

I



SONNETS

# Sonnets

## PREFACE

NO ONE NOW THINKS of Coleridge as a "sonneteer". The form seems too decorous, too limited and much too tidy for him. Yet Coleridge wrote sonnets at crucial moments throughout his life: when he went to school in London (No. 1); when he invented Pantisocracy at University (No. 8); when he got married and had his first child in Bristol (No. 12); when he fell in love again in the Lake District (No. 14); when he went abroad to Malta (No. 15); when he despaired of his writing (No. 19); and when he felt better about it (No. 17); and when he was slowly dying at Highgate (No. 21).

This section is made up of a chronological selection of twenty-one sonnets – less than half Coleridge's total output – written across the entire arc of his career, between the ages of sixteen ("To the Autumn Moon") and sixty-one ("To the Young Artist"). Part of its interest lies in the sort of miniature, snapshot history it provides of Coleridge's life over these forty-five years, with its extreme variations in mood, situation and outlook. There are a few great poems here – No. 5, No. 12, No. 19 perhaps – but all of them are revealing: funny, tragic, brilliant or absurd, just like their protean author.

The sonnets also show the broad development of Coleridge's literary style, seen through the magnifying glass of one particular and extremely demanding form. As a young man he learned a great deal from his contemporary William Bowles (see No. 4), and later from the seventeenth-century religious poet George Herbert (see No. 19). The early poems tend to be fulsome and derivative, the middle ones clear and highly original, the later ones denser and much more difficult to absorb. In general, there is a sense of Coleridge's language becoming quieter, and more personal. His voice gets steadily closer to us and more confidential.

The old, baroque Miltonic conventions of eighteenth-century

poetic diction – double-epithets, exclamations, personifications, decorative periphrasis (see No. 6) – slowly drop away. They are replaced by a plainer, but often more openly emotional style (see No. 14) which can be disturbingly bitter (see No. 20). The picture is further complicated by sonnets based on translations, adaptations, and one startling parody of the language of contemporary “Sensibility” in the form of a sonnet-nursery rhyme (No. 13).

Coleridge was not greatly interested in the mere technicalities of sonnets. This was simply a matter of adapting the rhyme schemes of the Petrarchean, Shakespearean or Miltonic forms; and of varying the iambic pentameter line to carry speech rhythms (see “The Poet in the Clouds”, No. 17). “Respecting the Metre of a Sonnet, the Writer should consult his own convenience. – Rhymes, many or few, or no rhymes at all – whatever the chastity of his ear may prefer, whatever the rapid expression of his feeling will permit.” (Preface, *Poems*, 1796).

But he was fascinated by the challenge of the sonnet’s brevity and finality. He wondered what sort of subjects, and what kind of emotional materials, such a compact and definitively “closed” form could contain. The idea of the sonnet as a small, sculpted, elegant shape, which its materials must fit snugly and exactly, is the very opposite of the “open”, irregular and unfinished form which Coleridge often used so spectacularly elsewhere (see VII Visionary Fragments).

Traditionally, the sonnet lent itself to love poetry, but Coleridge rarely used it in this way (though see Nos. 14–16). It also lent itself to sequences, and public occasions: Coleridge first made his name as a young poet with a sequence of twelve “Sonnets to Eminent Characters” (radical writers, politicians and scientists, as well as an actress) published in the *Morning Post* for winter 1794 (see Nos. 6–7).

But when in 1796 he privately published a critical anthology of sonnets, he wrote a preface suggesting that the true purpose of the form was to develop a single, inward line of emotion which was inspired by Nature – “a development of some lonely feeling deduced from, and associated with, the scenery of Nature.” His definition of the sonnet depended, paradoxically, on the subject-matter rather than the form. “Poems, in which no lonely feeling is developed, are not Sonnets because the Author has chosen to write them in fourteen lines; they should rather be entitled Odes, or Songs, or Inscriptions.”

It is remarkable how many of Coleridge’s best sonnets conform

to this psychological definition of their structure. A moment of intense isolation or self-awareness is progressively resolved by the revelation of some common law or experience in Nature. A mood of romantic solipsism (grief, anxiety, longing) is released into a more general or familiar pattern of feeling, a sense of shared human destiny. As he wrote in the 1796 Preface: "They create a sweet and indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world. Easily remembered from their briefness, and interesting alike to the eye and the affections . . . they domesticate with the heart, and become, as it were, a part of our identity."

