

A Coleridgean Account of Meditative Experience

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A Coleridgean Account of Meditative Experience

Peter Cheyne*

Abstract

This paper presents an exploratory account of contemplation and meditative experience as found in Coleridge's 'Meditative Poems' and in the nature writing recorded in his notebooks. In these writings, we see the importance of meditative thinking as an exercise concerned with spiritual transformation towards the true, the good, and the beautiful. Sometimes meditation is used as a practical device to stimulate the imagination. At other times it is used as a method to map and follow a train of thought outside the head, as it were, in the immediate landscape, which process is related to the communing with nature as that Coleridge and Wordsworth pursued. I examine Coleridge's 'Meditative Poems' and notebooks in order to situate his approach to imagination and Idea as applied in his poetic thought.¹

Contemplation has received recent attention in the fields of aesthetics of natural environment, and aesthetics of art (See Carlson and Berleant, 2004, and Cooper, 2006). This paper is presented in the hope of contributing a Coleridgean perspective to this discussion, a perspective that takes its starting point from the transcendental argument that any theory of human life that cannot account for poetic creation and the movement towards contemplation must be incomplete. This paper's title italicizes the '*an*' in Coleridgean to highlight that I present an account of meditative experience inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's insightful writings, but not always literally and directly traceable therein.

The ideas of Coleridge most germane to meditative experience can be found in his 'Meditative Poems' and in the nature writings recorded in his letters and notebooks. The first part of this paper will address the Meditative Poems, and the second his nature writing. Part two of this paper is more generally accessible, and a reader pressed for time might wish to begin at section two, Coleridge's Meditative Practice, pp. 17-23.

Coleridge expected to be remembered at least as much as a philosophical

* Lecturer, Dept. of English Language and Literature, Kyoto Notre Dame University, 1 Minami Nonogami-cho, Shimogamo, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto, 606-0847, Japan.

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thinker as a poet. Indeed there are only two volumes of poetry in the twenty-three-volume, sixteen-title Princeton edition of the Coleridge's Complete Works. Book-length works such as *Aids to Reflection*, *The Statesman's Manual*, the *Logic*, and *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* reveal the extent of his philosophical development. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge introduces his Imagination-Fancy distinction, and this is representative of a dichotomy, more appropriately a polarity, found in the rest of his philosophical development. His polar system was inspired by the dynamic philosophy of Giordano Bruno and both follow the Platonic and neo-Platonic traditions that may be described as Two-Level Models (Thesleff, 1999).²

Coleridge argues that the upper levels of Reason, Imagination, (Platonic) Idea, and the symbol are necessary in fulfilling the true ends of humane life, and that empiricism with "the general contagion of its mechanic philosophy" only saw Understanding, Fancy, concept, and allegory (Coleridge, 2001, 24). These are the lower counterparts, incapable of transcendence in Coleridge's system. While Coleridge kept these counterparts at the lower level of his system, he complained of the dangers the empiricists created in holding this lower plateau of mentation to be the end and apex of all human thought (Coleridge, 1984).

Maintaining a polarity between the contemplative, Platonic Idealism of his upper levels and the discursive, abstract conceptuality of the lower levels, Coleridge often expressed that he saw his main mission as explaining to the English-speaking public the distinction between Reason (and its Ideas) and the Understanding (and its concepts). These distinctions can be found throughout his corpus, but for his clearest and most concise explanation, see *Aids to Reflection*, p. 214.

1. The Meditative Poems: Coleridge's poetic accounts of meditative experience

The category of 'Conversation Poems' is usually given to Coleridge's blank verse. This practice follows from Coleridge's title, 'The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem', to one of these eight poems.³ Commentators, from M. H.

² For a recent discussion of Coleridge's Platonism, see Vigus, 2009. A good place to review Coleridge's polar philosophy is Barfield, 2006.

³ Namely, 'The Nightingale', 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement', 'Fears in Solitude', 'Frost at Midnight', 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', 'Dejection: An Ode', 'The Eolian Harp', and 'To William Wordsworth'.

Abrams onwards, usually express a need to group these poems together for thematic reasons, and not simply because of their composition in unrhymed iambic pentameter. In *Sibylline Leaves*, Coleridge arranged six of these poems together as ‘Meditative Poems in Blank Verse’, with the addition of seven others.

Coleridge’s calling ‘The Nightingale’ a ‘Conversation Poem’ stresses a listening to nature as nature, and not just a projection onto it. The root meaning of ‘conversation’ as a turning together cannot have escaped Coleridge. In like manner, the nightingales “answer and provoke each other’s songs”. The poet regrets that poets have emblemized the nightingale as a “melancholy bird”, likely because “some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced/ With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,/ Or slow distemper, or neglected love,/ [...] First named these notes a melancholy strain.”

And now “many a poet echoes the conceit”, instead of better taking the time to stretch “his limbs/ Beside a brook in mossy forest-dell” and really listen to “the merry Nightingale” “with fast thick warble” and “delicious tones”, instead of “heave their sighs/ O’er Philomela’s pity-pleading strains.”⁴ Here Coleridge establishes a theme for his Conversation or Meditative Poems, namely that they move beyond the projections of poetic conceit, moving beyond fancy to the ‘really listening’ of contemplation.

