

= Conversation poems =

The conversation poems are a group of eight poems composed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 ? 1834) between 1795 and 1807 . Each details a particular life experience which led to the poet 's examination of nature and the role of poetry . They describe virtuous conduct and man 's obligation to God , nature and society , and ask as if there is a place for simple appreciation of nature without having to actively dedicate one 's life to altruism .

The Conversation poems were grouped in the 20th @-@ century by literary critics who found similarity in focus , style and content . The series title was devised to describe verse where Coleridge incorporates conversational language while examining higher ideas of nature and morality . The works are held together by common themes , in particular they share meditations on nature and man 's place in the universe . In each , Coleridge explores his idea of " One Life " , a belief that people are spiritually connected through a universal relationship with God that joins all natural beings .

Critics have disagreed on which poem in the group is strongest . Frost at Midnight is usually held in high esteem , while Fears in Solitude is generally less well regarded .

= = Grouping = =

20th @-@ century literary critics often categorise eight of Coleridge 's poems (The Eolian Harp , Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement , This Lime @-@ Tree Bower my Prison , Frost at Midnight , Fears in Solitude , The Nightingale : A Conversation Poem , Dejection : An Ode , To William Wordsworth) as a group , usually as his " conversation poems " . The term was coined in 1928 by George McLean Harper , who used the subtitle of The Nightingale : A Conversation Poem (1798) to describe all eight . Harper considered these poems as a form of blank verse that is " ... more fluent and easy than Milton 's , or any that had been written since Milton " . In 2006 , Robert Koelzer wrote about another aspect of this apparent " easiness " , noting that " The Eolian Harp and The Nightingale maintain a middle register of speech , employing an idiomatic language that is capable of being construed as un @-@ symbolic and un @-@ musical : language that lets itself be taken as ' merely talk ' rather than rapturous ' song ' . "

M. H. Abrams wrote a broad description of the works in 1965 . He observed that in each , the speaker " begins with a description of the landscape ; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied by integral process of memory , thought , anticipation , and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene . In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight , faces up to a tragic loss , comes to a moral decision , or resolves an emotional problem . Often the poem rounds itself to end where it began , at the outer scene , but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation . " In fact , Abrams was describing both the conversation poems and later works influenced by them . Abrams ' essay has been describes as a " touchstone of literary criticism " . As Paul Magnuson wrote in 2002 , " Abrams credited Coleridge with originating what Abrams called the ' greater Romantic lyric ' , a genre that began with Coleridge 's ' Conversation ' poems , and included William Wordsworth 's Tintern Abbey , Percy Bysshe Shelley 's Stanzas Written in Dejection and John Keats 's Ode to a Nightingale , and was a major influence on more modern lyrics by Matthew Arnold , Walt Whitman , Wallace Stevens , and W. H. Auden . "

In 1966 , George Watson devoted a chapter to the poems in his literary analysis Coleridge the Poet . Although stressing that the form was the only type of poetry Coleridge created , he admitted that " the name is both convenient and misleading . A conversation is an exchange ; and these poems , a dozen or fewer , stretching from ' The Eolian Harp ' [...] to ' To William Wordsworth ' [...] and perhaps further , are plainly monologues . Those who met Coleridge in his later life , it is true , were inclined to find his conversation arrestingly one @-@ sided , but this will hardly serve as an explanation of what is happening here . "

= = Poems = =

== The Eolian Harp ==

Coleridge began work on The Eolian Harp in August 1795 during his engagement to Sara Fricker . It details their future union and was inspired by his visit to the house in Clevedon that would serve as their home after their wedding . The poem is infused by the fact that Coleridge took an idealised view of his life with Fricker .

The Eolian Harp was published in the 1796 edition of Coleridge 's poems and in all subsequent collections . Coleridge did not stop working on the poem after it was published . He expanded and reworked up until 1817 . It deals with themes of love , sex and marriage , but is not formed in the usual manner of a love poem . In contrast to the second poem in the series , Reflections , which hints at problems with the relationship , The Eolian Harp focuses on innocence and the poet 's anticipation of his conjugal union .

