

# Nature, Power, and the Light of Suns: The Poetry of Humphry Davy

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Humphry Davy's fame and reputation has, from the early 1800s, rested firmly on his scientific work: exploring the nature and effects of nitrous oxide ('laughing gas'), isolating seven new elements (among them potassium and sodium) using electrochemistry, a term and experimental practice he initiated and developed; and, of course, his invention of the miner's safety lamp in 1815. Davy was only the second natural philosopher to be knighted - Isaac Newton being the first.



And such was his fame as the experimental philosopher who for the first two decades of the nineteenth century put Britain at the forefront of European chemistry, that many rhymes were made up about him: one of the best-known is the clerihew by E. C. Bentley, inventor of this comic verse form:

Sir Humphry Davy  
Was not fond of gravy  
He lived in the odium  
Of having discovered sodium.<sup>1</sup>

But if we probe the life of Davy a little deeper, we discover that throughout it he also wrote a good deal of poetry. The nineteenth-century biographical writings of his brother Dr John Davy (who became the Wordsworths' family doctor in

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<sup>1</sup> E. Clerihew Bentley, *The First Clerihews* (Oxford, 1982), 7.

the Lakes)<sup>2</sup> and J. A. Paris, Davy's first biographer, print a good number of his poems.<sup>3</sup> Probe even further, into the archive of Davy's notebooks preserved at London's Royal Institution in Albermarle Street, and we find an immense amount of verse, much of it unrevised, but much of it of a fine order. Without question, this deconstructor of nature's chemistry felt compelled to convey nature's effects upon him in the rhythms and imageries of poetic language – for much of his verse does focus on nature. Davy's earliest surviving poems were written when he was sixteen in 1795, as he began his apothecary-surgeon's apprenticeship in the remote Cornish town of Penzance, and he continued writing poetry almost up to his death at Geneva in 1829, at the age of fifty.

Commenting on his poetry some fifty years ago, Roger Sharrock's critical evaluation was that Davy wrote 'the sort of second-order verse that is interesting and enlightening to contemporaries because it combines a workmanlike effort in the fashionable mode of expression of the age with relevance to the main current of its thought.'<sup>4</sup> Yet we know that a good number of Davy's friends, admirers and others, people who had read, or who had heard him read his verse, certainly thought that it was rather more than 'workmanlike'. Among those who praised Davy's poetry were some of the most famous poets of the age – Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Walter Scott, for instance – and they did this in writing too. Coleridge, a close friend and admirer in the early 1800s, wrote in the Preface to his poem 'Fire, Famine and Slaughter', for his 1817 poetry collection *Sibylline Leaves*, that Davy was: 'a man who would have established himself in the first rank of England's living poets, if the Genius of our country had not decreed that he should rather be the first in the first rank of its philosophers and scientific benefactors.'<sup>5</sup> And Walter Scott, who had made his name as a poet before turning to novel-writing, said that Coleridge's 'compliment' to Davy here was 'as just as it is handsomely recorded.' Responding to John Davy's request for any helpful comments he might provide for a biography he planned following his brother's death in 1829, Scott continued to his correspondent: 'As Sir Humphry's distinguished talents for literature were less known than his philosophical powers, perhaps Dr Davy might wish to preserve this attestation by so eminent a judge as Mr Coleridge. I have myself heard my deceased friend repeat poetry of the highest order of composition.'<sup>6</sup> That Davy possessed a poet's way of looking at the world, we know from the testimony of Robert Southey, who published six of his early

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (London, 2008), 433.

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Paris, *The Life of Sir Humphry Davy* (London, 1831); John Davy, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Humphry Davy*, 2 vols. (London, 1836); *The Collected Works of Sir Humphry Davy*, 9 vols, ed. John Davy (London, 1839); *Fragmentary Remains, Literary and Scientific, of Sir Humphry Davy* ed. John Davy (London, 1858).

<sup>4</sup> Roger Sharrock, 'The Chemist and the Poet: Sir Humphry Davy and the Preface to Lyrical Ballads,' *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, 17 (1962), 55-76 (58).

<sup>5</sup> 'Apologetic Preface to 'Fire, Famine, and Slaughter,' reprinted as Appendix III in *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (Oxford: 1912), 1052.

<sup>6</sup> Scott's letter is published in *Fragmentary Remains*, 113.

poems and became very close friends with him in Davy's Bristol years. Writing to him in mid-1799 about one of these poems, published as 'Extract from an unfinished poem on Mount's-Bay' for *The Annual Anthology* collection which he edited and published later that year, Southey stated how disappointed he was by its brevity:

I expected more, and wished more, because what there is is good; there is a certain swell, an elevation in the flow of the blank verse, which, I do not know how, produces an effect like the fulness of an organ-swell upon the feelings. I have felt from the rhythm of Milton, and sometimes of Akenside, a pleasure wholly independent of that derived from the soul of the poetry, arising from the beauty of the body only. I believe that a man who did not understand a word of it would feel pleasure and emotion at hearing such lines read with the tone of a poet.<sup>7</sup>