The Eolian Harp⁵

The attractive, tranquil musings portrayed ‘The Eolian Harp’ can be contrasted with genuine meditative experience in Coleridge’s verse. Indeed, Coleridge himself presented the predominant experience in the poem not as genuinely meditative, but as harmless speculation pushed on by Fancy. The tranquility described in the poem allows “Full many a thought uncalled and undetained”, including “Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break/ on vain Philosophy’s aye-babbling spring.” For Coleridge, the Aeolian harp represented an incomplete, merely mechanical mind; the mind as understood in empiricism, and incapable of comprehending how genuine poetry is possible. In one of his marginal notes to Kant’s First Critique, Coleridge wrote,

⁴ Philomela being the mythic Athenian princess whose tongue was cut out after being raped. She later metamorphosed into a nightingale, thus explaining the muteness of the female and the plaintive, so some say, song of the male.

⁵ I refer to the 1817 version of this Meditation Poem.

The mind does not resemble an Eolian Harp, nor even a barrel-organ turned by a stream of water, conceive as many tunes mechanized in it as you like—but rather, as far as Objects are concerned, a violin, or other instrument of few strings yet vast compass, played on by a musician of Genius.⁶

‘The Eolian Harp’ presents the tranquil scene of a recumbent poet idly musing as his Fancy plays,

And thus, my Love! as on the midway Slope
Of yonder Hill I stretch my limbs at noon
Whilst through my half-clos’d eye-lids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main.
And tranquil muse upon Tranquility

The innocent and attractive speculation, the “idle flitting phantasies”, allowed in this tranquil mode by his “indolent and passive” mind, muses thus,

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic harps diversly fram’d,
That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps,
Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze,
At once the Soul of each and God of all?

The poet allows himself to spin an attractive speculation of an animistic pantheism. In this stanza, God is not the God of transcendence, but an immanent and animating principle closer to Spinozism than to Christianity. Coleridge, although he could not assent to it, found he could yet be fascinated by Spinozean pantheism, which nevertheless, for him, amounted to atheism. “Not one man in ten thousand has goodness of heart or strength of spirit to be an atheist. And, were I not a Christian [...] I should be an atheist with Spinoza [...] This, it is true, is negative atheism; and this is, next to Christianity, the purest spirit of humanity.”⁷

The poet at ease with his gentle and attractive musings allows himself to be

⁶ Coleridge, *Marginalia* vol. III, 1992, p. 248. Note dated around 1801.

⁷ Coleridge, *Letters*, ed. Thomas Allsop, p. 61 (written c.1820).

carried away on an imaginative insight:

O! the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where—
Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so fill'd;
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
Is Music slumbering on her instrument.

These lines on “the one Life” were added, as errata, to the 1817 edition of *Sibylline Leaves*, and were not in the 1795 composition, nor any version between. The ‘one life’ is a highly energetic and imaginative presentation of an Idea, exemplified with synaesthetic resonances: “A light in sound, a sound-like power in light”. This inserted passage contrasts with the conception of nature as passive and inanimate, to be played on as a breeze plays an Aeolian harp. Nature as Aeolian harp is *natura naturata*, or passive nature natured rather than active nature naturing.

Interpreted as *natura naturata*, phenomena are conceived by the understanding as ‘fixities and definites’, Coleridge’s phrase for the fragmentary understanding that analyzes experience into units which are, however, never truly discrete. This attitude is reflected Wordsworth’s complaint that “we murder to dissect”. Thus Coleridge opposes his holistic, organicist approach to the reductionism he saw as prevalent in his day. A more recent application of this approach is seen in Heidegger’s taking the interpretive, situated, already significant experience as primary, and the analytic attitude to experiential basics as being derived from and secondary to the situated experience. In *Fancy*, for Coleridge, phenomena are thus imaged as counters to be manipulated.

On the other hand, the “one life” passage replaces this image of passivity with an active principle, namely, the (Platonic) Idea: Life, “within us and abroad”. The ideal unity of subject and object in harmony thus produces “Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where.” The truly imaginative passage settles down, nevertheless, and reverts to the delightfully unhurried

fancy of “Music slumbering on her instrument.”⁸

‘The Eolian Harp’ presents an ornamental flight of fancy, not an example of genuine contemplative experience. For Coleridge, a flight of fancy will always result in a false image, which may be used for good or ill to enhance literary effect. In this case the tranquil effect is that of an attractive Spinozistic panpsychism pursued by Fancy. The effect, however is not for the good. After his tranquil, indolent fancies pursuing pantheistic speculation, the poet allows himself to be cut short with a shock by his “pensive Sara”, who he imagines would not approve of these unchristian musings:

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
Darts, O beloved Woman!

The “idle and flitting phantasies”, which traverse the poet’s “indolent and passive brain”, comprise a criticism of Newtonian materialism and Lockean empiricism, which construe the mind as “always *passive*—a lazy Looker-on.”⁹ Coleridge syncretically incorporated this empirical model of mind into the lower, mechanical strata of his own system, which is in part empirico-mechanical but *in toto* active and creative. It is this lower mind which passively and mechanically produces phantasies “As wild and various, as the random gales/
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute.”

Frost at Midnight

The musing, “passive and indolent” speculation in ‘The Eolian Harp’, charming and attractive though it is, can be contrasted with ‘Frost at Midnight’, which very likely marks the summit of achievement in Coleridge’s meditative poetry. Here the poet takes no ironic, distanced stance from his own thoughts, but instead authentically follows and describes his imaginative and synthesizing meditation.