The poem creates a series of oppositional themes with aspects of nature representing each : seduction and innocence , order and chaos . These oppositions establish tension before the poem asks as to how they can be reconciled . These images and their being reconciled are described as analogous to the effects of an Aeolian harp and Coleridge 's pantheistic feelings towards nature . In terms of religion , The Eolian Harp describes the mind 's desire to seek after the divine . His approach is similar to Ralph Cudworth 's in The True Intellectual System of the Universe . However , Coleridge 's pantheistic feelings on nature are said to receive reproof from Fricker , and Coleridge returns to a more traditional view of God that deals more with faith than finding the divine within nature .

== Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement ==

Soon after his autumn 1795 marriage to Sarah Fricker , Coleridge left their home in Clevedon , North Somerset . However , he felt guilt at his absence from his wife , and eventually went to live with her family at Redcliffe Hill , Bristol . As he completed The Eolian Harp ? composed to commemorate his return to Clevedon ? Coleridge composed Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement on his absence from Clevedon and later return to be with his wife at Bristol . The poem was published in the October 1796 Monthly Magazine , under the title Reflections on Entering into Active Life . A poem Which Affects Not to be Poetry . Reflections was included in Coleridge 's 28 October 1797 collection of poems and the anthologies that followed .

The themes of Reflections are similar to those of The Eolian Harp . They are set in the same location , and both describe Coleridge 's relationship with his wife and sexual desire . The reflection on his life within the poem represent an unwillingness to accept his current idyllic life and a rejection of the conclusion drawn in The Eolian Harp . Although the land of Clevedon can bring one closer to God in Coleridge 's view , he reflects on how one cannot simply exist in such an area but must actively seek out truth in order to fulfill God 's will . The poem details how men feel a need to seek truth like a philosopher while also desiring to simply live in an idyllic natural state . The poem reconciles these desires by claiming that the pursuer of truth can still reflect back on his time when he was simply enjoying nature and God 's presence .

Reflections further differs from The Eolian Harp by looking at problems within Coleridge 's marriage , especially when the union distracts him from the world outside of his home . The poem expresses desire for solitude and confinement and emphasises the difference between the worlds within and outside of the cottage . Overall , there is focus on the relationship of the private to the public spheres . When engaged with the outside world the narrator is separate from mankind , yet his focus is devoted to helping mankind , which contains religious and political components . The image of " One Life " compels him to abandon the sensual pleasures of the cottage , to pursue a path of altruism .

== This Lime @-@ Tree Bower My Prison ==

During summer 1797 , Coleridge spent time with many of his friends , including John Thelwall , William and Dorothy Wordsworth , Charles Lamb , Thomas Poole , and his wife Sara Fricker . During this time , he suffered an accident in which his foot was burned . As a result , he was left alone at Poole 's property underneath a lime tree , while Lamb , the Wordsworths and his wife went on a journey across the Quantocks .

The first version of the poem was sent in a letter to Southey and was only 56 lines . The first published edition , in 1800 , was 76 lines long . The poem was revised and published under another name in Southey 's Annual Anthology . A later revised edition was included in Sibylline Leaves , Coleridge 's 1817 collection of poems .

Within the verse , Coleridge seeks to discover the environment that his friends are exploring because he is unable to join them . The poem links the lime @-@ tree bower to the Quantocks where the Wordsworths , Lamb and Fricker were out walking . Although he is separated from them , the poet connects to his distant friends and they are able to share in a common view on life . The poem describes Coleridge 's loneliness and solitude throughout , yet he is glad that his friends are able to experience nature . Because of this , he is able to tolerate his prison , which he views as merely physical rather than intellectual .

= = = Frost at Midnight = = =

Frost at Midnight was written in February 1798 . It is based on Coleridge 's childhood as well as his friendship with Wordsworth , who first exposed Coleridge to the wild beauty of the Lake District . The poem was published in a small work containing his France : An Ode and Fears in Solitude . It was rewritten many times ; seven versions have been printed . Of these , the 1798 edition contains six concluding lines that were removed from later editions .

The narrator comes to an understanding of nature while isolated with his thoughts . Nature becomes a comfort , however , the poet remembers the loneliness of childhood when he felt isolated from nature and other people , as if living in a world of strangers . His hope is that his own child , David Hartley , will experience an easier and more harmonious life .

