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Exploring the Myth of the Proper Writer: Jenny Diski, Montaigne and Coleridge

Emma Eldelin

The epigraph [...] is a signal (intended as a *sign*) of culture, a password of intellectuality. [...] With it, he [the author] chooses his peers and thus his place in the pantheon.¹

- 1 This article revolves around the changeable and contradictory relation of a contemporary piece of writing to two epigraphs taken from Western literary canon. According to Gérard Genette, the use of epigraphs may be the author's way to comment on the text, to mark the tenor or genre of writing; but the epigraph may also, in a wider sense, be the vehicle of integration into a cultural tradition.² Consider the following two quotations, constituting the epigraphic frame of British author Jenny Diski's *On Trying to Keep Still* (2006):

Recently I retired to my estates, determined to devote myself as far as I could to spending what little life I have left quietly and privately; it seemed to me then that the greatest favour I could do for my mind was to leave it in total idleness, caring for itself, concerned only with itself, calmly thinking of itself. I hoped it could do that more easily from then on, since with the passage of time it had grown mature and put on weight.

But I find [...] that on the contrary it bolted off like a runaway horse, taking far more trouble over itself than it ever did over anyone else; it gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monstrosities, one after another, without order or fitness, that, so as to contemplate at my ease their oddness and their strangeness, I began to keep a record of them, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself.³

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
 This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost
 Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
 Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
 Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness! [...]⁴

- 2 Though from different literary periods, languages and genres, these are obviously both well-known enunciations, pointing to a literary motif of a certain kind; in various ways, they express the anxieties and distinction of the solitary writer. What signal of culture is it, then, to let the voices of Montaigne and Coleridge cross-fertilize your writing in the 21st century, as is Diski's choice in *On Trying to Keep Still*?

The interplay of movement and stillness

- 3 Starting out as a novelist in the late 1980s, it is rather as a writer of literary non-fiction Jenny Diski (1947-) has been most widely appreciated in the last decade. Her definite breakthrough was probably *Skating to Antarctica* (1997), in which memories of a troubled and traumatic childhood with abusive parents are interspersed with the account of a journey to Antarctica in search of oblivion, whiteness and ultimate emptiness. While not as distressing, a similar combination of philosophical rumination on travelling and remembrance is significant of her following titles of non-fiction as well, most notably in *Stranger on a Train* (2002) and *On Trying to Keep Still* (2006). Both could be described as journeys of self-discovery, tours of digression into the writer's mind, as much as they are accounts of travels around the world, conditioned by encounters with strangers and cultural difference.⁵
- 4 Despite the focus on travelling and movement in her non-fiction books, Diski expresses a recurrent wish to keep still and do nothing. This urge is the essence of *On Trying to Keep Still*, the text explored in this article. Reminiscent of Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*, Diski aims to critically explore and confront her own mind; she seeks solitude in secluded places, striving to make a written portrait of her cogitations. Montaigne is posed as a paragon in Diski's project of "being alone usefully", particularly in the second part of the book, called "On Stillness", which accounts for her two-month stay in autumn 2003 in a small farm cottage in the Quantock Hills, Somerset.⁶ She turns to the Renaissance philosopher to "apply for justification" (87) when haunted by guilty conscience for preferring idleness and indolence. The tone being quite associative, talkative and doubtful, *On Trying to Keep Still* bears many overt and more implicit resemblances to the Montaignean essay as well. In ethos as well as in topics, this book has much in common with essay tradition.⁷ From the two epigraphs, however, it seems that *On Trying to Keep Still* is about negotiating ideals, sites and symbols of writing and artistic creativity associated not only with Montaigne, but also with the literature of Romanticism. Apart from being a prose writer rather than a poet, Diski responds to a key myth of the Romantic period: "the concept of solitary inspiration in nature, the lone poet secure in his rural, bardic isolation".⁸ In the Somerset journey, this myth is represented by the poetical figures of Coleridge and Wordsworth, whose ghosts seem to haunt the late modern writer on more than one occasion.
- 5 The tension between Diski's appointed literary ancestors or interlocutors – Montaigne and the Romantic Poet – is depicted in a metaphorical interplay of movement and stillness. Reflected already in part in the two epigraphs, Montaigne could be said to represent stillness and stasis, the idea of the sedentary, isolated writer making a record of his thoughts and fancies, while the British poets, prone to walking and composing as they were, express alternative ways of being a writer, but still favouring the solitary mind. The purpose of this article is thus to discuss how notions of landscape, imagery and the