Coleridge's technical mastery, never lost, shows most in his ability to produce sonnets of wildly different moods, without ever losing his own voice. But the sonnet is not, finally, his ideal form because it placed him under restraints, made him self-conscious, and tempted him to fall back on pastiche. Yet he left his distinct mark on it: no other poet could have written "To the River Otter" (No. 5), or "To a Friend Who Asked, How I felt When the Nurse First Presented my Infant to Me" (No. 12), or "Work Without Hope" (No. 19).

With Wordsworth, Coleridge was responsible for a powerful recovery of interest in the possibilities of the sonnet (as with seventeenth-century poetry as a whole, especially in the work of George Herbert, Edmund Spenser, and Fulke Greville – all notable sonnet-writers). He helped to liberate it from the weight of Shakespeare and Milton, and make it feel more intimate and modern. His influence shows in the great Victorian revival of sonnet writing which followed: by his own son, Hartley Coleridge, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and George Meredith.

1.

## To the Autumnal Moon

Mild Splendour of the various-vested Night!  
Mother of wildly-working visions! hail!  
I watch thy gliding, while with watery light  
Thy weak eye glimmers through a fleecy veil;  
And when thou lovest thy pale orb to shroud 5  
Behind the gather'd blackness lost on high;  
And when thou dartest from the wind-rent cloud  
Thy placid lightning o'er the awaken'd sky.

Ah such is Hope! as changeful and as fair!  
Now dimly peering on the wistful sight; 10  
Now hid behind the dragon-wing'd Despair:  
But soon emerging in her radiant might  
She o'er the sorrow-clouded breast of Care  
Sails, like a meteor kindling in its flight.

## Life

As late I journey'd o'er the extensive plain  
 Where native Otter sports his scanty stream,  
 Musing in torpid woe a Sister's pain,  
 The glorious prospect woke me from the dream.

At every step it widen'd to my sight – 5  
 Wood, Meadow, verdant Hill, and dreary Steep,  
 Following in quick succession of delight, –  
 Till all – at once – did my eye ravish'd sweep!

May this (I cried) my course through Life portray!  
 New scenes of Wisdom may each step display, 10  
 And Knowledge open as my days advance!  
 Till what time Death shall pour the undarken'd ray,  
 My eye shall dart thro' infinite expanse,  
 And thought suspended lie in Rapture's blissful trance.

## On Receiving an Account that his Only Sister's Death was Inevitable

The tear which mourn'd a brother's fate scarce dry –  
 Pain after pain, and woe succeeding woe –  
 Is my heart destin'd for another blow?  
 O my sweet sister! and must thou too die?  
 Ah! how has Disappointment pour'd the tear                   5  
 O'er infant Hope destroy'd by early frost!  
 How are ye gone, whom most my soul held dear!  
 Scarce had I lov'd you ere I mourn'd you lost;  
 Say, is this hollow eye, this heartless pain,  
 Fated to rove thro' Life's wide cheerless plain –                   10  
 Nor father, brother, sister meet its ken –  
 My woes, my joys unshared! Ah! long ere then  
 On me thy icy dart, stern Death, be prov'd; –  
 Better to die, than live and not be lov'd!

## On Quitting School for College

Farewell parental scenes! a sad farewell!  
 To you my grateful heart still fondly clings,  
 Tho' fluttering round on Fancy's burnish'd wings  
 Her tales of future Joy Hope loves to tell.  
 Adieu, adieu! ye much-lov'd cloisters pale! 5  
 Ah! would those happy days return again,  
 When 'neath your arches, free from every stain,  
 I heard of guilt and wonder'd at the tale!  
 Dear haunts! where oft my simple lays I sang,  
 Listening meanwhile the echoings of my feet, 10  
 Lingering I quit you, with as great a pang,  
 As when erewhile, my weeping childhood, torn  
 By early sorrow from my native seat,  
 Mingled its tears with hers – my widow'd Parent lorn.



