Coleridge was certainly in immense agony when he wrote an embarrassingly pathetic verse epistle to Sara Hutchinson in April 1802. Household discord, debilitated health from inveterate opium-addiction, and fear of his declining genius all supplied a source for his incessant depressions and overwhelming anxieties about his future. The letter tearfully appeals to the recipient for sympathy. Curiously enough, however, similar sentiments had been expressed five years before the crisis, when he had few complaints about his health and married life. He apologized to Cottle for his failure to visit him in Bristol: it was ‘such a day of sadness, that I could do nothing’ (CL, 1. 319). Anxiety over his future produced inert despair: ‘Indeed, every mode of life which has promised me bread & cheese, has been one after another torn away from me’. The ‘depression too dreadful to be described’ found a voice in the hero of Milton’s tragedy, Samson Agonistes, which he was probably studying at this time for his own tragic play, Osorio:

So much I felt my genial spirits droop!
My hopes all flat, nature within me seem’d
In all her functions weary of herself. (CL, 1. 319)

Though Coleridge in 1797 was not so critically depressed as to utter Samson’s suicidal wish, ‘My race of glory run, and race of shame, / And I shall shortly be with them that rest’ (597–8), Coleridge’s voice in 1802 became almost identical with Samson’s:

My genial Spirits fail—
And what can these avail
To lift the smoth’ring Weight from off my breast?

With his own ‘Nature all the Natural Man’ stifled by ‘abstruse Research’ (266–7), Coleridge despair of a life bowed ‘down to earth’ (237). His words in the 1797 letter, ‘I am not the man I have been — and I think never shall’ (CL, 1. 320), became horribly real. The ‘Dejection’ epistle is permeated with the sense of loss, the sense that happiness and innocence are irrecoverably gone: ‘I am not the buoyant Thing, I was of yore, / When like an own Child, I to Joy belong’d’ (227–8). The poet does not deny that ‘there was a time’ when the ‘Joy within’ consoled his depressed spirit with fanciful ‘Dreams of Happiness’ (232–4), but now the ‘change doth trouble me with Pangs untold’ (154). The inner ‘organic’ harp which once trembled to the ‘intellectual breeze’ coming from ‘the one Life within us and abroad’ (‘The Eolian Harp’, 45, 47, 26) makes dreadful discords:

What a Scream
Of Agony by Torture lengthen’d out
That Lute sent forth! (187–9)

Coleridge is haunted by the same ‘restless thoughts’ that torture Samson, the thoughts about ‘present / times past, what once I was, and what am now’ (Samson Agonistes, 19, 21–2); it is the Satanic despair awakened by ‘the bitter memory / Of what he was, what is, and what must be / Worse’ (Paradise Lost, 4. 24–6).

Coleridge’s appropriation of Samson’s voice could be taken merely as an example of his habitual plagiarism, but its seriousness belies such a fault-finding criticism. Nor does it illustrate the Bloomian thesis of the Romantic poet’s anxiety of influence from the strong precursor, Milton. Coleridge rather
deliberately internalises the voice of Milton’s hero, who, like himself, suffers from despair and agony in isolation. Though a great deal has been discussed about the poetic dialogue between Coleridge in the ‘Dejection’ poems and Wordsworth in his ‘Resolution and Independence’ and ‘Immortality Ode’, no consideration has been given to the fact that Coleridge’s reply to Wordsworth’s restoration of ‘genial spirit’ is skilfully made through the generic transformation of a dramatic voice. It is a pose of self-justification, or, to modify Eliot’s famous expression, an attempt to escape from a naked revelation of personal sufferings by integrating a dramatised mode of expression.

This personalisation of a dramatic voice is the characteristic nature of Romantic poetry which shows a conspicuously introspective tendency. Compared with the published version, the ‘Dejection’ Ode, which assumes a public outlook, the epistolary verse adopts a more spontaneous mode of self-revelation. It would be erroneous, however, to conclude that Coleridge dismisses all dramatic elements in his epistle. The letter is not a mere emotional outpouring scribbled on a piece of paper, but a highly elaborated lyric verse which supposes a sympathetic audience, just as Wordsworth addresses himself to Coleridge in his autobiography, The Prelude. Romantic poets revived and egocentrically developed the generic amalgamation attempted in Renaissance literature yet rejected in Neo-Classical literature. Coleridge’s verse epistle to Sara Hutchinson provides an example of Romantic poetry that trespasses generic boundaries. In this essay I discuss how he incorporates Milton’s strictly Aristotelian tragedy in his lyric correspondence.