presumed behaviour of the “proper writer” are explored by Diski against the backdrop of older literary ideals. In the following passages, my intention is to illustrate how Diski’s dialogue with her forerunners is portrayed in various ways, from affectionate appropriation over ironic reduction to dismissal and renegotiation. I will be focusing primarily on the second part of *On Trying to Keep Still* (“On Stillness”), which is the journey to Coleridge County, Quantock Hills.

Reworking the site of retreat

- 6 Diski’s first reply to her historic interlocutors is to appropriate or rework a certain cultural and mental terrain in Western literary tradition: the place of withdrawal or retreat. Straightforwardly, already the first few lines of “On Stillness” establish the occasion for Diski’s trip to Somerset: “The idea was to be isolated and alone, like a proper writer should be, and, writer or not, like I should be. To think, to read, to listen.” (71) Diski’s act of retreat may be read as a modern response to the Western cultural paradigm of the retired, solitary life, prefigured already in ancient ideas such as *skholé*, leisure or a life of contemplation (in Plato and Aristotle a desired state of life for the educated elites), or Roman *otium cum dignitate*, peace with honour or leisure with dignity, implying, in Cicero especially, a moral imperative to read, write and ruminate not only for oneself but also for the benefit of the community.⁹ Consequently, this pattern was formed long before our time and its parameters were to be negotiated by a line of writers and thinkers, among them Montaigne as well as the Romantic writers.
- 7 The symbolic space of the solitary writer foremost associated with Montaigne and the *Essais* would be the tower library, being a vantage point as well as a hermit’s cave, symbolizing freedom as well as the work of writing. From Italy to France, the trend of aristocratic retreats into libraries had been spreading slowly in the sixteenth century.¹⁰ Transforming this site of retreat into myth, associating it with cultivation, self-knowledge and self-improvement, Montaigne was a part of this transition.¹¹ In the Romantic period, the idea of the solitary writer was turned into a cult, which is perhaps an explanation for the increase in pilgrimages to Montaigne’s tower.¹² Apart from putting her own portable library on display on a window ledge, aiming at a useful solitude, or a “highly organised reading with a purpose” (77), as she puts it, Jenny Diski’s site of retreat does not however seem to be a replica of Montaigne’s. She has rented a secluded cottage, “perched low down on the side of a tiny but precipitous valley” (71) in the grass-covered West Country hills, surrounded by grazing sheep and cattle. The place of retreat is confined, but pleurably so:
- It was like being held in a cupped palm. The world was circumscribed by the line of trees at the top of the hill, blazing rich reds and golds in the autumn sun, the bronzed bracken above the fields, and a blue and cloud-patched sky. [...] It was perfect. Small, remote, comfortable, simple. A green desert island, with all amenities (I have never wanted a rugged solitude) where, once I delivered the Poet [her partner] to the train station [...], I would be left behind. [...] It was as near as possible to being alone. (72–73)
- 8 The prospect of being left behind in a rural cottage in the Quantock Hills, and the fact that “On Stillness” is introduced with a quotation from Coleridge, suggests that Diski, in enacting the idea of the proper writer and choosing her place of retreat, is responding not only to Montaigne, but also to the Romantic poet, and to the poem “This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison” in particular. Considered as one of Coleridge’s conversation poems,

“This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison” was written in a rented cottage in Nether Stowey, a village near the Quantocks, in July 1797. Coleridge later explained the occasion of the poem in a letter to Robert Southey: as his wife Sara had “accidentally emptied a skillet of boiling milk” on his foot, he was confined “during the whole time of C. Lamb’s stay”.¹³ Charles Lamb, dedicatee of the poem, was a literary friend of Coleridge and Wordsworth’s, who spent a week of summer 1797 in the cottage. While Lamb, Dorothy and William Wordsworth had been out walking in the neighbourhood, Coleridge, being left behind, had composed the poem.¹⁴ The speaker of the poem speculates almost melodramatically about never seeing his friends again, but he soon shifts from his own confinement to visualize his friends walking and the outdoor scenery, eventually to realise that he is reintegrated into friendship, and is able to enjoy the surrounding nature. The poem ends in a blessing of the morally and spiritually beneficial effects of nature significant of many Romantic writers.¹⁵

