENSEN, and HARDING 1957–2002, 2: 2398). The entry continues in anguish of a kind I am glad to say I have never experienced, but, read alongside other evidence, it suggests Coleridge's avoidance of direct action derived from "fear of Pain, or Shame, not from prospect of Pleasure" and had a physical cause. In my case, it is important that, for five years between the end of the war and going away to school, immediately preceding puberty, I was a fat boy. The cause was comic: the toothless pensioners among whom I lived couldn't handle toffee and humbugs so I maximised from multiple sweet rations. But self-consciousness about the inevitable result encouraged me to withdraw from boyish pursuits and made me shy. I hung around a local carpenter's shop, dropped *The Beano* in favour of *The Illustrated Carpenter and Builder*, and exchanged bows and arrows for a set of chisels. The joiners assigned me the task of pasting-in the knots on timber and I acquired the label "Jimmy the Notter", which down the years has evolved various avatars—Jacob Veilleicht and Tim La Brinth, among others. Coleridge's analysis helps me understand why negative reasons occur to me sooner than positive ones, and I have great sympathy with Basil Bunting's celebration of the slowworm. Indeed, Bunting's response to a question from Jonathan Williams (1980, 133) speaks entirely on my behalf:

Q. If you did have virtues, which would you want?

A. Inconspicuousness, combined with enterprise. That's about it.

I can't imagine better than that:

So he rose and led home silently through clean woodland
where every bough repeated the slowworm's song.¹⁶

16. For the slowworm and his song, see *Briggflatts* Part III in *Complete Poems* (CADDEL 2000, 73–74).

One doesn't have to be an editor to wonder at Coleridge's interior life, the extension of fault-lines into buttresses, the interpenetration of weakness and strength. I still find myself trawling through the collected edition, deflected into new channels of thought, returning to a phrase or insight that illuminates, like any other reader. I suppose familiarity breeds sympathy, and both encourage interaction, but the point I labour to make is that his writing creates a world to move out from, not to remain within. His writing is a world to identify with, which is the opposite of an end in itself; that is to say, it makes available a means of exploration in which private coincidences are left behind. In that spirit, I read Ed Dorn's or George Oppen's poems, say, more often than I read Coleridge's. When I was asked to name my favourite poem for an anthology compiled on behalf of a good cause it was by Lorine Niedecker:

My life is hung up
in the flood
 a wave-blurred
 portrait

Don't fall in love
with this face —
 it no longer exists
 in water
 we cannot fish¹⁷

I chose the particular poem partly because it fitted onto one page, partly because my mind was filled with departmental politics of the moment. It also happens to illustrate the theme of limiting self-centredness I have been labouring in these last paragraphs.

Finally, if I was asked whether the late work of either Oppen or Niedecker moved me as much as Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp, I would still have to say no. Or perhaps "maybe, no".

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