What Is Life?1

Resembles life, what once was held of light,
Too simple in itself for human sight?
An absolute self? an element ungrounded?
All, that we see, all colors of all shade
By encroach of darkness made?
Is life itself by consciousness unbounded?
And all the thoughts, pains, joys of mortal breath,
A war-embrace of wrestling life and death?

1804 1829

Limbo1

The sole true Something—This! In Limbo's Den
It frightens Ghosts, as here Ghosts frighten men.
Thence crossed unseized—and shall some fated hour
Be pulverised by Demogorgon's2 power,
And given as poison to annihilate souls—
Even now it shrinks them—they shrink in as Moles
(Nature's mute monks, live mandrakes3 of the ground)
Creep back from Light—then listen for its sound;—
See but to dread, and dread they know not why—
The natural alien of their negative eye.

'Tis a strange place, this Limbo!—not a Place,
Yet name it so;—where Time and weary Space
Fettered from flight, with night-mare sense of fleeing,
Strive for their last crepuscular half-being;—
Lank Space, and scytheless Time with branny4 hands

1. Written by Coleridge in a notebook kept at Malta in 1804, in order, he said, "to try a meter." It expresses a conception of life as a sustained opposition between the life principle and the death principle, in which the latter is the inevitable victor.
2. Demogorgon was described by Boccaccio and by Renaissance writers as the primeval father of all pagan gods, ruler of the nether world. For Shelley's Demogorgon see Prometheus Unbound, III.iv.
3. Plants with a forked root; according to legend, the root, similar in shape to the human body, shrieks when pulled from the ground.
4. Similar to bran, the husks of grain; thus, withered and brown.
Barren and soundless as the measuring sands,
Not marked by flit of Shades,—unmeaning they
As moonlight on the dial of the day!
But that is lovely—looks like Human Time,—

An Old Man with a steady look sublime,
That stops his earthly task to watch the skies;
But he is blind—a Statue hath such eyes;—
Yet having moonward turned his face by chance,
Gazes the orb with moon-like countenance,

With scant white hairs, with foretop bald and high,
He gazes still,—his eyeless face all eye;—
As 'twere an organ full of silent sight,
His whole face seemeth to rejoice in light!

Lip touching lip, all moveless, bust and limb—
He seems to gaze at that which seems to gaze on him!

No such sweet sights doth Limbo den immure,
Walled round, and made a spirit-jail secure,
By the mere horror of blank Naught-at-all,
Whose circumambience doth these ghosts enthral.

A lurid thought is growthless, dull Privation,
Yet that is but a Purgatory curse;
Hell knows a fear far worse,
A fear—a future state;—’tis positive Negation!


Phantom or Fact

A DIALOGUE IN VERSE

AUTHOR

A lovely form there sate beside my bed,
And such a feeding calm its presence shed,
A tender love so pure from earthly leaven,
That I unnetho1 the fancy might control,

'Twas my own spirit newly come from heaven,
Wooing its gentle way into my soul!
But ah! the change—It had not stirred, and yet—
Alas! that change how fain would I forget!
That shrinking back, like one that had mistook!

'Twas all another, feature, look, and frame,
And still, methought, I knew, it was the same!

FRIEND

This riddling tale, to what does it belong?
Is't history? vision? or an idle song?

Or rather say at once, within what space
Of time this wild disastrous change took place?

5. “The sole true Something” (line 1) which is “positive Negation” is like le néant—the existent nothingness—posited by some present-day

Existentialist philosophers.

1. With difficulty.
Call it a moment’s work (and such it seems)
This tale’s a fragment from the life of dreams;
But say that years matured the silent strife,
And ’tis a record from the dream of life.

Sonnet to the River Otter

Dear native Brook! wild Streamlet of the West!
How many various-fated years have past,
What happy and what mournful hours, since last
I skimmed the smooth thin stone along thy breast,
Numbering its light leaps! yet so deep impressed
Sink the sweet scenes of childhood, that mine eyes
I never shut amid the sunny ray,
But straight with all their tints thy waters rise,
Thy crossing plank, thy marge with willows grey,
And bedded sand that veined with various dyes
Gleamed through thy bright transparence! On my way,
Visions of Childhood! oft have ye beguiled
Lone manhood’s cares, yet waking fondest sighs:
Ah! that once more I were a careless Child!

On Donne’s Poetry

With Donne, whose muse on dromedary trots,
Wreathe iron pokers into true-love knots;
Rhyme’s sturdy cripple, fancy’s maze and clue,
Wit’s forge and fire-blast, meaning’s press and screw.

