

# A DELICIOUS TORMENT

## The friendship of Wordsworth and Coleridge

By Evelyn Toynton

Discussed in this essay:

*The Friendship: Wordsworth and Coleridge*, by Adam Sisman. Viking. 512 pages. \$27.95.



In December 1793, shortly after his twenty-first birthday, a lovesick, guilt-ridden scholarship student ran away from Jesus College, Cambridge, and fled to London. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was deeply in debt to his tutor, his violin teacher, his bookseller, and his wine merchant; the college authorities looked with disfavor on his radical politics; he had been neglecting his studies for months

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past; and he had convinced himself—somewhat prematurely, since he hadn't asked her—that the object of his love would never marry him. In London he bought a lottery ticket, hoping to gamble himself out of debt, but his number failed to come up. So he gave away his last few pence to some beggars and enlisted in the Light Dragoons under a ludicrous name that nonetheless retained his own initials: Silas Tomkyn Comberbache.

His Majesty's Army can rarely have welcomed so unpromising a recruit. He frequently fell off his horse as he tried to mount it; if he managed to land in

the saddle, the animal would buck him off again, or bolt from the parade ground with him on its back. It even resisted his efforts at grooming it (Coleridge decided that horses should really be able to clean themselves). Nor could he keep his musket in order. Once, when the regiment's carbines were laid out for inspection, the officer demanded, "Whose rusty gun is this?" Coleridge stepped forward. "Is it very rusty, sir?" he asked. "Because if it is, I think it must be mine."

His fellow soldiers, impressed by his spectacular incompetence, got into the habit of taking over his chores. In return, he wrote their love letters for them, amazing their sweethearts with his eloquence, and entertained them with stories from Herodotus (they assumed that the Battle of Thermopylae must have been fought in the north of England a few years back). He also nursed a "poor Comrade" with smallpox through eight days and nights of delirium and fever. Still, it was unanimously felt that the sooner he and the army parted company, the happier everyone would be. Four months after his enlistment, his family scraped together the money to buy him out, in time for him to sit his next scholarship exam at Cambridge. The

regiment's muster roll records his emancipation with the words, "discharged S. T. Comberbache, Insane."

Joining the Light Dragoons was not the first of Coleridge's mad ventures, nor would it be the last. ("If life is a lesson," said E. M. Forster, "he never learnt it.") A year later, he conceived a plan for a socialist farming community on the banks of the Susquehanna; he had never been to America and knew nothing about farming, but must have loved the sibilant rise and fall of the name. He titled his scheme of

communal living a “Pantisocracy,” a word he coined from the Greek, meaning power for all. It was this vision of Utopia, concocted with his fellow poet and radical Robert Southey, that led to his dropping out of Cambridge for good and stumbling into an engagement, urged on him by Southey, with the sister of Southey’s fiancée; the Pantisocrats were supposed to emigrate in pairs.

Pantisocracy collapsed when Southey, having come into a little money, decided he would rather not share it, and further proposed bringing servants to their American commune. But by that time Coleridge had been shamed by Southey into honoring his vague promise to Sara Fricker; managing to persuade himself, at least intermittently, that he loved her, Coleridge entered into a marriage that would prove disastrous. No one could buy him out of that one.

Of all the plans he hatched—and there would be many over the years, mostly for books on metaphysics he never wrote—the one for which he is best remembered now was a project conceived shortly after the emigration scheme had been abandoned. In early 1798, Coleridge and a little-known poet named William Wordsworth decided to publish a joint volume of their poems. As Coleridge described the undertaking almost two decades later,

it was agreed . . . that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us.