⁸ See also Hamilton, 2007. Hamilton questions whether what the Aeolian harp produces is music, although it is sound art, as the instrument was produced for that purpose. “The wind-powered Aeolian harp produces tones without direct human agency, though the sound-producer itself is created intentionally, and it is doubtful whether the result is music. Indeed, the form/matter distinction breaks down here, as elsewhere, if pressed hard enough.” What we have here is not quite music, although there is art and artistic intention using sound. Music, if we can speak of it here, is, as Coleridge says, ‘slumbering’.

⁹ Letter to Thomas Poole, 23 March, 1801.

This meditation takes a spiraling pattern of attention and mental focus that moves from his room in his country cottage in winter, back to his own childhood at a London school “pent mid cloisters dim” with the only natural sight a patch of sky, and forward, on to “the lakes and shores/ And mountain crags” of the Lake District. The poem was composed in Coleridge’s cottage in Nether Stowey, below Somerset’s Quantock Hills. Coleridge is therefore anticipating the Lake District described to him by Wordsworth, where his son, Hartley Coleridge, the babe in the poem, would indeed grow up. In these yearned-for surroundings his son will “see and hear/ The lovely sounds intelligible/ Of that eternal language, which thy God/ Utters”. The meditation then spirals back, with enlarged insight from his own nature-deprived yet hopeful past. Then circling to the future, he prayerfully envisions his son’s natural and spiritual development in the Lake District. Finally the meditation returns to the present, to his babe slumbering in the cot beside him, and to the icicles in the eaves, “Quietly shining to the quiet moon.”

In ‘Frost at Midnight’, the poet is not content to visit and describe a sad scene from his childhood, but rather folds this episode and its mood into a greater movement, winning a life-affirming confidence and sense of wonder. The nature in the poem’s symbols is *natura naturans*, nature naturing, described as “that eternal language”. By *natura naturans* Coleridge means that what is required is not an explanation in terms focused on phenomena and on what nature has made, but a sense of the *logos* of nature, its ways and its deeper laws. The focus is thus on the making rather than the made, on the processes rather than the products. Here “clouds image in their bulk/ Both lakes and shores and mountain crags”, suggesting a symbol for Coleridgean symbolism itself. As the clouds image the geography below, they are but a more transient part of the geographical scene. This echoes the way of the symbol, whose particular images represent the universal of which they are ‘consubstantial’. The symbol can therefore represent those Ideas which are its own laws, and excite more thought concerning them.

Nature in ‘Frost at Midnight’ is no collection of static harps awaiting a pantheistic spirit to blow them into giving the impression of life. Nature in ‘Frost at Midnight’ is an active principle, giving form by being the law to the natural scenes, and promising to formatively guide and shape, as divine Idea, the mind of the sleeping babe. This meditation is of nature as power, of the Ideas behind phenomena, and of participatory symbols reflecting the earnest hope of

quiet, contemplative prayer and reflection. The stillness and gentleness of this meditative mood is also very much the mood concluding another Conversation Poem of Coleridge's, 'To William Wordsworth',

Scarce conscious, and yet conscious of its close
I sate, my being blended in one thought
(Thought was it? Or aspiration? Or resolve?)
Absorbed, yet hanging still upon the sound—
And when I rose, I found myself in prayer.

While the forms of nature naturing resonate with the poetic Imagination proper, Fancy is represented in the poem as the poet finding his gaze charmed by the filmy play of soot on the hearth. Fancy animates these shadowy images, playing with them as "companionable forms". The "idling Spirit/ By its own mood interprets, every where/ Echo or mirror of itself/ And makes a toy of Thought." Thus the idling spirit of the poet may then be transported, by Fancy's association, back to memories of school-days at Christ's Hospital. Here, "in the great city, pen't mid cloisters dim," where he "saw nought lovely but the sky and stars", homesick pupils would believe that the "puny flaps and freaks" of the sooty film on the hearth could presage the coming of a friendly visitor. Thus Fancy, waiting on the hearth's midnight-dancing forms, recalls lonely school-days when he fantasized that the shapes on the fire grate, the strangers, foretold a visit from his sister.

In this masterfully comprehensive passage, the poet does not merely present the work of Fancy, as he did in the tranquil, passive musings of 'The Eolian Harp'. In 'Frost', the fanciful thought broadens into the more significant work of Imagination, where that lonely boyhood memory is comprehended into the larger pattern of life reflected in contemplation. Thus the poet's lonely pupilage pent in a city school becomes no longer a snag of sadness but a part of the whole mind's meditation, involving the past with the present and their movement into the next generation, the babe slumbering in the cot in that fire-warmed room.

In the meditative poem's spiraling movement, after recalling the poet as a boy yearning for "soothing things", he can say that

*[T]hou my babe! Shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags*

Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou hear
The lovely shapes and sound intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.

In Platonic terms, the play of Fancy charmed by the film on the hearth is the play of *eikasia*, fascinating the poet, as the prisoners in Plato's cave were captivated. This is the play of the "idling Spirit", the play of shadows. Here Fancy "makes a toy of Thought." In contrast, outside the city schoolroom, outside the cave, in the light of the Sun, the contemplation of "the lovely shapes and sounds intelligible/ Of that eternal language" as contemplation of the Forms is the activity of Platonic *noesis*, or higher contemplation, which is to *eikasia*, or captivated enchantment and speculation, as light is to shadow and reality to reflection.