2

Coleridge admired Milton’s genius in the Biblical tragedy Samson Agonistes as highly as that in Paradise Lost. In a lecture, he extolled it as a tragedy whose sublimity reaches ‘the grandeur and glory of the seventh heavens’ in its ‘finest imitation of the ancient Greek drama’. In a letter to Cottle, Coleridge recommends Southey’s Joan of Arc as a tragedy memorable ‘as Shakespeare’s great Grandson’, but ‘only as Milton’s great, great grand nephew-in-law’ (CL, 1. 313); the grandeur of Milton’s tragedy is more highly appreciated than that of Shakespeare’s. In a more private sphere, however, persistent misgivings cannot keep Coleridge from identifying himself with Milton’s impaired hero. In a letter to Humphry Davy, Coleridge adapts Samson’s words to a description of the acute opium-induced pain he felt in his bowels:

that load of overwhelming general sensations, that unutterable disgust thro’ body and soul seeming to myself and my very life for it’s sole object — ‘whence faintings, swoonings of Despair[sic], and Sense of Heaven’s Desertion’. (CL, 3. 28–9; Samson Agonistes, 631–2)

Coleridge’s sympathetic reading of Samson Agonistes may have been encouraged by Milton’s own identification with Samson. According to Katherine Coburn, Coleridge read William Hayley’s Life of Milton (1796) some time in 1807, but the poet had possibly come across rather earlier Hayley’s 1794 edition of Milton’s poetry, prefixed by a biographical sketch. Hayley presents Milton as a man of ‘genius’ as a result of ‘perfect morality’. This view corresponds to Coleridge’s portrait of Milton as a poet who combines ‘political Furore’ and poetic genius, as expressed in a letter during his radical years (CL, 1. 275). Hayley, moreover, describes the calamitous domestic discord which Milton suffered from, yet heroically withstood, and then demonstrates the possibility of a biographical reading of the tragedy:

To give it this peculiar effect, we must remember that the lot of Milton has a marvellous coincidence with that of his hero, in three remarkable points: first . . . he had been tormented by a beautiful but disaffectionate and disobedient wife; secondly, he had been the great champion of his country, and as such the idol of publick admiration; lastly, he had fallen from that height of unrivalled glory, and had experienced the most humiliating reverse of fortune."
This could be a description of Coleridge's life in the period 1801 - 7. His anti-Napoleonic articles in the Morning Post and the Courier are inflated with patriotic ardour after his disenchantment with the French Revolution. What is more, he also had complaints about his married life. Coleridge told his brother-in-law, Southey, how he was irritated by his wife's 'inveterate habits of puny Thwarting & unintermitting Dyspathy', while on Sara's side the poet vexed 'all her feelings of Pride' by his 'habits of impetuous & bitter censure' (CL, 1. 832 – 3).

The crisis of his marriage and his worsened health compelled Coleridge to seek for solace in the ruinous studies of metaphysics: 'Sickness & some other & worse afflictions first forced me into downright metaphysics' (CL, 2. 814). He recognised the perversity of 'metaphysical trains of Thought' — 'a metaphysical Bustard' — which came upon his mind 'uncalled' and spoiled all his poetic thoughts (814). This 'abstruse Research' thus began to suffocate his 'own Nature' ('A Letter to — ', 267 – 8):

And that, which suits a part, infects the whole,
And now is almost grown the temper of my Soul!
(269 – 70)

His private problem disturbed the balance between his poetic genius and taste for philosophical studies, and finally transmogrified him into 'a hooded eagle'sitting 'obscure'in the 'intense irradiation'of his own mind, 'Flag[ging] wearily through darkness and despair', as Shelley describes.