- 9 The relation of Diski’s literary experiment to “This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison” will be explored in detail throughout this article, but I would like to point here to the very site from which the poem is being enunciated – the bower – a mythological version of the jasmine-covered arbour at the back of Coleridge’s cottage garden of Nether Stowey which is brought to fame through this poem.¹⁶ Frequent in Coleridge’s poetry from the late 1790s and common among other Romantic writers as well, the image of the bower was often used as a site of self-referential reflection, referring to the process of poetic productivity and the general conditions of inspiration and composition.¹⁷ In Coleridge, the bower is “hedged round with anxieties, a retreat which is also a constraint”, a prison as well as a place of creativity.¹⁸ According to Rachel Crawford, the bower poems incorporate a feeling of loneliness, which is eventually raised into a constitutive aspect of poetic production.¹⁹
- 10 By renting the farm cottage near Nether Stowey and describing the rural surroundings, Diski seems to be putting on the shoes of the Romantic poet, heading for a walk. But is she confined in the bower as well? The closest thing to a bower in *On Trying to Keep Still* is the space Diski traverses by car after leaving her partner at the train station. It is described thus:

The Somerset country lanes were single track roads lined with tall hedgerows and overhung in places with the branches of trees which have grown across the tops of the hedges and formed a canopy over the tarmac. The leaves were turning, their colour warm and rich. Light and shadow strobed as the overhanging trees blocked the blazing autumn sunshine and then thinned out to allow the brightness to burst back. Sometimes on the return journey from the station I was plunged into a dark tunnel of leaves, as if I had dived underwater or underground, until I emerged gradually through dappled shade and then broke through into a sudden blast of sunlight and the extraordinary lush, brilliantly-coloured foliage, red, orange, gold, bronze – the colours of metals, warm or fiery. Not sharing this was wonderful. (73)

- 11 Not a site of anxiety but rather of delight, Diski’s “bower” is nevertheless distinguished by an interplay of light and darkness, light refracting through the leaves reminiscent of the bower of the conversation poem, in which the “transparent foliage” hangs “pale beneath the blaze” and the “shadow of the leaf and stem above” is “[d]appl[ing] its sunshine”.²⁰ For Diski, however, the bower is a space of transit, not of confinement, even if she later claims to feel apart from nature. Still, the response to the Romantic poet does not end there. Diski claims to be happy *not* to share her experience of nature and only to pass through the leafy tunnel, while the enunciator of “This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison”

laments being unable to share the scenery with his friends, eventually to realise that he can enjoy it through the imaginative processes of the mind. Unlike the Romantic poet, Diski also takes pleasure in being left behind (“Being left behind is one of my great luxuries” (107)), she embraces loneliness and does not seem particularly fond of walking. Her ironic and comic reduction of the Romantic praise of rural walking is discussed in the following section.

The importance of feet

- 12 During her stay in the cottage, Diski’s sense of an obligation to go for a walk becomes a serious issue and one of her major topics, hyperbolically depicted throughout the text. After spending an almost perfect first weekend, she wakes up

[...] in a kind of moral panic. I had been perfectly content with being indoors for two and a half days. But...but...but... I ought to go for a walk. Because? I ought. Need to explore my surroundings. Don’t want to. But need to. Why? If I don’t go out I won’t get lost, so there was no need to know my way around. But I ought to see trees and grass and nature, and where the lane and the bottom of the valley goes. I’d enjoy it. And even if I wouldn’t, I should. Think and walk. Walk and think. Like you’re supposed to if you’re a writer. But when I used to picture myself (or anyone else) being a writer, I was – and they were – sitting in a study reading and writing and making notes. Never mind Wordsworth and Coleridge. What about Emily Dickinson, Proust, Raymond Roussel? And Montaigne... (87)