Although Wordsworth places a similar emphasis on living in harmony with nature in his poetry , Coleridge 's view is different from that of Wordsworth 's in that he believed that nature represents a physical presence of God 's word ; this is combined with a Neoplatonic understanding of God that emphasises the need to understand the divine in order to embrace it .

= = = Fears in Solitude = = =

Fears in Solitude was written after rumors of a French invasion spread across England . Although Coleridge was opposed to Prime Minister William Pitt 's control over the British government , he sided with his homeland . He began work on the poem during April 1798 and it was first published in a small pamphlet along with Frost at Midnight and France : An Ode . It was eventually printed seven times with a later printing removing any anti @-@ Pitt sentiment .

The poem is critical of the corruption Coleridge sees within his own government , but it still displays his loyalty and devotion to England . The poem operates in a circular pattern with its beginning and ending at the Stowey dell . By introducing the historically real possibility of an invasion of England , the narrator announces his determination to protect his family and the dell , along with his fellow Britons . Throughout the poem , there is also an emphasis on the simple life and the narrator desires to return to his previous idyllic lifestyle .

= = = The Nightingale : A Conversation Poem = = =

The Nightingale was written in April 1798 , during the same time Coleridge wrote Fears in Solitude . The poem was included in the Lyrical Ballads , a joint publication with Wordsworth . The nightingale is part of a discussion directed to Wordsworths in which Coleridge refutes the traditional association between nightingales and melancholic feelings because of the bird 's appearance in the myth of

Philomela .

In a break from tradition , the nightingales in Coleridge 's poem represented an experience he had with the Wordsworths . The narrative is interrupted by a mysterious female character . In this case , the female is not Coleridge 's wife , Sara , a fact which separates The Nightingale from the other poems in the series . The work mentions Hartley , the child they had together , as well as a resonant night in which Coleridge viewed and contemplated the moon . John Keats would later follow Coleridge 's depiction and use of nightingale in " Ode to a Nightingale " .

= = = Dejection : An Ode = = =

Coleridge was living apart from his family in 1802 During this period he intended to write a poem for Sara Hutchinson , with whom he had fallen in love . He sent her the verse on 4 April 1802 . The original draft was titled " Letter to Sara Hutchinson " , but renamed as Dejection when published . There are many differences between the versions . The original consisted of 340 lines ; when published , 139 lines were cut to emphasise two moments in Coleridge 's emotional struggle , while many personal elements were removed . The poem was published in The Morning Post on 4 October 1802 . The date corresponds with Wordsworth 's marriage to Mary Hutchinson .

Dejection was a response to Wordsworth 's Immortality Ode . It conveys feelings of dejection , expressed through an inability to write or appreciate nature . Wordsworth is introduced in the poem as a counterbalance to Coleridge ; Wordsworth is able to turn his darkness to benefit and accept comfort . However , Coleridge cannot find any positive aspect to his despair , and is paralyzed by his emotions . The poem captures many of the feelings expressed in his earlier works , including his exploration of a problematic childhood and thoughts on his religious beliefs .

= = = To William Wordsworth = = =

To William Wordsworth commemorates the time when Coleridge stayed with the Wordsworths during the winter of 1806 ? 1807 , and recalls when William Wordsworth read his newly completed The Prelude . Coleridge wrote his poem in response during January 1807 , to capture his feelings about his friend 's poem . Portions of the verse were printed in the 1809 Friend , however Wordsworth did not wish it to be made public due to the private nature of Coleridge 's thoughts . Eventually , it was published in Coleridge 's 1817 collection Sibylline Leaves .

The poem begins by summarising the themes of The Prelude , and develops into a discussion of Wordsworth 's understanding of his beliefs and their relationship with nature . In the poem , Coleridge is self @-@ critical in a near masochistic manner , holding his poetry and thoughts as inferior to Wordsworth . This is partly because Coleridge believed that Wordsworth was able to find bliss from solitude while he was unable to find anything but pain . Coleridge discusses his youthful hopes to become a great poet and how his ability to write has diminished over time . The poem 's admiration of Wordsworth 's ability is rendered without jealousy , though he is scornful of his own .

