Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Voyaging on Seas Unknown

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The English Romantic figure Samuel Taylor Coleridge was many things besides being a poet: essayist, lecturer, philosopher, metascientist and theoretical student of the sciences, literary critic, social critic, youthful radical reformer and civil libertarian, university drop out, theologian, psychoanalyst, newspaper columnist, hypochondriac, valetudinarian, for a brief spell a minor public servant, and for a yet briefer spell an incompetent dragoon. That inventory by no means exhausts Coleridge's range, but it significantly omits the one activity that might best justify talking or writing about him as an explorer or traveller. Coleridge was no traveller, even though the year of his birth, 1772, was marked by the beginning of Captain James Cook's three-year circumnavigation of the globe in high southern latitude, during which he discovered the southern ice pack between 60 and 70 degrees south. Coleridge, youngest son of a country clergyman and his wife, loved and celebrated his native country. He did go to Germany as a student of comparative anatomy and German philosophy for somewhat less than one academic year; he also went to Malta in his early thirties, in an attempt to recover his health, and returned to England via Sicily and Rome; twenty odd years later, he went on a six-and-a-half weeks' tour to the Netherlands and the Rhine. None of these trips were voyages of exploration, and apart from them, he never left the British Isles.

Coleridge was no geographical explorer. Yet he does belong in a session on Romanticism and travel. He was an explorer of nature, not only in the writings of

naturalists and natural philosophers,[1] but also as he encountered it in the modest mountains and gentler countryside of England, Scotland, and Wales, as he found it in books of travel, as he represented it in his poetry, and as he explored it through his own self-consciousness. I shall follow him through some of his armchair travels, see how these are incorporated in his poetry, touch on his limited foreign travels, and follow him in his exhilarating discovery of the mountains of the Lake District. It will help if we remember that Coleridge, in that most maddening and brilliant of literary-critical-autobiographies, his *Biographia Literaria*, published in 1817, described perception as a perpetual act of creation.[2] To him, nature was the visible expression of God's own creation, and so it could and did serve him as a source of inspiration and literal re-creation. Re-creation will be a recurrent motif in this talk.

Since much of Coleridge's exploration was mental rather than physical, we need to know something about the workings of his mind. To know how someone's mind worked is often impossible for historians, but Coleridge offers an exception, gleefully tackled in Owen Barfield's *What Coleridge Thought* (London, Oxford University Press, 1972). Indeed, twentieth-century Coleridge scholarship has given us an overflowing cornucopia, filled with correspondence (six volumes), notebooks (transcribed and edited in ten volumes spanning several thousand pages), and his more systematic published and hitherto unpublished works, now all available in the magisterial, monumental, and very recently completed edition of some thirty volumes of his *Collected Works.* Coleridge's intellectual curiosity was insatiable, and the workings of nature, of other minds, and of his own mind, fascinated him greatly. The *Notebooks* were his least formal and most uninhibited record, written partly to reinforce an astonishing memory for what he read,

saw, or otherwise encountered, and partly to provide him with a way of working out ideas. His letters are more directly tailored to their individual recipients, but he often took it for granted that others would share his enthusiasms, and be interested in his interpretations of nature and in the workings of his mind.

Coleridge read omnivorously and closely; he annotated the margins of books that he owned, and of books lent to him by friends, returning them, as he observed, much enriched. He haunted libraries, and it is not safe to assume that he had not read any book available or in print in his lifetime, in English, Latin, Greek, German, and several other languages. On 17 November 1796, just months after his marriage and one month before he moved with his wife to Nether Stowey in Somerset in the West of England, he described himself in a letter to the author and political radical John Thelwall: "I am, & ever have been, a great reader -- & have read almost every thing – a library-cormorant – I am *deep* in all out of the way books, whether of the monkish times, or the puritanical aera – I have read & digested most of the Historical Writers --; but I do not *like* History. Metaphysics & Poetry, & 'Facts of mind' – (i.e. Accounts of all the strange phantasms that ever possessed your philosophy dreamers from Tauth [Thoth], the Egyptian to Taylor, the English Pagan,) are my darling Studies. – In short, I seldom read except to amuse myself -- & I am almost always reading."[3]

He was entitled to call himself a "library-cormorant". Like those fish-eating birds, he dived after his prey, which in his case meant books, caught them, swallowed them whole, and made them his own. He may not have liked history, but he interpreted "facts of mind" very generously indeed, to include discoveries about the natural world, and about mankind in its farthest reaches. Natural history, anthropology and ethnology were

very much to the point here, and so were the voyages and explorations that provided such knowledge.