- 13 The idea of the contemplative walk, cherished by Romantic writers from Rousseau (in *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*) to Coleridge and Wordsworth, established a relationship between walking, thinking and composing which has persisted, at least in part, in the prevailing belief in the virtue of rural walking.²¹ Wordsworth in particular made walking a mode of being and a means of composition of central importance to his life and art.²² It has been suggested that his solitude was goal-oriented; contemplation and love of nature were cultivated consciously, the “spontaneous, open-air poet” actually spending quite a lot of time sitting at his desk, revising and re-writing.²³ Something similar could of course be said of Montaigne, who was probably more actively occupied and socially engaged than he admits in the *Essais*.²⁴ The biographical reality of these writers is not what bothers Diski, however, but rather the myths of writing associated with them. About the year in which “This Lime-Tree” was composed, there was an emerging fashion for travelling on foot in Britain, and parameters of walking and its meaning began to be established. An aesthetic cult had by the mid nineteenth century been an acknowledged religion for the middle classes, and nature was often considered divine and morally uplifting. Within literary Romanticism, hillwalking was perceived as an act of “poetic training”, expressed, for example, in John Keats’s one great tour of walking for the sake of poetry in 1818.²⁵

- 14 The moral dimension of walking is a central part of Diski’s dialogue with literary tradition in *On Trying to Keep Still*. To “walk and think” is turned into a mantra, inaccessible for the urban “mistress of stasis” (34), resistant to any type of movement. Still, she cannot defend herself against it:

A terrible morality which I utterly disown came over me. A literary morality at that. The shades of Coleridge and Wordsworth, just down the road, striding about these very coombes, arguing and composing for all their worth, sucking up nature like poetic bumble bees, wagged their fingers at me. That’s what writers do. Walk and think. Think and walk. Think by walking. [...] Was I a writer? Then I must go for a walk. (110–111)

- 15 The compulsive idea to go for a walk is expressed already in the first chapter of the Somerset journey, but Diski's reluctance to outdoor activity is also reflected structurally in the text, in major and minor suspensions or detours from the movement of the travel narrative. It is not until the third chapter ("On Taking Walks") that she actually sets foot outside. The text in between, creating narrative stillness, consists of childhood memories of inner emptiness (see below) and of seemingly never ending ruminations on Diski's lifelong confusion about the minutiae of walking (How to find one's way? Where to go? What to think about? When to return? Etc.). When in London, she has solved her problem of taking walks by turning them into an activity she understands – she has gone shopping instead (114), but this alternative is not accessible to the rural visitor.
- 16 The chapter on taking walks also opens with a quotation from Coleridge, from the last stanza of the aforementioned poem:
- Yet still the solitary humble-bee
Sings in the bean flower! Henceforth I shall know
That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
No waste so vacant, but may well employ
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
Awake to Love and Beauty! [...] ²⁶
- 17 These solemn lines, along with the rest of the poem, have been interpreted as an example of the Romantic poet's idea of unity between human and divine in nature.²⁷ Nature does not betray the Romantic who loves and trusts her, but Diski is unable to share this faith, because she has a "deficiency with all things natural" (118). She cannot "feel at one with nature", as she puts it: "I am quite apart from it. Alien to it." (132) Not surprisingly then, due to Diski's ironic response to Romantic ideals and pretensions, her eventual walk turns out to be a complete disaster. Not only does she have a problem deciding where to go, but the only thing she can think about is how to avoid the molehills on the steeply sloping land and not getting cow shit on her Prada boots, or about what you are supposed to think about when walking. To cap it all, her walking companion, a useless but enthusiastic sheepdog, causes turmoil among the farmer's pregnant sheep, making Diski convinced that she will be expelled from the farm before long: "Imagine Coleridge causing sheep chaos. This was not at all the calm, peace-absorbing soul I had foreseen wandering aimlessly but with underlying meaningfulness in my rural imaginings." (121) For the rest of her stay, she takes occasional walks only to fulfil her obligation to the countryside. For most of the time, she stays indoors however, or goes to the sea by car.
- 18 Preferring modern means of transport instead of using her feet has yet another dimension, pointing to a slightly more concealed parallel between the late modern writer and the Romantic poet. In her early fifties, Diski learns that she suffers from Freiberg's disease, causing degeneration of the bones in one of her feet.²⁸ She finds it ironic, because as a child, she has "yearned for a condition" (94), as it would be a mark of distinction, excusing her from activities and groups. After two unsuccessful operations, she has finally been "officially entitled to sit on the sofa" (176), which seems to be much to her contentment, even if it reminds her that she is getting older and has to accept the pain that goes along with it. Much more discontented is the poet of "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison", whose foot has been scalded, making him unable to accompany his friends for a walk. This was hinted at in the first version of Coleridge's poem, in which the wounded speaker is "[l]am'd by the scathe of fire, lonely and faint" (this line was later excluded).²⁹ As Felicity James has noted, Coleridge turns the domestic accident with the spilt milk into