Work Without Hope

Lines Composed 21st February 1825

All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair—
The bees are stirring—birds are on the wing—
And Winter slumbering in the open air,
Wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!

1. Coleridge’s model was W. L. Bowles’s To the River Itchin. For the great impact of Bowles’s sonnets on Coleridge’s poetic theory and practice, see his Biographia Literaria, Chapter 1. Coleridge expanded this poetic mode of natural description interwoven with memory and meditation into his “conversation poems,” such as The Eolian Harp, This Lime-Tree Bower, and Frost at Midnight.
And I the while, the sole unbusy thing,
Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.

Yet well I ken the banks where amaranths blow,
Have traced the fount whence streams of nectar flow.
Bloom, O ye amaranths! bloom for whom ye may,
For me ye bloom not! Glide, rich streams, away!
With lips unbrightened, wreathless brow, I stroll:
And would you learn the spells that drowse my soul?
Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,
And Hope without an object cannot live.

Recollections of Love

1
How warm this woodland wild recess!
Love surely hath been breathing here;
And this sweet bed of heath, my dear!
Swells up, then sinks with faint caress,
   As if to have you yet more near.

2
Eight springs have flown since last I lay
On seaward Quantock’s heathy hills,\(^1\)
Where quiet sounds from hidden rills
Float here and there, like things astray,
   And high o’erhead the sky-lark shrills.

3
No voice as yet had made the air
Be music with your name; yet why
That asking look? that yearning sigh?
That sense of promise every where?
   Belovèd! flew your spirit by?

4
As when a mother doth explore
The rose mark on her long-lost child,
I met, I loved you, maiden mild!
As whom I long had loved before—
   So deeply had I been beguiled.

5
You stood before me like a thought,
A dream remembered in a dream.
But when those meek eyes first did seem
To tell me, Love within you wrought—
   O Greta,\(^2\) dear domestic stream!

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1. Near Nether Stowey, Somerset, where Coleridge had lived from 1796 to 1798.
2. The river Greta, which flowed past Coleridge’s home in Keswick, in the Lake District.
Constancy to an Ideal Object

Since all that beat about in Nature's range,
Or veer or vanish, why should'st thou remain
The only constant in a world of change,
O yearning Thought! that liv'st but in the brain?

Call to the Hours, that in the distance play,
The faery people of the future day—
Fond Thought! not one of all that shining swarm
Will breathe on thee with life-enkindling breath,
Till when, like strangers shelt'ring from a storm,
Hope and Despair meet in the porch of Death!

Yet still thou haunt'st me; and though well I see,
She is not thou, and only thou art she,
Still, still as though some dear embodied Good,
Some living Love before my eyes there stood
With answering look a ready ear to lend,
I mourn to thee and say—"Ah! loveliest friend!
That this the meed of all my toils might be,
To have a home, an English home, and thee!"
Vain repetition! Home and Thou are one.

The peaceful'st cot the moon shall shine upon,
Lulled by the thrush and wakened by the lark,
Without thee were but a becalmèd bark,
Whose Helmsman on an ocean waste and wide
Sits mute and pale his moldering helm beside.

And art thou nothing? Such thou art, as when
The woodman winding westward up the glen
At wintry dawn, where o'er the sheep-track's maze
The viewless snow-mist weaves a glist'ning haze,
Sees full before him, gliding without tread,
An image with a glory round its head;
The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues,
Nor knows he makes the shadow he pursues!

1. Foolish.
2. Sara Hutchinson.
3. Reward.
Epitaph

Stop, Christian passer-by!—Stop, child of God,
And read with gentle breast. Beneath this sod
A poet lies, or that which once seemed he.
O, lift one thought in prayer for S. T. C.;
That he who many a year with toil of breath
Found death in life, may here find life in death!
Mercy for praise—to be forgiven for fame
He asked, and hoped, through Christ. Do thou the same!

From Biographia Literaria

From Chapter 1

[THE DISCIPLINE OF HIS TASTE AT SCHOOL]

At school I enjoyed the inestimable advantage of a very sensible, though at the same time a very severe master. He early molded my taste to the preference of Demosthenes to Cicero, of Homer and Theocritus to Virgil, and again of Virgil to Ovid. He habituated me to compare Lucretius (in such extracts as I then read), Terence, and, above all, the chaster poems of Catullus not only with the Roman poets of the so-called silver and brazen ages but with even those of the Augustan era; and, on grounds of plain sense and universal logic, to see and assert the superiority of the former in the truth and nativeness both of their thoughts and diction. At the same time that we were studying the Greek tragic poets, he made us read Shakespeare and Milton as lessons; and they were the lessons, too, which required most time and trouble to bring up, so as to escape his censure. I learnt from him that poetry, even that of the loftiest and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive, causes. In the truly great poets, he would say, there is a reason assignable, not only for every word, but for the position of every word; and I well remember that, availing himself of the synonyms to the Homer of Didymus, he made us attempt to show, with regard to each, why it would not have answered the same purpose, and wherein consisted the peculiar fitness of the word in the original text.

