A COMPANION TO

ROMANTIC POETRY

EDITED BY **CHARLES MAHONEY**

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A Companion to Romantic Poetry

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Charles Mahoney

Introduction

Charles Mahoney

"We are living through a great age for poetry," Anne Elliot observes to Captain Benwick in the screen adaptation of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (Dear 1996: 47). Although Anne (and Austen) have reservations concerning its moral efficacy, the cultural significance of poetry is never questioned. Indeed, precisely this claim is made time and again by Romantic writers – from Wordsworth and Baillie to Austen and Hazlitt, Keats and De Quincey – but perhaps nowhere with greater conviction or urgency than in Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, when he contends:

> The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry. … It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns in their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations, for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. (Shelley 2002: 535)

Romantic poetry – for Shelley, the "power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature," the "words which express what [the poets] understand not" (2002: 535) – Romantic poetry is revolutionary. It is electrifying. It is dangerous, "seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely," according to Austen (1998: 90). For Hazlitt, it "partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age" (Hazlitt 1930–4: 11. 87). The center and circumference of Romanticism, Romantic poetry is for Shelley nothing less than the spirit of the age. It delineates, as Wordsworth expresses it, "the very world which is the world / Of all of us, the place in which, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all" (Wordsworth 1979: 1805 *Prelude* x. 725–7). Romantic poetry may not necessarily define Romanticism, but it is indispensable to any definition of Romanticism.

A Companion to Romantic Poetry, edited by Charles Mahoney

"Romanticism" is a notoriously difficult term to define. It resists historical confinement every bit as much as it deflects assignment of its definitive qualities. There are no incontestable dates with which to delimit Romanticism as a period; neither is there any one controlling idea that informs Romanticism as a concept. Integral to nearly every account of Romanticism, however, is the conviction that its poetry is somehow or another essential to its self-definition. Romantic poetry has also proven to be, for over half a century, a privileged site for the entry of critical theory into literary studies. The poetry that Cleanth Brooks and the New Critics read as the finest expression of their privileged category of "ambiguity" exemplified for William Wimsatt the intimate and ennobling exchange between mind and nature that inhered in the Romantic image. This same body of writing provided the material for M. H. Abrams's classifications of the "greater Romantic lyric" and the "correspondent breeze," as well as his comprehensive understanding of Romantic poetry as a template of "natural supernaturalism." The poetry that made possible Geoffrey Hartman's reading of the opposition between the Romantic imagination and nature, the *via naturaliter negativa*, was for Paul de Man exemplary of the rhetorical indeterminacy that characterized the "literariness" of poetic language. Work that Harold Bloom pressured as manifesting his theory of literary "misreading" served in turn for Marjorie Levinson and Jerome McGann as the aesthetic elision of an ideological reality. The arbitrarily marginalized writings of women poets catalyzed Paula Feldman and Stuart Curran to reorganize our understanding of the Romantic canon and chronology beyond the confines of a masculine gender line. And the ostensibly naive formalism of Romantic poetry provided Susan Wolfson with occasion to remap the relation of literary form to ideology under the heading of a renovated and contextualized formalist criticism.

As recently as twenty years ago, companions to Romantic poetry would have been (and often were) organized around the six principal male poets who dominated the canon – Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats – and consequently structured in terms of the categories generated by their writing. Today, our sense of both the achievements and the possibilities of Romantic poetry is far more expansive, due in no small measure to a number of groundbreaking anthologies that have dramatically increased our access to previously noncanonical Romantic writing. As Duncan Wu has remarked, "If critics create their own versions of Romanticism, so too do anthologists" (Wu 1994: xxvii), and Wu himself has been instrumental in this remapping, both with *Romanticism* (1994; 3rd edn. 2006) and *Romantic Women Poets* (1997). The circumference of our sense of Romantic poetry has grown almost beyond recognition in the wake of these two anthologies, accompanied as they have been by significant revisions to established offerings as well as by the emergence of new anthologies, not to mention numerous scholarly editions of the works of these recently "canonized" writers. As a result of the work of feminist, historicist, and cultural critics, the august canon that once seemed confined to six male poets has since exploded to include the work of such previously marginalized poets as Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and Joanna Baillie, Anna Barbauld, Robert Burns and Thomas Moore, John Thelwall, George Crabbe and Walter Scott, Robert Southey, Leigh Hunt and John Clare, Grace

Aguilar, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon. If the French Revolution continues to provide the historical backdrop against which the achievements of Romantic poetry may be highlighted, the poetry itself continues to serve as the battleground for new and often antagonistic theories regarding the nature of literary canonization, evaluation, and interpretation.