mythological dramatization, enhancing the desolation of the speaker.³⁰ Diski on the other hand reverses the order of the Romantic poem and changes its proportions and pretensions by preferring the comic and the mundane to the mythical. Apart from her own foot condition, which she seems to be quite philosophical about, there is another foot incident in “On Stillness”, which is part of this reversion. A few days after her unsuccessful walk, Diski has an unexpected encounter with a camel farmer, whose animals, previously used for trekking in the Quantocks, have been enforced to idleness due to the foot-and-mouth outbreak in the area (196). The result of this meeting is Diski’s imagined trek across the Quantock Hills on camel – a prospect that would have suited her better than walking. Accordingly, even the odd and incapacitated animals contribute in Diski’s turning of the romanticised rural surroundings into something comic and unpredictable.

The room of the empty mind

- 19 Despite the obvious irony and comedy of the referred passages where Diski dismisses the myth of artistic creativity in nature, “On Stillness” is not devoid of austerity. Especially in the last chapter, “On Being Shallow”, irony is turned into agony, depression and acceptance, in Diski’s reflections on the point of writing and of being a writer. In this chapter, she closes the books on her literary experiment, returning once again to Montaigne to respond to the notion of writing as a form of self-discovery expressed in the *Essais*. In Montaigne, self-discovery is attached to the idea of a certain mental space for thinking and looking inward, described in an often quoted phrase from “On Solitude”:

We should set aside a room, just for ourselves, at the back of the shop [*une arriereboutique*], keeping it entirely free and establishing there our true liberty, our principal solitude and asylum. Within it our normal conversation should be of ourselves, with ourselves, so privy that no commerce or communication with the outside world should find a place there [...]. We have a soul able to turn in on herself; she can keep herself company; she has the wherewithal to attack, to defend, to receive and to give. Let us not fear that in such a solitude as that we shall be crouching in painful idleness [...].³¹

- 20 Montaigne’s room at the back of the shop is often associated with the search for fullness and plenitude and with aspirations of self-sufficiency and inner control of the soul.³² Diski, on the other hand, offers quite another description of a metaphorical room, beginning in the early chapter called “On Emptiness” and remodelled in the last chapter. Again, seriousness lurks behind the odd and peculiar; in this case Diski irrationally believes she has no inner organs. In yet another medical anecdote related by Diski, when her doctor thinks that he hears her heart murmur, her instant reply is that she does not have a heart (91). She could hardly agree with Montaigne’s manifested corporeality and with his ambition to explore himself right into his very intestines, could she?³³
- 21 Diski locates the origin of her disbelief in early childhood. As a response to the “terrors of living with her madly miserable mother and father”, she has created an empty room inside herself, a place of retreat, “hollow and cavernous, a vaulted cathedral of vacant space” (96):

I must have chucked out all the wet and soggy stuff inside in order to fashion a place of safety where I could go when I needed to. My memory of contentment and pleasure in my childhood is largely made up of my visits to that place, a vast empty

dark-red chamber inside the deceptively compact envelope of my skin, where I would spend hours of my day sitting cross-legged. (96)

- 22 She retreats to this inner asylum when her parents yell at each other or at her, to pass the time, to read or daydream, or to confirm that her mother, teachers or other children are wrong in claiming that she is bad, evil and incapable of loving. But this “room without a view” (99) is only temporary and she loses it during adolescence:

I can't remember any moment when I tried to get there and failed, only lots of moments of diving down and being unable to gain entry (like Peter Pan, it strikes me now, looking in through the locked window of his home). My self had shut up shop. (99)

