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## Coleridge's Desultoriness

"DESULTORY" IS COLERIDGE'S OWN WORD, ONE USED TO NOMINATE BOTH a cast of mind and a kind of writing. His ambitious early metaphysical poem "Religious Musings," on which, he said, he rested "all my poetical credit,"<sup>1</sup> was subtitled: "A desultory poem, written on Christmas Eve, in the year of our Lord, 1794."<sup>2</sup> It might seem odd to place such weighty hopes on something conceived as "desultory," with all the implications of disconnectedness, irregularity, and uncertainty of purpose: "roving from thing to thing," says Johnson, "unsettled; immethodical; inconstant."<sup>3</sup>

*OED* cites Bishop Burnet, whom Coleridge admired, advising: "All men ought to avoid the Imputations of a desultory Levity."<sup>4</sup> Coleridge was of course fully aware of the moral shortcomings that the word might cover, principally through the painful consciousness that he embodied so many of them himself. Writing in contrition to his elder brother George, having flunked at Cambridge and recklessly run off to join the army, he described himself as "one, whose purposes were virtuous tho' infirm, and whose energies vigorous, tho' desultory," and that is something for which one should properly apologize, in writing as in life: "Excuse my desultory style & illegible scrawl" (*Letters*, 1:74, 1:398). Desultoriness is a kind of weakness, an inability to get it together, amounting to a sort of self-destructiveness: following their rupture, Coleridge self-punishingly contrasted his long devotion to the cause

1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Thomas Poole, April 11, 1796, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), 1:197: "I pin all my poetical credit on the Religious Musings"; and Coleridge to John Thelwall, [late April 1796]: "I build all my poetic pretensions on the Religious Musings" (*Collected Letters*, 1:203, 205). All subsequent references to Coleridge's letters are to this edition, and are cited parenthetically in the text as *Letters*.

2. Coleridge, *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: Robinsons; Bristol: Cottle, 1796), 139, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Poems on Various Subjects* by line number and page number. Line numbers are denoted by "lines," page numbers by numbers only.

3. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language: in which words are deduced from their originals and illustrated in their different significations*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., 2 vols. (London: Rivington, etc., 1785).

4. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "desultory, *adj.* and *n.*," accessed October 1, 2019, <https://www.oed.com>.

of Wordsworth with the “languid—at all events, a very desultory—interest” in his own literary reputation.<sup>5</sup>

So to adopt the word as the name of a nonce genre—“a desultory poem” in the way, perhaps, that Wordsworth would call “Michael” “a pastoral poem”—is an act of mild provocation, and it gathers its courage from one of the inspirations lying behind Coleridge’s 1796 collection, *Poems on Various Subjects*, in which it first appeared. This was William Lisle Bowles from whose poem “Monody, Written at Matlock” Coleridge took an excerpt to serve as the epigraph to the book’s long central section, “Effusions”: “Content, as random Fancies might inspire, / If his weak harp at times or lonely lyre, / He struck with desultory hand, and drew / Some soften’d tones to Nature not untrue” (*Poems on Various Subjects*, 44). Coleridge’s refinement on Bowles’s trope, in the thirty-fifth of the “Effusions,” was to make the instrument a wind-harp as though to remove conscious human purpose even more completely than was the case with Bowles’s absent-minded musician:

that simplest Lute,  
Plac’d length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!  
How by the desultory breeze caress’d,

. . . many idle flitting phantasies,  
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,  
As wild and various, as the random gales  
That swell or flutter on this subject Lute!<sup>6</sup>

*Poems on Various Subjects* is not only “various” in the range of markedly different topics with which its poems concern themselves, but also because it is deeply interested in the mental fact of variousness: “Poems on various subjects written at different times and prompted by very different feelings” (“Preface,” *Poems on Various Subjects*, v). Bowles suggests that the desultory giving-in to random fancies, far from being a corrigible shortcoming, is actually a route to a kind of literary experience that is valuable and true to life—or as Bowles put it, non-confrontationally, in his Matlock Monody, “not untrue.” In the background, perhaps, is the example of Cowper:

5. Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn et al., (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957–2002), 2:44.

6. Coleridge, *Poems*, ed. John Beer (London: Everyman’s Library, 1999), lines 12–14, 40–43, pages 72, 73, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Poems* by line number and page number. Line numbers are denoted by “lines,” page numbers by numbers only.

The earth was made so various, that the mind  
 Of desultory man, studious of change,  
 And pleased with novelty, might be indulged.<sup>7</sup>