Their collaboration was born of an impassioned friendship that had begun in 1797, when Wordsworth and his beloved sister Dorothy moved to Somerset, not far from where Coleridge

was living with his wife and baby son. The relationship between them, legendary in the history of English poetry, is now, for the first time, the subject of a “dual biography”: Adam Sisman’s new book, *The Friendship*. Referring to themselves jokingly as “The Concern,” the young poets spent hours discussing the limitations of reason, the power of nature, the evils of war, the hollow and brittle refinement of contemporary poetry, the tyranny of the English social system, and the true nature of religion. Like Coleridge, Wordsworth was an ardent democrat who had recently become disillusioned with radical politics. Having been a fiery Jacobin, he had spent long periods in France during the revolution and been horrified by the murderous violence of the Reign of Terror. Also like Coleridge, he had come to believe that it was poetry, not politics, that could redeem society. His own work was changing from an explicit call for social reform to an equally radical, but less overtly political, treatment of the impoverished “rustics” in his native Lake District; he was resolved to show them in their full humanity, something never attempted in English poetry before.

**B**ut unlike Coleridge, Wordsworth was not given to wild enthusiasms and bursts of fanciful humor; he was grave and deliberate, free of those vacillations and doubts that made his friend’s life so complicated. He did not go in for torrents of metaphysical speculation, but observed and reflected in silence. Whereas Coleridge’s habitual expression was one of “great Sloth, and great, indeed almost ideotic [sic], good nature” (his own description), Wordsworth’s “cheeks [were] furrowed by strong purpose and feeling.” Whereas Coleridge could not walk in a straight line—he kept veering from one side of the path to the other—and “liked to compose in walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches of a copse-wood . . . Wordsworth always wrote (if he could) walking up and down a straight gravel walk.” And also unlike Coleridge, Wordsworth had no tendency whatsoever toward excessive self-abasement.

Younger by two years, Coleridge was much better known—as both poet and radical thinker—yet professed himself “a little man” beside Wordsworth, inferior to him “in all modes of excellence.” He told anyone who would listen that Wordsworth was among the greatest poets. (The most extraordinary thing about that statement—made when Wordsworth had written just a few poems that seem negligible now—is that it proved to be true.) Wordsworth “strides on so far before you,” he told the unbelievers, “that he dwindles in the distance!”

He even decided that it was Wordsworth who should write the great epic he had intended to undertake himself—a long philosophical poem of “impassioned reflections on men, nature, and society” that would go very far toward changing the world. Wordsworth agreed to begin as soon as Coleridge had laid out the plan for it. In the meantime, when they were not roaming the Quantock Hills in the company of Dorothy Wordsworth (never Sara Coleridge), they worked—often seated at the same table, and sometimes providing each other with lines or even whole verses—on the poems for their joint volume, trying to create poetry that would reawaken the “great and simple affections of our nature.” In Wordsworth’s view, these affections were being blunted by “the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.”

The book was published anonymously in 1798, under the title *Lyrical Ballads*. Now acknowledged as the seminal event in the birth of English Romanticism, and the great precursor of all the English poetry that would follow, it was largely ignored at the time or else greeted with scorn. Southey, who knew the identity of the authors, gave it a particularly nasty review, singling out for dispraise the long poem that opened the collection, a supernatural tale of guilt and suffering and redemption; “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” he said, was “a poem

of little merit”—“a Dutch [i.e., drunken] attempt at German sublimity,” many of its stanzas “absurd or unintelligible.”

Although the *Lyrical Ballads* has been celebrated through two centuries for its groundbreaking use of the language of ordinary speech and for Wordsworth’s moving depictions of simple country people, its chief glories are not in fact its tales of idiot boys and poor cottage-dwellers. Along with the “Ancient Mariner,” one of Coleridge’s finest—and most untypical—creations, the greatest poem in the collection is surely “Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” in which Wordsworth both adopts the intimate, meditative tone of Coleridge’s earlier “conversation” poems and, for the first time, expresses his ecstatic feelings for nature within a metaphysical framework:

... And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the  
joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting  
suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living  
air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of  
man,  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all  
thought  
And rolls through all things.

Only Wordsworth could have written that—the great master of English cadence, he can make blank verse sound like the voice of God—but it is doubtful that he could have done so had he not met Coleridge. Although it is probably an exaggeration to suggest, as the critic I. A. Richards does, that “Coleridge was Wordsworth’s creator,” Coleridge certainly gave him a metaphysical perspective, a largeness of understanding, that Wordsworth might never have found for himself. His previous work had drawn almost exclusively on instinctive sympathies; now it took on the language of transcendence.