Southey knew that by this time Davy's energies were almost wholly taken up by his research and experiments as superintendent at Thomas Beddoes' new Pneumatic Institute in Bristol. Yet it is significant to note his later comment in the letter: 'I must not press the subject of poetry upon you, only do not lose the feeling and the habit of seeing all things with a poet's eye: at Bristol you have a good society, but not a man who knows anything of poetry.'<sup>8</sup> This situation would change when Coleridge, on his return from Germany, came to Bristol for a time. He was introduced to Davy, who, although now a star attraction in his own right as the experimenter with and dispenser of nitrous oxide at the Pneumatic Institute in Hot Wells, quickly became one of Coleridge's fans and friends.<sup>9</sup> The key point to note from Southey's letter here is that without any prompting from others, Davy *already* as a matter of course observed the world 'with a poet's eye'. He was to be influenced by and come to learn a lot from both Coleridge and Wordsworth as poets, but Davy's imagination and feelings had long been formed for poetic composition.<sup>10</sup>

The foregoing to a degree establishes Davy's credentials as a poet in his own time – but what are we to think of his poetry now? For a taste of Davy's teenage verse, what follows are a few lines from the poem to which Southey was referring, on 'Mount's Bay', a place and a scene which had been familiar to Davy from childhood, and the memory of which would always affect him deeply. In the following extract, he addresses the Land's End itself, using the name the ancient Romans gave it, Bolerium ('seat of storms'). The lines are a

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<sup>7</sup> J. Davy, *Fragmentary Remains*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Fragmentary Remains*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> In turn, Coleridge became a fan of Davy, especially after his meteoric rise to scientific fame at the age of twenty-one, following publication of his first substantial work, *Researches chemical and philosophical; chiefly concerning nitrous oxide, or dephlogisticated air, and its respiration* (London, 1800).

<sup>10</sup> See Maurice Hindle, 'Humphry Davy and William Wordsworth: A Mutual Influence', *Romanticism*, 18.1 (2012), 16-29.

good, representative sample of what John Davy came to call the 'happy blend' of 'philosophical spirit' and 'an intense love of nature' to be found in Davy's poems, the qualities which he thought gave them their 'peculiar character' and their 'principal charm':<sup>11</sup>

Thy awful height Bolerium is not loved  
By busy Man, and no one wanders there  
Save He who follows Nature: He who seeks  
Amidst thy craigs and storm-beat rocks to find  
The marks of changes teaching the great laws  
That raised the globe from Chaos. Or He whose soul  
Is warm with fire poetic, He who feels  
When Nature smiles in beauty, or sublime  
Rises in majesty. He who can stand  
Unaw'd upon thy summit clad in tempests  
And view with raptured mind the roaring deep  
Rise o'er thy foam-clad base, while the black cloud  
Bursts with the fire of Heaven.<sup>12</sup>

From this we can see how from the beginning Davy was a 'worshipper of nature', but a worshipper not merely of Wordsworthian sensibility, conveying a perception of nature as educator of the feelings. What we see here revealed is an inspired eighteen-year-old speaker who so *identifies* with and revels in nature's awesome material powers that he feels deliriously elevated by the experience. It is a sublime experience of sorts, but the enchantment kindled is such that it transcends the 'ordinary' sublime, inciting him to 'stand / Unaw'd upon' the Land's End heights, energised by the powerful storms of nature by which he feels enraptured. It was to be the 'fire of heaven' - electricity - which enabled him, through the vital and practical tool of the Voltaic battery, to make possible his later chemical discoveries at the Royal Institution.

A full survey of the complete range of Davy's poetry is impossible to give here. I shall therefore mainly focus on some of the work Davy produced in the period 1795 to 1806, covering the time he spent in Cornwall, in Bristol, moving into his London period at the Royal Institution, and concluding with some late poems. Doubtless the key formative phase of Davy's life was the time he spent in Cornwall. He was nearly twenty before he left his native Penzance for Bristol, and it was in those two decades that most of his fundamental ambitions and aspirations were triggered, his basic social values formed, and his approaches to science and poetry brought into focus. As Michael Neve so insightfully puts it,

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<sup>11</sup> *Collected Works of Sir Humphry Davy, I, Memoirs of his Life, 23.*

<sup>12</sup> 'Extract from an unfinished poem on Mount's-Bay, c.1796', in *The Annual Anthology*, 2 vols, ed. Robert Southey (Bristol, 1799, 1800), I, 283.

for Davy it was always the ‘Cornwall of his youth’ that ‘retained its pull on his poetic imagination’.<sup>13</sup>

It is the expressivity of the *imagination* in the artistry of the Romantic period that we tend to regard as a quintessential feature of its practitioners, and which we particularly associate with the verse of the Romantic poets. Davy was born in 1778 and died in 1829, a period coinciding almost exactly with the era we have come to call ‘Romantic’: 1780 to 1830. Is this significant? I believe it is absolutely *central* to the case of Davy, a man who in so many ways was the embodiment of what we think of as the Romantic and heroic figure of the artist – except of course that Davy was primarily a natural philosopher, a chemist. No matter, for what drove him forward in his life-quest was a deep sense of being destined for greatness, a feeling that his genius was a gift vouchsafed to him by his Creator, and that this gift must be developed and deployed for the betterment and progress of society.<sup>14</sup> By the middle of 1800, his last year in Bristol, Davy was undertaking an intensive series of experiments using the voltaic battery, the invention of which he later recalled (in 1810) as being ‘an alarm-bell to experimenters in every part of Europe’.<sup>15</sup> At this earlier time he confided to a notebook how he felt ‘grateful to M. Volta, Mr Nicholson, and Mr Carlisle, whose experience has placed such a wonderful and important instrument of analysis *in my power*’.<sup>16</sup>