## To the River Otter

Dear native Brook! wild Streamlet of the West!  
 How many various-fated years have past,  
 What happy and what mournful hours, since last  
 I skimm'd the smooth thin stone along thy breast,  
 Numbering its light leaps! yet so deep imprest 5  
 Sink the sweet scenes of childhood, that mine eyes  
 I never shut amid the sunny ray,  
 But straight with all their tints thy waters rise,  
 Thy crossing plank, thy marge with willows grey,  
 And bedded sand that vein'd with various dyes 10  
 Gleam'd through thy bright transparence! On my way,  
 Visions of Childhood! oft have ye beguil'd  
 Lone manhood's cares, yet waking fondest sighs:  
 Ah! that once more I were a careless Child!

## To the Author of *The Robbers*

Schiller! that hour I would have wish'd to die,  
 If thro' the shuddering midnight I had sent  
 From the dark dungeon of the Tower time-rent  
 That fearful voice, a famish'd Father's cry –  
 Lest in some after moment aught more mean 5  
 Might stamp me mortal! A triumphant shout  
 Black Horror scream'd, and all her *goblin* rout  
 Diminish'd shrunk from the more withering scene!  
 Ah! Bard tremendous in sublimity!  
 Could I behold thee in thy loftier mood 10  
 Wandering at eve with finely-frenzied eye  
 Beneath some vast old tempest-swinging wood!  
 Awhile with mute awe gazing I would brood:  
 Then weep aloud in a wild ecstasy!

## To the Rev. W. L. Bowles

My heart has thank'd thee, BOWLES! for those soft strains,  
 That, on the still air floating, tremblingly  
 Wak'd in me Fancy, Love, and Sympathy!  
 For hence, not callous to a Brother's pains

Thro' Youth's gay prime and thornless paths I went; 5  
 And, when the *darker* day of life began,  
 And I did roam, a thought-bewilder'd man!  
 Thy kindred Lays an healing solace lent,

Each lonely pang with dreamy joys combin'd,  
 And stole from vain REGRET her scorpion stings; 10  
 While shadowy PLEASURE, with mysterious wings,  
 Brooded the wavy and tumultuous mind,

Like that great Spirit, who with plastic sweep  
 Mov'd on the darkness of the formless Deep!

## Pantisocracy

No more my visionary soul shall dwell  
 On joys that were; no more endure to weigh  
 The shame and anguish of the evil day,  
 Wisely forgetful! O'er the ocean swell  
 Sublime of Hope, I seek the cottag'd dell 5  
 Where Virtue calm with careless step may stray,  
 And dancing to the moonlight roundelay,  
 The wizard Passions weave an holy spell.  
 Eyes that have ach'd with Sorrow! Ye shall weep  
 Tears of doubt-mingled joy, like theirs who start 10  
 From Precipices of distemper'd sleep,  
 On which the fierce-eyed Fiends their revels keep,  
 And see the rising Sun, and feel it dart  
 New rays of pleasance trembling to the heart.

## Pity

Sweet Mercy! how my very heart has bled  
 To see thee, poor Old Man! and thy grey hairs  
 Hoar with the snowy blast: while no one cares  
 To clothe thy shrivell'd limbs and palsied head.  
 My Father! throw away this tatter'd vest. 5  
 That mocks thy shivering! take my garment – use  
 A young man's arm! I'll melt these frozen dews  
 That hang from thy white beard and numb thy breast.  
 My Sara too shall tend thee, like a child:  
 And thou shalt talk, in our fireside's recess, 10  
 Of purple Pride, that scowls on Wretchedness –  
 He did not so, the Galilaeen mild,  
 Who met the Lazars turn'd from rich men's doors  
 And call'd them Friends, and heal'd their noisome sores!

## On Receiving a Letter Informing me of the Birth of a Son

When they did greet me father, sudden awe  
 Weigh'd down my spirit: I retired and knelt  
 Seeking the throne of grace, but inly felt  
 No heavenly visitation upwards draw  
 My feeble mind, nor cheering ray impart. 5  
     Ah me! before the Eternal Sire I brought  
     Th' unquiet silence of confuséd thought  
 And shapeless feelings: my o'erwhelméd heart  
 Trembled, and vacant tears stream'd down my face.  
 And now once more, O Lord! to thee I bend, 10  
     Lover of souls! and groan for future grace,  
 That ere my babe youth's perilous maze have trod,  
     Thy overshadowing Spirit may descend,  
 And he be born again, a child of God.