In our own English compositions (at least for the last three years of our school education) he showed no mercy to phrase, metaphor, or image unsupported by a sound sense, or where the same sense might have been conveyed with equal force and dignity in plainer words. Lute, harp, and lyre, muse, muses, and inspirations, Pegasus, Parnassus, and Hippocrene were all an abomination to him. In fancy I can almost hear him now, exclaiming, “Harp? Harp? Lyre? Pen and ink, boy, you mean! Muse, boy, muse? Your nurse’s daughter, you mean! Pierian spring? Oh, aye! the cloister pump, I suppose!” Nay, certain introductions, similes, and examples were placed by name on a list of interdiction. Among the similes there was, I remember, that of the manchineel fruit, as suiting equally well with too many subjects, in which, however, it yielded the palm at once to the example of Alexander and Clytus, which was
equally good and apt whatever might be the theme. Was it ambition? Alexander and Clytus! Flattery? Alexander and Clytus! Anger? Drunkenness? Pride? Friendship? Ingratitude? Late repentance? Still, still Alexander and Clytus! At length, the praises of agriculture having been exemplified in the sagacious observation that, had Alexander been holding the plow, he would not have run his friend Clytus through with a spear, this tried and serviceable old friend was banished by public edict in *secula seculorum*. I have sometimes ventured to think that a list of this kind or an *index expurgatorius* of certain well-known and ever returning phrases, both introductory and transitional, including the large assortment of modest egoisms and flattering illeisms, etc., etc., might be hung up in our law courts and both Houses of Parliament with great advantage to the public as an important saving of national time, an incalculable relief to his Majesty’s ministers; but, above all, as insuring the thanks of country attorneys and their clients, who have private bills to carry through the House.

Be this as it may, there was one custom of our master’s which I cannot pass over in silence, because I think it imitable and worthy of imitation. He would often permit our theme exercises, under some pretext of want of time, to accumulate till each lad had four or five to be looked over. Then placing the whole number *abreast* on his desk, he would ask the writer why this or that sentence might not have found as appropriate a place under this or that other thesis; and if no satisfying answer could be returned and two faults of the same kind were found in one exercise, the irrevocable verdict followed, the exercise was torn up, and another on the same subject to be produced, in addition to the tasks of the day. The reader will, I trust, excuse this tribute of recollection to a man whose severities, even now, not seldom furnish the dreams by which the blind fancy would fain interpret to the mind the painful sensations of distempered sleep; but neither lessen nor dim the deep sense of my moral and intellectual obligations. He sent us to the university excellent Latin and Greek scholars and tolerable Hebraists. Yet our classical knowledge was the least of the good gifts which we derived from his zealous and conscientious tutorage. He is now gone to his final reward, full of years and full of honors, even of those honors which were dearest to his heart as gratefully bestowed by that school, and still binding him to the interests of that school, in which he had been himself educated and to which during his whole life he was a dedicated thing. * * *

[Bowles’s Sonnets]

I had just entered on my seventeenth year, when the sonnets of Mr. Bowles, twenty in number, and just then published in a quarto pamphlet, were first made known and presented to me by a schoolfellow who had quitted us for the university and who, during the whole time that he was in our first form (or in our school language, a Grecian), had been my patron and protector. I refer to Dr. Middleton, the truly learned and every way excellent Bishop of Calcutta. * * *

It was a double pleasure to me, and still remains a tender recollection, that I should have received from a friend so revered the first knowledge of a poet by whose works, year after year, I was so enthusiastically delighted and inspired. My earliest acquaintances will not have forgotten the undisciplined eagerness and impetuous zeal with which I laboured to make proselytes, not only of my companions, but of all with whom I conversed, of whatever rank and in whatever place. As my school finances did not permit me to purchase copies, I made, within less than a year and a half, more than forty transcriptions, as
the best presents I could offer to those who had in any way won my regard. And with almost equal delight did I receive the three or four following publications of the same author.