So, Davy was an ambitious opportunist of sorts, as all pioneers must be. But his very powerful sense of election, that he had been chosen for great things, great discoveries, even though he was only 22 at the time, had already been with him for years. This factor is something easily missed by those who seek simply to ‘place’ the poetic achievement of Davy in conventional literary-historical terms, considering only his very earliest published poetry. On the other hand, this early published poetry can to a degree be seen as part of: ‘an end rather than a beginning, the last representative, as Thomson was the first, in the succession of that eighteenth-century scientific verse which praised the fabric of the universe in Newtonian terms.’<sup>17</sup> Roger Sharrock was probably thinking here of Davy’s earliest published poem, ‘The Sons of Genius’, written when he was sixteen in Penzance, and when he aspired,

To scan the laws of Nature, to explore  
The tranquil reign of mild Philosophy;  
Or on Newtonian wings sublime to soar  
Through the bright regions of the starry sky.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Neve, ‘The Young Humphry Davy: or John Tonkin’s Lament’, in *Science and the Sons of Genius: Studies on Humphry Davy*, ed. Sophie Forgan (London, 1980), 6.

<sup>14</sup> That Davy was a late Enlightenment Romantic is argued at length in my essay, ‘Humphry Davy and William Wordsworth: A Mutual Influence’, 16-29.

<sup>15</sup> *Collected Works*, VIII, 308.

<sup>16</sup> *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Humphry Davy*, 1, 378. Emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> Sharrock, 58-59.

<sup>18</sup> ‘The Sons of Genius’, *The Annual Anthology*, I, 93-99 (97).

Competent, and indeed, perhaps 'second order verse', but Sharrock himself noticed how there is a similar aspiration and style articulated in Wordsworth's earliest recorded poem, where a personification of the 'Spirit of Education' aims:

To teach, on rapid wings, the curious soul  
To roam from heaven to heaven, from pole to pole,  
From thence to search the mystic cause of things  
And follow Nature in her sacred springs.<sup>19</sup>

Both examples are clearly derivative of the neo-classical verse style of Pope, Thomson and Akenside. Whereas Wordsworth addresses the Spirit of Education, Davy is invoking the female spirit of Genius, by whom he feels *chosen* to achieve great things:

Inspired by her, the sons of Genius rise  
Above all earthly thoughts, all vulgar care,  
Wealth, power and grandeur, they alike despise,  
Enraptur'd by the good, the great, the fair.<sup>20</sup>

Yet we need to note a real divergence here between Wordsworth and Davy that I have already hinted at. Davy's is indeed conventional verse in one sense, written by a sixteen year old who has read, like many another middle-class sixteen year old of the period, his Pope, Thomson and Akenside. The difference is that Davy really *does* seem to have been inspired by nature, but in a very immediate and penetrating way: his feeling imagination has been agitated and incited to creative work by the force of nature's mysterious *material* processes as well as its beauties. Throughout his teenage years, he collected and studied the rocks around Land's End, a witness to the sights and sounds of the sea at Mount's Bay, a scene of often tumultuous nature lit by a constantly changing atmospheric light that provided him with images and incited him to thoughts deeply retained. From a favourite vantage point at Gulval Rocks, near Penzance, he even painted the scene. As can be seen from the reproduction below of Davy's watercolour of Mount's Bay, he was not destined to become a Turner or a Constable. But his fascination for the active nature of the Penwith peninsular that sculptor Barbara Hepworth spoke of as the 'pagan triangle of landscape' between St. Ives, St. Just and Penzance,<sup>21</sup> *did* incite him to write poetry that from the first grappled with ideas of how the dynamics of human existence could be linked to the mysteriously vital forces lying behind the surfaces of the world that he saw and sensed. One of the earliest of these poems