Integral to the reevaluation of Romantic poetry has been a reinvigorated attention to the formal vocabulary of this poetry, including but by no means limited to such matters as form and meter, genre and mode. (As Michael O'Neill has observed in a related context, "it is in the use of poetic shaping that Romantic poetry conveys most authoritatively its variety and high quality" (O'Neill and Mahoney 2008: xxviii).) This revitalized attention occurs, moreover, not in isolation or as the obfuscation of history (however inflected), but in increasingly refined relation to such categories and concerns as gender, politics, ecology, economics, sexuality, canon formation, and of course literary theory. The essays in *A Companion to Romantic Poetry* attest to the remarkable diversity of this poetry at the same time as they illuminate it in relation to the historical and theoretical struggles that continue to take place in and around it. Arguably since Stuart Curran's *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, with its rejuvenated claim for the inevitability of thinking about form when thinking about Romantic poetry, it has become increasingly difficult *not* to think about the logic of Romantic forms – if not also the degree to which, as Curran argues, "the formal structuring principle in large part predetermines ideological orientation" (1986: 10). Similar claims for formal agency are advanced by Susan Wolfson throughout *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism*, with its practice of "an intensive reading of poetic events within a context of questions about poetic form and formalist criticism" (1997: 1), a method designed to interrogate conventional associations of "form" and "ideology." In *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, Michael O'Neill argues for a similar sense of formal agency in his reading of the "self-conscious poem" not only in terms of "the recognition made by a poem that it is a poem" but furthermore in the contention that "it is in the taking on of form that Romantic and post-Romantic poems are often at their most self-conscious" (1997: xiv, xv). William Keach's attention to the logic of Romantic forms manifests itself in *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* as a sustained examination of the politicizing of poetic styles at the "intersections between political and linguistic 'possibilities,' between historical reference and stylistic performance" (2004: xii). More recently, David Duff has argued not only that "[i]deas about genre are inseparable from Romanticism" but that, following Curran, "the Romantics effected a major expansion of the generic repertoire" (2009: 1, 2). As these and other examples demonstrate, the renewed attention to the close reading of poetic form should not be misunderstood as a reactionary turn against the critical *-ism* of the day, but as a sophisticated attempt to explicate the critical relations that abide between Romantic poetry and ideology, history, gender, sexuality, class – indeed, as a politicizing of Romantic poetic forms from all angles. Consequently, attention to form in this *Companion* is not confined to those chapters that attend specifically to one form or genre. The centrality of formal considerations here is such that numerous chapters also explicitly take up matters of

form and genre, whether in the context of, say, Romantic short lyrics and songs (chapter 1), the Romantic sonnet (chapter 4), Celtic Romantic poetry (chapter 15), Anglo-Jewish poetry (chapter 16), improvisation (chapter 19), Romantic poetry and illustration (chapter 21), the "pleasures of enduring form" (chapter 26), the genres of the Romantic sublime (chapter 29), or the persistence of Romantic poetry and poetic forms (chapter 34). The entirety of *A Companion to Romantic Poetry* participates in the critical premise that matters of poetic form *matter*, regardless of the specific teleology of any given critical practice.