= = Themes = =

The Eolian Harp examines Coleridge 's understanding of nature within the concept of his " One Life " , an idea that came from reflection on his experiences at Clevedon . The conversation poems as a whole are connected to the ideas within The Eolian Harp that deal with the nature and mans ' understanding of the universe . In particular , The Eolian Harp express an unease with David Hartley 's ideas about necessity . Within Reflections , the idea of " One Life " compels the narrator to abandon the sensual pleasures of the cottage and of nature in order to pursue a path of helping mankind . This Lime @-@ Tree Bower continues the conversation poems theme of " One Life " by linking Coleridge 's surroundings with the walk his friends went on . Although they are all separated , Coleridge connects to his distant friends by their mutual experience and appreciation of nature .

Frost at Midnight uses the idea of " One Life " as the poem describes the idea life that Coleridge 's child will experience in the countryside . Coleridge hoped that the boy would become a " child of

nature " and raised free of the constraints that come from a disconnection from nature . Fears in Solitudedescribes the unity of mankind and nature , which manifests in the form of fearing for his fellow countrymen in times of invasion . This idea of " One Life " , according to Abrams , " best epitomize the Romantic constellation of joy , love , and the shared life " .

Both The Eolian Harp and Reflections deal with similar understandings of nature but differ in approach . By Reflections , Coleridge questions his right to simply enjoy nature . The image of nature and other themes reappears in Fear in Solitude , and the later poem even recreates the " Valley of Seclusion " image . Similarly , the compulsion to enter into the world and help mankind is included , but it is altered from being motivated by guilt to a warning message against a possible invasion from outside forces . As such , Fear in Solitude does not seek to leave the location to help mankind , but to stay as a protector over his family .

This Lime @-@ Tree Bower and Frost at Midnight also deal with a similar understanding of nature , and the ideas within This Lime @-@ Tree Bower form the basis for a natural education . Coleridge hoped that his son Hartley would be able to learn through nature in an innocent way . Unlike Wordsworth 's nature , Coleridge 's has a strong Christian presence and nature is a physical presence of God 's word . There is also a connection between Dejection and Frost at Midnight with its emphasis on Coleridge 's private life .

= = Critical response = =

The poems are considered by many critics to be among Coleridge 's finest . The final ten lines of Frost at Midnight were chosen by Harper in 1928 as the " best example of the peculiar kind of blank verse Coleridge had evolved , as natural @-@ seeming as prose , but as exquisitely artistic as the most complicated sonnet . " In 1966 , Virginia Radley argued , " Although no conversation poem can rightly be said to stand equally with the poems of high imagination [...] certainly " Frost at Midnight " and " This Lime @-@ tree Bower ... " both have within them that quality of heart so essential to these latter poems . Because of this quality , and because of the striking effectiveness of their imagery , these poems can be said to be the true harbingers of Coleridge 's greatest poems " .

Others agree on the strength of Frost at Midnight . Richard Holmes wrote in 1989 that the poem " is one of the most intricately structured of all the Conversation Poems " . Rosemary Ashton argued in 1997 that the poem is " one of [Coleridge 's] most delightful conversation poems " . Agreeing with this view in 2006 , Adam Sisman believes that Frost at Midnight is " perhaps the most beautiful of Coleridge 's ' conversation poems ' " . Other poems in the series received praise , with George Watson , in 1966 , claiming that To William Wordsworth " is the last pure example that Coleridge 's poetry affords of the conversation poem [...] the poem is extravagant in its very being . " Also , Holmes describes The Eolian Harp as a " beautiful Conversation Poem " .

Not all of the poems have been well received . Watson believes that Fears in Solitude " shows how precarious Coleridge 's new achievement was . It is a shameless return to the older , effusive manner , evidently written in a white heat of patriotic indignation against the degradation of English public opinion during the French wars , and it is only by stretching charity that it can be considered a conversation poem at all . " Holmes simply claims Fears in Solitude as " one of the most difficult of [Coleridge 's] Conversation Poems " . In discussing The Nightingale , Ashton writes that , " Bantering though this is , and , however , beautiful the final lines about Hartley are , ' The Nightingale ' is as a whole a less successful poem than the other conversation poems . It has rather a blank at the centre , just where the others pivot on a significant controlling idea . "