Shelley's portrait of Coleridge points to another important feature shared by Samson, Milton, and Coleridge: they are all blind, the first two literally and Coleridge figuratively. The grieving loss of light, that is, 'the prime work of God' (Samson Agonistes, 70), throws Samson into the state of 'a living death' (100). It is 'Prison within prison / Inseparably dark' (153 – 4) which, like Satan's 'hell within' (Paradise Lost, 4. 20), isolates him from society into a hopeless despair of lost identity:

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day!
(Samson Agonistes, 80 – 2)

Coleridge seems to have been attracted to the pathos expressed here, as these lines undergo a careful metrical analysis in one of his notebooks (CN, 2. 3180). Consciously or not, Coleridge's persona in his 1798 ballad utters a lamentation on his purgatorial voyage, 'Life-in-Death', in a simpler metre than Samson's lines ('The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', 193):

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony. (232 – 5)

For Coleridge, the deprivation of light also means loss of imagination. Milton invokes 'Light' as a divine source for creative inspiration, 'Bright effluence of bright essence increate' (Paradise Lost, 3. 6). Coleridge extols this divine power as the 'primary' imitation which is 'the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception', and 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'. In 'The Eolian Harp', the creative 'one Life within us and abroad' is perceived as 'A light in sound, a sound-like power in light' (26, 27). In the 'Dejection' poem, Coleridge similarly associates human creativity, the 'secondary' imagination, with 'Light' and 'Glory':

Ah! from the Soul itself must issue forth
A Light, a Glory, and a luminous Cloud,
Enveloping the Earth! (301 – 3)

But this 'shaping Spirit of Imagination' (241) is now stifled by the 'dark distressful Dream' of realities (185): he cannot win 'from outward Forms . . . / The Passion & the Life, whose Fountains are within!' (50 – 1). The poet's inner eyes are blind: 'I see, not feel, how beautiful they are' (43). With the flame of imagination extinguished, he cannot assert his pantheistic or Christian beliefs any longer as he acknowledges to Godwin:
The Poet is dead in me — my imagination (or rather somewhat that had been imaginative) lies, like a Cold Snuff on the circular Rim of a Brass Candle-stick, without even a stink of Tallow to remind you that it was once cloathed & mitred with Flame. (CL, 4. 714)

It is true that night and confinement conventionally offer an ideal environment for a melancholic philosopher, like the one in Milton’s Il Penseroso, to reach ‘staid Wisdom’ (16) and relish ‘gorgeous Tragedy’ (97). The old blind man turning his face up to the moon in Coleridge’s poem ‘Limbo’ is a solitary philosopher who pursues profound truths of human nature and metaphysics with his inner eye. But Coleridge himself in the ‘Dejection’ letter is closer to the ‘mole’ in the same poem which shrinks from light, ‘the natural alien of their negative eye’ (10). Dejection is a state so ‘hopeless’, ‘remediless’, and ‘immedicable’ (Samson Agonistes, 648, 620) that the poet’s soul is barred from ‘divinest Melancholy’ (Il Penseroso, 12). Coleridge, like Samson, remains plagued with ‘restless thoughts’ and

Shut up from outward light
To incorporate with gloomy night;
For inward light, alas,
Puts forth no visual beam.
(Samson Agonistes, 160–3)

Coleridge’s ‘void, dark, & drear’ grief (17) echoes Samson’s ‘answerable pains, but more intense, / Though void of corporal sense.’ (615–6). But, unlike Samson, he remains shamefully inactive and unheroic. Even if there is an element of self-pitied performance, his state was seriously tragic when he composed the letter.

Yon hanging Woods, that touch’d by autumn seem
As they were blossoming hues of fire and gold,
The flower-like woods, most lovely in decay,
The many clouds, the sea, the rock, the sands,
I lie ill the silent moonshine — and the owl,
(Strange! very strange!) The screech-owl only wakes!
Sole voice, sole eye of all that world of beauty!