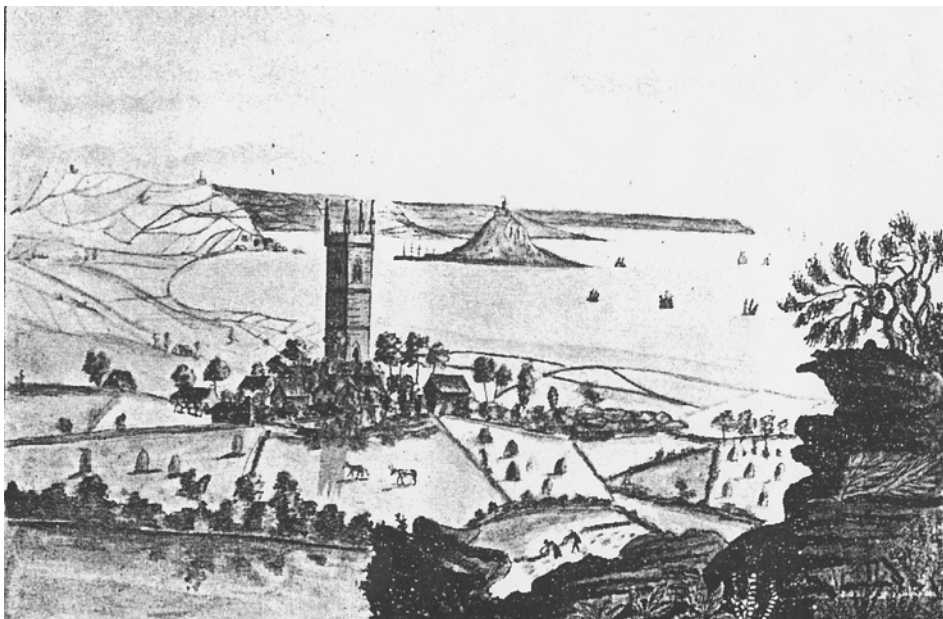
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<sup>19</sup> Sharrock, 59. The poem is 'Lines Written as a School Exercise at Hawkshead'. See *William Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, eds. T. Hutchinson, E. de Selincourt (Oxford, 1984), 483, ll. 73-76.

<sup>20</sup> *The Annual Anthology*, I, 94

<sup>21</sup> Holmes, 237n.

was evidently written as Davy sat contemplating the gravestones of his forebears that stood (and still stand) against the south wall of the church at Ludgvan, a small village lying a little inland to the north east of nearby Penzance at the top of a winding road overlooking Mount's Bay.<sup>22</sup>



We perhaps need to imagine Davy sitting with his back against the south facing gravestones of his forebears, gazing out toward St Michael's Mount.<sup>23</sup> Written in language that strikingly links the personal with the cosmically material universe, we are taken into a series of emotional but materialistic reflections in which the speaker is wrestling with profound ideas, attempting to articulate how (his) life and (his forebears') death were, or could be, connected:

My eye is wet with tears  
For I see the white stones  
That are covered with names  
The stones of my forefathers graves

No grass grows upon them  
For deep in the earth  
In darkness and silence the organs of life

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Holmes is right to say we have no obvious indication as to when Davy wrote this (Holmes, 240). But my feeling accords with that of Anne Treneer, who describes it as an 'early poem' in *The Mercurial Chemist: A Life of Humphry Davy* (London, 1963), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Treneer states that 'The Mount' is 'from nowhere more royally viewed than from the heights above Ludgvan' (10). I agree.

To their primitive atoms return  
Through ages the air  
Has been moist with their blood  
Through ages the seeds of  
the thistle has fed  
On what was once motion and form

The white land that floats  
Through the heavens  
Is pregnant with  
that which was life  
And the moonbeams  
that whiten it came  
From the breath and the spirit of man.

Thoughts roll not beneath the dust  
No feeling is in the cold grave.  
Neither thought nor feeling can die  
They have leaped to other worlds  
They are far above the skies

They kindle in the stars  
They dance in the light of suns  
Or live in the comet's white haze<sup>24</sup>

Richard Holmes is right to observe that this 'striking and mysterious' poem of Davy's feels 'oddly pagan' with a 'harsh physicality often associated in later Cornish art with the worship of stone, flint and sunlight,' and is one of the few to 'not rhyme' among his output.<sup>25</sup> But his assertion that the poem is 'formed from a plain list of terse factual statements [...], such as one might find in a shorthand account of an experiment in a laboratory notebook',<sup>26</sup> feels a little wide of the mark for the poem's significance. This is because, although unrhymed, most of the lines convey their meaning and effects in clusters of three or four iambic beats, and, hurried on though they may be by the impulse of the writer's emotional search, as one reads they create a cumulative impact that is well served by Davy's early mastery of the blank verse form. That 'Neither thought nor feeling can die,' but instead leap 'to other worlds far above the skies, kindling in the stars', dancing 'in the light of suns,' are notions that leap from Davy's imagination. Certainly, such ideas are intimately related to the corpuscular theory of light and perception spelt out in his first sensational 'Essay on Heat, Light, and the Combinations of Light', published in 1799 at the

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<sup>24</sup> Treneer, 4-5.

<sup>25</sup> Holmes, 240.