A few months after moving to Stowey, Coleridge wrote to his friend the publisher Joseph Cottle, [4] describing his depression, sometimes harrowing, but just then mild. "A sort of calm hopelessness diffuses itself over my heart." He moved thence to a discussion of poetry, which, he observed, ought to arise from lofty imaginings, and not be mere story in verse, of the kind that his friend Southey, and even much admired Wordsworth, sometimes wrote. John Milton, whose epic *Paradise Lost* was a major influence on the principal English Romantic poets, provided inspiration but also seemed to offer a model impossible of emulation: "Observe the march of Milton – his severe application, his laborious polish, his deep metaphysical researches, his prayers to God before he began his great poem, all that could lift and swell his intellect, became his daily food." Coleridge, more than half in earnest, told Cottle that:

> *I should not think of devoting less than 20 years to an Epic Poem. Ten to collect materials and warm my mind with universal science. I would be a tolerable Mathematician, I would thoroughly know Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Optics, and Astronomy, Botany, Metallurgy, Fossilism, Chemistry, Geology, Anatomy, Medicine – then the mind of man – then the minds of men – in all Travels, Voyages, and Histories. So I would spend ten years – the next five to the composition of the poem – and the five last to the correction of it.*

Coleridge's omnivorous appetite for "phantasms of mind" would join forces with his program of reading in this cheerfully impossible plan of study, and would culminate in knowing "the *minds of men* – in all Travels, Voyages, and Histories." Here was the

perfect armchair traveller in the making. It is worth remarking how widespread armchair travelling was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A gentleman's library was usually well stocked with expedition narratives, and subscription and institutional libraries were rich in such lore. When the Royal Institution of Great Britain, where Coleridge's sometime admired friend Humphry Davy soared in his charismatic chemical career, found that it was running out of room for books in the twentieth century, it was unhappily determined that the easiest way to create much needed and substantial space was to get rid of the travel books, which had formed a very substantial part of the collection. Geography belonged in a scientific library, since it was regarded as a science, and many naval explorers, of the Arctic and other regions, were elected to the Royal Society of London for their discoveries. Coleridge, however, was unusual in seeing an immersion in the literature of travel, including his best loved "out of the way" books, as a prelude to the writing of epic poetry; but his enthusiasm for the genre was merely a keener and profounder version of a widespread appetite.

Coleridge may have differed – indeed, did differ – from Wordsworth in his developing ideas about the nature of poetry, but he also admired his friend's genius, sometimes even subordinating himself to Wordsworth's imperious needs. More to the point, for our purposes, he and Wordsworth enjoyed one another's company, and, especially in the early years of their friendship, urged one another on to new ventures and to new heights in poetry. The year after Coleridge's move to Stowey, Wordsworth visited him, and soon he and his sister Dorothy moved into a country home comfortably within reach. In November, Coleridge and the Wordsworths set out on a walking tour, and decided to write a poem, half epic, half ballad, that would earn enough to pay for their

tour. This was the beginning, or rather the conception, of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", which became one of Coleridge's best loved and triumphal poems, a haunting account of sin, the heartless shooting of a harmless albatross, followed by suffering, expiation, the redeeming return of love and prayer, and further penance, all in the context of a seafaring voyage to the southern ocean, replete with geographical, nautical, and natural historical lore. The original plan was to write the ballad jointly – Coleridge and Wordsworth had already collaborated in writing the deservedly less well-known "The Three Graves". Wordsworth contributed significantly to the plot, coming up with the mariner as the main agent, "the theme of crime, persecution, and wandering … ; the shooting of the albatross … ; and the navigation of the ship by dead men."[5] Wordsworth had been reading George Shelvocke's *A Voyage round the World by Way of the Great South Sea, Performed in the Years 1719-1772* (1776), an account of the voyage of the *Speedwell*, which included an account of the shooting of an albatross. But in spite of their shared enthusiasms, the collaboration between Coleridge and Wordsworth soon broke down, and Wordsworth withdrew from the project, principally because he was out of sympathy with the supernatural agencies that Coleridge built around and onto the original scheme, turning narrative into allegory. Coleridge's personal receptiveness to supernatural manifestations may be gauged from his answer to a lady who once asked him if he believed in ghosts: "the Reason why I did not believe in the existence of Ghosts &c was that I had seen too many of them myself."[6]

Part of Coleridge's apparatus in the poem is a series of marginal glosses, and these combine a straightforward account of a southern voyage with stories of spirits of the air and of the vasty deep. Consider first the account of the voyage, spiritual elements

apart, in these glosses: “The Mariner tells how the ship sailed southward with a good wind and fair weather, till it reached the line” – i.e., the equator. “The ship drawn by a storm toward the south pole. The land of ice, and of fearful sounds where no living thing is to be seen. … [T]he ship … returned northward through fog and floating ice. … The fair breeze continues; the ship enters the Pacific Ocean, and sails northward, even till it reaches the line. The ship hath been suddenly becalmed.” That takes us barely a quarter of the way through the poem; the remaining three quarters bring the mariner back to his native country, but they do so in spiritual and supernatural ways that are quite distinct from the geographical sailing narrative of the first quarter.