- 23 Diski's childhood retreat, the empty room of the body, is transformed by the adult into an empty room of the mind in the final pages of “On Stillness”. Instead of a concealed self or inner complexity, brought into the open by silence and stillness, Diski has found (again alluding to Montaigne) “nothing more monstrous, chimerical, interesting, or elaborate than solipsism; certainly nothing substantial, just the echoing vacancy of a shallow vessel, an empty container, with nothing evident in it at all” (213). During her stay in Somerset, she reads the thoughts of others but waits in vain for her own to come. What goes on in her mind (simple responses to the physical world, memories retold as stories, mental rearrangements and plans) could at best be called “chatterings” (215) which is most disappointing:

Where's the humbling insight into my deepest workings, the interior suffering, the anguish of the solitary soul faced with its own naked, unbearable image? Where is the suffering artist, imagination, creativity, anything? Where's the *through a glass darkly, now face to face?* (213)

- 24 The myth of creation, the moment of fullness as a sense of absolute solitude, is totally torn into pieces in these passages. All that remains is emptiness, accompanied by writing. Writing keeps “the underlying emptiness underlying” (216). It passes the time, as Vladimir says in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, quoted by Diski in these last few pages (216).³⁴ Ultimately, however, writing is rather “an inability to come to terms with emptiness. In fact, an attempt to escape from it: to turn emptiness into substance – narrative, marks on a page. A fundamental lie. A failure at the core” (217).

- 25 In conclusion, Diski may seem to close the door on her solitary Renaissance and Romantic companions, to hit the road with the blank vagrants of Beckett's play. But anxiety, vacancy and the risk of loss of control linger in the Renaissance tower and in the Romantic bower as well. As Rachel Crawford has argued, through the image of the bower, the Romantic poet reflects his own problematic status as a writing subject. Coleridge's repeated and anxious return to the bower suggests a certain “hesitation concerning the vocation of poetry”,³⁵ possibly supplemented with the Romantic fear that the potency of the idle, contemplative mind would turn into a loss of self.³⁶ In Montaigne's case, not only the wild and monstrous thoughts, crowding the mind of “*De l'oisiveté*”, are professed as the birth of writing. Jean Starobinski has pointed to an additional and contradictory passage, where the mind is depicted as “quite empty”, vacuous and destitute, in need to be filled with, and fixed by, writing.³⁷ Therefore, writing as a way of coming to terms with existential guilt and feelings of uselessness, emptiness and doubt may be read as a final point of convergence between Diski and her fellow travellers from literary tradition.

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NOTES

1. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 160.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 156–160.
3. Michel de Montaigne, “On Idleness”, in *The Complete Essays*, transl. by M. A. Screech, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 31. Diski’s quotation from “On Idleness” (from Screech’s English translation, hence the choice to use this version in the article) is placed before the introduction.
4. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”, in *Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, London: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 178–179. These first few lines of Coleridge’s poem make up the epigraph of the second section of Diski’s book, “On Stillness”, which is the prime focus of this article.
5. *Stranger on a Train* depicts two cross-country trips by train in America, while *On Trying to Keep Still* revolves around three journeys: to New Zealand, Somerset and the Lapland province in Sweden.
6. Jenny Diski, *On Trying to Keep Still* (2006), London: Virago, 2007, p. 77. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.
7. Among common essay topics, also brought to the fore in *On Trying to Keep Still*, are solitude, leisure and idleness, walking, nature, childhood memories, illness, old age and death, and writing and reading. These topics or themes are all outlined as typically essayistic in *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, ed. Phillip Lopate, New York: Anchor Books, 1994, pp. x–xv.
8. Felicity James, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 4.
9. For an overview of the concept of *otium* from Antiquity to the Renaissance, see Brian Vickers, “Leisure and Idleness in the Renaissance: The Ambivalence of *Otium*”, in *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 4, No. 1, 1990, pp. 1–37.
10. Sarah Bakewell, *How To Live, Or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2010, p. 28.
11. Virginia Krause, *Idle Pursuits: Literature and Oisiveté in the French Renaissance*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003, pp. 72–73.
12. Bakewell, p. 196.
13. Letter to Southey quoted from Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. A Critical Biography*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 105.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
15. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 107–108; William A. Ulmer, “The Rhetorical Occasion of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison’”, in *Romanticism*, vol. 13, No. 1, 2007, p. 20.
16. Ashton, p. 91.
17. Rachel Crawford, *Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape, 1700-1830*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 226; cf. James, pp. 62–63. Two other “bower poems” by Coleridge are “The Eolian Harp” (1795) and “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement (1795).
18. James, pp. 65, 107. Quotation from p. 65.
19. Crawford, p. 233.