<sup>26</sup> Holmes, 240.



instigation of his admiring employer Dr Thomas Beddoes. His writings on heat and light were based on ideas, speculations and experiments carried out while he was still living in West Cornwall, so noted for its quality of light. This potent influence is worth re-invoking: for the most obvious source for Davy's fascination with light was the Cornish light of such protean quality that lit up the land and seascapes of his experience so extraordinarily. In one of his notebooks we find him explaining that 'What we mean by Nature is a series of visible images: but these are constituted by light [...] Hence the worshipper of Nature is a worshipper of light.'<sup>27</sup> In his Essay, he believed he had not only 'proved the existence of light in the arterial blood', but that there was an intimate link between the intellectual 'light of reason' in man, and the 'light of suns' in deep space, without whose agency no life could exist: 'We may consider the sun and fixed stars, the suns of other worlds,' he says, 'as immense reservoirs of light destined by the great ORGANISER to diffuse over the universe organisation and animation. And thus will the laws of gravitation, as well as the chemical laws, be considered as subservient to one great end, PERCEPTION.'<sup>28</sup> As June Fullmer has argued, another inspiration for the expression of these ideas may have included his reading of Abraham Tucker's *The Light of Nature Pursued*, a work introduced to him by Thomas Beddoes, and which seems to have obsessed both of them as 'readable Hartley.'<sup>29</sup>

For Davy then, 'to be intensely aware of the natural world, to be perceptive, seemed the highest pleasure.'<sup>30</sup> This is perhaps why, although he was soon to become sceptical of the scientific value of his own youthful theories, later referring to them as his 'infant chemical speculations,'<sup>31</sup> in his poetic and later writings on nature and nature's processes, he stuck to his earliest convictions about the operations of light on and in us, as perceiving, imaginative, and intellectual beings.<sup>32</sup> Although experimental science would enable him to make stupendous discoveries in his brilliant career as a natural philosopher, a career that led Charles Lamb to describe him in a letter of 1808 as 'the great young English chemist!'<sup>33</sup> it could not replace the affectively discriminating *sensing* and perceptively *feeling* qualities of the human imagination, qualities with which Davy's poetry was powerfully invested.

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<sup>27</sup> RI (Royal Institution) Davy archive, Notebook 20a, Quoted by June Z. Fullmer, *Young Humphry Davy: The Making of an Experimental Chemist* (Philadelphia, 2000), 169.

<sup>28</sup> 'An essay on heat, light and the combinations of light,' in *Collected Works*, II, 85.

<sup>29</sup> Fullmer, *Young Humphry Davy*, 169, 118.

<sup>30</sup> Fullmer, *Young Humphry Davy*, 169.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by John Davy, Introduction to 'An essay on heat, light [...]', in *Collected Works*, II, 3.

<sup>32</sup> This valuation applies especially to Davy's visionary last work, the posthumously published *Consolations in Travel, or The Last Days of a Philosopher* (London, 1830).

<sup>33</sup> This was in a letter giving London news to his far-flung missionary friend Manning, 26 February, 1808. See *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E.W. Marris, 3 vols (Ithaca, 1975-8), II, 274.

~ Davy, Coleridge and Wordsworth ~

Full of expectation for the experimental work he was engaged to undertake for Thomas Beddoes at the Pneumatic Institute, Davy reached Bristol on 7 October, 1798, still only nineteen. Though destined to be involved in the future of its second edition, he could not know how three days before his arrival, Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* had been published.<sup>34</sup> I have mentioned Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge as two of the poets Davy made friends with in Bristol. The new breed of what might be called the male 'progressive' poets of the 'revolutionary decade' as a matter of course began to show and read their work aloud to each other, offering constructive praise or criticism. Davy would benefit immensely from this kind of interaction. As well as receiving encouragement and recognition of his poetic talents from Southey in this Bristol period, Davy later also gained admiring comments from Coleridge, who in a letter even offered him detailed critical commentary on one of his poems. Davy had evidently put much of himself into the poem he entitled *The Spinosist* in one of his notebooks, for much later (in 1808) he took the trouble to rework it into a more finished form while recovering from an illness brought on by overwork at the Royal Institution. In fact, the first draft of this poem that Coleridge read in October 1800 was originally written as Davy recovered from a bout of illness occasioned by a period of overwork in his Bristol laboratory, which probably included the strain of extricating himself from an addiction to nitrous oxide.<sup>35</sup> The poem is most interesting for the way it seems to bring together two things: Davy's continuing preoccupation with imaging in verse the changing and life-giving forces of nature on a universal scale, but also Coleridge's restorative view of what he called the 'One Life' binding man to nature, which he had developed in his 'Religious Musings' poems, and a form of 'faith' which had saved the eternally grateful Wordsworth from atheistic despair in the early days of their friendship.<sup>36</sup>

It could well be that *The Spinosist* was an attempt to image forth feelings and ideas concerning the *oneness* in nature that Davy had developed independently in Cornwall, and which were now stimulated further by Coleridge's conversation on the matter. Coleridge was full of praise for the poem that Davy sent him, saying that there were: 'never so many lines which so uninterruptedly combined natural and beautiful words with strict philosophic truths, i.e. scientifically philosophic. Of the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh stanzas, I am doubtful which is the most beautiful.'<sup>37</sup> We do not have the poem that Coleridge received and read, but we do have the first seven

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<sup>34</sup> The publication arrangements of the collection had become quite a protracted affair. See Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (Oxford, 1983), xvi-xx.

<sup>35</sup> Davy's early fame came as a result of his work on nitrous oxide – so-called 'laughing gas'; Fullmer, *Young Humphry Davy*, 270-71.

<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford, 1990), 232-33.