In 1927 John Livingston Lowes published a pioneering study of Coleridge’s reading as it bore on the composition of “Kubla Khan” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”.[7] He pointed out that Coleridge’s description of the geographical voyage was a fair summary of the history of southern exploration. In 1520 Magellan entered the Pacific Ocean via the strait that now bears his name. In 1578, Francis Drake sailed through the Magellan Strait, was caught by a storm and driven south towards the Pole, and, south of Cape Horn, found open sea. In 1772, the year of Coleridge’s birth, Captain James Cook set out on his second voyage to try to discover what lay to the south of the Antarctic Circle, and discovered the southern pack ice. Thereafter, as Lowes notes, “Ship after ship sailed south into the Atlantic, past the great skull-shaped westward rondure of Africa” – some of them touching at the Canary Islands, others frustratingly failing to make a landfall there, as was the case in the generation after Coleridge with Fitzroy’s *HMS Beagle*, to the bitter disappointment of Charles Darwin, who was eager to explore the natural history and geology of the islands. The *Beagle*’s journey was, however, typical of

those earlier voyages. It crossed the equator – "the Line" – and headed "down around the jutting shoulder of Brazil" towards Cape Horn. Ships that had sailed thus far "were driven (unless luck was with them) past the tempestuous headlands into fields of floating ice. Once round the cape, they ran before the trade winds towards the Line again, to lie becalmed for days or weeks, under a heaven that was burning brass above them, in a tranced and breathless sea."

Coleridge's Ancient Mariner was following a route from ocean to ocean made familiar by almost three centuries of exploration. But Coleridge, when he wrote the poem, had never been outside the British Isles. His knowledge of both the contours and the details of such a voyage came from extensive and esoteric readings, transmuted by his brilliant capacity for association, and by the craft and imaginative powers of a great poet. Lowes has shown how the poem incorporates Coleridge's wide reading. He tends, however, to assume that the sequence of entries on the page in Coleridge's notebooks corresponds to the sequence in which Coleridge wrote them. But Coleridge often used several different notebooks in the same period, opening whichever one came to hand at the first page with room for an entry (which need not have been the last page used), and making use of almost every blank space; meticulous editing of the notebooks[8] has made this process clear. The result is a somewhat less chaotic chronological sequence than Lowes assumes, but it is nevertheless wondrously rich and varied.

When Coleridge wrote "The Ancient Mariner", no one had yet reached the landmass of Antarctica. Captain Cook had discovered the ice fields beginning at the Antarctic Circle, but what lay to the south was unknown. There had, however, been many voyages to the Arctic, a region where continents and archipelagos surround an ice-

covered ocean, and where numberless icebergs calve from glaciers into the sea. By the late eighteenth century, whalers, explorers, and marine entrepreneurs had sailed around the southern half of Greenland, and had become familiar with Svalbard (Spitzbergen), and with much of Hudson's Bay, as well as with discontinuous fragments of the continental shores of the Arctic Ocean.

The search for a Northwest Passage had entered the imaginative geography of English readers since the sixteenth century, and Coleridge mined the expedition narratives. Martin Frobisher in the 1570s reached Baffin Island in what is now the Canadian Arctic archipelago, in search of gold. The mineral samples that he brought home were fool's gold, iron pyrites, and worthless. John Davis, a superb navigator, rediscovered Greenland in the 1580s, sailed up its west coast past Disco Island, and ventured further into the Canadian Arctic archipelago. In 1609, Henry Hudson set out for the Barents Sea (named for the great Dutch explorer who had explored Svalbard and Novaya Zemlya in the sixteenth century), but was forced by his crew to sail west, and was marooned in the vast bay that now bears his name. There were several other Arctic voyages through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The early expedition narratives were either published separately, or collected in anthologies, most notable among them being Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* …(1598-1600).[9] Coleridge, self-styled library-cormorant, devoured these narratives, including Hakluyt's, together with Frederick Marten[s]'s *The Voyage into Spitzbergen and Greenland, in An Account of Several Late Voyages and Discoveries to the South and North … By Sir John Narborough, Captain Jasmen Tasman, Captain John Wood, and Frederick Marten of Hamburgh* (London, 1694), Alexander Dalrymple's *A Collection of Voyages Chiefly in*

the Southern Atlantick Ocean: Published from Original Manuscripts (London, 1775), David Crantz's *The History of Greenland: Containing a Description of the Country and its Inhabitants … Translated from the High Dutch*, 2 vols. (London 1767), and many others. The work of Coleridge's editors, especially on his Notebooks and Marginalia, has wonderfully enriched our certain knowledge of his reading; and the early and independent work of Lowes, although often less conclusive, also documents a good deal of that reading, and is suggestive about much more. Lowes tends to assume that the coincidence of a single phrase, indeed sometimes a single word, between Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" and texts that Coleridge may have read, is enough to demonstrate that he had read those texts. For all that the evidence is slight, he probably had. Coleridge tells us explicitly that he knew and valued several travel books, which form part of the background to "The Ancient Mariner". William Bartram's *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Country of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws; containing an account of the Soil and Natural Productions of those regions, together with Observations on the Manners of the Indians* (Philadelphia, 1791), is one such book. Coleridge drew on it for *Kubla Khan*, composed in 1797 and published in 1798, as well as for the "Ancient Mariner". In 1800 he asked his friend James Webb Tobin to bring the book with him when he visited Coleridge in the English Lake District.[10] It was probably this copy that in December 1801 he presented to Sarah Hutchinson, the woman he wished he had married. In a note under the presentation inscription, he wrote: "This is not a Book of Travels, properly speaking; but a series of poems, chiefly descriptive, *occasioned* by the Objects, which the Traveller observed. – It is a *delicious* Book; & like all *delicious*