Meditation's comprehensive spiraling is an activity poetizing life. Beginning with the poet's present being at the time of composition, retrieving his boyhood, yearning self, and bringing both into the future of a life promising the aesthetic experiences of freedom in nature, the meditation then comprehensively reveals his life, concerns, and relations *sub specie aeternitatis*, intimating the values of the true, the good, and the beautiful. The "abstruser musings" develop into meditation, rise above fanciful associations and fixated recollections, finally to achieve contemplation, winning living depth and import for the values signified and modeled by the imaginative work of composing life as poetry.

Around him now, behind him in memory and association, and before him in hopeful expectation, life is poetized and poetry is lived. In the syntheses of imagination the episodes of life, and its higher purposes, are reassessed in the broadened and deepened comprehension afforded by meditative experience pursued into contemplation, that is to say, pursued seriously. Value arises from contemplation, and is felt as such by virtue of the beauty and moral sense evoked. Light-hearted meditation becomes the lightheadedness of Fancy; meditative seriously attained, however, opens a space for beholding, whereby a *con-templum*, a space cut off for pious beholding, an altar of thought, is shaped. The shaping of this space is an act of pious attention, unbuffeted by the breezes

of Fancy and streams of association. In a letter to William Sotheby, dated 13 July 1802, Coleridge relates that,

Metaphysics is a word that you, my dear Sir! are no great friend to/ but yet you will agree, that a great Poet must be, implicitè if not explicitè, a profound Metaphysician. He may not have it in logical coherence, in his Brain & Tongue; but he must have it by *Tact*/ for all sounds, & all forms of human nature he must have the *ear* of a wild Arab listening in the silent Desert, the eye of a North American Indian tracing the footsteps of an Enemy upon the Leaves that strew the Forest—; the *Touch* of a Blind Man feeling the face of a darling Child.

Here attention intensifies, turning inward in contemplation. Yet such intense concentration has also been trained in meditative practices directed outward, which practices develop sensitivity to change, import, and nuance in outer phenomena. This sense of contemplation as a stretching to ‘hear’, whether in appreciation of an outer ‘music’, or in straining to attain or maintain an inner focus, is conveyed in another Meditation Poem, ‘Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement’,

Unearthly minstrelsy! then only heard
When the soul seeks to hear; when all is hushed,
And the heart listens!

Coleridge suggests that one can only prepare for the object of contemplation with a corresponding mood and appropriate silence. This suggestion reappeared in the twentieth century with Rudolf Otto’s phenomenology of ‘the holy’, arguing that the sacred can only be revealed to the subject in the numinous state of the *mysterium tremendum* (Otto, 1923). In addressing mood’s irreducible qualitative aspect, Otto thus addressed the irrational (i.e. the pure qualia) in experience as a relation to the rational (e.g. one may have a rational Idea of the divine, necessarily accompanied by awe) without the mood itself being reducible to rational conception. Any purely rational, definitional and conceptual account is insufficient to convey an experience as of the holy. No doubt a similar analysis could be made of the Idea of joy, or any other mood, exactly insofar as the qualitative, irrational aspects of moods remain essential to them.

Otto's 'numinous' is a "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self".¹⁰ In a similar way, the *consideration* of one's life from the aspect of "the one Life within us and abroad"; the *comprehensive* view of the present, past, and future; and the *evaluation* of events and meanings in terms of ideals which transcend the phenomena that make up the outward forms of these events, *are possibilities revealed* in meditative experience involving the whole mind as Imagination brings the Ideas of Reason to bear on the meaning of life.

The "secret ministry of frost" hanging up silent icicles "quietly shining to the quiet moon" is an image of the symbol as neither opaque, nor transparent, but as a translucence, such that it can hold up and show the light it symbolizes, without the light being either occluded or so transparent that it is not seen as light, but only seen indirectly, in its illumination of the non-lucent. The secret ministry of frost is the luminous quiet of a contemplative experience that is transformative, that poetizes life towards truth, goodness, and beauty, regardless of whether or not we then reflectively take up the insight with the philosophic or literary secondary Imagination.¹¹ Hence, the "secret ministry" represents the often unnoticed working of the symbol, which more often than not operates below the level of self-consciousness, so that "It is the privilege of the few to possess an Idea: of the generality of men, it might be more truly affirmed that they are possessed by it."

Coleridge distinguishes his symbol as presenting Idea in nature from the Lockean natural theology exemplified by Paley, who aimed to show concrete evidence of a Divine Watchmaker by indicating complexity and purposiveness in natural phenomena. For Coleridge, Paley's evidences of the divine fingerprint in nature only present nature as *natura naturata*. However, it is precisely from *natura naturata* that the Idea, *a fortiori* the divine Idea, must transcend, rather than be immanently and empirically evident in its appearances. For Coleridge, the appearance of a rainbow, the space remarkably left in the chrysalis for the as-yet unformed wings of the air-sylph, and all other appearances of nature are not to be counted as *evidence* of divinity.¹² The symbolic aspect of phenomena is the working of the primary Imagination, which may be taken up by the conscious poetry of the secondary Imagination, transforming disparate

¹⁰ Otto, R., *The Idea of the Holy*, [1917], 1923.

¹¹ See Coleridge, 1984, ch. 13 for the *locus classicus* of his Primary-Secondary Imagination distinction.

¹² *Biographia Literaria* I, p. 241.

appearances into the unity of a deeper meaning. This work conveys the universal in the particular, conveying a sense of experiencing something more than, but not other than, what is immediate in appearance.