<sup>37</sup> The full text of Coleridge's letter can be read in *Fragmentary Remains*, 80-83.

uncorrected stanzas based on the surviving 1799 draft in Davy's notebook, which bring us closer to the version that Coleridge read:

Lo! o'er the earth the kindling spirits pour  
The seeds of life that bounteous nature gives -  
The liquid dew becomes the rosy flower  
The sordid dust awakes & moves & lives -

All, All is change, the renovated forms  
Of ancient things arise & live again.  
The light of suns the angry breath of storms  
The everlasting motions of the main

Are but the engines of that powerful -  
The eternal link of thoughts where form revolves  
Have ever acted & are acting still -  
Whilst age round age & worlds round worlds revolves -

Linked to the whole the human mind displays  
No sameness & no deep identity  
Changeful as the surface of the seas  
Impressible as is the moving sky.

Being of aggregate the power of love  
Gives it the joy of moments, bids it use  
In the wild forms of Mortal things to move  
Fix'd to the earth below the eternal skies -

To break the ether; & to feel the form  
Of orb'd beauty through its organs thrill  
To press the limbs of life with rapture warm  
And drink of transport from a brimming rill

To view the heavens with morning radiance bright  
Majestic mingling with the ocean blue  
To view the forests green the mountains white  
The peopled plains of rich & varying hue<sup>38</sup>

When reading this I feel much the same as Southey did when reacting to Davy's 'Mount's Bay' poem; it is the moving protean *body* of the poem that engages me, the sublime acoustic of the shifting word-images which secures a prior affective

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<sup>38</sup> RI Davy archive, Notebook 13c, 7-9. The text of the longer, revised 1808 version, 'Written after Recovery from a Dangerous Illness,' including all of Coleridge's suggested changes, can be read in *Collected Works*, I, 114-16.

impact, over meaning. This is very much the case in the sixth stanza, where the sensuous plenitude of 'brimming rill' looks forward to the resonant language of the opening stanza of Keats's ode 'To Autumn', conveying as it does so powerfully the 'mellow fruitfulness' of that season: Davy's poem was written in autumn too.<sup>39</sup>

In 1800, Davy's gift for registering his feelings for nature and humanity in poetry became influenced by a new force, the source of which is not hard to fathom. Earlier in the year, Coleridge had gone 'to join his god, Wordsworth, in the North', as Charles Lamb so neatly put it.<sup>40</sup> So now, taking firm but gentle advantage of his friendship with Davy, Coleridge encouraged Wordsworth to write to him as a fellow-poet in Bristol living conveniently close to Biggs and Cottle the publishers, requesting that Davy oversee the second, enlarged edition of *Lyrical Ballads* through the press for him. Agreeing to the senior poet's request to 'look over' his poems, 'correcting anything you find amiss in the punctuation,' and then checking 'the proof-sheets of the 2<sup>nd</sup> volume before they are finally struck off',<sup>41</sup> Davy now close-read the much-expanded collection of lyrical ballads that Wordsworth sent him in repeated postal missives over the final months of 1800. The strong native feeling for nature already embedded in Davy's poetic imagination could only be deepened by this process, while his eagerly receptive literary powers, exposed to the writing of a brilliant poet working at a white heat of creative intensity, were amply satisfied.<sup>42</sup>

### ~ Davy and Romance ~

By the middle of 1799 Davy was deeply engaged in experiments at the Pneumatic Institute in Bristol – chiefly on himself – to determine what he and Thomas Beddoes hoped would be the beneficial medical effects of breathing nitrous oxide. In this period he wrote two eight-line poems, both entitled 'On Breathing the Nitrous Oxide' and both appearing close together on succeeding notebook pages – yet they could not be more different in tone, execution and purpose. Although each poem attempts to put into words rhapsodic experiences and perceptions arising from the ingestion of the gas, the second delivers perhaps the kind of first-person testimony that might satisfy both a physiologist and a poet, written out in lines of precisely pulsed blank verse, ending with, 'Yet are my limbs with inward transports thrill'd/ And clad with new born mightiness around.'<sup>43</sup> The poem preceding this in the notebook has a

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<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, in a favourable discussion of Davy's *Consolations in Travel*, Michael Neve observes striking similarities between the last years of Keats and Davy, positing that Davy had 'an end that rivals Keats, whose genius Davy resembles'. See Neve, 'The Young Humphry Davy', 3.

<sup>40</sup> Treneer, 61-62.

<sup>41</sup> The letter is printed in full in *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford, 1935), 244-5.

<sup>42</sup> The influence Wordsworth's poetry had on Davy in the period 1799-1801 is discussed more fully in Hindle, 'Humphry Davy and William Wordsworth: A Mutual Influence', 20-22.