Things, you must take but a *little* of it at a time."[11] Twenty-five years later, in his "table talk", he announced: "The latest book of travels I know, written in the spirit of the old travellers, is Bartram's account of his tour in the Floridas. It is a work of high merit every way."[12] Here, clearly, was a work that had entered into his imagination, and to which he returned, in memory if not in fact, over half a lifetime. Samuel Purchas's *Purchas his Pilgrimage, or Relations of the World and the Religions observed in all Ages and Places discovered, from the Creation unto this Present* … (London, 1617) was another such book, a great cornucopia into which Coleridge dipped, and it includes much travel lore.

It is time to engage with some of the ways in which expedition narratives entered into the fabric of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". But first, a minor caution. Coleridge revisited and revised many of his poems throughout his life, to a degree that has led one commentator "to describe them as existing in a state of 'textual instability'".[13] The recent definitive edition[14] of Coleridge's poems by J. C. C. Mays makes this abundantly clear for the "Ancient Mariner". Coleridge composed it in 1797-98, repeatedly reworked it over the years, producing a much-revised version in 1817, and approved the text published in the last year of his life, 1834. For present purposes, this latest version is as useful as the first one, and, since it contains much less deliberately archaic language, and is therefore more accessible, it is the version that I shall use here.

The southward passage described by the Mariner, in his tale to the Wedding Guest, his unwilling but helpless auditor, could scarcely be more economically sketched. The sun rose on the left, and set on the right:

> Higher and higher every day,
> Till over the mast at noon –
> The Wedding-Guest here beat his breast,
> For he heard the loud bassoon.

With the sun overhead at noon, the ship had reached the equator. Any account of the rest of the Atlantic part of the voyage is omitted; South America is ignored. But the storms south of the Horn have a vital role, and the wind is personified:

> And now the storm-blast came, and he
> Was tyrannous and strong:
> He struck with his o'ertaking wings,
> And chased us south along.
>
> ….
> The ship drove fast, loud roared the blast,
> And southward aye we fled.

Then came the ice – icebergs, ice-cliffs, and ice fields:

> And now there came both mist and snow,
> And it grew wondrous cold:
> And ice, mast-high, came floating by,
> As green as emerald.
> ….
> The ice was here, the ice was there,
> The ice was all around:
> It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
> Like noises in a swound.

The ship was trapped in the ice. James Cook had described the Antarctic ice pack. Others whom Coleridge had read described the noises of the Artic ice pack, roaring, howling, and splitting with cracks like thunderclaps. Even the word "swound", already archaic in Coleridge's day and generally replaced by "swoon", appears in the narrative of Barents's men, enduring the winter of their third voyage, lying cold in their cabins and all but suffocated by the smoke and carbon monoxide of an ill-ventilated fire, heard the ice crack even as they came near fainting: and the man who saved them by opening the door "fell down in a swound upon the Snow." It is an uncommon enough word for it to be likely that Coleridge had this particular narrative in mind, and, more generally, it is all but

certain that the early Arctic narratives were running through Coleridge's mind as he shaped his own poetic narrative.[15] Northern icepacks would do very well as models and stimuli for his account of southern ones, ice was likely to be the same beyond the Antarctic Circle as it was beyond the Arctic Circle, and in any case, none of Coleridge's readers could have had any Antarctic experience that would enable them to contradict him. It was not until the 1840s, when James Clark Ross returned from his voyage of geographical, geomagnetic, and other scientific discovery to the Antarctic, that Antarctic ice, in the shape of the Ross Sea and its ice shelf, became widely known to the reading public.

The Ancient Mariner, his companions, and the ship that bore them, were all trapped in the ice. Then came a great seabird, an albatross, a bird of good omen:

> As if it had been a Christian soul,
> We hailed it in God's name.

The mariners adopted the bird, which came for food; and suddenly the ship was free:

> The ice did split with a thunder-fit;
> The helmsman steered us through!

Ice had split with a thunder-clap in more than one of the accounts in Purchas; and, in the Arctic expedition carried out under the command of Constantine Phipps in the year after Coleridge's birth, the ship was trapped in the ice, when "the Omnipotent … caused … the ice to part in an astonishing manner, rending and cracking with a tremendous noise, surpassing that of the loudest thunder."[16] Phipps's expedition, heading northeast towards the pole, was partly one of geographical exploration, and partly for more general scientific purposes. In later years, especially after Nelson's victories in the Napoleonic Wars, the expedition came to be remembered mainly for an exploit of young Horatio

Nelson, who, exploring away from the ship on an ice floe, came into conflict with a polar bear, which was scared off by the ship's guns; for Coleridge in 1797-98 the descriptions of ice were what mattered.[17] Once free from the ice, the Mariner's ship caught a south wind:

> And a good strong wind sprung up behind,
>
> The albatross did follow.