Dejection: an Ode

Where in 'Frost at Midnight' the poet overcomes the attractions and consolations of the play of Fancy to move through meditation and enter into contemplation, in 'Dejection', again set at midnight, he does not move beyond meditation. Grappling those "viper thoughts, that coil round my mind", he does not progress to contemplation. While the wind in 'Frost at Midnight' had a ministry to perform, and the breeze in 'Eolian harp' could lull with pleasing music in tune with Fancy, in 'Dejection' "the wind, which long has raved unnoticed" has become "as scream of agony by torture lengthened out/ That lute sent forth!"

While not achieving contemplation, this poem is a sustained and highly poetic meditation on, ironic to consider, his fearing the loss of poetic sensibility. Following Coleridge's sustained meditation on mood, I will find comparisons with Kant and Heidegger. Although beauty does not 'show up' as a felt value in the poem, this absence is taken as an occasion for a meditation on what is required for beauty to be fully, and not only intellectually, revealed. Coleridge describes his being able to "see, not feel" the beauty of the western sky, with crescent moon below thin clouds "That give away their motion to the stars." The poem is thus a meditation on beauty and the completeness of aesthetic response requiring more than an intellectual appreciation of the object. Although the poet has an intellectual evaluation of the scene's beauty, he is, at the poem's beginning, unable to *feel* it. In contrast to the idle musing of 'Eolian Harp', where the breeze could always be expected to bring pleasant music, the wind has now, in dejection, become,

The dull sobbing draft that moans and rakes
Upon the strings of this Eolian lute,
Which better far were mute.

Coleridge's pointing out a possible gap between intellectual appreciation and aesthetic response adds a level of depth and complexity beyond Kant's criterion of disinterestedness in the moment of aesthetic appreciation. In this poem, it

seems that Coleridge finds reason to distance himself from Kant's criterion that the subject must be detached from sensual interest in the object of genuine aesthetic experience. For Coleridge, aesthetic appreciation must involve the whole mind, and not only, transcendental though this is, the intellectual appreciation of beauty, and thence of the moral value it intimates.

In aesthetic appreciation, for Coleridge, we read our wider situation. A comparison can be made here with a thinker from a later era – Heidegger, for whom it is in the qualitative import of mood and attunement that we read how we find ourselves, in *Befindlichkeit*, as how things go with us and how we are going amongst our concerns. In aesthetic experience, insofar as it is referred to the transcendental Ideas of Reason, our situation is revealed to us from the vantage of higher purposes, situated as they are within an experience conveyed by aesthetic Ideas relating beauty, the sublime, and the morally good, as well as situational transcendentals such as, in Kant's examples of "death, envy, love, and so forth", and in Heidegger's examples, now called existentialia: Being-with, Being-towards-death, resoluteness, and so forth.

In Coleridge's 'Dejection', the poet's darker mood is revealed and explored. The mood reveals "Reality's dark dream", and in this frame beauties can be recognized, but only blankly, without any consoling aesthetic response. Thus when the poet sees, but does not *feel*, the beauty of the western sky, etc., he is in the position of Hamlet, wherein "it goes so heavily/ with my disposition that this goodly frame, the/ Earth, seems to me a sterile promontory".

Recalling Kant's genius, or *Geist*, in the phrase "genial spirits", Coleridge, in 'Dejection', complains that, "My genial spirits fail". His "genial spirits" are the genius of the Kantian artist, the poetic shaper of aesthetic Ideas. With the failure of genial spirits, the poet is unable to imaginatively see, that is to feel, not only see, the value that exceeds the concepts of the understanding. Dejected, everything before the eye deflates into empirical concepts, as if the air of feeling were removed through puncture. In dejection, beauty becomes an empty category intellectually 'seen' but not aesthetically felt. However, intellectual appreciation makes the poet aware that he is nevertheless lacking, and that he ought to feel the overflow of Idea and its resonance that continues beyond the concept's ken.

To feel, and not only intellectually see, beauty requires a resolution involving the activity of the whole mind. To *only see* the beauty is to intellectually recognize the application of rules of judgment, such as purposiveness without

purpose, to the presentation. But just as the poet involves the whole mind in acts of creativity, every experiencing individual is in a sense poetizing when they open themselves to be fully touched, seen *and* felt, in the experience of beauty. Hence the poet can declare, “O Lady! We receive but what we give,/ And in our life alone does Nature live:/ Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!” This receiving what we give is no mere projection, but is the acknowledgment of a resonance and reverberation.

Imagination must discern its aesthetic Ideas in nature in order to appreciate nature symbolically, not allegorically, as power. This is to discern the scene as nature naturing, rather than as “that inanimate cold world” which, perceived only as *natura naturata*, is insufficient to invite a transcendental, active response from “the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd.” The poet’s general and self-prescribed remedy, then, is that

Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth—
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

Coleridge is not anticipating John Ruskin’s pathetic fallacy here, which fallacy merely projects human emotion, insight and significance onto inanimate nature. To say “we receive but what we give,/ And in our life alone does Nature live” is to encourage the hearer to experience more fully, and for Coleridge, that means more actively. He is not advocating a relativistic personifying projection that uses nature as a sounding board to amplify one’s own personal dramas. I take the point to be that in order to receive symbolic import from natural forms, we must engage the imagination in symbolically relating it to Ideas. It is this connection with concept-exceeding Ideas which adds the shimmering of beauty and transcendent meaning to appearance taken symbolically. This transcendental meaning is not a propositional sequence, which would lead to antinomies of reason, but is rather a deepening and beholding of values and resonances. It is an aesthetic, not an epistemological, response.