<sup>43</sup> RI Davy archive, Notebook 13c, 5-6. Note that the word Fullmer transcribes as 'fill'd' from the MS upon closer analysis is importantly revealed as 'thrill'd'.

fierce defiant passion clearly concerning itself with the emotional impact another person is having on the speaker, and as such the lines succeed each other with little regard for consistency of poetic pulse or rhyme:

Shall I renounce the countenance  
Living in the beauty of expression?  
Shall I give up the articulately  
Sounding voice whose gentle sound  
Has so often lull'd me to repose  
To worship the dry and unmeaning word benevolence?  
No - let me live a son, a brother, and a lover;  
Let me die a husband, a friend and a father.<sup>44</sup>

These heart-felt lines suggest a number of things. For one thing, this is the only place in Davy's writings where he explicitly speaks of the desire to be a lover and a father. But more broadly, the poetic register of the lines indicates that the late-Enlightenment project of universal benevolence in which Davy had engulfed himself at Bristol seems to have become momentarily suspended. Why? Liberated by the emotionally intoxicating effects of nitrous oxide, it seems that his feelings have overcome him, moved as he is by the 'beauty of expression', and the 'gentle' and 'articulately sounding' voice of Anna Beddoes. For it was Anna Edgeworth Beddoes, young wife of Dr Beddoes, Davy's scientific mentor and guide at this time, who had got underneath his skin. It had been Anna, a daughter of educational pioneer Richard Lovell Edgeworth and sister of Maria Edgeworth the novelist, who first introduced Davy to the natural beauties of Bristol, and went on to accompany him on many walks they took around the heights of Clifton and along the River Avon in the three years he spent there.

Davy at twenty had evidently become smitten by Anna, a feeling that was reciprocated, as I shall go on to show. By 1812, Davy's European fame, knighthood, and fashionable marriage to wealthy widow and bluestocking Jane Apreece would secure his ascendancy into high society. But various poems and other writings show that his heart and imagination were always to be haunted by the memory of Anna Beddoes. In 1800, just as he continued to be throughout his life, Davy was an obsessively hard worker, and without an emotional or sexual outlet it was perhaps inevitable that he would become sexually frustrated. And he would never quite 'renounce the countenance' - or voice - of Anna Beddoes, whom he innocently described to his mother in a letter as 'the best & most amiable woman in the world'.<sup>45</sup> Of all the friendships he made in Bristol, this one would never die in his heart, and that is because it was a friendship very much *of* the heart - and possibly more. In her biography of Davy, June Fullmer makes some interesting observations on this subject, noting

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<sup>44</sup> RI Davy archive, Notebook 13c, 4-5.

<sup>45</sup> Fullmer, 107.

how he and Anna explored Clifton together 'on excursions Davy remembered for a very long time,' and points to the 'tender poem' he started writing in one notebook, which began: 'Anna thou art lovely ever / lovely in tears / In tears of sorrow bright / Brighter in tears of joy.'<sup>46</sup> In a second fragment, Davy wrote: 'Oh Anna should try / spirit rest / A peaceful inmate / Inmate / The'.<sup>47</sup> Then lapsing into lines of faulty Greek, translated by Fullmer as 'beautiful girl / Is not mine, is not mine / the beautiful'.<sup>48</sup> Fullmer concludes that perhaps 'sexual yearning was responsible' for this second fragment, and that 'Apparently he fell a little in love with her, since among the few papers he saved are some of her letters. He also copied some of her poems into one of his notebooks - a surprising gesture from a man reputedly too impatient to bother with souvenirs.'<sup>49</sup>

But the 'gesture' is less surprising if one looks closer at the manuscript evidence. This amply shows that he was more than a little in love with her, and without doubt she was utterly in love with him. There are nine extremely competent poems by Anna Beddoes that Davy carefully wrote out in his notebooks - twice - all clearly addressed to him.<sup>50</sup> That he carefully copied out these poems, not once, but *twice*, in different notebooks, strongly suggests that Davy must have felt the same way about Anna as she did about him. In fact, there is a manuscript poem of 1803 indicating this, one that again refers to Anna in Bristol:

There last I heard her tones;  
Her sweet & silver voice  
The mountains rose above  
The torrent foamed beneath  
Whitening the moss grown rocks  
The air was still & clear  
The moonbeam in the sky.

She did not say she loved  
Yet from her glowing cheek  
And from her humid eye  
And from her trembling hand  
And from her throbbing heart  
I learned the rapturous truth.

The breathings of her soul  
Were sentiment & life  
And every glowing thought  
Had all the power of youth

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<sup>46</sup> RI Davy archive, Notebook 13c, 111.

<sup>47</sup> RI Davy archive, Notebook 13g, 104.

<sup>48</sup> Fullmer, 107.

<sup>49</sup> Fullmer, 107.

<sup>50</sup> These poems are the subject of a forthcoming journal essay on Anna Beddoes and Davy.

It seemed as if a Mind  
Like Her's could never die  
Immortal in its strength.  
There last I heard her tones  
They are for ever gone  
Her music never more  
Shall glad my troubled soul  
No more shall she create  
The world for which I lived.

Alone she filled the mind  
A vision of delight  
In which all natural charms  
Of motion colour form  
Were kindled into life  
By Fancy, reason, taste.

There last I heard her tones  
There still the moonbeam shines  
There still the torrent roars  
There still the humid rocks  
Flame with the silver light  
There, still the lofty hills  
Darken the azure sky.

Nature has not changed  
But pleasure dwells no more  
Within her ancient haunts  
A star of joy is set  
Which never more can rise  
No second spring of life  
Awaits our mortal years.<sup>51</sup>

'There still the torrent roars / There still the humid rocks / Flame with the silver light'. This is Davy truly writing like a Romantic poet, conveying the deepest of human feelings in urgent, breathless, three-beat lines through word-images of living nature. The re-iteration of 'there' in stanzas 1, 4 and 6 strongly suggests that the feelings of Davy are still 'here' as he writes.

