

Molly Lefebure

Humphry Davy: Philosophic Alchemist

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Essays for Thomas McFarland

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Humphry Davy: Philosophic Alchemist

MOLLY LEFEBURE

In 1823 Coleridge was invited to lecture at the Literary and Philosophical Society in Leeds. For reasons of health and professional writing commitments he felt obliged to refuse. His letter of refusal, a typically Esteesian composition, digresses into reminiscence concerning his lectures at the Royal Institution many years before and includes this remarkable tribute to a ‘fellow lecturer’:

My attachment to Sir H. (then Mr) Davy, who had shortly before commenced his March of Glory as the Chemical Lecturer, a Glory not brighter or filling a larger space to my mind now that I look back on it, than it did at Bristol, in his 20th year, when I had to look forward to it.—I can with truth say, that I lectured for *Pride*; but it was the Pride of being a fellow lecturer with the Father and Founder of philosophic Alchemy, the Man who *born* a Poet first converted Poetry into Science and *realised* what few men possessed Genius enough *to fancy* (CL, v, 309).

The sentences suggest a state of strong emotion. Coleridge was recalling to mind the man of whom he had once said, ‘I have hoped, and do hope, more proudly of Davy than of any other man; and ... he has been endeared to me, more than any other man, by the being a Thing of Hope to me’ (CL, ii, 927). In 1823 Coleridge was casting a backward glance down the years at perhaps the most exciting friendship in his life, certainly one of the outstanding friendships of his life. And without doubt he was remembering how he had ruptured that friendship through opium-sodden pique and resentment in 1809 – that period when, under similar circumstances, he was also in the process of rupturing another great friendship, with William Wordsworth. In 1823 thirteen years had passed since Coleridge had last met Davy, whom he had once seen almost every day when in London, in whom he had confided his most intimate truths about himself, and to whom he had looked for help, trusting Davy as ‘one who loves me in the Light of knowledge’ (CL, ii, 1102).

Humphry Davy (1778–1829), born at Penzance, Cornwall, of an old Cornish