"When a Man is unhappy he writes damned bad Poetry," Coleridge once quipped. Yet remarkably revealing poetry at times, Heidi Thomson might counter, and she could summon this book as evidence. It is a biographically grounded critical study focused on the period between Coleridge's return from Germany in July, 1799 and the marriage of William Wordsworth and Mary Hutchinson on October 4, 1802—which was also, without the least coincidence, the date on which Coleridge published "Dejection: An Ode" in The Morning Post. As Thomson demonstrates, Daniel Stuart's "Romantic Newspaper"—as she calls it—was vitally important to Coleridge during these years, and not just for the income it provided.

They were dark and difficult years for Coleridge in several respects. On the domestic front, his efforts to actually live with his wife merely exacerbated their incompatibility even as he saw no way out of his failed marriage. By late 1799 he was infatuated with Sara Hutchinson and feeling trapped. On the poetic front, the banishment of Christabel from the 1800 Lyrical Ballads signaled his increasing estrangement from Wordsworth, immersing Coleridge in a mood of despondency all the darker for the contrasts he was compelled to draw between his failures and Wordsworth's domestic happiness and poetic self-confidence. And so one place he turned was the Morning Post. By affording Coleridge an appreciative audience and a venue for supportive intellectual relationships—perhaps his friendship with Mary Robinson above all—the Morning Post shored up Coleridge's stature as a poet when Wordsworth appeared to be undermining it. But the opportunities for newspaper publication also helped Coleridge deal with his tormenting domestic situation. The chance to publish poetry in the Morning Post gave him a forum in which, through private coding, he could acknowledge and try to master the emotional vicissitudes of his relations with what he calls the Grasmere "Gang" ("A Soliloquy of the Full Moon," line 27).

Thomson tells the story of this poetry in nine chapters, which for interested readers are abstracted in detail on the Palgrave website. But briefly, chapter 1 serves an Introduction to the argument; chapter 2 treats Coleridge's failing marriage and his business arrangements with the Morning Post after his return from Germany; chapter 3 reads "Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie" as an expression of Coleridge's need for emotional and poetic reciprocity; chapter 4 examines poems concerned with the interdependence of parenting and genius; chapter 5 considers Coleridge's unhappiness with living in the Grasmere neighborhood; chapters 6 and 7 track Coleridge's personal and intellectual relations with Mary Robinson, with particular reference to Wordsworth's 1800 appropriation and expansion of Lyrical Ballads; chapter 9 assesses the numerous poems Coleridge published in the Morning Post in the weeks just prior to Wordsworth's marriage; and the final, ninth Chapter reconsideres "Dejection: An Ode" on the terms established by previous discussion. As the book travels this "Road to 'Dejection,'" it substantially comments on numerous poems often ignored in Coleridge studies, places several familiar works in revealing new biographical or paratextual contexts, and touches more briefly on a host of others.

The analysis I found most impressive was Thomson's reading of the 1799 "Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie," the poem better known to Coleridgeans as "Love." One of the virtues of Thomson's book is that she indubitably proves her thesis. Just so, she convincingly glosses "Dark Ladie" by tracking it to the early stirrings of Coleridge's ambivalence about Wordsworth and his passion for Sara Hutchinson. While his introductory letter "To the Editor of the Morning Post" aligns him with positions taken in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, it also obliquely censures Wordsworth for his objections to the archaic diction of the first Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Extrapolating from James Mays's editorial notes on the importance of Sockburn and Stowey to the poem (Collected Coleridge: Poetical Works [2001], 2.604), Thomson argues for the importance of Clevedon too, where "The Eolian Harp" is set. In "Dark Ladie," she contends, Coleridge not only revisits "The Eolian Harp" and the origins of his disastrous marriage, but also projects a compensatory fantasy in which Genevieve's responsiveness to the poet's song figures Sara Hutchinson's responsiveness to his love (61-69). It is both a brilliant interpretation and a fair example of the kind of critical investigation Thomson's study typically undertakes.

The portrait of Coleridge that emerges from Thomson's readings may force some Coleridgeans to adjust—at least slightly—their sense of his "Antithetical Character." Emphasizing a wounded and complexly defensive Coleridge, Thomson rightly differentiates her viewpoint from the perspective offered (for instance) by John Worthen's group biography, The Gang (2001), which mostly depicts Coleridge, the Wordsworths, and the Hutchinsons as a happy surrogate family. But Worthen richly documents his case for the amicable, even collaborative interactions of the Grasmere circle. In reading Thomson's book against Worthen's, then, I found myself contemplating a Coleridge who seemed at times almost to be living a double life. As Thomson tracks "Coleridge's compulsion to publish matters of an extraordinarily sensitive personal nature in the
Wordsworth and Coleridge scholars have long known Coleridge's authorship of hurtful epigrams such as "Spots in the Sun," which has a moralistic confessor secretly frequenting "Annette's door, the lovely courtesan." But I had frankly forgotten that this bit of sneering at Wordsworth's love affair with Annette Vallon was originally published in the Morning Post the week after the Wordsworths' wedding. It did not stand alone. Thomson finds veiled public references to Annette and the negotiations in France that preceded Wordsworth's marriage with Mary Hutchinson—references to extremely sensitive private information conveyed in confidence—in Coleridge's three-part series "Romantic Marriage," in his public letters to Fox, in some epigrams based on Wernike, and in several poems from 1802 (see her synopsis on 213). Thomson also elaborates on Kenneth Johnston's suggestion that Mary Robinson's "The Granny Grey"—its collected version featuring characters named Annetta and William—rechannels gossip about Wordsworth that Robinson could have learned only from Coleridge (The Hidden Wordsworth [1998] 790).