Remember that for Coleridge, to take nature, or anything for that matter, symbolically is not to employ allegory, whereby everything represents something

different from what it is and carries the burden of another meaning. The Coleridgean symbol is “consubstantial” with that which it symbolizes, so, for example, a crashing wave might be a symbol of nature’s power, or of power in general, or equally, it could be taken by imagination in another direction as a symbol of the dissipation of unity. In this example, the crashing wave does not represent, as a stand-in, something different, separate and apart from itself. The wave is itself also power, which it represents, and also dissipation, which it might also represent. How the appearances are to be read symbolically is the creative, hermeneutic and reconstructive work of the imagination, and it is in this sense that “We receive but what we give.”

The poet in ‘Dejection’ proposes that to fully appreciate natural beauty, phenomenal presentations cannot be passively perceived as a series of given objects taken as *natura naturata*. To do this would be to proceed without appreciation of the laws “behind” the phenomena, which laws are the correlates of the Ideas of Reason. These laws or Ideas are what give the phenomena their form, and the phenomena are their signs and results. Thus the experiencing mind that is open to more fully aesthetic experience will not passively receive phenomena as an Aeolian harp receives the wind, responding mechanically. Rather, the phenomena will be interpreted by active poetic imagination as symbols of nature naturing, as symbols of aesthetic Ideas. This interpretative process involves the admission of the inadequacy of the concepts of the understanding, and then referring the presentation to the Ideas of Reason. Thus a person can be said to be responsible for their own aesthetic sensitivities, insofar as they are conceived not only as passions, but as actions bringing with them their own rewards.

This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison

In ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, the poet is forced – due to his foot having recently been scalded by boiling milk in an accident at home, or so he says – to wait under a tree while his friends continue on a walk that he has enjoyed many times before. This Conversation Poem addresses itself to Charles Lamb, fellow poet and Coleridge’s old school-friend from Christ’s Hospital days. Lamb is described as being up from London and in dark spirits, sorely in need of this Lakeland walk.

Coleridge does not mention the cause for Lamb’s deep grief, namely that

caused by the death of his mother at the hands of his sister, in a fit of “lunacy”, as the court termed it. The poet does, however, describe Lamb’s need for the vistas of nature as a tonic, coming from being “[i]n the great City pent, winning thy way/ With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain/ And sad calamity!” The obvious sympathy for his friend is underscored in the choice of words describing Lamb in London – “in the great City pent” – being the very same words used in ‘Frost at Midnight’ to describe his own schooldays in London. The use of this same phrase in both poems highlights Coleridge’s fraternal feeling toward Lamb, recalling that they were together “pent mid cloisters dim” as friends at the same school. In ‘Frost at Midnight’, Coleridge recalls a school-day memory without joy, “For I was reared/ In the great city, pent ‘mid cloisters dim,/ And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.”

The poet begins in a state of almost comically exaggerated self-pity. As in ‘Dejection: an Ode’, the poet in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ bemoans the loss of aesthetic joys: “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!” The lime tree he rests by is “his prison”, and he considers, in exaggeration, that he “may never more meet again” his friends, even though they have only gone for an afternoon walk.

Sympathy for his friend, and the expectation that the walk, familiar to Coleridge but new to Lamb, will make Lamb “most glad” after he “has pined/ And hunger’d after Nature, many a year”. Coleridge is then able to overcome self-pity, and to imagine the walk and its effect from his own recollection and anticipation. Thus he can imagine his friend “Struck with deep joy” such that he may stand “as I have stood,/ Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round/ On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem/ Less gross than bodily; and of such hues/ As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes/ Spirits perceive his presence.” The poet concludes that “’Tis well to be bereft of promised good,/ That we may lift the soul, and contemplate/ With lively joys the joys we cannot share.”

With his sympathy for his friend Lamb, the poet’s sense of his situation is turned around from self-pity at missing out on the shared experience of a walk in the beauties of nature, to a deeper sharing of “deep joy” contemplated. An act of will, involving the whole activity of the whole mind, its memory, expectation, anticipation, sympathy, and aesthetic openness, is responsible for the poet’s turning from self-pity to a shared experience of glory. The perception of the poet

then changes only with a deliberate, poetic act of the secondary imagination in presenting a sublimely beautiful “wide landscape” that invites a meditative response “Silent with swimming sense; yea gazing round.” Once the poet has overcome his self-pity at shared pleasures missed, he is now free to appreciate the less spectacular, yet no less impressive, beauties of the modest forms surrounding him in his bower. Blessing a rook beating its path above him, soon perhaps to fly near his friend, he can appreciate that “No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.”

I read Coleridge’s Conversation Poems as the acts and expressions of meditational practice moving into contemplation. M.H. Abrams has noted that seven of these poems – ‘The Nightingale’, ‘The Aeolian Harp’, ‘Reflection on having left a Place of Retirement’, ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, ‘Frost at Midnight’, ‘Dejection: an Ode’, and ‘To William Wordsworth’ – present Coleridge’s contemplation of metaphysical themes that took up so much of his prose writing.¹³ It is hardly surprising to find in his Conversation Poems the poetic presentation of aesthetic Idea. Here we find the secondary Imagination composing for appreciation the primary Imagination’s construction of experience as intimating, in its shimmering with beauty, the transcendence that overflows the conceptualization of the understanding. In these Conversation or Meditative Poems, the poet moves beyond self-circling egocentrism and its fancies, through meditative experience, towards the beholding of value and resonant meaning experienced in contemplation.