Cowper is a firm enough moralist to reproach human fickleness and to disapprove of indulgence; but then *The Task* is all about the saving grace of distraction, and the main sentiment of the lines is that the variousness of the earth is a fine thing in itself: the desultoriness of man, while doubtless deplorable from one point of view, is, from another, a way into the discovery of things being various. But this is hardly Cowper's private insight, needless to say: James Thomson's *Seasons* are an extended hymn to what he calls, in the proem to "Spring," "the various parts of Nature," over which the poet's eye roams with a sort of purposeless purpose, emulating the creative power of nature herself, which is free "to wander o'er the verdant earth, / In various hues."<sup>8</sup> "Wander" has impeccable Miltonic credentials which associate it with post-lapsarian errancy and waywardness: the fallen angels debate matters "in wandering mazes lost," a description that Coleridge once ruefully applied to his own precocious metaphysical habits;<sup>9</sup> but in Thomson, and in his Romantic descendants, it also has a quietly contrarian value, connected with ideas of freedom—to "wander up and down at liberty," as the youth pines to do in "The Foster-Mother's Tale" (line 64, *Poems*, 162), or like the company of friends in "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison," who, unlike the imprisoned poet, "Wander in gladness" and later "wander on / In gladness all" (line 8, lines 26–27, *Poems*, 166). The language of sensibility often has this double edge: Coleridge's use of "indolent," for example, which borrows a formative ambivalence from Thomson's "The Castle of Indolence," a poem that mattered to both Coleridge and Wordsworth (as later it would to Keats). Thomson originally began the poem as a light-hearted response to his friends, "who would reproach him with indolence; while he thought them, at least, as indolent as himself"; but, as one of those friends duly observed, he realized "that the subject deserved to be treated more seriously, and in a form fitted to convey one of the most important moral lessons."<sup>10</sup>

7. William Cowper, *The Task*, 1,506–508, in *The Complete Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H. S. Milford (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), 140.

8. Thomson, "'Spring,' 'The Argument'; lines 82–83 in *The Seasons and The Castle of Indolence*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972; corr. repr., 1984), 3, 5.

9. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, II,561, in *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1968; corr. repr., 1980), 534; Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1:16. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Biographia*.

10. Patrick Murdoch, ed., *The Works of James Thomson* (London: Strahan, 1788), 1:xxiii.

The lesson in question, that indolence will not do, is obvious enough (“Re-nown is not the child of indolent repose”);<sup>11</sup> but the poem nevertheless continues to communicate the pleasures and even the benefits of indolence very well indeed, in a way that Coleridge evidently learned from—“soft gales of passion play, / And gently stir the heart, thereby to form / A quicker sense of joy; as breezes stray / Across the enlivened skies, and make them still more gay.”<sup>12</sup> His fellow feeling here was partly temperamental. Thomson was reputed to be so idle that he wouldn’t bother to pick fruit from the tree before eating it. When Cary, the translator of Dante, told Coleridge this story, “he observed that there was nothing remarkable in it, for that it was no more than he used to do himself at Malta. But, as Cary went on judiciously to say, “I doubted whether this was so much an apology for Thomson as a proof that my admirable friend, who resembled him in his higher qualities, partook also of this infirmity.”<sup>13</sup>

At the end of “Effusion XXXV” the moral judgment lurking in the background comes into prominence as Coleridge gives his wife the thankless task of reproving the metaphysical wanderings of his “unregenerate mind” and bringing him back upon the straight and narrow; but in a way the poem has already attempted to redeem its central figure by a pious sleight of hand: for the breezes that flit across the responsive strings are not really “random” at all, but rather “Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze”—or, at least, that possibility is raised within the “what if” mental space that Geoffrey Hartman called “the realm of surmise” (lines 47, 44, *Poems*, 73).<sup>14</sup> “Religious Musings” also raises questions about its own self-professed desultoriness: for in one way, its duty to be non-desultory is almost comically obvious. The preliminary “Argument” makes clear that this is a poem intent on getting somewhere with apocalyptic determination: “The present State of Society. French Revolution. Millenium. Universal Redemption. Conclusion” (*Poems on Various Subjects*, 137)—a poem could hardly embrace a more comprehensive teleology, setting out to move in a wholly purposive way toward the end it has in view, which happens to be the apocalyptic end of absolutely everything. For a poem with such a trajectory to be desultory at the same time seems paradoxical and even perverse: as John Axcelson has reasonably observed, there is “surely some tension between the desultory and the apocalyptic, which is anything but

11. Thomson, “The Castle of Indolence,” Canto II, stanza L, in Sambrook, 203.

12. Thomson, “The Castle of Indolence,” Canto I, stanza XVI, in Sambrook, 170.

13. H. F. Cary, ed., “Biographical Notice of James Thomson,” in *Poetical Works of John Milton, James Thomson, and Edward Young* (London: W. Smith, 1841), vii–xiii, v–vi.

14. Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787–1814* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964; 1987), 8.

accidental or ephemeral.”<sup>15</sup> Some such “tension” seems inferable from the references Coleridge made to the work in which he put such hopes. “Musings” in the title, especially in the company of “desultory,” has a possible edge of self-deprecation (as in “that solitude, which suits / Abstruser musings”: “Frost at Midnight,” lines 5–6, *Poems*, 209);<sup>16</sup> and there is a hesitancy too in its grammar. *OED* defines the word (which it calls “a count noun”) as “a spell of thoughtfulness or reflection; a meditation; (also) a written reflection, thought, idea, etc. Usually in plural”<sup>17</sup>—usually, yes, but not invariably. Sometimes when Coleridge writes about his poem it feels like something that requires the singular, as when he writes to Thomas Poole: “The ‘Religious Musings’ has more *mind* than the Introduction of B[ook] II[n]d of Joan of Arc, but its versification is not equally rich: it has more passages of sublimity, but it has not that diffused air of severe Dignity which characterizes *my Epic Slice*” (*Letters*, 1:207); but at other times, and more typically, it feels more of a plural sort of thing, not an “it” but a “them,” as would perhaps better befit an exhibition of variousness: “The Religious Musings are finished, and you shall have them on Thursday,” he wrote to his publisher Cottle, and when he revised the poem for the second edition he thought of “[t]he Religious Musings, I have altered monstrously, since I read them to you, and received your criticisms” (*Letters*, 187, 309). A sense that some desultory counter-principle is interfering with the more singular sort of purpose that religion requires is felt at several points in the poem itself, which often feels as if the material Coleridge has to fill out his intently teleological plan is not quite fit for purpose. He tries at one point, for example, to explain the relationship between indolence and political commitment, describing the character of the elect, who, once the millennium has arrived, will impose order on the chaos of human relations. The “perfect forms” they will impose on society are the productions of the long time they have spent, waiting for the new age to dawn, idling around in a Thomsonian manner, doing nothing much:

when, the Summer noon,  
Beneath some arch'd romantic rock reclin'd,  
They felt the sea-breeze lift their youthful locks,  
Or in the month of blossoms, at mild eve,

15. Axcelson, “Timing the Apocalypse: The Career of *Religious Musings*,” *European Romantic Review* 16, no. 4 (2005): 441.

16. Jean-Pierre Mileur notes the “hint of self-deprecation” in the subtitle, which seems “to deny, even as it solicits, comparison with Milton’s ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,’” in *Vision and Revision. Coleridge’s Art of Immanence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 120–21.

17. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “musing, *n.*,” accessed October 1, 2019, <https://www.oed.com>.

Wandering with desultory feet inhal'd  
 The wafted perfumes, and the flocks and woods  
 And many-tinted streams and setting Sun  
 With all his gorgeous company of clouds  
 Extatic gaz'd! then homeward as they stray'd  
 Cast the sad eye to earth, and inly mus'd  
 Why there was Misery in a world so fair.

(lines 262–72, *Poems*, 97)

The self-entangling movements of the verse enact the desultory mood it describes, momentarily distracted by the lovely variousness of “many-tinted streams and setting Sun.” That these heroes of truth should wander with “desultory feet” wishfully makes Coleridge of their heroic company, or they of his:<sup>18</sup> either way, the attempt to vindicate his own indolence, as much as theirs, as an oblique form of radical action, a magical turning of desultoriness to purpose, cannot be wholly persuasive on the level of theory.

But desultoriness can be magnificently achieved as a matter of writing: if Coleridge’s desultoriness was his undoing as a millennialist it was the making of him as a poet. What look very much like weaknesses or shortcomings, such as desultoriness or randomness or wandering, can prove places where imagination finds a local habitation; and this extends to the making of books as well as of individual poems. Leslie Stephen famously said that *Biographia Literaria* “of course, is put together with a pitchfork”;<sup>19</sup> but despite his breezy “of course” it remains unresolved just to what extent that appearance of haphazardness was in fact purposive and to what extent it was just the work of Coleridge’s inability to master the incoherence amid which he normally lived. Kathleen Wheeler’s remains the most thorough-going attempt to find the book a single, made thing, despite its wayward look: the book, she says, is organized not as normally discursive prose, in which regard it would certainly appear extremely incoherent, but rather as a readerly experience, structured by various deployments of irony that create, taken all together, “a submerged level of discourse” that unifies the book.<sup>20</sup> Hers is certainly a reading marked by great generosity of spirit, and I am not sure even the most ingenious deployment of irony could explain the presence of “Satyrane’s letters”;<sup>21</sup> but

18. David Collings, “Coleridge Beginning a Career: Desultory Authorship in *Religious Musings*,” *ELH* 58, no. 1 (1991): 187.

19. Stephen, *Hours in a Library* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1907), 4:350.

20. Wheeler, *Sources, Processes and Methods in Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 155.

21. Which were added late in the day to make up volume II, and only then because *Zapolya* was unavailable, being under contract to John Murray: see Daniel Mark Fogel, “A Compositional History of the *Biographia Literaria*,” *Studies in Bibliography* 30 (1977): 222; and compare with *Biographia*, 1:lxi–lxiv.

whatever the merits of the case as a whole, Wheeler does profitably alert us to the many kinds of literary self-consciousness in which Coleridge evidently delighted—the games, possibly serious games, that you might play with texts, as in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, the precursor to which his own subtitle, *Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions*, points.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the most extraordinarily desultory bit of authorship that Coleridge ever engaged in occurs in chapter 13 of *Biographia*, a passage with which Coleridgeans are so familiar that its extreme peculiarity has become almost invisible. In the thick of the transcendental deduction of the imagination Coleridge is interrupted, rather as he recalled being called away on business in the preface to “Kubla Khan” (*Poems*, 228–29): a letter from a well-meaning and practically-minded friend has arrived, containing some good advice which Coleridge transcribes. Readers are going to be perplexed by the philosophy, the friend tells Coleridge, “so abstruse a subject so abstrusely treated,” and feel additionally aggrieved that a book which announced itself as a literary life should have taken such a turn. Better to save all such matter for another occasion, counsels the friend—a “very judicious” suggestion, remarks Coleridge gratefully, promising to print “a detailed prospectus” of the forthcoming philosophical work at the close of the second volume (*Biographia*, 1:303, 304). There was no such prospectus at the end of the second volume. Hazlitt was very puzzled by the whole spectacle: “As Mr. C. has suppressed his Disquisition on the Imagination as unintelligible, we do not think it fair to make any remarks on the 200 pages of prefatory matter, which were printed, it seems, in the present work, before a candid friend apprised him of this little objection to the appearance of the Disquisition itself”;<sup>23</sup> and the comical point is indeed that so marked a shift of judgment about the wisdom of the metaphysical pages, or a change of heart about the prospectus, should not have entailed simply cutting the relevant passages from the book altogether. Coleridge goes out of his way to make a show of his incapacity, his struggle to handle the business of putting a book together. John Wilson (“Christopher North”) in *Blackwood’s* was incredulous, calling it an instance of “magnificent promise, and laughable non-performance, unequalled in the annals of literary history”:

The audience is assembled, the curtain is drawn up, and there, in his gown, cap, and wig is sitting Professor Coleridge. In comes a servant

22. The idea is floated by Peter Conrad in *Shandyism. The Character of Romantic Irony* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 71; and tied down by Donald H. Reiman, “Coleridge and the Art of Equivocation,” *Studies in Romanticism* 25, no. 3 (1986): 335–40, 344. Wheeler adduces *Shandy* briefly at one point in analogy with the missing chapter in *Biographia*: Wheeler, *Sources, Processes and Methods*, 203n40.

23. *Edinburgh Review*, August 1817, in *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson (London: Routledge, 1970), 320.



with a letter; the Professor gets up, and, with a solemn voice, reads it to the audience. It is from an enlightened Friend; and its object is to shew, in no very courteous terms either to the Professor or his Spectators, that he may lecture, but that nobody will understand him. He accordingly makes his bow, and the curtain falls; but the worst of the joke is, that the Professor pockets the admittance-money, for what reason, his out-witted audience are left, the best way they can, to “fancy or imagine.”<sup>24</sup>

Wilson is impressed if full of disdain and moved by the lingering suspicion that someone has got away with something; but Wilson anticipates, however unsympathetically, Kathleen Wheeler’s defence that the non-chapter is not an argument about imagination but rather an invitation to use it.<sup>25</sup> The relevant analogy might be something like Sterne’s invitation to readers to draw their own vision of Widow Wadman (“paint her to your own mind”) in the space he has left for them;<sup>26</sup> but where Sterne feels wholly in charge of proceedings, Coleridge’s textual desultoriness comes across as much less coherently strategic, and more obliquely revelatory. The friend has some hard words for Coleridge, which is to say that Coleridge has some hard words for himself, and in an intricate game of self-consciousness those hard words are partly his own words quoted against himself:

*I could not but repeat the lines which you had quoted from a MS. poem of your own in the FRIEND, and applied to a work of Mr Wordsworth’s though with a few of the words altered:*

————— An orphic tale indeed,  
A tale *obscure* of high and passionate thoughts  
To a *strange* music chaunted!

(*Biographia*, 1:302)

The words were indeed altered: the lines in the poem to Wordsworth, as published in *Sibylline Leaves*, read, “An orphic song indeed, / A song divine of high and passionate thoughts, / To their own Music chaunted!” (lines 46–48, *Poems*, 439). The self-punishing here is a matter of his failing a Wordsworthian destiny, which means in this context not being able to write like the poem that would come to be called *The Prelude*: Coleridge can manage not a “song” but merely a “tale,” something concocted and

24. *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, October 1817, in *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, 348.

25. Wheeler, *Sources, Processes and Methods*, 128.

26. Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 376, 377.

far-fetched, perhaps even a “mouldy” tale, as Jonson found *Pericles*;<sup>27</sup> nothing “divine” but simply “obscure”; and instead of the magically autotelic “their own Music” his thoughts have the sorry inadequacy of “a strange Music.” He is saying: this desultory literary life is not *that* literary life, an implication which would have been lost to more than a handful of readers (who had never heard Wordsworth’s poem on his own life) and was perhaps fully legible only by one, Wordsworth himself. Wordsworth’s literary life is one in which, as Wordsworth says, “should the guide I chuse / Be nothing better than a wandering cloud, / I cannot miss my way”;<sup>28</sup> and Coleridge’s is one in which he has very much missed his way. He has made a real hash of things, both of his life and of his literary *Life*, but there is brilliance and a sudden fluency in his non-achievement, which comes with a rush like inspiration:<sup>29</sup> the letter was written, he later recalled, “without taking my pen off the paper except to dip it in the inkstand” (*Letters*, 4:728).

*Biographia* has an epigraph from Goethe which effectively establishes desultoriness as the master theme of the work, setting it up from the off as something eminently worth writing about, even as it announces the correction of desultoriness as its *raison d'être*:

TRANSLATION. Little call as he may have to instruct others, he wishes nevertheless to open out his heart to such as he either knows or hopes to be of like mind with himself, but who are widely scattered in the world: he wishes to knit anew his connections with his oldest friends, to continue those recently formed, and to win other friends among the rising generation for the remaining course of his life. He wishes to spare the young those circuitous paths, on which he himself had lost his way.

