As a boy, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was badly bullied. His brother Frank bullied him because he thought Samuel was their mother’s favorite son. Samuel became “fretful” and “timorous” (Weissman 110). Shunned by other boys for being a sissy, Samuel read books about adventures and playfully acted out the tales. But his father, believing Samuel to be overwhelmed by the books’ scary parts, burnt the books. This Coleridge was understandably pleased after writing “This Lime-Tree Bower,” because “Lime-Tree” was an imaginative attempt to shape his boyhood miseries into a boon. However, Coleridge had once both turned the tables on his brother and successfully braved an evening alone outside his home. And this Coleridge, the person he might have been had he not been bullied, the one who thought of himself as wild and free, is the person he tried to recover in subsequent poetry. Through first rejecting (in the re-write of “Lime-Tree” and in “Frost at Midnight”) the accommodating tone and the self-deceptive stance of “Lime-Tree,” Coleridge regains the will in “France: an Ode” to once again brave placing himself before a threatening night sky. And out there, outside, Coleridge claims liberty from all “prisons,” self-imposed or otherwise.

In “Lime Tree,” Coleridge characterizes himself as “lame,” “faint,” and “lonely.” He pretends that this status—the consequence here of Sarah spilling hot milk on his foot—is unusual. The norm, he pretends, was for him to roam about with friends. But Coleridge grew up denied the outdoor play others enjoyed. His brother Frank intimidated him until he became the sort of person—a sissy—other boys would have nothing to do with (Weissman 110). He compensated by reading adventure stories, but his father, “disliking the effect [. . .] which these books had produced” (Coleridge, “Dearest Poole” 346-50), burnt the books, just as Sarah burns Coleridge’s foot in “Lime-Tree.” Coleridge had his whole childhood to persuade himself that deprivation is a good thing, so his revelation in “Lime-tree” is better understood as a capitulation to the status imposed upon him by boyhood bullies than as enlightenment. But Coleridge penned “Lime-Tree” prepared to repudiate the lame representation of himself in the poem as someone whose natural company is the hornless, stingless, humble-bee.

Perhaps buoyed by his friendship with the “great man” Wordsworth, and certainly building on the one night as a boy he had threatened his brother with a knife, Coleridge alters “Lime-Tree” in the re-write so he seems more commanding.
than accommodating. The accommodating Coleridge in the first version is the one who discovers virtues in “narrow” places, and who states that “sometimes / [t]is well to be bereaved of promised good, / [t]hat we may lift the soul and contemplate [ . . . ] the joys we cannot share.” The commanding Coleridge is the one who in the re-write alters the dell his friends explore so it becomes awe-inspiring and threatening.

In the original version there is a “rifted dell, where many an ash / [t]wists its wild limbs beside the ferny rock.” In the re-write there is a “roaring dell, o’erwooded, narrow [ . . . ] [and] deep.” In the original version he imagines his friends only “look[ing]” into the dell; the re-write has them “winding down” into it. The result of this alteration is that when Coleridge addresses the sun, clouds, grove, and ocean, he is commanding these elements to do battle with the dell. Despite all of the exclamation marks ending statements such as “[r]ichlier burn, ye clouds!” and “kindle, though blue ocean!,” in the first version, because he has not evoked the image of a threatening dell, Coleridge’s address seems more a wistful plea for nature to tend to his long-suffering friend Charles Lamb than a command to rescue him from threatening surroundings. The reference to his friend’s deprived status as a city-dweller is still there in the re-write, but it is overwhelmed, outmatched, by the more evocative dell.

Lamb objected to being described in “Lime-Tree” as a “gentle” city-dweller that needed “rescuing,” and asked that Coleridge change how he characterized him in subsequent versions of the poem (Wu 458). Coleridge never complied with his friend’s request; instead, in the re-write he ends up leaving out his own self-description as “lame,” “lonely,” and “faint.” The removal of these descriptors is appropriate, for in the re-write Coleridge acts in such a way that he no longer warrants being described as the human equivalent of the humble bee.