Then the Mariner shot the albatross, that "pious bird of good omen", with his crossbow. In spite of that crime, the favourable south wind continued. Coleridge consistently refers to it as "the breeze", and as Lowes has shown, the Brise or Brises was the term given, in Purchas and elsewhere, to the trade winds that blow from the southeast towards the equator, in a usage familiar to readers when Coleridge wrote the *Ancient Mariner*.[18] The voyage from the southern ice pack to the tropics is as briskly accomplished in Coleridge's verse narrative as was the original southbound voyage from the tropics to the land of ice and snow.

Then the ship was suddenly becalmed in the tropics, and stuck, day after endless day beneath the equatorial sun. Here, if one ignores the supernatural parts of the poem, was an experience that too many ships had experienced. And here, in an experience unlike that of any other vessel, the geographical voyage ends, and the supernatural voyage takes over. But first came a reengagement with nature, in the shape of water snakes, and the resurgence of love and prayer. The Mariner's shipmates all died, but he lived on, enduring the knowledge of his crime in killing the albatross, loathing himself and loathing the marine life around him:

> The many men, so beautiful!
> And they all dead did lie;

And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.

Then came a transformation; the marine life – "water snakes" – now seemed to him beautiful, and he blessed them. Here was the beginning of the Mariner's salvation, but not before much penance. Lowes shows convincingly that Coleridge's descriptions of the sea snakes rest on a bed of by now familiar reading, including Captain Cook, Purchas, and even Martens on Spitzbergen and Greenland. Coleridge seems no more fazed by transposing creatures from the Arctic to the equator than he was by transposing ice from the Arctic to the Antarctic. He even took descriptions of the Northern Lights, and used them to dramatic effect in his account of the tropics. But for all his casualness about location, the life and colour of his descriptions is meticulous, full of particularities.

Coleridge was more than an armchair traveller; he was a keen observer and explorer of the natural world around him in his native country, in the West of England, in the Lake District, and on hiking tours elsewhere. He always had an eye for detail, the shape of a cloud, the colour of a flame, the movement of an insect – and he had a mind for seeing wider, even cosmic significance in that detail – Blake's "world in a grain of sand". Seeing the universal in the particular, and interpreting nature as a symbolic representation of what he saw as God's very Platonic ideas, were increasingly part of Coleridge's response to nature, and of his poetic imagination. He had already asked, in 1795:

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?[19]

And in 1798, even before his move to the Lake District, he contrasted his own urban schooldays with the mountain freedom that he foresaw for his son Berkeley, born that May:

> … For I was reared
> In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
> And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
> But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
> By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
> Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
> Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
> And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
> Of that eternal language, which thy God
> Utters, who from eternity doth teach
> Himself in all, and all things in himself. [20]

Alas, young Berkeley died the following February, two days before Coleridge, studying in Germany on his first trip abroad, arrived at the University of Göttingen. News of Berkeley's death reached him in April, which did not prevent him from going on a walking tour in the Hartz Mountains, in a party that included Charles and Frederic Parry, brothers of the future Arctic and Antarctic explorer William, whose narratives, along with John Franklin's and Otto von Kotzebue Coleridge later devoured.[21] His responses to the mountains were at this stage expressed in terms of somewhat stilted sublimity, but that was to change. He was back at Stowey in July 1799, having scarcely hurried to comfort his wife on the loss of their child. In October and November, he went on his first tour of the Lake District with Wordsworth, and in July of the following year moved there, to be near the mountains, near Wordsworth, and near Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister-in-law.

Hiking (he was lovingly proud of the boots he had custom-made for the mountains), scrambling, and climbing (no technical work, but climbing none the less)

became increasingly solace and, literally, a source of re-creation for him. When he was suffering from depression or the effects of withdrawal from laudanum (a solution of opium in alcohol), the mountains were his best cure and restorative. In August, he went up Helvellyn by way of the dramatic knife-edge ridge now known as Striding Edge: "ascended that steep & narrow ridge on my right that precipice & the morass at its feet – on my left the two Tairns/ & another precipice twice as lofty as the other … [T]ravelling along the ridge I came to the other side of those precipices and down below me on my left – no – no! no words can convey any idea of this prodigious wilderness/ that precipice fine on this side was but its ridge, sharp as a (jagged) knife, level so long, and then ascending so boldly …"[22] In 1802, he climbed Scafell, the highest mountain in England, and wrote to Sara Hutchinson about it: "I ascended Sca' Fell by the side of a torrent, and climbed & rested, rested & climbed, 'till I gained the very summit of Sca' Fell … Even to Black Coomb – before me all the Mountains die away, running down westward to the Sea …. O my God! What enormous Mountains these are close by me …."[23]