(*Biographia*, 1:3)

Goethe’s paragraph comes from his introduction to *Propyläen* (1798), a piece full of what you might think of as a classical sense of orderly purpose:

27. Ben Jonson, *The New Inn, or The Light Heart*, in *Poetaster, Sejanus his Fall, The Devil is an Ass, The New Inn*, ed. Margaret Jane Kidnie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 425.

28. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), I.17–19, in *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), 28.

29. Jonathan Wordsworth points out how the structure of Chapter 8 is used “deliberately and skilfully” to throw into relief the climactic definitions of fancy and imagination, which appear on the last page of the volume. Jonathan Wordsworth, “The Infinite I AM: Coleridge and the Ascent of Being,” in *Coleridge’s Imagination*, ed. Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, and Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 23.

the *Propylaea* was the structure through which you reached the Athenian citadel. It is with a certain assurance that Goethe's original paragraph ends: "Er wuenscht der Jugend die Umwege zu ersparen, auf denen er sich selbst verirrte, und, indem er die Vorteile der gegenwärtigen Zeit bemerkt und nützt, das Andenken verdienstlicher früherer Bemühungen zu erhalten" (Coleridge leaves untranslated "and, while he observes and profits from the advantages of the moment, he preserves the memory of earlier and more praiseworthy endeavours").<sup>30</sup> But Coleridge suppresses any such complacent notes to end on the verb "verirrte," which means "strayed" as a lost sheep might stray: it has a moral edge of having left the straight and narrow and wandered. Even a wandering cloud will help Wordsworth find his way, so *wandering* isn't really what's going on at all; but wandering is for Coleridge the thing itself and makes him what he is.

*Biographia* is the sister work of *Sibylline Leaves*, Coleridge's first attempt to collect his poems together as an extensive body of work, and it might even be thought part of a single work: "the work sho<sup>d</sup> make three Volumes," was Murray's advice (*Biographia*, 2:287), apparently envisaging it as a single publication in three parts, and Coleridge himself described it as an "*Autobiography*" with "a Collection of Poems, by the same author" (*Letters*, 4:585, 4:584). *Biographia* had begun its life as the "Preface" to a (not quite) collected poems before swelling first into a separate volume in its own right, and then, thanks to the publisher, into two (*Biographia*, i.lv; lix); and the letter from a friend called it "a sort of introduction to a volume of poems," though there was not much in the book to suggest it was a companion volume to anyone who did not know already (*Biographia*, 1:301, 2:159). It is a sort of *Collected Poems* but as eccentric of its kind as *Biographia* was a "literary life," and while it would doubtless be too much to claim the volume as a piece of quasi-Nabokovian play with the idea of a "collected poems," still, there is a good deal of extraordinarily self-aware contrivance about, and, as with *Biographia*, Wordsworth is its unannounced focus. For the "collected poems" with which Coleridge was especially preoccupied at this stage of his life was Wordsworth's *Poems*, which had come out in the Spring of 1815. Wordsworth's volumes were a monument to a career-so-far, a handsome affair complete with frontispiece, a dedication to Sir George Beaumont, and a lengthy new preface (to which Coleridge sought to respond in the preface that then grew into *Biographia*). The books also had an ambitious organization reflected in a contents page which listed,

30. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Karl Goedeke (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1874), 12:564. English translation from *Goethe on Art*, ed. John Gage (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 5.

where available, dates both of composition and original publication:<sup>31</sup> the contents page is an early contribution to a Wordsworth bibliography. The works themselves were arranged into unusual categories which related the poems back to the predominant mental faculty represented in them: "Poems of the Fancy," "Poems of the Imagination," "Poems Proceeding from Sentiment and Reflection," and so on. This was an ostentatiously individual way of making such a book and of exhibiting the work (to date) of a writing life that came across as highly meditated and deeply ordered.

Surviving correspondence reveals that Coleridge was originally extremely keen that his response to Wordsworth should physically resemble Wordsworth's 1815 volumes, as though to engage with it visually as well as argumentatively: it was, said Morgan, his amanuensis, "to be printed like, in all respects, Mr Wordsworth[']s last edition . . . The Preface to these two volumes: that preface which precedes the poems, is the one which he has fixed on as a prototype for his preface," something which the editors of *Biographia* reasonably describe as "near obsession" (*Biographia*, 1:li, l). As things developed, Coleridge became less occupied by that thought—"As to the Size and Type I care nothing," he subsequently told his publisher (*Letters*, 4:585)—although the *Sibylline Leaves* page does indeed resemble the Wordsworthian in its disposition and the number of lines on each page, and Wordsworth's example haunts the book in ways other than typographical: in its organization, for one thing. As J. C. C. Mays comments, "the question arises whether he was at all influenced in his grouping of poems in *SL* by WW's far more elaborate classifications, even negatively";<sup>32</sup> and "negatively" is precisely, I should say, what was going on. For by contrast with Wordsworth's scheme, Coleridge's organizing concepts are almost ostentatiously unambitious: "Poems Occasioned by Political Events or Feelings Connected with them," "Love-Poems," "Meditative Poems in Blank Verse," "Odes and Miscellaneous Poems." Wordsworth, quite justifiably, was striving for a kind of career-summing substance: collecting your poems is a way of gathering yourself;<sup>33</sup> and indeed he kept to his categories in successive editions, as though having found the secret to what made his entire career tick. Coleridge's volume, by contrast, speaks of hesitancy and improvisation and work undone, a writing life only imperfectly

31. William Wordsworth, *Poems by William Wordsworth: including the Lyrical Ballads, and the Miscellaneous Pieces of the Author, with Additional Poems, a New Preface, and a Supplementary Essay*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1815).

32. Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 1:1249n10. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Poetical Works*.

33. A theme pursued enlighteningly by Michael Gamer, *Romanticism, Self-Canonization, and the Business of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

or provisionally gathered, as though ready to be gathered again in some different, better way sometime.

The title of *Sibylline Leaves* is already a confession of Coleridge's own desultory habits, this time as a keeper of his own archive. The first line of the preface reads: "The following collection has been entitled SIBYLLINE LEAVES; in allusion to the fragmentary and widely scattered state in which they have long been suffered to remain."<sup>34</sup> And, as it happens, we know this attitude of neglect to be no pose but to be quite correct: Coleridge had to write to Lady Beaumont to seek a copy of his poem to Wordsworth, published as "To a Gentleman," for example, as he had not kept one himself (*Letters*, 4:564). In the account of the Sibyl that Aeneas gives us, the prophecies are all initially placed in coherent order; it is only when a gust of wind disturbs them that they get out of sequence:

numquam deinde cavo volitantia prendere saxo  
nec revocare situs aut iungere carmina curat;  
inconsulti abeunt sedemque odere Sibyllae

("Never thereafter does she care to catch them, as they flutter in the rocky cave, nor to recover their places and unite the verses; inquirers depart no wiser than they came, and loath the Sibyl's seat.")<sup>35</sup> Coleridge's behavior is different, as for him there was never an order in the first place; and nor does the book obviously make good the disorder it discovers. For one thing, there is no contents page: "The list of contents appears to have been omitted by oversight," says Mays (*Poetical Works*, 1:1248), but then the attribution of intention is complex and even oversight might have a co-operative role to play. Signature A was printed sometime after the rest of the book (*Poetical Works*, 1:1246) and it makes for a very curious opening: the first thing the reader encounters after the title page is the preface, and then three extra poems that are added in, the inclusion of which Coleridge defends by appealing to the normal indulgence extended to juvenilia, though no one believes they really are juvenile poems;<sup>36</sup> then an extensive list of errata, which includes a famous and prominent addition to "The Eolian Harp"—"O! the one Life, within us and abroad" (*Sibylline Leaves*, xi)—which could not be remotely construed as an "erratum"; and

34. Coleridge, *Sibylline Leaves: A Collection of Poems* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), i. Hereafter, cited parenthetically in the text as *Sibylline Leaves*.

35. Virgil, *Aeneid*, III.441–52, in *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1–6*, ed. and trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 402–3.

36. Mays tentatively dates "Time, Real and Imaginary" to 1806–7 or 1811, "The Raven" to 1796 or 1797, and "Mutual Passion," which is actually an adaptation of a poem by Ben Jonson, to 1811 (*Poetical Works*, 1:798, 1:316, 1:890).

then the reader arrives at Signature B and “The Ancient Mariner. In Seven Parts”; and the other poems follow in their categories. The prominence of the “Errata,” among the front papers, where one might have looked for “Contents,” is very striking: the prominence of this advertisement of error and second thoughts adds to the eccentricity of the volume, which goes out of its way to look, indeed, like it’s been put together with a pitchfork.<sup>37</sup> The title page insists, in its layout, curiously, on the indefinite article: “SIBYLLINE LEAVES: / A / Collection of Poems.” This is, emphatically, a collection of poems, as though other collections of poems might have been possible: it is an extremely un-authoritative title page, by contrast with, for example, Wordsworth’s.<sup>38</sup> There is, in short, something decidedly *uncollected* about *Sibylline Leaves*: the Sibyl never collected her poems back together again, so the title *Sibylline Leaves* implies things that have gone uncollected, a gathering of scattered things; there is a rueful kind of paradox or puzzle in the title. One of its most striking poems, “Human life,” which is about the impossibility of really imagining a meaningful human life without crediting its immortality, says of the merely mortal man: “Thy being’s being is a contradiction” (line 29, *Poems*, 474; *Sibylline Leaves*, 269); and a feeling of deep self-contradiction haunts the whole volume, reminding me (I admit incongruously) of the highly knowing joke made by John Betjeman’s late collection, *Uncollected Poems*.<sup>39</sup> Or the old cartoon which shows an exasperated railway employee finally succumbing to the remorseless logic of the nerdish schoolboy who has pointed out that the sign “Lost Property” should properly read “Found Property.” Coleridge’s volume has a similar kind of paradox about it: it is a finding of lost things.

“To a Gentleman,” the poem to Wordsworth about *The Prelude*, was printed for the first time in *Sibylline Leaves*, against Wordsworth’s wishes, and embodies the volume’s paradoxical kind of creativity as it proceeds under a Wordsworthian shadow. The poem contrasts Wordsworth’s achievement with Coleridge’s own sense of failure: Wordsworth appears, memorably, as a mighty piece of castle architecture, like something Kubla Khan might have thrown up around his pleasure grounds—“the dread Watch-Tower of man’s absolute Self” (*Poems*, 441; *Sibylline Leaves*, 199, 200–201)—while Coleridge

37. Coleridge was certainly capable of serious play with the paratextual stuff, including errata: one of the errata in the early pamphlet *Conciones ad Populum* reads “Page 61, for murder read Fight for his King and Country,” *Conciones ad Populum. Or Addresses to the People* (n.p., 1795), 69.