Though I have seen and known enough of mankind to be well aware that I shall perhaps stand alone in my creed, and that it will be well if I subject myself to no worse charge than that of singularity, I am not therefore deterred from avowing that I regard and ever have regarded the obligations of intellect among the most sacred of the claims of gratitude. A valuable thought, or a particular train of thoughts, gives me additional pleasure when I can safely refer and attribute it to the conversation or correspondence of another. My obligations to Mr. Bowles were indeed important and for radical good. At a very premature age, even before my fifteenth year, I had bewildered myself in metaphysics and in theological controversy. Nothing else pleased me. History and particular facts lost all interest in my mind. Poetry (though for a schoolboy of that age I was above par in English versification and had already produced two or three compositions which, I may venture to say without reference to my age, were somewhat above mediocrity, and which had gained me more credit than the sound good sense of my old master was at all pleased with), poetry itself, yea novels and romances, became insipid to me. In my friendless wanderings on our leave-days (for I was an orphan, and had scarce any connections in London), highly was I delighted if any passenger, especially if he were dressed in black, would enter into conversation with me. For I soon found the means of directing it to my favorite subjects

Of providence, fore-knowledge, will, and fate,
Fixed fate, free will, fore-knowledge absolute,
And found no end, in wandering mazes lost.

This preposterous pursuit was, beyond doubt, injurious both to my natural powers and to the progress of my education. It would perhaps have been destructive had it been continued; but from this I was auspiciously withdrawn, partly indeed by an accidental introduction to an amiable family, chiefly however by the genial influence of a style of poetry so tender and yet so manly, so natural and real, and yet so dignified and harmonious, as the sonnets, etc., of Mr. Bowles! Well were it for me, perhaps, had I never relapsed into the same mental disease; if I had continued to pluck the flower and reap the harvest from the cultivated surface, instead of delving in the unwholesome quicksilver mines of metaphysic depths. But if in after time I have sought a refuge from bodily pain and mismanaged sensibility in abstruse researches, which exercised the strength and subtlety of the understanding without awakening the feelings of the heart; still there was a long and blessed interval, during which my natural faculties were allowed to expand and my original tendencies to develop themselves: my fancy, and the love of nature, and the sense of beauty in forms and sounds.

[COMPARISON BETWEEN THE POETS BEFORE AND SINCE MR. POPE]

The second advantage which I owe to my early perusal and admiration of these poems (to which let me add, though known to me at a somewhat later period, the Lewesdon Hill of Mr. Crow) bears more immediately on my present subject. Among those with whom I conversed there were, of course, very many who had formed their taste and their notions of poetry from the writings of Mr. Pope and his followers: or to speak more generally, in that school of
French poetry condensed and invigorated by English understanding which had predominated from the last century. I was not blind to the merits of this school, yet as from inexperience of the world and consequent want of sympathy with the general subjects of these poems they gave me little pleasure, I doubtless undervalued the kind, and with the presumption of youth withheld from its masters the legitimate name of poets. I saw that the excellence of this kind consisted in just and acute observations on men and manners in an artificial state of society as its matter and substance, and in the logic of wit conveyed in smooth and strong epigrammatic couplets as its form. Even when the subject was addressed to the fancy or the intellect, as in the Rape of the Lock or the Essay on Man; nay, when it was a consecutive narration, as in that astonishing product of matchless talent and ingenuity, Pope’s translation of the Iliad; still a point was looked for at the end of each second line, and the whole was as it were a sorrhites or, if I may exchange a logical for a grammatical metaphor, a conjunction disjunctive, of epigrams. Meantime the matter and diction seemed to me characterized not so much by poetic thoughts as by thoughts translated into the language of poetry. On this last point I had occasion to render my own thoughts gradually more and more plain to myself by frequent amicable disputes concerning Darwin’s Botanic Garden, which for some years was greatly extolled, not only by the reading public in general, but even by those whose genius and natural robustness of understanding enabled them afterwards to act foremost in dissipating these “painted mists” that occasionally rise from the marshes at the foot of Parnassus. During my first Cambridge vacation I assisted a friend in a contribution for a literary society in Devonshire, and in this I remember to have compared Darwin’s work to the Russian palace of ice, glittering, cold, and transitory. In the same essay too I assigned sundry reasons, chiefly drawn from a comparison of passages in the Latin poets with the original Greek from which they were borrowed, for the preference of Collins’s odes to those of Gray, and of the simile in Shakespeare:

    How like a younker or a prodigal
    The scarfed bark puts from her native bay,
    Hugged and embraced by the strumpet wind!
    How like the prodigal doth she return,
    With over-weathered ribs and ragged sails,
    Lean, rent and beggared by the strumpet wind!

to the imitation in the Bard:

    Fair laughs the morn, and soft the zephyr blows
    While proudly riding o'er the azure realm
    In gallant trim the gilded vessel goes;
    YOUTH on the prow, and pleasure at the helm;
    Regardless of the sweeping whirlwind’s sway,
    That, hushed in grim repose, expects its evening prey.