Coleridge admits in a letter that these lines reflect his languid desire to ‘float about along an infinite ocean’ for millions of years, wishing for ‘the Death’ that is ‘the best of all’ (CL, 1. 350). In the ‘Dejection’ epistle, the ‘Mad Lutanist’ Coleridge pours out his feelings: ‘wild Storm without’, a ‘Crag’, and a ‘lightning-blasted Tree’ are ‘fitter Instruments’ for him to make ‘Devil’s Yule’ of ‘dark brown Gardens, & of peeping Flowers’(194, 189–90, 193, 195–6). Coleridge thus uses a dramatic

Allusions to Milton’s tragedy can also be found in Coleridge’s tragedy, which, having been turned down by Sheridan in 1797 because of its ‘obscurity’(CL, 1. 358), underwent significant revisions and became the successful, more introspective play Remorse (1813). Alvars, the usurped hair to Valez, reflects in part the poet’s weariness with the ‘burden’ of life (1. 1. 73). He pours out the poet’s melancholic anguish in the mode of Milton’s tragedy:

Wounded, I fell among the dead and dying,
In death-like trance: a long imprisonment followed.
The fullness of my anguish by degrees
Waned to a meditative melancholy. (1. 1. 77–80)

In a dungeon, the locus of solipsistic meditation, Alvars meditates the efficacy of nature on the diseased human mind, like his brother Ordonio’s, whose ‘angry spirit’ is not ‘heal’d and harmoniz’d’/ By the benignant touch of Love and Beauty’ (5. 1. 29–30). Ordonio thus becomes an alter ego of Coleridge, who, estranged from the blessing of nature and from the Wordsworth circle, fled to Malta in 1804. Alhadra’s soliloquy in Act 4 also expresses the poet’s morbid feelings and self-doubt in Gothic machinery.

3

Allusions to Milton’s tragedy can also be found in Coleridge’s tragedy, which, having been turned down by Sheridan in 1797 because of its ‘obscurity’(CL, 1.
mode to express his private anguish.

Ventriloquism is no less conspicuous in Wordsworth’s tragedy, *The Borderers*.

The plot of the play shows distinct traces of such Shakespearean tragedies as *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, as well as Schiller’s *Robbers*, but, at the root of the play, there lies his disenchantment at Godwin’s rationalism. The antagonistic characters Rivers and Mortimer reflect Wordsworth’s ‘two consciousnesses’, the stubborn Godwinian self in the 1794–9 period and the present self which questions the Godwinian tenet of ‘independent intellect’ (3. 5. 33). Like Wordsworth, Mortimer has become ‘a shadowy thing’, ‘A thing by pain and thought compelled to live’ (5. 3. 266, 230). Through a dramatic voice, Wordsworth makes a didactic criticism of his own past error. The self-reference in the tragedy is obvious if we compare Mortimer’s lines with Wordsworth’s own in *The Prelude*, which tell how he ‘lost / All feeling of conviction’ and ‘[y]ielded up moral question in despair’. Despair, melancholy, and dejection are found to be essential elements in Wordsworth’s self-reflective tragedy, as in Coleridge’s. Voices of dejection rise from the poet’s immensely troubled self-consciousness and pour out of the mouths of dramatic personae in an objective mode of expression.

Given that Coleridge admired *The Borderers* as a ‘most masterly’ tragedy, just as Wordsworth admired *Osorio* (CL, 1. 325, 603), it is safe to argue that the two Romantic poets pursued a dramatisation of anguished self-consciousness in their tragedies.

With Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* and Byron’s *Manfred*, *The Borderers* and, conditionally, *Remorse* can be categorised as closet dramas which emphasise inner thoughts and emotions of characters rather than their individualities and physical actions. Characters are all shadows of the author’s self-consciousness. Hazlitt describes the age of Romanticism as ‘critical, didactic, paradoxical, romantic’, but ‘not dramatic’: the post-Revolution civilization has ‘abstracted man from himself so far, that his existence is no longer *dramatic*’. Existential problems raised by turbulent ideological conflicts in the revolutionary years entangled the poets’ consciousness and identity in their pursuit of ideals to the point where they could hardly escape the impasse. Alan Richardson sees a prototype of this Romantic ‘mental theatre’ in Milton’s *Samson*, who falls in an identity crisis:

The state of restless psychic torment shared by the protagonists of Gothic and Romantic stage plays and mental theatre alike is exemplified by Samson plagued by his ‘restless thoughts’ of betrayal and remorse.