He took risks carelessly, almost eagerly, and boasted of them to Sara Hutchinson:[24] "There is one sort of Gambling, to which I am much indebted; and that not of the least criminal kind for a man who has children & a Concern. – It is this. When I find it convenient to descend from a mountain, I am too confident & too indolent to look round about & wind about 'till I find a track or other symptom of safety; but I wander on, & where it is first *possible* to descend, there go I – relying upon fortune for how far down this possibility will continue. So it was this afternoon. I passed down from Broad-crag, skirted the Precipices, and found myself cut off from a most sublime Crag-summit, that

seemed to rival Sca' Fell Man in height, & to outdo it in fierceness. A Ridge of Hill lay low down, & divided this Crag … & Broad-crag .... ; the first place I came to, that was not direct Rock, I slipped down, & went on for a while with tolerable ease – ". There followed a series of sheer drops and ledges, ending with a long drop with a narrow ledge above a lethal drop, and Coleridge shaking with excitement and exhaustion: "My Limbs were all in a tremble – I lay upon my Back to rest myself, & was beginning according to my Custom to laugh at myself for a Madman, when the sight of the Crags above me on each side, & the impetuous Clouds just over them, posting so luridly & so rapidly northward, overawed me / I lay in a state of almost prophetic Trance & Delight -- & blessed God aloud, for the powers of Reason & the Will, which remaining no Danger can overpower us!" He recovered enough to look around, found a crack or chimney in the cliff face, and descended just before the onset of a thunderstorm.

Such experiences were ecstatic as well as foolhardy, and Coleridge, a young man still, never came to any harm in the hills. It is striking that, although he enjoyed hiking and scrambling in company, his most demanding ascents were always solo, and his most powerful experiences of sublimity always occurred when he was solitary in the hills; as he observed after a hike undertaken in 1803 with Southey and Hazlitt -- "I must be alone, if either my Imagination or Heart are to be excited or enriched. Yet even so I worshipped with deep feeling the grand outline & perpetual Forms, that are the guardians of Borodale, & the presiding Majesty, yea, the very Soul of Keswick."[25]

In reading the mountain entries in Coleridge's notebooks and letters, his energy, enthusiasm, and endurance are so striking that it is easy to forget the problems, originating in body and mind, which assailed and enfeebled his frame. He was plump,

could not breathe through his nose – "so my mouth, with sensual thick lips, is almost always open"[26] – and was convinced that he suffered from a mild form of scrofula. He had almost certainly had rheumatic fever as a child, and doctors, including his friend and mentor Dr. Thomas Beddoes,[27] had prescribed laudanum for him. This medicine was as much in use then as aspirin is today, and was the direct source of Coleridge's opium addiction, and that of many others.[28] He suffered all the pangs of withdrawal during his long struggle to overcome his addiction, a struggle in which he was ultimately largely successful, with the necessary personal and medical help of James Gillman of Highgate. And he suffered from depression, an illness that seems to have been horribly widespread among Romantic poets.[29] Throughout his life, he suffered bouts of prolonged illness. Hiking up to forty miles across the mountains, day after day, was, in this context, a startling restorative, but there is no doubt that it worked for him.

From 1802 until 1804, he contemplated moving to a warmer and healthier climate than that of England –the Lakes enjoyed one of the wettest climates in Europe. In December 1802 he wrote to his brother James that he was "determined to pass the next year or two of my Life either at Madeira, or Teneriffe, or Lisbon – with my Family."[30] The idea of going to Teneriffe may have originated with his friend and benefactor Tom Wedgwood,[31] younger brother of Josiah Wedgwood the potter. Tom's health was poor, he was another patient of Dr. Beddoes, and he died young. Wedgwood, Coleridge had remarked in November, was always talking about Teneriffe; Coleridge urged his wife to look it up in the encyclopaedia.[32] By Christmas, he had determined that he would go to the Canary Islands, and wrote accordingly to Southey: "As to my own Health, it is very indifferent. I am exceedingly temperate in every thing – abstain wholly from wine,

spirits, or fermented Liquors – almost wholly from Tea – abjure all fermentable & vegetable food – bread excepted -- & use *that* sparingly – live almost entirely on Eggs, Fish, Flesh, & Fowl -- & thus contrive not to be *ill* – but well I am not -- & in this climate never shall be. A deeply ingrained, tho' mild Scrofula, is diffused through me: & is a very Proteus. I am fully determined to *try* Teneriffe or Gran Canaria, influenced to prefer them to Madeira solely by the superior cheapness of living. The Climate & Country are heavenly" – indeed, the only drawback to Coleridge's protestant English mind was that the inhabitants were all Roman Catholics.[33]

But whatever the drawbacks of an English winter (or even of an English summer, which in the Lake District can be cold and wet), Coleridge's spirits still soared when he was in the hills. Three weeks after complaining about health and climate to Southey, he found himself caught in a midwinter thunderstorm in the mountains, and never thought of turning back. He wrote to Tom Wedgwood: "In simple earnest, I never find myself alone within the embracement of rocks & hills, a traveller up an alpine road, but my spirit courses, drives, and eddies, like a Leaf in autumn: a wild activity, of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion, rises up from within me – a sort of *bottom-wind*, that blows to no point of the compass, & comes from I know not whence, but agitates the whole of me; my whole Being is filled with waves, as it were, that roll & stumble, one this way, & one that way, like things that have no common master. I think, that my soul must have pre-existed in the body of a Chamois-chaser …. The farther I ascend from animated Nature … the greater becomes in me the Intensity of the feeling of Life. … I do not think it possible, that any bodily pains could eat out the love & joy, that is so substantially part of me, towards hills, & rocks, & steep waters!"[34]