(In which, by the bye, the words “realm” and “sway” are rhymes dearly purchased.) I preferred the original, on the ground that in the imitation it depended wholly in the compositor’s putting, or not putting, a small capital both in this and in many other passages of the same poet whether the words should be personifications or mere abstracts. I mention this because, in referring various lines
in Gray to their original in Shakespeare and Milton, and in the clear percep-
tion how completely all the propriety was lost in the transfer, I was at that early
period led to a conjecture which, many years afterwards, was recalled to me
from the same thought having been started in conversation, but far more ably,
and developed more fully, by Mr. Wordsworth; namely, that this style of poetry
which I have characterized above as translations of prose thoughts into poetic
language had been kept up by, if it did not wholly arise from, the custom of writ-
ing Latin verses and the great importance attached to these exercises in our
public schools. Whatever might have been the case in the fifteenth century,
when the use of the Latin tongue was so general among learned men that Eras-
mus is said to have forgotten his native language; yet in the present day it is
not to be supposed that a youth can think in Latin, or that he can have any
other reliance on the force or fitness of his phrases but the authority of the
author from whence he had adopted them. Consequently he must first prepare
his thoughts and then pick out from Virgil, Horace, Ovid, or perhaps more
compendiously, from his Gradus, halves and quarters of lines in which to
embody them. I never object to a certain degree of disputatiousness in a young
man from the age of seventeen to that of four or five and twenty, provided I find
him always arguing on one side of the question. The controversies occasioned
by my unfeigned zeal for the honor of a favorite contemporary, then known to
me only by his works, were of great advantage in the formation and establish-
ment of my taste and critical opinions. In my defense of the lines running into
each other instead of closing at each couplet, and of natural language, neither
bookish nor vulgar, neither redolent of the lamp nor of the kennel, such as I will
remember thee; instead of the same thought tricked up in the rag-fair finery of

—Thy image on her wing
Before my fancy's eye shall memory bring,

I had continually to adduce the meter and diction of the Greek poets from
Homer to Theocritus inclusive; and still more of our elder English poets from
Chaucer to Milton. Nor was this all. But as it was my constant reply to author-
ties brought against me from later poets of great name that no authority could
avail in opposition to Truth, Nature, Logic, and the Laws of Universal Gram-
mar; actuated too by my former passion for metaphysical investigations,
I labored at a solid foundation on which permanently to ground my opinions
in the component faculties of the human mind itself and their comparative dig-
nity and importance. According to the faculty or source from which the plea-
sure given by any poem or passage was derived I estimated the merit of such
poem or passage. As the result of all my reading and meditation, I abstracted
two critical aphorisms, deeming them to comprise the conditions and criteria
of poetic style: first, that not the poem which we have read, but that to which
we return with the greatest pleasure, possesses the genuine power and claims
the name of essential poetry. Second, that whatever lines can be translated into
other words of the same language without diminution of their significance,
either in sense of association or in any worthy feeling, are so far vicious in their
diction. Be it however observed that I excluded from the list of worthy feelings
the pleasure derived from mere novelty in the reader, and the desire of excit-
ing wonderment at his powers in the author. Oftentimes since then, in perus-
ing French tragedies, I have fancied two marks of admiration at the end of each
line, as hieroglyphics of the author's own admiration at his own cleverness. Our
genuine admiration of a great poet is a continuous undercurrent of feeling; it is everywhere present, but seldom anywhere as a separate excitement. I was wont boldly to affirm that it would be scarcely more difficult to push a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand than to alter a word, or the position of a word, in Milton or Shakespeare (in their most important works at least), without making the author say something else, or something worse, than he does say. One great distinction I appeared to myself to see plainly, between even the characteristic faults of our elder poets and the false beauties of the moderns. In the former, from Donne to Cowley, we find the most fantastic out-of-the-way thoughts, but in the most pure and genuine mother English; in the latter, the most obvious thoughts, in language the most fantastic and arbitrary. Our faulty elder poets sacrificed the passion and passionate flow of poetry to the subtleties of intellect and to the starts of wit; the moderns to the glare and glitter of a perpetual yet broken and heterogeneous imagery, or rather to an amphibious something, made up half of image and half of abstract meaning. The one sacrificed the heart to the head, the other both heart and head to point and drapery. ***