A Comparison between the Two Versions of Coleridge's “Dejection"

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Abstract
Many critics have argued, each with his or her logic and reasoning, which of the two versions better represents Coleridge and which, artistically, has the edge. This study is an attempt to prove that the second version, that is, the published revised version (RV) of “Dejection: An Ode,” is artistically better than the verse letter (VL) version because it achieves compactness as a result of Coleridge's artistic deletions, modifications and alterations. One of the difficulties I encounter in this paper is that only a few critics have written and expressed their views about and preferences for the two versions and which version better represents Coleridge, the poet.

Keywords: Coleridge, Dejection: An Ode, verse letter, revised version

1- Introduction
The first draft of “Dejection: An Ode” was a verse letter (VL) written to Sara Hutchinson the evening of Sunday, April 4th, 1802. Discovered by Ernest de Selincourt in 1936, it is more than twice as long as the revised version (RV), the received text (textus receptus), of “Dejection: An Ode” (Coleridge, pp. 362-68). The best introduction (Magnuson, 2014) to the VL is provided by an entry in Coleridge’s Notebook no. 1064, dated December 1801 (Magnuson, 2014):

To write a series of Love Poems truly Sapphic, save that they shall have a large Interfusion of moral Sentiment & calm Imagery on Love in all the moods of the mind - Philosphic, fantastic, in moods of high enthusiasm, of simple Feeling, of mysticism, of Religion - / comprize in it all the practice, & all the philosophy of Love

A lively picture of a man, disappointed in marriage, & endeavouring to make a compensation to himself by virtuous & brotherly friendship with an amiable Woman the impossibility of it. Best advice that he should as much as possible withdraw himself from pursuits of morals & devote himself to abstract sciences (p. 290)


2- Critics' Views about the Two Versions and the Reasons Coleridge Shortened the VL
On one hand, a number of critics prefer the VL. For example, House (1953) admits that “a case cannot be made for the full coherence of the original version,” but he argues for its superiority over the RV because he thinks that the deletion of all “personal detail” affected the poem; thus, “the sequence of the poem was altered as well as its direction and tone” (pp. 136-37). John Beer seems to prefer the earlier version:
Both poems have their peculiar value. Dejection stands to its predecessor rather as an engraving may stand in relation to an original painting. Its point is made more sharply and stringently: but in order to hear the full throb of Coleridge’s unhappiness the greater length of the earlier version is needed. (Cited in Barth, 1967, p. 180)

Reeve Parker believes that the VL to Sara “has been called an incomparably greater poem …chiefly on the ground of its being a less disguised personal lament over marital unhappiness, ill-health, and weakened poetic power” (Cited in Barth, 1967, p. 180). Walsh (1973) notes that some critics prefer the VL, mainly because they think it is “more exposed and fluent” than the RV. On the other hand, the following critics are among those who prefer the RV. For example, Watson (1970) insists that “there can be no doubt of the superiority of the final version, where the original 340 lines have been reduced to a tight-packed 139,” and on the whole, “the reduction of the ode to its familiar form is a continuous triumph of critical acumen” (pp. 74-75). Barth (1967) considers the RV to be “a love poem in a broader and deeper sense” than the VL (p. 186). Siferd (1995) attests that “Coleridge obviously struggled with this work to produce the final draft, which makes it all the more amazing.” Lovejoy writes (1948) that Coleridge’s revisions of the VL are a case in point, a poem in which the poet was “able to derive, and to impart, aesthetic pleasure from the very emotion aroused by his own inability to experience aesthetic pleasure” (p. 28). Read (1963) believes that, although Coleridge sacrificed many beautiful stanzas, in the RV, “form still proceeds from the core of the artist’s consciousness” (p. 35).

However, in Yarlott’s opinion (1967), the two versions are not only “poems of uneven quality” but also “virtually different poems” (p. 248). It is clear that deciding which version is better is difficult (Barth, 1967) because “the relationship between the two” versions is “tantalizing” (p. 180).

Undoubtedly, both versions express the poet’s inner turmoil and crisis, and therefore, in Larkin’s opinion (1995), they “reflect Coleridge’s concern with the nature of imagination he was in the process of exploring” (p. 193). These revisions were made (Dugas, 1985) because of Coleridge’s “increasingly clear consciousness of the need to separate external or local afflictions from a dejection born out of formal and epistemological tension” (p. 66).