Coleridge did find the hills and mountains restorative, but it was a cure that never lasted long away from the hills, and in 1804, after two years of hesitation about such a voyage, and of uncertainty about his choice of Mediterranean or warmer clime, he set out, unaccompanied by wife or child, for Malta, by way of Gibraltar.[35] The Napoleonic Wars still raged across Europe and its environing seas, with Britain fighting France and Spain. It was unsafe for passenger or goods ships to venture out alone. At the beginning of April, Coleridge found himself waiting at Portsmouth for the *Speedwell* that was to carry him south, and for the flagship *HMS Leviathan* and its subordinate fighting ships to lead and shepherd the convoy. *Speedwell* – coincidentally the name of the ship in Shelvocke's narrative, which had provided Wordsworth with the central image of the shooting of an albatross – was a merchant brig carrying cannon for Trieste; the whole convoy carried supplies and arms for Nelson's fleet and for British and allied ports in the war, and even with its naval guard, the voyage was not without danger. The West Indies convoy that left five days before *Leviathan*'s hit bad weather and suffered the loss of several ships, and there had been other recent severe losses, as Coleridge wrote from Gibraltar: "The day before yesterday I saw a Letter from Barcelona, giving an account that the Swift Cutter with Dispatches to Lord Nelson had been boarded by a French Privateer & the Dispatches taken, her Captain having been killed in the first moments of the Engagement: and the same Letter conveyed the still more melancholy tidings of the utter loss of the Hindostan by Fire off the coast of Spain [laden with naval stores for Malta, where they were in distress for such stores]."[36] *HMS Leviathan*'s convoy made a good passage as far as Gibraltar, and Coleridge, although despondent during the nights, soon found his sea legs, and was absorbed by day in writing, talking to the sailors, and

observing the sea, the coasts, and the natural world as they sailed south. He was entranced by the Mediterranean, and delighted by the Rock of Gibraltar – not as spiritually uplifting as the mountains of the Lake District, but a wonderful place for Coleridge to use his mountaineering skills: "Since we anchored, I have passed nearly the whole of each day scrambling about on the back of the Rock among the Monkeys: I am a match for them in climbing, but in Hops & flying Leaps they beat me. … How I shall bear the intensity of [a] Maltese or even Sicilian Summer, I cannot guess; but if I get over it, I am confident from what I have experienced, the last 4 days, that their late Autumn & Winter will almost *re-create* me."[37]

In the event, Coleridge was disappointed in his hopes for re-creation in Malta. His health did improve, in response to the clerical and even minor diplomatic work that he undertook for the Governor of Malta, Sir Alexander Ball. He found, indeed, that his "whole salvation depends on being always either at *work* – (not *reading*: for in half an hour my Stomach begins to be *twitchy*; my breathing smothered; my eyes close in spite of my will; and I fall into diseased & painful Doses; but) actual [wri]ting & composition/ or in company – . … Now I *know* that a change of climate, and an absence from [England] & inward Distractions were necessary for me."[38] The trouble was that Coleridge could no more stop himself reading and thinking than he could stop eating and drinking, and he did not long escape "inward Distractions" by undertaking a Mediterranean voyage. He returned to England two years later, no better in health, and, after job-hunting and other business in London and the south, headed north to the Lake District and to the Wordsworths. For a complex variety of reasons, which Richard Holmes explores in the

second volume of his lively biography,[39] this offered a brief refuge but no solution. Re-creation was to elude Coleridge, and depression and addiction to plague him.

Re-creation was what Coleridge sought, in body and spirit. He found it, especially in the years of his young manhood, in the mountains, in solitary climbing and hiking; he found it in the detailed beauties of nature, transformed by creative imagination; and he dreamed of it as he read and mined the travel literature of his own and earlier ages. His discovery of mountaineering as a spiritual exercise was part of the transformation of the experience of nature that produced the Romantic sublime. Coleridge's help, like that of the psalmist, did indeed come from the hills.

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[1] Trevor H. Levere, *Poetry Realized in Nature: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Early Nineteenth-Century Science* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1981). Nicholas Roe, ed., *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001). "Natural philosophers" is the appropriate term, because, although there were many recognized sciences in Coleridge's day, the word scientist was coined in the year of his death (1834), following his interjection during the Cambridge meeting of the British Association for the Advancement at Science. *Quarterly Review* 51 (1834) 59: "Science..loses all traces of unity. A curious illustration of this result may be observed in the want of any name by which we can designate the students of the knowledge of the material world collectively. We are informed that this difficulty was felt very oppressively by the members of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, at their meetings..in the last three summers... Philosophers was felt to be too wide and too lofty a term,..; savans was rather assuming,..; some ingenious gentleman

proposed that, by analogy with artist, they might form scientist, and added that there could be no scruple in making free with this termination when we have such words as sciolist, economist, and atheist–but this was not generally palatable." [Quoted in *Oxford English Dictionary*.]

[2] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton and London, Princeton University Press and Routledge, 1969-2002) [henceforth *CC*] , no. 7, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983), vol. 1 p. 304: "The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."