20. Coleridge, p. 180.
21. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, New York: Viking, 2000, pp. 20–22, 104–107, 124.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 104, 113.
23. Andrew Keanie, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Views from the Meticulous to the Sublime*, London: Greenwich Exchange, 2007, pp. 9, 12, 135.
24. Cf. George Hoffmann, *Montaigne's Career*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1998.
25. Solnit, pp. 116–119, quotation from p. 117.
26. Coleridge, p. 181. Diski's quotation is slightly longer, but of no relevance to my point here.
27. Ulmer, pp. 22–23.
28. The story of Diski's foot condition is outlined in the chapter "On Anatomy", pp. 156–182.
29. Coleridge, p. 178.
30. James, p. 106.
31. Montaigne, "On Solitude", *The Complete Essays*, p. 270, cf. "De la solitude" in *Les Essais*, ed. Jean Balsamo, Michel Magnien & Catherine Magnien-Simonin, Paris: Gallimard, 2007, p. 245. Diski does not overtly allude to this quotation, but her imagined inner room as a child and her sense of inner emptiness as an adult can be read as comments on the idea of the fullness of the solitary existence captured in Montaigne's metaphorical room.
32. Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement*, Paris: Gallimard, 1983, pp. 104, 118, 276 ; cf. Krause, p. 143.
33. Montaigne: "I see myself and explore myself right into my inwards; I know what pertains to me." *The Collected Essays*, p. 956 ("On some lines of Virgil").
34. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot. A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*, London: Faber & Faber, 1965, p. 48.
35. Crawford, p. 231.
36. Richard Adelman, *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic, 1750–1830*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 80–82.
37. Starobinski, pp. 36–38. Quotation from Montaigne, "On the Affection of Fathers for Their Children", *The Complete Essays*, p. 433.

RÉSUMÉS

Encadré par deux citations de la tradition littéraire occidentale, cet article examine le dialogue changeant entre l'auteur britannique Jenny Diski et deux précurseurs littéraires désignés comme tels par elle : Samuel Taylor Coleridge et Michel de Montaigne. Dans *On Trying to Keep Still* (2006), un texte littéraire non-fictionnel, Diski s'engage dans un voyage de deux mois afin de vivre dans une maison de campagne isolée dans les Quantock Hills du Somerset. Son objectif est de jouer le rôle de l'écrivain solitaire et autoréflexif, et d'explorer les espaces, l'imaginaire et le comportement qui y sont normalement associés. En racontant son expérience, Diski répond à un mythe clé de la période romantique, l'idée de l'inspiration solitaire de la nature, déjà préfigurée dans la solitude de l'écrivain de la Renaissance dans sa célèbre tour. Le but de l'article est d'illustrer comment le dialogue sert d'intégration dans une tradition culturelle, et de montrer

comment la réplique de Diski est décrite de plusieurs points de vue, de l'appropriation affectueuse au rejet et à la renégociation, en passant par la réduction ironique.

Framed by two quotations from Western literary tradition, this article examines the changeable dialogue of British writer Jenny Diski with two of her self-appointed literary forerunners: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Michel de Montaigne. In *On Trying to Keep Still* (2006), a book of literary nonfiction, Diski sets out on a two-month journey to live in an isolated cottage in Quantock Hills, Somerset. Her aim is to enact the role of the solitary, self-reflective writer and to explore spaces, imagery and supposed behaviour attached to it. In relating her experience, Diski responds to a key myth of the Romantic period, the idea of solitary inspiration in nature, prefigured already in the solitude of the Renaissance writer in his famous tower. The purpose of the article is to illustrate how this dialogue serves by way of integration into a cultural tradition, and to show how Diski's response is portrayed in various ways, from affectionate appropriation over ironic reduction to dismissal and renegotiation.

INDEX

Keywords : Jenny Diski, Coleridge, Montaigne, solitude, writing

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