In my opinion, Coleridge shortens the VL to create a new ode because he had one or more purposes in mind. Perhaps one of the purposes is Coleridge’s desire to apply his organic approach to his own poetry because it was his habit (Cambridge History, 1907-21) to weave “every side of his experience into a consistent whole” and he insisted “that every work of art” is “by its very nature, an organic whole.” Coleridge (Dugas, 1985) “could not free himself from thinking in the hierarchies which led him at various times to privilege” “unity over diversity” (p. 62). Thus, it is not strange that, from the very beginning of Biographia Literaria, Coleridge praises the organic unity of poems. This is clear from his admiration of James Bowyer’s opinion concerning organic unity; Coleridge quotes Boyer, saying 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” (Vol. 1: p. 4). I think that Coleridge decided to achieve unity in revising his VL and making it less personal and more concise. However, the RV is a step forward because it is a movement away from the poet’s searching through his past remembrances towards finding an outlet for his grief that heavily characterizes the VL. Thus, in the RV, Coleridge situates himself face to face with actual real problem, that is, the failure of his poetic experience, or what Coleridge termed (Griggs, 1956) an “intellectual exsiccation” (Vol. 2, p. 713). Therefore, Coleridge aims to turn (Jone, 1999) “the poem into something of a higher kind.”

Despite what has been said up to this point, the main problem (i.e., which of the two versions is better) remains. This question is what I shall attempt to answer. It is clear that the differences between the two versions start from the very beginning, with the affixation of the epigraph taken from the famous ballad
“Sir Patrick Spence.” This addition to the RV is successful because this epigraph functions as an introduction to the poet’s declaration of his failure as a creator. Thus, the epigraph enhances the creation of an atmosphere of disappointment, agony and despair within the RV, despite the fact that the opening stanza (Yarlott, 1967) “belie(s) the poet’s self-assurance” (p. 249). Both the sailors in “Sir Patrick Spence” and the poet feel the inevitable agony of death: the sailors’ physical death and the poet’s spiritual death. However, the poet’s death, as it is depicted, is more painful because the agony he feels is endless. Therefore, the use of the epigraph is an improvement.

In line with the theme and atmosphere of “Dejection: An Ode,” Coleridge retains the first three stanzas from the VL with a few alterations and omissions, making the poem less personal; for example, he replaces “Oh! Sara!” (l. 16) in the VL with “O Lady!” in the RV (l. 25). Lines 17-20 are added in the RV:

Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,
Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

What makes the addition of these lines successful is that they constitute a logical connection with the second stanza. The poet is in need of shedding his spiritual aridity and, as Siferd states (1995), being “transformed by the storm, and so is able to transcend his own grief.” Thus, a catalyst, such as the wind, is a necessity that may help him, having revived his dull creativity in the past.

The same holds true with regard to the poet’s way of expressing his anxiety over losing his poetic creativity in the second stanza in the RV, which is artistically better than his explicit expression of horror in the second stanza in the VL. Comparing the following lines in both stanzas clarifies this point. In the VL, Coleridge writes:

This, Sara! Well thou know’st,
Is that sore Evil, which I dread the most
And oft’nest suffer! (ll. 21-23)

On the other hand, in the RV, he writes:

O Lady! In this wan and heartless mood,
To other thoughts by yonder woo’d. (11.25-26)

The two quotations above show that, in the VL, there is an indication that the external circumstances are the cause of the poet’s failure but that, in the RV, the poet’s inner spirituality is the cause, which is in line with the theme of “Dejection: An Ode.”

However, there are some lines in the VL that are omitted in the RV because, as I believe, they do not contribute much to the meanings contained in the RV. This point is clear from the following lines in the VL that are omitted:

(The larch, which pushes out in tassels green
It’s bundled leafits) woo’d to mild Delights
By all the tender Sounds and gentle Sighs. (11. 26-28)
After the third stanza, the two versions diverge. In the VL, Coleridge immerses himself in remembrances from his childhood, which cover a considerable portion of the poem, specifically lines 52-284 and 243-64, whose ideas are somewhat distant from the central theme. On the other hand, the RV is developed logically, and a smooth transition is felt from the end of stanza three to the beginning of stanza four. At the end of stanza three, the poet determines that he “may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within” (ll. 45-46), and he then elaborates on this creed in stanza four, which expresses Coleridge’s belief in his own abilities within himself, as opposed to external forms, as the sole source of happiness and sadness:

O Lady! We receive but what we give
And in our life alone does Nature live. (11. 47-48)

This smooth transition in the RV contrasts with the abrupt digressions after stanza three in the VL to mere sad and happy personal memories. This digression, which concentrates on the poet’s happy relationships with nature in the past, seems to be illogical because, at least superficially, it contradicts his ideas in the poem concerning nature as a bundle of lifeless objects. Personally, I surmise that Coleridge would have liked to compose the VL to be similar to Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, but he found himself unable to do so because he did not have much to say about his happy past experiences. He felt this fact deeply, and it encouraged him to revise the VL and omit lines of remembrances and digressions to create an intense, coherent poem, the RV. Another factor that urged Coleridge to revise his poem is his outlook on life, which he conceived in spiritual terms. Perhaps Coleridge felt that he was far too realistic in the VL and thus decided to shorten it. This notion seems logical in light of Coleridge’s prose writing. For example, in one of his letters (Griggs, 1956), he writes, “I never regarded my senses in any way the criteria of my belief. I regulated all my creeds by my conception, not by my sight, even at that age” (Vol. I, p. 354).