The essays in this *Companion* are arranged in four parts. The first, "Forms and Genres," underlines the centrality of meter and form to a *poetic* consideration of Romantic poetry. This section consists in considerations of forms as fixed as the couplet and the tercet, as hybrid as loco-descriptive poetry, and as seemingly undefinable as the pastoral. Certainly, these boundaries are frequently as permeable as they are arbitrary, and there is a significant degree of productive interplay between various forms and various chapters, such as between the ode and the elegy, the pastoral and the georgic. The second part, "Production and Distribution, Schools and Movements," attends to the public spheres in which Romantic poetry was produced and in which it circulated, under such headings as the periodical press, the public lecture, or conversation. Integral to this section is an understanding that the "schools" of Romantic poetry are not limited to, say, the Lake School and the Cockney School but include such diverse poetic entities as labouring-class poetry, Celtic Romantic poetry, and Anglo-Jewish poetry. The third part, "Contemporary Contexts and Perspectives," assembles a series of readings of cultural and intellectual concerns particularly germane to Romantic poets themselves. These include poetic celebrity, improvisation, the role of sport in Romantic poetry, poetry and science, poetry and illustration, and the Romantic poets' relations to Milton. Finally, the fourth part, "Critical Issues and Current Debates," brings to the fore a number of critical concerns in recent scholarship on Romantic poetry. While there is certainly a good deal of overlap between parts III and IV, these chapters more often highlight the critical lexicon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Included here are considerations of the enduring forms of Romantic aesthetics, constructions of gender in Romantic poetry, emerging trends in ecocriticism, the relation between literary criticism and Romantic poetry, and the persistence of Romantic poetry in twentieth-century American poetry.

Near the conclusion of the *Preface*, Wordsworth reminds his readers that

> an *accurate* taste in Poetry and in all the other arts, as Joshua Reynolds has observed, is an *acquired* talent, which can only be produced by thought and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition. … if Poetry be a subject on which much time has not been bestowed, the judgment may be erroneous, and in many cases it necessarily will be so. (Wordsworth 1974: 1. 156)

Though it is certainly not the goal of this volume to inculcate taste (however Wordsworthian), *A Companion to Romantic Poetry* does aspire to provide "long continued

intercourse" with some of the most resonant voices and forms of Romantic poetry, in the hope that such intercourse will reward the time of reading with a renewed conviction that Romantic poetry, as Shelley contended, "arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life, and veiling them *or in language or in form* sends them forth among mankind" (Shelley 2002: 532, emphasis added).

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Part I
Forms and Genres

1

Mournful Ditties and Merry Measures: Feeling and Form in the Romantic Short Lyric and Song

Michael O'Neill

Short poems can condense all things into themselves, drops of dew that fold in on themselves but mirror the cosmos. Brief in one sense, they are immense in others, making one little stanzaic room an everywhere. Keats's hauntingly tuned "In drear nighted December," with its dancing, troubled lilt, contrasts nature's indifference to its changes with the human experience of loss. The poem trips, in both senses of the word, as it concludes by pointing out how "The feel of not to feel it, / When there is none to heal it, / Nor numbèd sense to steel it, / Was never said in rhyme" (ll. 21–4). The passage moves fleetly, but, as it turns from song to speech in the last line, a line that catches up the close of the previous two stanzas in its rhyming wake, it mimes the effect of slowing, even half-stumbling. The poem's end suggests the huge tracts of human experience never caught in "rhyme" and hints at its own success in netting a strange, uncomfortable sensation, the "feel of not to feel it," when "passèd joy" (l. 20) is re-experienced like a phantom limb.

Keats's poem shows how Romantic brief lyrics turn into metapoetry (poetry about poetry) with startling rapidity. The short lyric is poetry at its most exposed; each short lyric performs an implicit work of poetics, bearing out a poet's essential idea of poetry, and this is partly because it must "sing," or at least be "A Sort of a Song," to borrow the title of a poem by William Carlos Williams. Brief lyric and song, my two concerns, blend and intermingle as subgenres: "lyric," for my purposes, draws attention to the expression of feeling, "song" to the imperatives of the rhythmic movement of words, a movement rooted in traditional airs and measures.

The long, withdrawing roar of historicist and ideologically theorized reaction against aestheticism in its varied shapes and guises has meant a relative indifference to the gift of song which Romantic poetry extends to its readers. At times one may feel that the loss is ours; and one does not have to be a follower of Theodor Adorno, with his view that, through its very autonomy, art might offer a revealing "negative" image of social and political realities, to see that supposedly "pure lyric," in obeying its own formal laws, has

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much to say about a very impure bundle of realities. In the hands of Romantic practitioners, the short lyric and song represent a major generic breakthrough. If the Romantic short lyric and song draw on the eighteenth-century revival of ballad and minstrelsy, they imbue their forms with a new personal note, even as they encourage the personal to communicate with the impersonal (often embodied in the form of poetry). The chapter argues that, in their dramatization of the relationship between form and feeling, the Romantic short lyric and song explore their own cultural purpose and value.