Composed on a Journey Homeward;  
 the Author having received Intelligence  
 of the Birth of a Son, Sept. 20, 1796

Oft o'er my brain does that strange fancy roll  
 Which makes the present (while the flash doth last)  
 Seem a mere semblance of some unknown past,  
 Mixed with such feelings, as perplex the soul  
 Self-questioned in her sleep; and some have said 5  
 We liv'd, ere yet this robe of flesh we wore.  
 O my sweet baby! when I reach my door,  
 If heavy looks should tell me thou art dead,  
 (As sometimes, through excess of hope, I fear)  
 I think that I should struggle to believe 10  
 Thou wert a spirit, to this nether sphere  
 Sentenc'd for some more venial crime to grieve;  
 Did'st scream, then spring to meet Heaven's quick reprieve,  
 While we wept idly o'er thy little bier!

To a Friend who Asked,  
 How I Felt When the Nurse First  
 Presented my Infant to me

Charles! my slow heart was only sad, when first  
 I scann'd that face of feeble infancy:  
 For dimly on my thoughtful spirit burst  
 All I had been, and all my child might be!  
 But when I saw it on its mother's arm, 5  
 And hanging at her bosom (she the while  
 Bent o'er its features with a tearful smile)  
 Then I was thrill'd and melted, and most warm  
 Impress'd a father's kiss: and all beguil'd  
 Of dark remembrance and presageful fear, 10  
 I seem'd to see an angel-form appear –  
 'Twas even thine, belovéd woman mild!  
 So for the mother's sake the child was dear,  
 And dearer was the mother for the child.



## On a Ruined House in a Romantic Country

And this reft house is that the which he built,  
 Lamented Jack! And here his malt he pil'd,  
 Cautious in vain! These rats that squeak so wild,  
 Squeak, not unconscious of their father's guilt.  
 Did ye not see her gleaming thro' the glade? 5  
 Belike, 'twas she, the maiden all forlorn.  
 What though she milk no cow with crumpled horn,  
 Yet *aye* she haunts the dale where *erst* she stray'd;  
 And *aye* beside her stalks her amorous knight!  
 Still on his thighs their wonted brogues are worn, 10  
 And thro' those brogues, still tatter'd and betorn,  
 His hindward charms gleam an unearthly white;  
 As when thro' broken clouds at night's high noon  
 Peeps in fair fragments forth the full-orb'd harvest-moon!

## To Asra

Are there two things, of all which men possess  
 That are so like each other and so near,  
 As mutual Love seems like to Happiness?  
 Dear Asra, woman beyond utterance dear!  
 This Love which ever welling at my heart, 5  
 Now in its living fount doth heave and fall,  
 Now overflowing pours thro' every part  
 Of all my frame, and fills and changes all,  
 Like vernal waters springing up through snow,  
 This Love that seeming great beyond the power 10  
 Of growth, yet seemeth ever more to grow,  
 Could I transmute the whole to one rich Dower  
 Of Happy Life, and give it all to Thee,  
 Thy lot, methinks, were Heaven, thy age, Eternity!

## Lady, to Death we're Doom'd . . .

TRANSLATED FROM MARINO

Lady, to Death we're doom'd, our crime the same!  
 Thou, that in me thou kindled'st such fierce heat;  
 I, that my heart did of a Sun so sweet  
 The rays concentre to so hot a flame.  
 I, fascinated by an Adder's eye – 5  
 Deaf as an Adder thou to all my pain;  
 Thou obstinate in Scorn, in Passion I –  
 I lov'd too much, too much didst thou disdain.  
 Hear then our doom in Hell as just as stern,  
 Our sentence equal as our crimes conspire – 10  
 Who living bask'd at Beauty's earthly fire,  
 In living flames eternal these must burn –  
 Hell for us both fit places too supplies –  
 In my heart *thou* wilt burn, I *roast* before thine eyes.