38. It is true that the book is not really a “collection” since it lacks, among other things, “Kubla Khan” and “Christabel,” published the year before by Murray, as well as other poems that Coleridge seems to have believed were owned by Longman, their original publisher.

39. Betjeman, *Uncollected Poems* (London: John Murray, 1982).

is a different sort of creature altogether: “ill beseems it me, / Who came a welcomer in Herald’s Guise, / Singing of Glory, and Futurity, / To wander back on such unhealthful road, / Plucking the poisons of self-harm!” (lines 77–81, *Poems*, 441; *Sibylline Leaves*, 199, 200–201). “Absolute self” versus a self-harming disposition to “wander” puts the antithesis in a starkly self-deploring way; and other passages make the point no less clearly:

Ah! as I listened with a heart forlorn,  
 The pulses of my Being beat anew:  
 And even as Life returns upon the Drown’d,  
 Life’s joy rekindling rous’d a throng of Pains—  
 Keen Pangs of Love, awakening as a babe  
 Turbulent, with an outcry in the heart;  
 And Fears self-willed, that shunn’d the eye of Hope;  
 And Hope that scarce would know itself from Fear;  
 Sense of past Youth, and Manhood come in vain,  
 And Genius given, and Knowledge won in vain;  
 And all which I had cull’d in Wood-walks wild,  
 And all which patient toil had reared, and all,  
 Commune with *thee* had opened out—but Flowers  
 Strewed on my corse, and borne upon my Bier,  
 In the same Coffin, for the self-same Grave!

(lines 62–81, *Poems*, 440; *Sibylline Leaves*, 200)

He has lived an anti-*Prelude*, past youth and manhood come “in vain”; and genius given and knowledge won “in vain”: the stalled repetition, and the dissonant off-rhyme of “come” with “won,” enact a failure of powers with brilliant resourcefulness. It is a piece of self-abnegation but also possesses a kind of strength in the ingenuity of its self-definition:

And when—O Friend! my comforter and guide!  
 Strong in thyself, and powerful to give strength!—  
 Thy long sustained Song finally closed,  
 And thy deep voice had ceased—yet thou thyself  
 Wert still before my eyes, and round us both  
 That happy vision of beloved Faces—  
 Scarce conscious, and yet conscious of its close  
 I sate, my being blended in one thought  
 (Thought was it? or Aspiration? or Resolve?)  
 Absorb’d, yet hanging still upon the sound—  
 And when I rose, I found myself in prayer.

(lines 103–113, *Poems*, 443; *Sibylline Leaves*, 202–3)

That last line has a double meaning: “when I rose, I discovered myself to be praying, without having particularly willed myself to do so”; or, more affirmatively, “when I rose, I discovered myself, myself as myself, I *found* myself, in an act of prayer: your poetry has made me realise what it is that I am.” That second reading has the vigor of a certain kind of Protestant self-confirmation: as in “I once was lost, but now am found,” or the splendid lines of Charles Wesley: “I now believe, and therefore speak, / And found myself go forth to seek / The sheep that wander still.”<sup>40</sup> Finding yourself, in that sense, means that the wandering has come to an end; but finding yourself in the first sense is something like the opposite of that: it is waking up to discover whatever it is that is happening to happen to you at the moment.

Finding yourself features on a number of occasions in *Sibylline Leaves*. The ancient Mariner gets all the way back to his home port without apparently doing anything to will it: “But swift as dreams, myself I found / Within the Pilot’s boat” (lines 587–88, *Poems*, 278; *Sibylline Leaves*, 36). “Fears in Solitude” has:

Homeward I wind my way; and lo! recall’d  
From bodings that have well nigh wearied me,  
I find myself upon the brow, and pause,  
Startled!

(lines 210–13, *Poems*, 327; *Sibylline Leaves*, 73)

And from “The Picture”:

I find myself  
Beneath a weeping birch (most beautiful  
Of forest-trees, the Lady of the woods),  
Hard by the brink of a tall weedy rock  
That overbrows the cataract. How bursts  
The landscape on my sight!

(lines 135–40, *Poems*, 416; *Sibylline Leaves*, 133)

In these cases of “finding yourself,” both meanings are present: the desultoriness of succumbing to what happens to happen, finding yourself doing something, gets wound up and perhaps identified with something momentous and wonderful and potentially transformative, like a Wesleyan finding of yourself. Through what looks like a weakness, a being astray, a wandering,

40. John Newton, “Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound!),” line 3, in *Olney Hymns: in Three Books* (Edinburgh: James Taylor, 1877), 73. Charles Wesley, “I thank Thee, Lord of Earth and Heaven,” line 13, in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1749), 1:298.