2. Coleridge’s Meditative Practice

BEAUTY! in the intuition of the Beautiful!—This too is spiritual,
the . . . short-hand Hieroglyphic of truth—the mediator between
Truth and Feeling, the Head & the Heart—¹⁴

In his notebooks, Coleridge recorded some of his meditations, writing in prose poetry reminiscent of his blank verse. His meditations on water, for example, along the River Greta, are particularly revealing of his meditative practice. Visiting the town of Barnard Castle, he walked along the River Greta, a tributary to the River Tees, paying close, imaginative attention to ever-flowing,

¹³ See Abrams, 1972, and Boulger, 1965.

¹⁴ Coleridge, *Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 4, entry 5428 (Aug. 1826).

ever-reforming patterns in the water. This sustained practice is a reflexive activity, attending to the flow of external patterns and at the same time to the mind's processes in the experience.

River Greta near its fall into the Tees—Shootings of water thread down the slope of the huge green stone—The white Eddy-rose that blossom'd up against the stream in the scollop, by fits & starts, obstinate in resurrection—It is *the life* that we live.¹⁵

Here we see meditative practice leading to imaginative perception augmented by aesthetic ideas. Seeing the life we live in the resurrecting rose pattern of the eddy is not a mere projective identification, but a use of symbolic pattern in nature to refer to persevering poiesis, the self's holding together through vicissitudes.

In a letter to Sara Hutchinson, dated 25th August 1802, Coleridge produces an intensely expressive and engaging piece of nature writing describing “a glorious walk” from which he has just returned. The walk was not without its dangers, the crags could tear the hands, “and the gusts came so very sudden and so strong”. Often the walk required an intense concentration, for safety's sake, yet he says he has “always found this *stretched and anxious* state of mind favourable to depth of pleasurable impression, in the resting places and *lownding* [sheltering] coves.” The crags and coves of anxiety and peace show us the mountains of the mind in the relief of the terrain, and both can be known more fully through the walk itself.

Coleridge's reflection on the “*stretched and anxious* state” that provides a “depth of pleasurable impressions” is acutely prescient of the state of ‘flow’ described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. This state of spontaneous joy flows from activity that requires high levels of skill and concentration such that action and awareness merge. In flow, the present moment becomes more foregrounded, and the experience of the activity is taken as intrinsically rewarding, requiring no justification (Csikszentmihalyi, & Nakamura, 2009). The term ‘flow’ was chosen by Csikszentmihalyi on hearing many such descriptions using metaphors of water current, which not only befits Coleridge's meditative experience of rivers and waterfalls, but also suggests a relation of

¹⁵ Notebook entry no. 495, (1799).

themes shared in Daoist accounts of peak experience.¹⁶

Coleridge expresses an appreciative wonder as in contemplation he discerns the aesthetic perfection in the laws and dynamics of hydraulic force:

the mad water rushes thro' its *sinuous* bed, or rather prison of rock, with such rapid curves, as if it turned not from the mechanic force, but with foreknowledge, like a fierce and skillful driver.

In the same letter he describes a waterfall, Halse Fall, or Moss Force, in the Lake District's Buttermere:

What a sight it is to look down on such a cataract!—the wheels, that circumsolve in it—the leaping up and plunging forward of that infinity of pearls and glass bulbs—the continual *change* of the *Matter*, the perpetual *sameness* of the *Form*—it is an awful Image and Shadow of God and the World.

Such meditative practice can be physically as well as mentally taxing, exercising and strengthening the imaginative faculty with the fullest engagement. Coleridge thought he could transcend the 'fixed and dead' concepts of the understanding through the imaginative processes involved in such direct, meditative experience. The strength of attention required in such nature walks, often thirty miles a time, was simultaneously applied to focused psychological observation and meditations on thinking itself.

A sense of resonance between the forms of nature and the thinking mind was not only an observation of Coleridge's regarding poetry, it was taken to be a general poetic sense native to every thinking mind.

In looking at objects of nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering through the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking for, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new. Even when the latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phenomenon were the dim awaking of a forgotten or hidden truth

¹⁶ For more on the use of water imagery in Daoist literature, and of the Way as flow, see D. E. Cooper, 2012.

of my inner nature.¹⁷

Here Coleridge, on a hazy April night in Malta, is awake to the search for symbolic meanings in nature. Looking at the “moon dim-glimmering thro’ the dewy window pane” is already an image of poetic symbolism: Dim, reflected, celestial light seen through the window distorting with a covering of condensation speaks, in pleasing, softly-lit images, of thinking and seeing through barriers, transforming media, and reflecting surfaces. This observation of seeking a symbolical language in nature for something within him is also the mood of his Meditative Poems. The scene, with the dim-glimmering moon seen through the window dew, is reminiscent of the icicles, “quietly shining to the quiet moon” in ‘Frost at Midnight’, and similarly has a mood of silent longing that is yet content to participate by echoing or reflecting. It is closer to the look of love than the watching of a spectator. In a notebook entry of 1807, he describes:

[T]he eyes quietly and steadfastly dwelling on an object, not as if looking at it or as in any way exerting an act of sight upon it, but as if the whole attention were listening to *what the heart was feeling and saying about it*.¹⁸

This is a contemplative attending with an appearance of devotion, attending to the contemplated while ‘listening for’ its meaning and value. Coleridge continues this notebook entry:

As when A is talking to B of C—and B deeply interested listens intensely to A, the eye yet steadfastly fixed on C as the subject of the communication[.]