The introspective nature of Romantic theatre is, in effect, a revolt against the neo-Classical concept of tragedy based on the Aristotelian principle of three unities. The dominance of subjective expressions in Romantic tragedies thus establishes a new mode of tragedy which culminates in Nietzsche’s interpretation of Greek tragedy: the Dionysian functioning as a threatening force to usurp the Apollonian. Coleridge’s ‘lyricisation’ of Samson’s voices is part of this revolution in the history of theatre. We should be reminded that ‘ode’ was originally a part of the chorus in Greek tragedy and established as an independent genre concerned predominantly with the articulation of the poet’s inner feelings in the late eighteenth century and the Romantic period. Coleridge’s later modification of his ‘Dejection’ epistle into an ode presents a perfect example that followed this literary trend of generic subversion.

Coleridge’s Shakespearean criticism more clearly demonstrates a Romantic reading of tragedy. He resurrects and advocates those subjective elements in Shakespearean tragedies which had been neglected in the theatre of the Age of Reason. Shakespeare’s violation of the conventional three-unity principle is justified because of the inner organic unity in his plays: the unity of action transcends the unities of time and place and keeps the ‘homogeneity, proportionateness, and totality of interest’ in mental activities. The inner organic unity is placed above the mechanical unity of outward structure. *Romeo and Juliet* is taken as an
example which fully displays Shakespeare’s ‘creative, productive, life-power of inspired genius’ distinct from ‘the shaping skill of mechanical talent’ in the neo-Classical theatre (1. 5). This is the modernity of Shakespeare’s imagination which Coleridge highly extols.

On the other hand, the romantic poetry, the Shakespearian drama, appealed to the imagination rather than to the senses, and to the reason as contemplating our inward nature, the workings of the passions in their most retired recesses. (1. 198)

Coleridge’s well-known character analysis of Hamlet illustrates this Romantic concept of tragedy. As a reader who ‘has a smack of Hamlet himself’, Coleridge sympathetically searches the mind of Hamlet for his *alter ego*: Hamlet’s thoughts, images and fancy are too vivid to keep ‘a due balance between the real and the imaginary world’. ‘Hence’, he adds, ‘great, enormous, intellectual activity, and a consequent proportionate aversion to real action, with all its symptoms and accompanying qualities’ (CSC, 1. 37). Hamlet thus becomes Coleridge himself, whose life and works remain fragmentary; he has ‘a morbid craving after the indefinite’ (2. 273) and suffer from ‘a sense of imperfectness’ (2. 195). The poet’s excuse for his ‘procrastination’ in *Biographia Literaria* (1. 45) is echoed in the description of Hamlet as ‘producing the lingering and vacillating delays of procrastination, and washing in the energy of resolving the energy of acting’ (CSC, 2. 273). Coleridge is most concerned about subjectivity. In Shakespeare’s and Milton’s dramas, he asserts, ‘the Individual and the Subjective are intense’. Despite his introspective reading of *Hamlet*, however, Coleridge argues that subjectivity in Milton’s drama is more personal than subjectivity in Shakespearean characters: Milton is ‘himself before himself in every thing he writes’, whereas Shakespeare’s characters show ‘a Subjectivity of the Persona’, as Hamlet typically exemplifies. It is not certain whether a ‘dissociation of sensibility’ takes place in the mid-seventeenth century, as Eliot alleges, yet Coleridge here points out the distinctive difference between Shakespeare and Milton. Milton’s egocentric elaboration on Shakespearean psychodramas influenced the Romantics’ further elaborations on the introspective pattern in their dramatic works which explore more painfully isolated self-consciousness.

Coleridge’s personalisation of the Shakespearian and Miltonic tragedies, as we have seen, provides a basis for the monologic mode of his ‘Dejection’ letter. The verse epistle expresses the anxieties experienced by Hamlet and Samson, but in the poet’s own voice. It is certainly less emotionally restrained than the reshaped poem ‘Dejection: An Ode’, which becomes ‘more decorous’ by tightening control over emotions, dropping the personal references intelligible only to the immediate circle, and impersonalising Sara Hutchinson into a Spenserian or Miltonic muse. This expressive mode can be called ‘lyric’, in the sense that it has only one voice expressing the poet’s feelings. Even this epistolary verse, however, should not be considered as Coleridge’s undisguised confession of crisis. Exactly when he wrote and sent his verse to Sara Hutchinson is hard to decide, but the ‘Letter to — ’, as we know it, is an already elaborated form of epistolary verse, which assumes the presence of the audience and urges her to share and understand the poet’s painful inner experiences:

> This, Sarah! well thou know’st,
> Is that sore Evil, which I dread the most,
> And oft’nest suffer. (21 – 3)

The poet earnestly expects her to know and sympathise with his sufferings.