**A**nd here we come to the great source of contention among writers on the subject: If

Wordsworth owed his whole poetic flowering to Coleridge, how could he have treated him so shabbily later on? Defenders of Wordsworth counter that question with one of their own: How could anybody have put up with the impossible person Coleridge became? Everyone agrees, more or less, about the joyful beginnings of their friendship; when it comes to explaining what went wrong—and things went very wrong indeed—opinion is bitterly divided.

Adam Sisman—winner of a 2001 National Book Critics Circle Award for *Boswell’s Presumptuous Task*, the tale of another famous literary friendship—vows to avoid the “partisanship” that has “bedevilled” so much writing about the two men and presents his book as an “attempt to escape from this biographical impasse.” In this he succeeds admirably. Ironically, however, his very judicious account can only convince us that both men behaved extremely badly. It’s simply a question of which type of bad behavior the reader will find more objectionable.

When people say they love Coleridge, they tend to mean just that. Even such distinguished scholars as the late Walter Jackson Bate of Harvard write of what a “lovable human being” he is, referring to “our love of Coleridge” as a fact to be taken for granted. And Anne Fadiman, former editor of *The American Scholar*, describes the Comberbache side of Coleridge as “the fellow who makes scads of promises he cannot keep, ducks his responsibilities, owes money, moves through life in a frenzy of disorganization, and yet—because he is generous, because he has so much charm, because he is his own worst critic, because we can’t help ourselves—commands and deserves our love.” To many readers, Coleridge’s combination of intellectual brilliance and warmhearted, even foolish, naiveté has always proved irresistible.

Wordsworth inspires a different sort of devotion; people love him not for who he was but for what he wrote. Practically everyone who met him, including those, like Keats, who revered his work, was shocked by his egotism. Southey decried his “entire & intense selfishness”; a

typical dinner party at Charles Lamb’s house, Coleridge sat at one end of the table, quoting Wordsworth, and Wordsworth sat at the other end, also quoting Wordsworth. When Coleridge managed to persuade a publisher to issue a second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, with all the proceeds going to Wordsworth—as they had the first time around—he spent weeks transcribing Wordsworth’s poems, marking up the sheets for the printer, and writing letters to everyone he knew who might praise the work in print. Wordsworth, meanwhile, refused to include “Christabel,” a new poem of which Coleridge was very proud, and insisted on adding to the preface an apology for the “great defects” of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” which he had always regarded with scorn.

**Y**et apart from being the greater poet, Wordsworth was in many ways the more admirable character: a loving husband and brother (a skeptic might point out that his wife and sister were so selflessly devoted to his interests, so worshipful of his genius, that they cannot have been hard to love); a fond father; a conscientious member of his community. At the same time he was heroically, single-mindedly dedicated to his poetic task. Coleridge, on the other hand, though he certainly had a conscience, was rarely capable of acting on it. His laudanum addiction, the periodic torments of withdrawal, his titanic guilt, his titanic self-doubt, in combination with many physical ailments both real and imaginary—it was he who coined the term “psychosomatic”—all these things rendered him incapable of providing for his wife and children. (Southey wound up supporting them all.) Not surprisingly, he was also a nightmare as a houseguest.

By the early nineteenth century, both men had moved to Wordsworth’s beloved Lake District with their families. More and more, as Coleridge’s marriage disintegrated, he stayed with the Wordsworths rather than at home. The whole family, particularly the women in

the household, provided copious sympathy and succor. They had always blamed his difficulties on Sara Coleridge; given the encouragement he needed and a tranquil atmosphere in which to work, he would, they were sure, produce masterpieces. Seeing him at such close quarters shook their faith severely. Although there was one manic period of activity, lasting several months, during which he wrote almost the entire contents of a weekly journal he had founded, the rest of the time he barely worked at all. He still managed to be useful as an adviser on Wordsworth's poetry, but he spent more time reading than writing, more time talking than writing, more time drinking than writing. He often stayed in bed until noon, and his screaming, opium-induced nightmares must have had the family leaping out of their beds. Nor did it help matters that he had been obsessively, unrequitedly in love with Wordsworth's unmarried sister-in-law for nearly a decade—the only great poem of his later years, "Dejection: an Ode," began as a letter to her—and was "harassing and persecuting" her, as Dorothy Wordsworth put it, with declarations of that love.