However, the digressions in the VL start in stanza four, and most of the stanzas from stanza four to the end of the poem are either loosely connected or contain superfluous personal details that are irrelevant to the theme of the poem, that is, the poet’s imaginative failure. In stanza four, the poet unsuccessfully draws a comparison between his own outlook and his beloved’s towards nature: “Art gazing, now, like me” (1. 55). It is true that both look at what is around them, but each has his or her own purpose. Sara seeks sensual pleasures, whereas the poet needs nature to stir his creativity. Thus, although Sara is “gazing” towards the “Shapes, around, below, Above,” from this perspective, she is not “like” the poet. Stanza five (11. 58-73) contains pieces of the poet’s remembrances of his childhood at school and how the sky, for him, was the main source of beauty: “The sky was all, I knew, of the beautiful” (1. 63). In stanza six (ll. 74-91), some lines addressed to Sara seem strange with no logical connection between them and the main theme of the poem; for example, “And tho’ thy Robin may have ceas’d to sing” (l. 87). Stanza seven (ll. 92-98) is no more than a childish address to his beloved. Stanza eight (ll. 99-118) is a clear continuation of the mainly happy remembrances:

Ah fair Remembrances, that so revive
The Heart, and fill it with a living Power,
Where were they, Sara? (ll. 111-13)

Stanza nine (11. 119-29) is exclusively about personal matters and remembrances, mainly Coleridge’s repentance of sending a letter to Sara that caused her great pain. In stanza ten (ll. 130-68), the poet prays for Sara, and he remembers other friends: “Mary, and William, and dear Dorothy” (1. 158). Furthermore, Coleridge’s view of himself in this stanza is low, and unfortunately, he despises himself when comparing himself with others:

While ye and well and happy ‘twould but wrong you
If I should fondly yearn to be among you. (11. 165-66)

Although the beginning of stanza eleven is a continuation of personal matters, a transition occurs when the poet distances himself from sad, unhappy dreams and once again notes the wind, the symbol of creativity:

The dark distressful Dream

I turn from it, and listen to the Wind. (11. 185-86)

This line puts him on the right track again and marks a return to the theme of the poem by describing his agony and evoking his catalyst, the wind, the “Mad Lutanist!” (1. 194). Thus, it is reasonable to include these lines (185-86) in the RV. This stanza contains a prayer for the welfare of his beloved, and these lines are modified as stanza eight, that is, the last stanza in the RV.

Stanza thirteen in the VL becomes a constituent part of stanza six in the RV, in which the poet laments his loss of “joy” and his “Shaping spirit of Imagination” (1. 242). The poet in lines 243-64 in stanza fourteen complains about his domestic life, which deadens his soul and leaves him hopeless:

But that my coarse domestic Life has know
No Habits of heart - nursing Sympathy
No Hopes of its own Vintage, None O! none—. (11. 258-59, 262)

What is retained in the RV from the previous stanza are lines 265-71, which are suitable because they emphasize the idea that the poet’s creativity is blocked by internal factors, a pivotal idea in “Dejection: An Ode”:

And haply by abstruse Research to steal
From my own Nature, all the Natural man. (11. 267-68)

Stanzas fifteen and sixteen are repetitions of previous personal memories. In the former, Coleridge, on the one hand, remembers his children and the joy he draws from them; on the other hand, because of his sad domestic memories, he wishes that his children “never had been born!” (1. 282). In the latter, the poet confesses his inability to appreciate nature, which represents his loss of poetic creativity; thus, his communion with nature is disrupted. This idea is repeated several times in the VL: “they are not to me now the Things, which once they were” (1. 295). Thus, the two stanzas are omitted in the RV. Stanza seventeen is transformed into stanzas four, five and partially eight in the RV, except lines 324-33, which are omitted because they include redundant ideas concerning Sara’s warmth, goodness and love.