Robert Langbaum finds a ‘dramatic nature’ in ‘Romantic lyrics’, like ‘Tintern Abbey’ and ‘Frost at Midnight’, while M. H. Abrams dismisses these dramatic or mimetic elements and emphasises the expressive and imaginative dimension of Romantic lyrics. Coleridge’s epistolary lamentation in an internalised dramatic voice is neither merely mimetic nor expressive, but is concerned, like his tragedy, with
representing his inner consciousness to his audience. It strategically attempts to build a sympathetic relationship with Sara Hutchinson. Hunger for sympathy is Coleridge’s natural disposition. By urging Sara Hutchinson to recollect ‘fair Remembrances’ they once shared (111), he tries to reconstruct their intimacy and solicit her sympathy towards his present calamity:

Such Joy I had, that I may truly say,
My Spirit was awe-stricken with the Excess
And trancèlike depth of its brief Happiness.
(108–110)

The poet humbly admits his fault of inflicting her with his painful address.

I hear thee of thy blameless Self complain—
And only this I learn— and this, alas! I know,
That thou art weak and pale with Sickness, Grief,
& Pain —
And I — I made thee so! (126–9)

Coleridge is devious, however. Even after he declares that he shall be ‘content’ with being a detached spectator of Sara’s domestic peace with the Wordsworths (148), he again addresses her as ‘My Comforter! A Heart within my Heart!’ (249), expecting that his friends, including Sara, would ‘weep’ for his ‘coarse domestic Life’ (255, 257).

The mode of address to a close friend was already established in his ‘Conversation Poems’, such as ‘The Nightingale’, ‘This Lime Tree Bower’, and ‘Frost at Midnight’, in which Coleridge speaks to his intimate society whom he expects to share his emotional and imaginative experiences. Coleridge was compelled to develop this unique style out of fear of the growing number of unsympathetic readers in public which threatened to unsettle his authorial self. The problem of audience was of crucial importance to Coleridge. Kelvin Everest points out that the rhetoric of his conversation poems is, in effect, ‘a rhetoric that seeks deliberately to give intimacy, with its implicit polemical commentary, of close private relationship, rather than the formal public language of eighteenth-century English poetry’. The flood of periodicals multiplied the tastes and interests of the audience who could not be content with the personified ‘I’ of eighteenth century literature which represents the collective consciousness of literary élites. They consequently destabilised the authorial ‘I’ in Romantic poetry and compelled it to discover, or cultivate by its own discourse, its own ideal readers whom it could address, expecting their sharing of its interests and value judgements. With hostile reviewers surrounding him, Coleridge desperately needed to find a voice that would win sympathy from the readers. The voice addressed to Sara Hutchinson is such a voice.

‘Epistle’ was the most suitable form for Coleridge to endeavour to elicit sympathy from an intimate person. His autobiographical sketches written to Thomas Poole in 1798 openly tell the ‘loneliness and wretchedness’ of the poet’s heart for the purpose of making the warm-hearted reader look at his ‘weaknesses and defects’ with ‘no unforgiving and impatient eyes’ (CL, 1. 302). It is for Sara Hutchinson’s ‘forgiving’ and ‘patient’ eyes that Coleridge seeks in the verse letter. The sympathy between his own self and others is an important constituent of Coleridge’s personal identity, as the diagram in a notebook indicates:

\[ W + D + MW + SH + HDSC = STC \]

\[ = Ego contemplans \]

(CN, 2. 2389)

‘Ego contemplans’, or ‘personal identity’, is formed through the poet’s interactive relationships with the Wordsworths, his own family, and Sara Hutchinson. The inner uncertainty about his own identity is solved only by the presence of those who intimately surround him.