The break came when a mutual friend, preparing to take Coleridge back to London with him, was warned by Wordsworth against having him as a houseguest and told in confidence about Coleridge's irregular habits and lack of discipline. The friend, as friends will, repeated Wordsworth's remarks to Coleridge, even embellishing them a little: Wordsworth, he said, had given up on Coleridge completely, and regarded him as an "absolute nuisance." A devastated Coleridge wandered the streets and then poured out his heartbreak in often disjointed sentences in his journal: "No hope of me! Absol. Nuisance! God's mercy is it a dream!" Months later, he showed up at Lamb's house, weeping, and told Lamb's sister in a broken voice, "Wordsworth, Wordsworth has given me up."

When the news of Coleridge's distress was conveyed back to the Lake District, Wordsworth, regarding himself as blameless, felt it was up to

Coleridge to demand an explanation, which Coleridge could not bring himself to do. He had always effaced himself in his relations with Wordsworth, forgiving both Wordsworth's unquestioning acceptance of his devotion and his dismissive attitude toward Coleridge's poetry. He could not forgive being called a "rotten drunkard." Although the two men were superficially reconciled some years later, their friendship was effectively over.

Coleridge lived out his last eighteen years in Highgate, then a leafy village north of London, where a sympathetic doctor and his wife had taken him in. His hosts strictly regulated his laudanum intake, although he did manage to sneak extra doses now and then, and under their care he embarked on the most productive period of his life. He no longer considered himself a poet—whatever confidence he'd had had been destroyed by Wordsworth's lack of enthusiasm for his work—but his writings on politics and religion, his lectures on Shakespeare and philosophy, and his *Aids to Reflection*, an influential volume of Christian apologetics, brought him many new admirers. So did his "literary autobiography," the *Biographia Literaria*—a sprawling hodgepodge of a book that is nevertheless one of the great texts of literary criticism. Some of the most brilliant chapters in the book are devoted to a defense and explication of Wordsworth's poetry, while its defects are defined in a word of Coleridge's own coinage: "matter-of-factness." Bate calls the Coleridge of the *Biographia* "one of the half-dozen greatest critical interpreters in the history of literature . . . in philosophic profundity he excels every other English critic."

It was also during this period that, at the urging of Byron, Coleridge finally published both "Christabel" and the last of the great poems he had written at the time of his early friendship with Wordsworth. In his prefatory note, he calls this poem a mere "fragment," its laudanum-induced composition having been, he says, interrupted by the arrival of "a person on business from Porlock."

**FPO  
B&W**

**FPO  
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(The Person from Porlock has become the best-known excuse in literature, and the title of numerous books.) But “Kubla Khan” remains one of the most vivid poems in the language, its exultant final lines the ultimate expression of the Romantic conception of the poet:

And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

It was to be the final appearance of Coleridge’s fiery youthful self. By the time of its publication, he had become stout and mild and sorrowful, with a prematurely old face. “The sage of Highgate” was celebrated above all, in those years, for his conversation, or rather his monologues, since he did not so much converse as expound upon an astonishing range of topics—science, metaphysics, literature, religion, ethics, politics—for hours at a time. The eminences of the age—Emerson, Carlyle, Harriet Martineau, John Stuart Mill, and many religious thinkers inspired by Coleridge’s philosophical rebuttals of Enlightenment skepticism—trooped up Highgate Hill to visit him. Mill credited Coleridge with liberating him from “mechanistic” and materialistic philosophy, just as he credited Wordsworth’s poetry with saving him from a nervous breakdown. He would later say, “The class of thinkers has scarcely yet arisen by whom [Coleridge] is to be judged.”