Based on the above, one can state that the VL contains a number of defects, specifically digressions and redundancies. On the other hand, the RV is compact, well organized and logically developed. These qualities are achieved mainly because the images are woven around one idea: poetic creativity and the poet’s failure to compose. This point is clear from the following analysis of the structure of the RV, which clarifies how it develops organically and, even with the addition of the epigraph, as noted above, is successful. Stanza one starts with the mentioning of the wind, which symbolizes creativity, and how, later, it becomes a force of destruction. The following lines show that the wind is no longer the catalyst it once was:

Upon the strings of this Æolian lute,
Which better far were mute. (11. 7-8)

The images of the superstitious moon accompanied by the gust enhance the idea that nothing good will occur. These images reflect the poet's attempt, made in vain, to revive his poetic creativity. Indeed, in
Suther's opinion (1965), stanza one can be regarded as “a miniature of the poem as a whole” (p. 126). Stanza two is a continuation of the description of Coleridge's “heartless mood” (1. 25) and his inability to appreciate the beauty in nature: “I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!” (1. 38). Stanza three emphasizes the fact that joy comes from within, not from without:

I may not hope from outward forms to win

The passion and the life, whose fountains are within. (11. 45-46)

In stanza four, the poet elaborates the main idea contained in the previous stanza, that is, the notion that what is within is more important than what is without:

O Lady! We receive but what we give,

And in our life alone does Nature live. (11. 47-48)

Stanza five is a logical continuation of the previous stanza because the poet attempts to define who he is through his “beauty-making power” (1. 63) and “joy” (1. 64). Thus, when joy starts to work, the “beauty-making power” (1. 64) is suffused in nature, and a new world emerges because nature echoes the poet's spiritual voice. Therefore, at any pure moment of the poet’s life and when joy is suffused within and welded to nature, the poet is able to create limitless melodies and colors, “A new Earth and a new Heaven” (1. 69). A confession follows in stanza six, in which the poet laments the loss of his “beauty-making power” and “Joy” as a result of “afflictions” that “bow” him “down to earth” (1. 82), in addition to “abstruse research” that steals from him “all the natural man” (1. 90). Stanza seven is logically connected with stanza six because the latter pinpoints the causes of the poet's loss of poetic creativity, whereas the former illustrates the results of this loss. Nature becomes a bundle of lifeless objects, and the wind is no longer a catalyst of the poet’s creativity; even its sound has a painful effect on him. Stanza eight is an appropriate ending because it is a prayer for the welfare of the poet’s beloved that marks the culmination of his discourse with the lover. Therefore, I conclude that the RV is organically developed and that its arrangement is better than that of the VL. Indeed, as John Jump notes, the RV “is one of the most regular odes” in English (qtd. in Hill, 1983, 199).

3- Comparing Stanzas in the VL with those in the RV

Finally, let us briefly compare the stanzas in the VL with those in the RV to show what is retained from the former in the latter. Stanza one in the VL remains untouched as part of stanza one in the RV, with the addition of four lines at the end, that is, lines 17-20. Stanza two and three in the VL remain as they are in the RV, except for the omission and alteration of a few lines in stanza two; however, nothing is retained from stanzas four, five, six, seven, eight, nine and ten. Lines 186-215 from stanza eleven in the VL remain as they are in stanza seven in the RV, except for the word “William’s” (1. 210), which becomes “Otway’s” (1.120). Stanza twelve in the VL becomes stanza eight in the RV, with some alterations, but the spirit of the original lines remains untouched. Except for the first line, stanza thirteen, with a few alterations, becomes lines 76-86 in stanza six in the RV. The end of stanza fourteen in the VL, specifically lines 265-71, becomes the end of stanza six in the RV, that is, lines 87-93. Nothing from stanzas fifteen and sixteen is kept. Except for lines 324-33, all of the lines in the last stanza, that is, stanza seventeen, are retained in the RV. The first twelve lines of stanza 17, lines 296-307, constitute stanza four in the RV, except for the beginning of the stanza, “O Sara!” (1. 296), which becomes “O Lady!” (1. 47), and lines 308-23 from the same stanza, which become stanza five in the RV, although the words “innocent Sara!” (1. 313), “Sara!” (1. 315) and “We, we” (1. 320) are changed to “virtuous lady!” “Lady” and “We in,” respectively, in the RV. The last seven lines of the last stanza of the VL, that is stanza
seventeen (11. 334-40) becomes lines 134-39, that is, the last lines of the RV, with some alterations and modifications.

4- Conclusion
The RV is entirely derived from the VL. Some lines are intact, whereas others are changed or modified and some are completely deleted; however, as a whole, one can confidently assert that Coleridge observes the spirit of the original lines. It is clear that the VL is more personal, whereas the RV is more compact and is aesthetically superior.

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