I

My title comes from a poem by Shelley, entitled, like so many ventures in the lyric mode, "Song," and, like many of Shelley's briefer pieces, it uses its lyricism to lament an absence, but it does so in such a way that it converts absence into musical presence. From its beginning, "Rarely, rarely comest thou, / Spirit of Delight!" (ll. 1–2), a trochaic lilt moves in sympathy with the coming and going of the "Spirit of Delight," whose visitations are "rare," in the dual sense of being very infrequent and being valuable. In "Song," Shelley expressly shapes lyric into a dimension which "may be / Untainted by man's misery" (ll. 35–6), yet the "taint" of "man's misery" refuses to be eradicated. It reappears in the poet's own refusal to sentimentalize: "Let me set my mournful ditty / To a merry measure. / Thou wilt never come for pity – / Thou wilt come for pleasure" (ll.19–22). The poem notes the disjunction between form and content, even as the "merry measure" bears witness to Shelley's refusal simply to intone "mournful" commonplaces. Lyric art heightens, so the lines suggest, our awareness of the "mournful" by bringing into play awareness of art as always art, always obedient to rules governing "measure."

In fact, Shelley's lyric self-positioning, as in "To a Skylark," is relatively intricate. In that poem the trill of the clever stanzaic form, its long last alexandrine floating and running "Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun" (l. 15), imitates the poet's admiration for the skylark's world of "clear keen joyance" (l. 76); at the same time, Shelley recognizes his distance from such a world. "Our sweetest songs," as he notes reflexively, "are those that tell of saddest thought" (l. 90), and "saddest thought" discovers its nature most profoundly and finds "sweetest" expression when contemplating its opposite. "Song," too, both surrenders to and offers a critique of pure lyric, if one identifies such a thing with the "Spirit of Delight," a Spirit sought after with a restrained, disciplined longing that is affecting. It is as though the lyric poet's fate were to devise beautiful forms that articulate his distance from the beauty they embody. The close of the poem composes a chastened music out of its sense of such a distance:

> I love Love – though he has wings,
> And like light can flee –
> But above all other things,
> Spirit, I love thee –

> Thou art Love and Life! O come,
> Make once more my heart thy home.
> (ll. 43–8)

The metre here, as elsewhere in the poem, plays with and against the cadences of the speaking voice, which is allowed to assert itself in unostentatious ways at moments such as "though" (l. 43), "all" (l. 45), "love" (l. 46), and "my" in the last line. The emotion is one of longing, as is betokened by the final apostrophe. Yet "once more" in the final line indicates that the invoked Spirit has, in the past, made the poet's "heart" its "home," where the alliterative bond suggests, tantalizingly, the appropriateness of such a domiciling, just as the previous line has briefly married "Love and Life."

Shelley's "Song" suggests that many Romantic lyrics carry their burdens of significance lightly. Appropriately, my word "burdens" can have a musical meaning, too, and Romantic lyrics are frequently within calling distance of literal music. As often, they anticipate Verlaine's nuanced injunction in his "Ars poétique" "De la musique avant toute chose" (Music above everything; Verlaine 1999): an injunction which allows for things, even as it sets music in a superior position to them. Byron wrote the poems in *Hebrew Melodies* to be set to music by Isaac Nathan; Shelley's lyrics have often been set to music, too. Moore's *Irish Melodies* provide a preeminent example of poems written to be sung, even if, in the words of one entranced listener, the American poet Nathaniel Parker Willis, Moore "makes no attempt at music" in his singing of his poems. Willis continues: "It is a kind of admirable recitative, in which every shade of thought is syllabled and dwelt upon, and the sentiment of the song goes through your blood, warming you to the very eyelids, and starting you to tears, if you have soul or sense in you" (Vail 2001: 85). Such a "recitative" serves as a means of reflecting on the purpose and role of poetic lyric, as Moore's "Oh! Blame not the Bard" (1810) brings out. Participating in sophisticated ways in that recovery of the bard as impassioned champion and chronicler of a culture typical of the eighteenth-century revival of medieval minstrelsy, the poem's galloping anapaests may lack the subtlety of rhythm and suggestion which Verlaine urges in "Art poétique"; they may even threaten to descend to the status of that "littérature" which is the final scornful word of Verlaine's poem. But nuance re-enters via a syntax which hints at failed possibilities, so many sharp stones on which to cut one's feet beneath the limpid flow of the rhythms. Indeed, the poem acts as a lament for what the lyric poet might have done with his art: were Ireland's "spirit" not "broken" (l. 10), then