To what extent the torrent roared between Humphry and Anna, I suspect we may never know. But what we do know, from a much later poem addressed to her – probably around 1819 – is that she went on haunting his mind, if not his body. As ever, Davy is keen to celebrate her 'intellectual light'. But the verse repeats the crucial fact that it was her *voice* in particular which lived on in him:

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<sup>51</sup> RI Davy archive, Notebook 13c, 118-20.

Thy voice is full and sweet tho' low  
And chastened. Such its varied powers:  
It haunts me in my very dreams,  
In cities as in rural bowers<sup>52</sup>

Anna's voice continued to haunt Davy until the end of his life. In his posthumously published book, *Consolations in Travel*, described by the French anatomist Georges Cuvier as the work of a dying Plato,<sup>53</sup> Davy celebrated the delights and beauties of pursuing natural philosophy and chemistry in a series of six dialogues written in a style he called 'philosophical poetry though not in metre.'<sup>54</sup> The first of these dialogues, set in the Colosseum in Rome, is called 'The Vision'. This is a vision in which the sight of the character who experiences it, Philoletes, is overcome by a flood of moonlight – moonlight always having been significant for Davy – while his ears are simultaneously ravished by the 'most melodious sounds'.<sup>55</sup> The music ceases, but, still bathed in moonlight, Philoletes hears the voice of a mysterious character speaking to him, whom he will describe later to his friends as 'The Genius'. Although Davy himself said that he had based his Vision on a daydream – his health severely impaired, he was taking pain-killing laudanum at the time – as Fullmer reports, it did resemble in many ways Abraham Tucker's 'Vision' in *The Light of Nature Pursued*.<sup>56</sup> But now, Davy apparently encountered difficulties in creating a *cicerone* (or intellectual guide) for his 'Vision'. Ned Search's guide in Tucker's work had been a female, and Davy's notes show that he had also initially created a female guide, 'apparently basing her on his memories of Anna Beddoes'.<sup>57</sup> However, he then abandoned that figure, 'substituting for it an unseen male manifested by light, with a "low, but extremely distinct and sweet voice,"' as Philoletes describes it.<sup>58</sup> Yet this description of course tallies completely with the voice of Anna described in the late Davy poem addressed to her: 'Thy voice is full and sweet tho' low.'

Anna Beddoes then, who seems to have been the only true love of Davy's life - apart from science and salmon fishing that is - was still speaking to him towards the end of it.

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Having approached the conclusion of this essay by way of one light of Davy's life, Anna, I shall close with a late, thirteen-line poem of Davy's in which the source of all our light, the sun, is conjured up once again. Davy was a man of strong religious feeling who described the purpose of his last book *Consolations*

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<sup>52</sup> RI Davy archive, Notebook 14e, 53-54.

<sup>53</sup> David Knight, *Humphry Davy: Science and Power* (Cambridge, 1998), 9.

<sup>54</sup> Fullmer, 350.

<sup>55</sup> Davy, *Consolations in Travel*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> Fullmer, 355, n.1.

<sup>57</sup> Fullmer, 355, n.1.

<sup>58</sup> Davy, *Consolations*, 17.



in *Travel* as being 'to display & vindicate *the Instinct or feeling of religion*'. He was therefore not religious in any conventional Anglican sense, this being confirmed by his going on to say – anticipating objections – that 'The philosophers I am sure, *will quarrel with it, & no Christian ought to quarrel with it.*'<sup>59</sup> His true convictions, which combine a religious feeling with his observations of the natural world, projecting them into a futurity which seems to fuse both realms, emerges in a poem headed 'Ullswater August 4 1825'. This was written while Davy was staying with Lord Lonsdale at Lowther castle in a party that included Wordsworth, this being the last occasion the two men would ever meet.

The poem reveals some key characteristics of Davy, including his mature style as a seasoned Romantic poet and a clear declaration of what he calls his religious instinct at work. But most important of all the poem shows how unabated was his belief that all manifestations of spiritual and material power owe their existence to the 'light of suns,' a phenomenon he had been celebrating since his teenage years:

Ye lovely hills that rise in majesty  
Amidst the ruddy light of setting suns  
Your tops are bright with radiance whilst below  
The wave is dark and gloomy and the plain  
Hid in obscurest mist. Such is the life  
Of Man. This vale of earth and waters dark  
And gloomy: but the mountain range above  
The skies, the heavens, are bright: there is a ray  
Of evening which does not end in night;  
A Sun of which we catch uncertain gleams  
In this our mortal state, but which  
For ever shines, wakening the spirit of Man  
To life immortal and undying glory.<sup>60</sup>

We can learn much from the poetry of Humphry Davy.

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<sup>59</sup> Letter from Humphry to Jane Davy, 18.12.1828, accessed 4 January 2013 at <http://www.davy-letters.org.uk>. The emphases are Davy's own.

<sup>60</sup> RI Davy archive, Notebook 14e, 97.