## Farewell to Love

Farewell, sweet Love! yet blame you not my truth;  
 More fondly ne'er did mother eye her child  
 Than I your form: *yours* were my hopes of youth,  
 And as *you* shaped my thoughts I sighed or smiled.

While most were wooing wealth, or gaily swerving 5  
 To pleasure's secret haunts, and some apart  
 Stood strong in pride, self-conscious of deserving,  
 To you I gave my whole weak wishing heart.

And when I met the maid that realised  
 Your fair creations, and had won her kindness, 10  
 Say, but for her if aught on earth I prized!  
*Your* dreams alone I dreamt, and caught your blindness.

O grief! – but farewell, Love! I will go play me  
 With thoughts that please me less, and less betray me.

## Fancy in Nubibus

OR THE POET IN THE CLOUDS

O! It is pleasant, with a heart at ease,  
 Just after sunset, or by moonlight skies,  
 To make the shifting clouds be what you please,  
 Or let the easily persuaded eyes  
 Own each quaint likeness issuing from the mould 5  
 Of a friend's fancy; or with head bent low  
 And cheek aslant see rivers flow of gold  
 'Twixt crimson banks; and then, a traveller, go  
 From mount to mount through Cloudland, gorgeous land!  
 Or list'ning to the tide, with closéd sight, 10  
 Be that blind bard, who on the Chian strand  
 By those deep sounds possessed with inward light,  
 Beheld the Iliad and the Odyssee  
 Rise to the swelling of the voiceful sea.

## To Nature

It may indeed be phantasy, when I  
     Essay to draw from all created things  
     Deep, heartfelt, inward joy that closely clings;  
 And trace in leaves and flowers that round me lie  
 Lessons of love and earnest piety. 5  
     So let it be; and if the wide world rings  
     In mock of this belief, it brings  
 Nor fear, nor grief, nor vain perplexity.  
 So will I build my altar in the fields,  
     And the blue sky my fretted dome shall be, 10  
 And the sweet fragrance that the wild flower yields  
     Shall be the incense I will yield to Thee,  
 Thee only God! and thou shalt not despise  
 Even me, the priest of this poor sacrifice.

## Work Without Hope

All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair —  
 The bees are stirring — birds are on the wing —  
 And Winter slumbering in the open air,  
 Wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!  
 And I the while, the sole unbusy thing, 5  
 Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.

Yet well I ken the banks where amaranths blow,  
 Have traced the fount whence streams of nectar flow.  
 Bloom, O ye amaranths! bloom for whom ye may,  
 For me ye bloom not! Glide, rich streams, away! 10  
 With lips unbrightened, wreathless brow, I stroll:  
 And would you learn the spells that drowse my soul?  
 Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve,  
 And Hope without an object cannot live.

## Duty Surviving Self-Love

Unchanged within, to see all changed without,  
 Is a blank lot and hard to bear, no doubt.  
 Yet why at others' wanings should'st thou fret?  
 Then only might'st thou feel a just regret,  
 Hadst thou withheld thy love or hid thy light 5  
 In selfish forethought of neglect and slight.  
 O wiselier then, from feeble yearnings freed,  
 While, and on whom, thou may'st – shine on! nor heed  
 Whether the object by reflected light  
 Return thy radiance or absorb it quite: 10  
 And though thou notest from thy safe recess  
 Old Friends burn dim, like lamps in noisome air,  
 Love them for what they are; nor love them less,  
 Because to thee they are not what they were.



## To the Young Artist

Kayser! to whom, as to a second self,  
 Nature, or Nature's next-of-kin, the Elf,  
 Hight Genius, hath dispensed the happy skill  
 To cheer or soothe the parting friend's "Alas!"  
 Turning the blank scroll to a magic glass, 5  
 That makes the absent present at our will;  
 And to the shadowing of thy pencil gives  
 Such seeming substance, that it almost lives.

Well hast thou given the thoughtful Poet's face!  
 Yet hast thou on the tablet of his mind 10  
 A more delightful portrait left behind –  
 Even thy own youthful beauty, and artless grace,  
 Thy natural gladness and eyes bright with glee!  
     Kayser! farewell!  
 Be wise! be happy! and forget not me.