> The string that now languishes loose o'er the lyre
> Might have bent a proud bow to the warrior's dart,
> And the lip which now breathes but the song of desire
> Might have poured the full tide of a patriot's heart.
> (ll. 5–8; quoted from Wordsworth and Wordsworth 2003)

The image of the lyre-string which have might strung a longbow suggests that the hand is mightier than the pen, but it is only the bardic effusion which makes possible

"the song of desire": a desire for the "mights" of patriotic engagement. And in its final stanza the poem throws off its veils of self-abasement and recovers its lyric nerve:

> But though glory be gone, and though hope fade away.
> Thy name, loved Erin, shall live in his songs:
> Not e'en in the hour when his heart is most gay
> Will he lose the remembrance of thee and his wrongs!
> (ll. 25–8)

True, this sentiment might play into the hands of those who would see Moore as an ineffectually anglicized Irish bard, wailing tunefully and noncontroversially of his nation's injuries. But the writing links lyric to processes of "remembrance" in ways that are complicated. The poem may be learned by heart, remembered as though a song of some long-distant historical event; yet its capacity to work on the conscience of Ireland's rulers is suggested, too, a suggestion made overt at the end when Moore sings to "loved Erin" (l. 26) of a time when "thy masters themselves, as they rivet thy chains, / Shall pause at the song of thy captive and weep" (ll. 31–2). This complicated state of affective embroilment by both "masters" and "captive" in the pity induced by Ireland's "wrongs" means that the word with which that noun rhymes, "songs," draws powerful attention to itself. "Songs" point up "wrongs," a rhyme that hints at Moore's apologia for his career as a poet.

II

Romantic brief poems often reflect, implicitly or explicitly, on their own reasons for existence and mode of being, and do so through their musical intensity. Leigh Hunt praises Coleridge for writing poems "so perfect in the sentiment of music, so varied with it, and yet leaving on the ear so unbroken and single an effect," and in doing so comes close to formulating an ad hoc Romantic poetics of the lyric. For him, Coleridge's is a poetry "quietly content with its beauty": furthermore, "Of pure poetry, strictly so called, that is to say, consisting of nothing but its essential self, without conventional and perishing helps, he was the greatest master of his time." There are substantial objections to the idea of a "pure poetry," just as there are to the notion of "music" in poetry. Rhythm, sound-effects: these cannot be isolated from semantic considerations. Yet we can grant the force of these objections, and still believe that Hunt has captured a quality without which poems such as Coleridge's "Love" would make only half their impact on us. That quality is a sense in which the lyric mastery of the poet, consubstantial as it is with the poem, is also felt as a contributing and overriding presence. Hunt notes of "Love," a poem of great narratorial sophistication, that "one of the charms of it consists in the numerous repetitions and revolvings of the words, one on the other, as if taking delight in their own beauty" (Hunt 1891: 251, 250, 259). Such

"revolvings" slyly and affectingly link to the poem's hints that its scenario serves as a mask for an unspoken autobiographical endeavor of the poet's, one running parallel to the sophisticated self-awareness of the lyric. Mirrors start to mirror mirrors in a stanza such as this, singled out by Hunt: "I told her how he pined: and ah! / The deep, the low, the pleading tone / With which I sang another's love, / Interpreted my own" (ll. 33–6). As the singer of a song, the "I" has stepped inside the lyric space; as the writer who draws attention to the singer who has so stepped, Coleridge invites us to suppose that we might interpret his own extra-poetic feelings.