During these years, Robinson served as a sympathetic correspondent who listened to Coleridge's recriminations and boosted his creative self-confidence through such adulatory poems as "Mrs. Robinson to the Poet Coleridge," and he occasionally sided with her against Wordsworth. Even while working assiduously to secure the publication of the 1800 Lyrical Ballads, it seems, he helped Robinson publish her Lyrical Tales when the calculated similarity of title was a considerable irritant to Wordsworth. Also, in the Morning Post he introduced "The Solitude of Binnorie" to Wordsworth's disadvantage by noting its metrical borrowings from Robinson's "The Haunted Beach" (159). Throughout these machinations we witness a Coleridge who could be almost effortlessly manipulated through gestures of sympathy, and who was to all appearances bitterly resentful at Wordsworth's having a second chance at love when he remained trapped in a loveless marriage. In Grasmere, he deferred to the withdrawal of Christabel from Lyrical Ballads and cherished his place in the hearts of the Gang; in London, he was not above promoting Wordsworth's rivals and excoriating his private life behind his back.

My one reservation about this scholarly yet readable book involves the tacit claims of its subtitle. The book unavoidably maps a "Road to Dejection," not the road, of course, and its conclusions may apply less to "Dejection: An Ode" than to the far more confessional "A Letter to..." that Coleridge wholly or mostly composed on April 4, 1802. Thomson would surely reject that suggestion. Her final chapter begins by censuring what she regards as overstated distinctions drawn by traditional criticism between the initial, private text of "Dejection" and its published, public version. Reconstructing the compositional genesis of the poem from its origins in Coleridge's cottage through its intermediate states to the version which appeared in the Morning Post, Thomson shows how Coleridge reworked personal material so that the public text incorporated private associations in palimpsest form. Despite these revisions, she claims that "All versions are variations on the same theme: the association of settled, domestic happiness with the 'shaping Spirit of Imagination'" (218). Yet there are differences in play that matter as much as the similarities. Unlike "A Letter," "Dejection: An Ode" mentions neither children, nor matrimonial history, nor domestic conflict, and the word "love" appears only in connection with the "loveless" common crowd, not with the speaker. If Coleridge believed that domestic happiness fostered genius, "Dejection" is content to stress merely the necessity of resilient "Joy."

Analogous differences arise from Coleridge's intertextual invocations of Wordsworth in the later text. Both of Thomson's last two chapters choose to avoid "the well-trodden path of the important poetic dialogue involving 'Dejection: An Ode,' the 'Intimations Ode,' and 'Resolution and Independence' between Wordsworth and Coleridge, in order to focus on Coleridge's lesser known poems and texts" (191). Yet Coleridge's poetic dialogue with Wordsworth allowed him to recenter his ode on the transactions of mind and nature. It thereby afforded him a vehicle through which "Dejection" could distance the private and transmute it into philosophical reflection of paradigmatic relevance. Charged with writing on Coleridge's great ode, I would use Thomson's approach in conjunction with available traditional approaches and argue that "Dejection" ultimately transcends its personal matrices.

About the usefulness of Thomson's approach, its validity and importance, there should be no doubt. Coleridge and the Romantic Newspaper offers a fascinating account of Coleridge's inner life in a clearly written, well organized format. Thomson's arguments are thoroughly grounded in Coleridge scholarship, and at several moments she makes original contributions. For instance, she identifies the etymological logic behind Coleridge use of "Grieta" for "Gretta" Hall (110); she conclusively demonstrates Robinson's importance to Coleridge in 1799-1800 (138-40); and above all, she judiciously reads his Morning Post poetry. In the nineteenth century, she observes at one point, "the critical focus of the poetic Coleridge canon largely narrowed down to the Conversation Poems and the 'supernatural' poems, with the result that the more sentimental poems and ballads, of which Coleridge produced many, became almost invisible" (55). James Mays hoped that his massive Bollingen edition of Coleridge's poems would counter that tendency and extend the franchise. One way of understanding Thomson's project is to see it as a complementary attempt to show that Coleridge's accomplishments as a poet were more numerous, various, and interesting than we had previously realized.

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