Here, Imagination is at work within the contemplative attending, ‘seeing into’ and ‘listening for’ the heart of the matter. To access Reason, for Coleridge, one requires a symbolic image, rather than an image acting as a counter to be processed by the understanding. Because the Coleridgean symbol – examples of which can include perceived natural phenomena – is ‘consubstantial’ with the

¹⁷ *Collected Notebooks II*, entry 2546, 1805.

¹⁸ Entry 3027.

power or Idea it symbolizes, meditation on natural phenomena can become a contemplation of the powers or Ideas they exemplify. This contemplation is simultaneously merged with a perception of what is before one's eyes. Thus Coleridge could write, "I seem to myself to behold in the quiet objects, on which I am gazing, more than an arbitrary illustration, more than a mere simile, the work of mere fancy. I feel an awe, as if there were before my eyes the same power as that of reason—the same power in a lower dignity, and therefore a symbol established in the truth of things." In his meditations on the patterns and power of water, or on a moonlit scene through a dewy window, on the spray of ice as skaters curve, and in many such observations made in meditative mood, Coleridge explored this contemplative perceiving originating from meditative observation of natural objects and processes.

Coleridge's meditative observations of natural phenomena exemplify a direction of thought and attention continued by a phenomenological thinker in the following century. In her introduction to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Mary Warnock notes a similarity between Coleridge's attentive penetration into appearances and Sartre's excitement at the possibilities available through phenomenology. Sartre expressed excitement when he realized that phenomenological reflections, for example on viscosity, fire, solidity, even a cocktail glass, could lead to insight into our imaginative relations with the world. Warnock notes Sartre's "careful and obsessive absorption in the actual physical properties of the world [...] as a source of revelation of the nature of existence itself" and remarks that "Coleridge perhaps more than any other writer in English demonstrated in his detailed description of [...] the movements of water, the same belief that from the sensible properties of things one could deduce not only *their* true nature, but the true nature of the universe at large."¹⁹

The genius of imagination in its use of symbol adds to the experience of the richness of life. Without this, everything is no more for us than its appearance. In Coleridge, the symbol, as opposed to the metaphor or analogy, is what it is and not another thing, representing its class with resonating depth and connoted generality.

One of Coleridge's examples of the genius of symbolic imagination is a couplet, from Robert Burns' 'Tam O'Shanter',

¹⁹ Warnock, 1996, p. xiii.

To snow that falls upon a river
A moment white—then gone forever!²⁰

Coleridge quoted this couplet from memory, as Burns' wording is a little different. Here is the couplet from Burns, with the preceding couplet showing the theme of pleasure's ephemeral nature:

But pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snow falls in the river,
A moment white—then melts for ever

Coleridge quotes Burn's 'Tam O'Shanter' couplet to show the perennial resonance of the Idea conveyed in a genuine symbol. Unlike analogy, or metaphor, which for Coleridge was a part of analogy, the symbol does not need interpreting, being "consubstantial" with the Idea represented.

Such genius is always capable of awakening us to the freshness of Ideas, while the understanding and its schematized concepts are too often covered with "the film of familiarity." Removing this film and restoring the freshness of enlivened perception is the task of the genius of imagination.

Far from repeating the usual gloss of Appearance *versus* Reality, especially common in Two World interpretations of Plato, a Coleridgean account of meditative experience shows that rich experience can be felt more fully for what it is: the appearance *of* reality. Accounts of Platonism that oppose the Two Worlds interpretation, such as Holger Thesleff's two-level account, resist talk of a 'realm' of appearance utterly separate from a 'realm' of reality (Thesleff, 1999). Instead, they present an account of appearance as the appearance *of* reality, rather than a mere simulacrum utterly divorced from reality. A poetic description fine-tuned to appearances and their subtle changes and inter-relations can achieve profound and real resonance if it is combined with the imaginative use of symbol, such that a universality is conveyed, relating the reality of which this is an appearance. The main point here can also be seen in one of Blake's proto-Romantic proverbs of Hell, "Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth." In this proverb, the imagined is an image of truth in the way that

²⁰ Quoted in *The Friend*, II, p. 74, and in *Biographia Literaria*, I, p. 81

appearance is an image of reality.

For Coleridge, the genius, or spirit, of imagination is “that sublime faculty, by which a great mind becomes that which it meditates on.”²¹ Such experience dissolves the everyday differentiation of subjective and objective such that “in every work of art there is a reconciliation of the external with the internal” and that this reconciliation will work “to make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature—this is the mystery of genius in the Fine Arts.”²² Whether or not this is necessarily true for all fine art in any historical period is debatable.²³ For Coleridge, genius in fine art of the Romantic period worked towards overcoming the alienation from an increasingly distant external nature. The Romantic return to Platonism was a return from evaluations of utility and reductive explanation to values as ideals and active *physis* rather than nature as product.

**Note: Minor corrections were made on July 14, 2014.*

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²¹ *Collected Notebooks*, III, entry 3290.

²² ‘On Poesy or Art’, [1818] in S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria . . . with his Aesthetical Essays*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) II.

²³ See Gardner, 2002.

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