Self-consciousness about lyric reaches an extravagant extreme in Edgar Allen Poe's bravura post-Romantic manifesto, "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846). It is post-Romantic in that Poe has, it would seem, studied the effects of the best Romantic lyrics and sought to elicit from them a formula for the archetypal short, perfect poem. Poe has this to say:

> What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones – that is to say, of brief poetical effects. … For this reason, at least, one half of the "Paradise Lost" is essentially prose – a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, *inevitably*, with corresponding depressions – the whole being deprived, through the extremeness of its length, of the vastly important artistic element, totality, or unity of effect. (Poe 1846: 164)

Poe may exaggerate. Yet he isolates a central feature of, and source of power in, Romantic poetry. Shelley, for all his grasp of Dante's *Commedia* as an epic poem, anticipates Poe in his sense of the Italian poet's work as burning with a many-faceted, highly localized brilliance: "His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought" (Shelley 2003: 693). Is it not the case that Shelley's famous or notorious difficulty connects closely with the jostling concourse, in poems such as the "Ode to the West Wind," of many "burning atoms of inextinguishable thought"? Were figures of speech ever so vividly heaped, one upon another, as at that poem's close, as we move from imagined "incantation" (l. 65) of the poem we are reading to "Ashes and sparks" (l. 67) "scattered" (see l. 66) as from "an unextinguished hearth" (l. 66), to the "trumpet of a prophecy" (l. 69)? Each word burns with its own connected, if atomized, minidrama; thus the command to "Scatter" (l. 66) imbues the verse with a sense of the poet's authority so to command; in the same breath, it hints, too, at the notion of dispersal, even at an Orphic sacrificial ritual that links with the eruption into the second terza rima sonnet, by way of a simile, of "some fierce Maenad" (l. 21). The terza rima mimes, among other things, a continual interplay between concentration and scattering.

The idea of poetry struggling to aspire to the condition of a single word may have its origins in Christianity's trust in the Logos. The poet of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, canto III, true to that canto's shadowy, alternative life as an extended sequence of connected short lyrics, expresses the wish to

> wreak
> My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
> Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
> All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
> Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe – into *one* word
> (97, ll. 906–10)

The longing comes and goes, and defeats itself in the act of utterance. The trailing sentence speaks of conditionality, unassailability. Even details such as the repetition of "feel" after "feelings" tell us that the dream of encapsulating the self into "one word" cannot be realized. But many Romantic poems believe that brevity is the soul of poetic achievement, as the following very short poem bears witness:

> A slumber did my spirit seal;
> I had no human fears:
> She seemed a thing that could not feel
> The touch of earthly years.
>
> No motion has she now, no force;
> She neither hears nor sees,
> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
> With rocks and stones and trees.

Wordsworth's enigmatic poem continues to haunt. Coleridge spoke of it as a "sublime Epitaph" and went on: "Whether it had any reality, I cannot say. Most probably, in some gloomier moments he had fancied the moment in which his sister might die" (Wu 2006: 478). Coleridge poses a possibility, that of the lines having "any reality," that the poem outlaws and prompts. Its lyric autonomy seems absolute. Yet its urgency shocks us into the wish to find a biographical key. Even in his glissade to "the moment in which his sister might die" after "in some gloomier moments he had fancied," Coleridge slides from lyric to life in a way that suggests the power of the fiction is to suggest in some way that it is not a fiction.

The poem itself fuses brevity with intensity. It wrongfoots the reader, operating with unknowing, knowing, sly straightforwardness. It is the poem's art to be piercingly direct and endlessly productive of doubt and interrogation. "A slumber did my spirit seal," then, but, ironically, now – though the right inflection of any irony is hard fully to register – a slumber does her spirit (and body) seal. "I had no human fears"; did I have superhuman fears? Did I suppose she was beyond "human fears." And is "She," as has been argued, not another person but a reference to "my spirit" (see the discussion in Rzepka 2008)? This possibility flickers and troubles, even as most readers are surely right instinctively to see the poem as reaching out to someone beyond the poet in that "She." If she was a woman or girl who then "seemed a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years," she is now, most definitely, a thing "Rolled round" with other things, whose thinginess could not be more thingy, "rocks and stone and trees." Is this