Yet Coleridge’s life was still widely adduced as a cautionary tale about blighted promise. Hazlitt, describing their first meeting thirty years after the fact, wrote, “his nose, the rudder of the face, the index of the will, was small, feeble, nothing—like what he has done.” If Coleridge “had not been the most impressive talker of his age, he would probably have been the finest writer.” Carlyle described the talk in the garden at Highgate as “not flowing any-whither like a river, but spreading every-whither in inextric-

able currents and regurgitations like a lake or sea; terribly deficient in definite goal or aim,” noting that Coleridge’s “express contributions to poetry, philosophy, or any specific province of human literature or enlightenment, had been small and sadly intermittent.”

Indeed, it sometimes seems that Coleridge is more famous as a failure than for anything he wrote. His loyal daughter, trying to explain his relatively small output, declared, “He could not bear to complete incompletely, which everybody else does.” But it is E. M. Forster, writing a century after his death, who offers what may be the best rejoinder to Coleridge’s critics:

He seldom did what he or what others hoped, and posterity has marked him as her prey in consequence. She has never ceased to hold up her plump finger to him, and shake it and say that he has disappointed her. And he has acquiesced because he is a darling. But if one turns on posterity and says, “Well! what else do you want him to do? Would you rather have Comberbacke [sic] as he is or not at all?” she is apt to be silent or to change the conversation.

While Coleridge was being treated as a “useless genius,” Wordsworth was becoming the most revered literary figure of the age. He was given a government sinecure that at last provided him with a reasonable income—provoking much criticism from those who felt he’d betrayed his early radicalism for “a handful of silver”—and then, in 1843, was made Queen Victoria’s Poet Laureate. He lived surrounded by devotees, from the adoring females of his family circle to the countless admirers who began making the pilgrimage to the Lake District to worship at his shrine. But he, too, had more than his share of sorrow: three of his five children died before he did, and his sister Dorothy lapsed into dementia.

Wordsworth’s poetry suffered also. Even as his reputation was growing, his work was becoming more and more pedestrian, full of humorless and turgid moralizing about man and nature. (“Do not think/That good and wise ever will be allowed/Though strength decay, to breathe

in such estate/As shall divide them wholly from the stir/Of hopeful nature.”) Such “uplifting” solemnity may have appealed to the Victorians, but the later work now goes largely unread, for good reason. Almost all the great poems for which he is remembered were written in the ten years after 1797; the rest, as one critic recently put it, “have become bywords for tedium.”

And sometimes Wordsworth, like Coleridge, was haunted by a sense of failure. Sisman argues, convincingly, that Coleridge must bear much of the responsibility: it was because he could not complete the long philosophical poem Coleridge had urged on him—the work on nature, man, and society that was to redeem the world—that Wordsworth feared he had not fulfilled his mission as a poet. He struggled with this epic off and on for forty years, but managed to complete only a long autobiographical poem, in fourteen books of often rhapsodic blank verse, that he thought of as the “prelude” to the great work. Although he had virtually finished it by 1805, he refused to publish it in his lifetime. After his death, it finally appeared as *The Prelude: Growth of a Poet’s Mind*, and in the years that followed it was increasingly recognized as his masterpiece. He had never been a systematic thinker, of the sort that “Coleridge’s poem” would have required; what he was, in all his egotism, was a genius at introspection, and *The Prelude’s* explorations of his own states of mind and being, of the continuities and discontinuities between his childhood and older self, had particular resonance for writers of the early twentieth century. “Of all English men of letters,” declared James Joyce, Wordsworth “best deserves [the] word ‘genius.’”

Wordsworth outlived his former friend by sixteen years. When Coleridge died, in 1834, he apparently was not among the mourners at the funeral. Nor did he express much grief. Yet it seems, from various remarks he made, that he had not only forgiven

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Coleridge but also remembered him with something like an old man's tenderness. He told Coleridge's nephew that Coleridge's mind was "habitually present" with him; on another occasion, he said, "Many men have done wonderful things . . . but STC is the only wonderful man I ever knew." He never composed an elegy for the man who had been so central to the realization of his own poetic powers. But he, more than anyone, must have recognized the truth of the epitaph that Coleridge had written for himself years earlier:

Here sleeps at length poor Col. and  
without screaming  
Who died, as he had always lived, a-  
dreaming. ■

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