This is the reason he was so anxious to gain his friends’ sympathy and to give his sympathy to them in turn. He claimed Sara Hutchinson’s sympathy in exchange of his blessings to her. ‘I cannot be happy’, he once wrote, ‘but while awakening, enjoying, and giving sympathy to one or a few eminently loved Beings’ (CN, 2. 2647). Indeed, Coleridge wrote a deeply religious letter to Lamb to console his friend’s depression at his
domestic tragedy. In 'This Lime Tree Bower Prison', on the other hand, Coleridge addresses Lamb, whose supposed presence delivers him from solipsistic melancholy: the address to the intimate soul 'lift[s] the soul' and compensates for 'the joys [they] cannot share' with 'lively joy' (65–6). The same psychic mechanism is seen to be working in the 'Dejection' letter. Coleridge feels the 'Weight' of dejection 'somewhat lifted from my Breast' while addressing Sara Hutchinson (79). The presence of a sympathetic audience, real or imaginary, is a necessary condition for Coleridge to escape solipsism. In his deep affliction from the Satanic curse, Coleridge cannot resist asking why he deserves such a punishment, when 'To be loved is all I need, / And whom I love, I love indeed' ('The Pains of Sleep', 46, 51–2). The exchange of love is what the poet ultimately aims at in his lyric letter, and for this purpose, the letter needs to have a dramatic voice which seeks to establish sympathetic communication with the intimate reader.

6

Though he was eventually estranged from both his wife and Sara Hutchinson, Coleridge seems to have succeeded in gaining sympathy from his friends, at least on the textual level, by presenting himself as a ruined genius. The personalisation of a dramatic voice in Milton's tragic hero is a necessary means for Coleridge to gain their sympathy and understanding, which he desperately needed to bear his identity crisis. The establishment of his identity is not achieved in the poem so long as the poet's blessing of Sara Hutchinson remains unrequited. By assuming the presence of a sympathiser, however, the poet at least feels his 'spirit moved' (92). This is a sort of cathartic effect as a consequence of the internalisation of a voice of tragedy. Whenever 'sad Thoughts' are brought into his mind, he has to dramatise himself as a poet who pours out a soliloquy in the dark, like a nightingale, expecting sympathy from an intimate audience:

like the Poet's Nightingale, I sing
My Love-song, with my breast against a Thorn.
(283–4)

Milton's classical tragedy is thus transformed into a Romantic poet's lyric love-song.

Notes


(2) Samson Agonistes, 594–6. All quotations from Milton's poems are from D. Bush (ed.), Milton: Poetical Works (Oxford, 1966) with (volume and) line number(s) in brackets.

(3) In a note of her Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion (Oxford, 1986), Lucy Newlyn points out Coleridge's allusion to Samson Agonistes in this passage, but does not discuss its significant resonances (68). For quotations from 'A Letter to — April 4, 1802.— Sunday Evening', instead of Coleridge's draft on which Griggs's edition is based, I use Mary Hutchinson's transcription (the Cornell Manuscript) edited by Stephen Parrish, who concludes it to be earlier than Coleridge's draft from textual evidence and therefore closer to the unknown original letter (Coleridge's Dejection: The Earliest Manuscript and the Earliest Printings (Ithaca, 1988) 16). As for Coleridge's other poems and dramatic works are all quoted from E. H. Coleridge (ed.), Coleridge's Poetical Works (1917; London, 1967) with line number(s) or Act, Scene, line numbers in brackets.


(5) The most helpful studies on this Wordsworth-Coleridge intertextual collaboration are Thomas McFarland, Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation (Princeton, 1981) ch.1; Newlyn,


(9) Hayley, xciii.


(12) For a paradox of the 'Dejection Ode', in which the poet laments his inability to write poetry, and a revaluation of Coleridge's later poetry, see Morton D. Paley, Coleridge's Later Poetry (Oxford, 1996).

(13) All quotations from Wordsworth's Borderers are from Robert Osborn (ed.), The Borderers (Ithaca, 1982), with Act, Scene, and line numbers in brackets.


(21) Table Talk, 1. 130.


(23) Jack Stillinger, Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems (New York, 1994) 92. See also Parrish, 18.


(29) Coburn’s note to CN, 2. 2389.