Coleridge, while he commands nature, does not in the re-write usurp his bower-prison. What he does do is italicize the word “usurp” in the text, which only adds to the many exclamation marks in the poem, a disturbance to its meditative mood.

Coleridge does not usurp “prisons” in “Frost at Midnight,” either, but he makes clear in this poem the real reason he chose not to do so in “Lime-Tree.”

As was the case in “Lime-Tree,” Coleridge is denied access to “playmate[s]” in “Frost at Midnight.” Unlike “Lime-Tree,” he boldly addresses rather than camouflages his perpetual boyhood experience of being “dr[iven] [ . . . ] from play” (“Dearest Poole” 346-50). What keeps him “imprisoned” in “Frost at Midnight” is not an accident but rather the “stern preceptor’s [intimidating] face.” And rather than
disc overing that there is “[n]o scene so narrow but may well employ / [e]ach faculty of sense, and keep the heart / [a]wake to love and beauty,” in “Frost at Midnight” “narrow” scenes lead inevitably to restricted happiness. “Cloister[ed]” living is not redeemed in this poem by discovering virtue in denied pleasures. Instead, Coleridge is regretful that he “saw nought lovely [as a child] but the sky and stars (emphasis added).”

In “Frost at Midnight,” Coleridge hopes his son will not be confined to narrow scenes as he once was. He hopes instead his son will “wander [epic landscapes] like the breeze.” However, because he refers to the night sky as the only redemptive element he knew as a boy, Coleridge may already be preparing to wander about awesome environments himself. Coleridge’s sole experience as a child of usurping bullies and enduring outside dangers involved spending an evening alone before the night sky. Though it may have been only one occasion, Coleridge bad on this occasion known what it was to fight back “without running back to his mother, [. . .] proving he was no sissy or tattletale” (Weissman 118). He ran outside his home and endured a “dreadful stormy night” (Coleridge, “Dear Poole” 352-56), proving he could handle the fearsome experiences his father thought him incapable of. And in “France: An Ode,” Coleridge leaves his bower-prison behind to wind his “moonlight way” “[t]hrough glooms which never woodman trod.”

Coleridge begins “France: An Ode” with an apology: he must apologize to nature for controlling it in the re-write of “Lime-Tree.” The clouds he had commanded to “richlier burn” become the clouds that “no mortal may control.” The woods that he had the “ancient ivy” “usurp,” now are “imperious” and master the wind. Coleridge has no interest here in the “sweet sounds” and “pleasing shapes” of nature that inspired capitulation in “Lime-Tree.” He is instead intent on rediscovering amidst the “rude shape[s] [. . .] and wild unconquerable sound[s]” of nature, the obstinacy, the will, to refuse to “[y]ield homage” to those who would curtail his freedom.

He does not exempt himself. Coleridge repudiates in “France: an Ode” those who are “[s]laves by their own compulsion[,] [. . .] [who] wear the name / [o]f freedom graven on a heavier chain.” He likely is thinking of himself here—or at least the version of himself who pretended in “Lime-Tree” that deprivation can lead to “wis[dom],” “pur[ity],” and happiness. This Coleridge, who used his imagination to transform a prison into a holy site, needed no stern eye to keep him in place. Nor should he have feared punishment: he was willing to pretend that physical
incapacitation can be a good thing.

The Coleridge in “France: An Ode” should expect punishment—but this Coleridge is not intimidated. Standing before nature he declares he will not be anyone’s slave. But because, despite the certainty of punishment, he had still as a boy managed to defy brother, father, and mother—those who had, as with Sarah in “Lime-Tree,” made him into a pitiful home-body—Coleridge had already learned that “obstinacy vanquish[es] [. . .] fears” (“Dear Poole” 352-56).

By rediscovering this insight, a more profound discovery than anything found in the bower-prison, outside, before a night sky, Coleridge also recovers what he hopes is his true self: “Oh Liberty, [he proclaims,] my [true] spirit felt thee there!” (emphasis added).

Works Cited


---. “My Dearest Poole.” 9 October 1797. E. L. Griff.


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