
 SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

 Dejection: An Ode¹

Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon,
 With the old Moon in her arms;
 And I fear, I fear, my master dear!
 We shall have a deadly storm.

Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence

I

Well! If the bard was weather-wise, who made
 The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,
 This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
 Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade
 5 Than those which mold yon cloud in lazy flakes,
 Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes
 Upon the strings of this Aeolian lute,²
 Which better far were mute.
 For lo! the New-moon winter-bright!
 10 And overspread with phantom light,
 (With swimming phantom light o'erspread
 But rimmed and circled by a silver thread)
 I see the old Moon in her lap, foretelling
 The coming-on of rain and squally blast.
 15 And oh! that even now the gust were swelling,
 And the slant night shower driving loud and fast!
 Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
 And sent my soul abroad,
 Might now perhaps their wonted³ impulse give,
 20 Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

2

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
 A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
 Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
 In word, or sigh, or tear—
 25 O Lady!⁴ in this wan and heartless mood,

1. This poem originated in a verse letter of 340 lines, called *A Letter to —*, which Coleridge wrote on the night of April 4, 1802, after hearing the opening stanzas of *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, which Wordsworth had just composed. The *Letter* was addressed to Sara Hutchinson (whom Coleridge sometimes called "Asra"), the sister of Wordsworth's fiancée Mary. It picked up the theme of a loss in the quality of perceptual experience which Wordsworth had presented at the beginning of his *Ode*. In his original poem, Coleridge lamented at length his unhappy marriage and the hopelessness of his love for Sara Hutchinson. In the next six months Coleridge deleted more than half the original lines, revised and reordered the remaining passages, and so transformed a long

verse confession into the compact and dignified *Dejection: An Ode*. He published the *Ode*, in substantially its present form, on October 4, 1802, Wordsworth's wedding day—and also the seventh anniversary of Coleridge's own disastrous marriage to Sara Fricker. Coleridge's implicit concern with the marital relation emerges in the marriage metaphors of lines 49 and 67–70.

2. A stringed instrument played upon by the wind: see Coleridge's *The Eolian Harp*, note 1.

3. Customary.

4. In the original version "Sara"—i.e., Sara Hutchinson. After intervening versions, in which the poem was addressed first to "William" (Wordsworth) and then to "Edmund," Coleridge introduced the noncommittal "Lady" in 1817.

To other thoughts by yonder throstle wooed,
 All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
 Have I been gazing on the western sky,
 And its peculiar tint of yellow green:
 30 And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!
 And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
 That give away their motion to the stars;
 Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
 Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:
 35 Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
 In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
 I see them all so excellently fair,
 I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

3

My genial⁵ spirits fail;
 40 And what can these avail
 To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?
 It were a vain endeavor,
 Though I should gaze forever
 On that green light that lingers in the west:
 45 I may not hope from outward forms to win
 The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

4

O Lady! we receive but what we give,
 And in our life alone does Nature live:
 Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!⁶
 50 And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
 Than that inanimate cold world allowed
 To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
 Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
 A light, a glory,⁷ a fair luminous cloud
 55 Enveloping the Earth—
 And from the soul itself must there be sent
 A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
 Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

5

O pure of heart! thou need'st not ask of me
 60 What this strong music in the soul may be!
 What, and wherein it doth exist,
 This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,
 This beautiful and beauty-making power.
 Joy,⁸ virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given,

5. In its old use as the adjective form of "genius": "My innate powers fail."

6. I.e., whether nature is experienced as "inanimate" (line 51) or in living interchange with the observer depends on the apathy or joyous vitality of the observer's own spirit.

7. Coleridge commonly used "glory" not in the sense of a halo, merely, but as a term for a moun-

tain phenomenon in which a walker sees his own figure projected by the sun in the mist, enlarged, and with a circle of light around its head. See Coleridge's *Constancy to an Ideal Object*, line 30.
 8. Coleridge often uses "Joy" for a sense of abounding vitality and of harmony between one's inner life and the life of nature. He sometimes calls the contrary "exsiccation," or spiritual dryness.

- 65 Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,
 Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,
 Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
 Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower
 A new Earth and new Heaven,⁹
 70 Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud—
 Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—
 We in ourselves rejoice!
 And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,
 All melodies the echoes of that voice,
 75 All colors a suffusion from that light.

6

- There was a time when, though my path was rough,
 This joy within me dallied with distress,
 And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
 Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
 80 For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
 And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.
 But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
 Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
 But oh! each visitation
 85 Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
 My shaping spirit of Imagination.
 For not to think of what I needs must feel,
 But to be still and patient, all I can;
 And happy by abstruse research to steal
 90 From my own nature all the natural man—
 This was my sole resource, my only plan:
 Till that which suits a part infects the whole,
 And now is almost grown the habit of my soul.

7

- Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,
 95 Reality's dark dream!
 I turn from you, and listen to the wind,
 Which long has raved unnoticed. What a scream
 Of agony by torture lengthened out
 That lute sent forth! Thou Wind, that rav'st without,
 100 Bare crag, or mountain tairn,¹ or blasted tree,
 Or pine grove whither woodman never clomb,
 Or lonely house, long held the witches' home,
 Methinks were fitter instruments for thee,
 Mad lutanist! who in this month of showers,
 105 Of dark-brown gardens, and of peeping flowers,
 Mak'st devils' yule,² with worse than wintry song,
 The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among.
 Thou actor, perfect in all tragic sounds!

9. The sense becomes clearer if line 68 is punctuated in the way that Coleridge himself punctuated it when quoting the passage in one of his essays: "Which, wedding Nature to us, gives in dower." I.e., "Joy" is the condition which (overcoming the alienation between mind and its milieu) marries us

to "Nature," and gives by way of wedding portion ("dower") the experience of a renovated world.

1. Tarn, or mountain pool.

2. Christmas, in the perverted form in which it is celebrated by devils.

Thou mighty poet, e'en to frenzy bold!
 110 What tell'st thou now about?
 'Tis of the rushing of an host in rout,
 With groans, of trampled men, with smarting wounds—
 At once they groan with pain, and shudder with the cold!
 But hush! there is a pause of deepest silence!
 115 And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd,
 With groans, and tremulous shudderings—all is over—
 It tells another tale, with sounds less deep and loud!
 A tale of less affright,
 And tempered with delight,
 120 As Otway's³ self had framed the tender lay—
 'Tis of a little child
 Upon a lonesome wild,
 Not far from home, but she hath lost her way:
 And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,
 125 And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear.

8

'Tis midnight, but small thoughts have I of sleep:
 Full seldom may my friend such vigils keep!
 Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing,
 And may this storm be but a mountain birth,⁴
 130 May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling,
 Silent as though they watched the sleeping Earth!
 With light heart may she rise,
 Gay fancy, cheerful eyes,
 Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;
 135 To her may all things live, from pole to pole,
 Their life the eddying of her living soul!
 O simple spirit, guided from above,
 Dear Lady! friend devoutest of my choice,
 Thus mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice.

April 4, 1802

1802, 1817

3. Thomas Otway (1652–85), a dramatist noted for the pathos of his tragic passages. The poet originally named was “William,” and the allusion was probably to Wordsworth’s *Lucy Gray*.

4. Probably, “May this be a typical mountain storm, short though violent,” although it is possible that Coleridge intended an allusion to Horace’s phrase, “the mountain labored and brought forth a mouse.”