Coleridge arrives at something that a greater sense of purpose or intent would not have pulled off. J. C. C. Mays once suggestively brought together Coleridge's "myth of himself as a failure, in relation to Wordsworth" with the spirit abroad in the works of Samuel Beckett, another master of non-achievement, whose narrators often find themselves somewhere, with something of the same combination of happenstance and self-discovery:<sup>41</sup> "But it was not long before I found myself alone, in the dark."<sup>42</sup>

The last poem in *Sibylline Leaves* is not "Religious Musings: A Desultory Poem" but the "Destiny of Nations," which, as its title suggests, promises to be anything but desultory, but then discovers an alternative Coleridgean vocation. The theological question the poem addresses is the relationship between individual agency and the ubiquity of God, and the Spinozistic answer is that "Duteous or proud, alike obedient all, / Evolve the process of eternal good" (lines 58–59, *Poems*, 127; *Sibylline Leaves*, 283), but the experience of the poem is diffusive rather than purposive, as Coleridge becomes absorbed in the different examples of superstition that he offers:

For Fancy is the Power  
That first unsensualizes the dark mind,  
Giving it new delights; and bids it swell  
With wild activity; and peopling air,  
By obscure fears of Beings invisible,  
Emancipates it from the grosser thrall  
Of the present impulse . . .

(lines 80–86, *Poems*, 128–29; *Sibylline Leaves*, 285)

The movement here is one of sheer proliferation, of the mind free-wheeling into random fancies of inventiveness. That various movement of consciousness is enacted in the miscellaneous business of the page, Coleridge's lengthy footnotes wandering off into the mountains and parenting methods of the Laplanders as recounted by Leemius; and, even more experimentally, at the closing of the poem, which is also the closing of the book, which is a non-closing. It resembles nothing so much as the end of Beckett's novel *Watt*, where the author prints as an "Addenda" a gathering of miscellaneous stuff that he could get into the novel, some of it very beautiful, including the little poem that begins "who may tell the tale / of the old man?," some odd, some imponderable. Beckett

41. J. C. C. Mays, "Coleridge's 'Love': 'All he can manage, more than he could,'" in *Coleridge's Visionary Languages. Essays in Honour of John Beer*, ed. Tim Fulford and Morton D. Paley (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 57. Mays says: "The comparison with Beckett could get out of hand," 58.

42. Beckett, *Malone Dies: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1959), 180–81.

dryly explains in a footnote to his "Addenda": "The following precious and illuminating material should be carefully studied. Only fatigue and disgust prevented its incorporation."<sup>43</sup> Coleridge makes something very like the same throwaway joke in "The Destiny of Nations," interrupting the voice of God "—O Thou of the Most high / Chosen, whom all the perfected in Heaven / Behold expectant—" (lines 275–77) with a heading in square brackets:

[The following fragments were intended to form part of the Poem when finished.]

(*Poems*, 134; *Sibylline Leaves*, 293)

It is one of his best textual games about desultory composition, work left undone, like publishing the poem "The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree" with several stanzas paraphrased in prose and with the invitation to readers to work them up into verse themselves if they wanted (*Poems*, 448–49). In Coleridge's "Addenda," we come across the Tutelary Spirit addressing Joan of Arc, and one of her visions, which rises, anachronistically, to a hectic climax announcing an all-embracing theistic Monism. This sounds like something ending:

"Glory to Thee, Father of Earth and Heaven!  
 All-conscious PRESENCE of the Universe!  
 Nature's vast Ever-acting ENERGY!  
 In Will, in Deed, IMPULSE of All to All!  
 Whether thy Love with unrefracted Ray  
 Beam on the PROPHET's purged eye, or if  
 Diseasing Realms the ENTHUSIAST, wild of Thought,  
 Scatter new Frenzies on the infected Throng,  
 Thou Both inspiring and predooming Both,  
 Fit INSTRUMENTS and best, of perfect End:  
 Glory to Thee, Father of Earth and Heaven!"

(lines 459–69, *Poems*, 140; *Sibylline Leaves*, 302–3)

A book that has begun with scattered leaves ends with an instance of scattering: a bad man, an enthusiast, scatters wild ideas on the throng; but even such scattering is redeemed: within the optimistic scheme, all contributes to the good, and even scattering can be incorporated, somehow, within an imaginative economy in which all will come right. Which may be just as well for, no sooner has this remarkable crescendo occurred, than the poem itself breaks into scraps; the effect on the page is marvelously inventive:

43. Beckett, *Watt* (London: John Calder, 1976), 247.

“Fit INSTRUMENTS and best, of perfect End:  
Glory to Thee, Father of Earth and Heaven!”

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And first a Landscape rose  
More wild, and waste, and desolate, than where  
The white bear, drifting on a field of ice,  
Howls to her sundered cubs with piteous rage  
And savage agony.

FINIS

(lines 468–74, *Poems*, 140–41; *Sibylline Leaves*, 303)

This is a FINIS which hardly feels much like a FINIS—in Coleridge’s words from the poem to Wordsworth, “Scarce conscious, and yet conscious of its close.” The page manages to recreate a sense of scattered leaves, and then calls attention to its own interest in fragmentation by ending with a simile of fragmentation, the white bear finding itself drifting off upon an iceberg of its own, “sundered.” The analogy with Beckett is imperfect of course, not least because, as Mays says, “Coleridge was not happy in his inachievement”;<sup>44</sup> but there is a likeness for all that, and even a paradoxical kind of Coleridgean happiness to be found in so wonderfully inventive a desultory spirit.

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