[3] STC to John Thelwall, 19 November 1796, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956-1971) [henceforth *CL*], vol. 1 (1956), p.260.

[4] STC to Joseph Cottle, *CL* vol. 1 pp.320-321.

[5] *CC*, no. 16, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 3 parts in 6 vols. (Princeton, 2001), part 1 vol. 1, p.366.

[6] *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vols. 1-4 ed. Kathleen Coburn, vol. 5 ed. A. Harding, 5 vols. in 10, Bollingen Series L (New York and Princeton, Bollingen Foundation and Princeton University Press, 1961-2002) [henceforth *CN*], vol. 1, enry 2583.

[7] John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (Boston & New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1927), p.123.

[8] *CN*.

[9] Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation: made by sea or over-land, to the remote and farthest distant quarters of the earth, at any time within the compasse of these 1500 yeeres: devided into three severall volumes, according to the positions of the regions, whereunto they were directed* … (London, 1598-1600).

[10] STC to Tobin, 25 July 1800, *CL*, p.613.

[11] *CC* no. 12, *Marginalia*, 6 vols., vols. 1-2 ed. George Whalley, vols. 2-6 ed. H. J. Jackson and George Whalley (London, Routledge, 1980-2001), vol. 1 (1980), p. 227.

[12] *CC* no. 14, *Table Talk*, 2vols. edited by Carl Woodring, vol. 2 (London and Princeton, Routledge and Princeton University Press, 1990), 12 March 1827, p. 57.

[13] *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H. J. Jackson, *The Oxford Poetry Library* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994), p. xvii.

[14] *CC, Poetical Works*, (note 5 above).

[15] Lowes, *Road to Xanadu*, p.147.

[16] Constantine John Phipps, *The Journal of a Voyage … For making Discoveries towards the North Pole. By the Hon. Commodore Phipps* (London, 1774), p. 82, cited in Lowes, *Road to Xanadu*, p. 146.

[17] T. H. Levere, *Science and the Canadian Arctic: A Century of Exploration 1818-1918* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.37-38 The painting of Nelson and the bear, by Richard Westall (1781-1850), is in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

[18] Lowes, op. cit., pp. 128-9.

[19] "The Eolian Harp" (1795).

[20] "Frost at Midnight" (1798).

[21] *CL* vol. 1, STC to his wife Sara, 17 May 1799. *CN* vol. 4 (1990), entry 5328 (1826): "men in general enjoy Franklin's Travels over the Frozen Zone or Parry's Voyages." *CN* vol. 4 entry 4848 (1823) contains notes from Franklin's *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea, in the Years 1819 …. 1822* (first ed. 1823): "Not less instructive than interesting, and most worthy to appear as the Successor to Hearne's and Mackenzie's Volumes." Coleridge copied a passage from Otto von Kotzebue, *A Voyage of Discovery into the South Sea and Beering's Straits, for the purpose of exploring a North-East Passage, undertaken in the years 1815-18* (1821), in *CN* vol. 4 entry 4841 (1821-22): "The green Island that proved to be an Ice-berg. 'masses of the purest Ice to the height of an hundred feet, concealed under a rich cover of Moss and Grass.'"

[22] *CN* vol. 1 (1961) entry 2798, August 1800.

[23] *CL* vol. 2 (1956), p. 840, STC to Sara Hutchinson, 1-5 August 1802.

[24] *CL* vol. 2 pp.841-845, STC to Sara Hutchinson, 6 August 1802.

[25] *CN* 1 entry 1607, October 1803.

[26] *CL* 1 no. 156, STC to Thelwall 19 November 1796.

[27] Dorothy Stansfield, *Thomas Beddoes M.D. 1760-1808* (1984); T. H. Levere, *Chemists and Chemistry in Nature and Society 1750-1858* (Aldershot, Hants., Variorum, 1994).

[28] Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (London, Faber, 1968).

[29] Kay R. Jamison, *Touched with fire: manic-depressive illness and the artistic temperament* (New York and Toronto, Free Press and Maxwell Macmillan, 1993).

[30] *CL* 1, STC to James Coleridge 14 December 1802.

[31] Richard B. Litchfield, *Tom Wedgwood, the first photographer: an account of his life, his discovery and his friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge* … (London, Duckworth, 1903).

[32] *CL* vol. 2, pp.882-885, STC to Sara Coleridge 16 November 1802.

[33] *CL* vol. 2, pp.902-903, STC to Southey 25 December 1802.

[34] *CL* vol.2, p.916, STC to Tom Wedgwood 14 January 1803.

[35] The best general account of Coleridge's Maltese residence, and of his travels through Sicily and Italy on the return journey is Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London, HarperCollins, 1998), pp. 1-63. See also Alethea Hayter, *A Voyage in Vain: Coleridge's Journey to Malta in 1804* (London, Faber, 1973).

[36] *CL* vol. 2, pp. 1131-32, STC to Daniel Stuart 21 April 1804.

[37] Ibid.

[38] *CL* vol. 2, pp.1145-46, STC to Daniel Stuart 6 July 1804.

[39] Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (1998).