

Coleridge's Conversation Poems: Thinking the Thinker

Although Coleridge himself identified only 'The Nightingale' as 'A Conversation Poem', the assumption that it possessed certain generic or thematic characteristics in common with other poems has prompted critics for the past eighty years to group them together. 'The Æolian Harp', 'Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement', 'This Lime-Tree Bower', 'Frost at Midnight', 'The Nightingale', 'Dejection: An Ode', 'To William Wordsworth' were the seven poems said to share basic features.¹ The first to set forth these shared characteristics, George Harper emphasised a structure which began in a pleasant sanctuary, launched a metaphorical flight of fancy, then returned with altered perspective to the sanctuary.² Richard Fogle noted recurrent image patterns in the seven poems.³ M. H. Abrams called attention to the poetic expression of Coleridge's key metaphysical ideas.⁴ Other critics saw the poems as meditations and religious reflections inspired by a revelatory experience or harmony in nature.⁵ With a focus on the presumed interlocutor in the 'Conversation', critics have also made a case for the conjured presence in these poems of Sara Fricker Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Hartley Coleridge, Sara Hutchinson, and William and Dorothy Wordsworth.⁶ Others have examined the stylistic presumptions of conversational language.⁷ Still other critics have attended to political concerns, perhaps most prominent in

'Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement', but also lurking in 'Frost at Midnight' and some of the other 'Conversations.'⁸ Many critics have observed strong dialectical tensions: aesthetics vs. ethics, idealism vs. materialism, isolation vs. engagement, idleness vs. industry, loss vs. desire, indolence vs. creativity.⁹ My own reading of the 'Conversation Poems' is also concerned with dialectical tensions, those derived from Coleridge's effort to reconcile subject and object, thinker and thing perceived.

In his distinction between the Primary and the Secondary Imagination, Coleridge addressed the mental act necessary to apperception and the volitional act necessary to creative expression.¹⁰ The peculiarity of Coleridge's definition is that he has divided the Imagination into two modes, a receptive phase of perception followed by an expressive phase of recreation. The Primary is 'the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception [...] a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'. The Secondary is 'an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with former in the kind of its agency, and different only in degree, and in the mode of its operation' (*BL*, i. 304). There is a parallel in the two phases that Wordsworth attributes to the generation of poetry: 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and 'emotions recollected in

tranquillity'. It is in the latter phase, Wordsworth explains, that 'successful composition generally begins.'¹¹ For Wordsworth the inspirational moment is emotional, for Coleridge it is an epiphany of perception. In spite of the differences, these descriptions of the creative process are similar in positing two distinct stages: the first based in response, the second involving the active work of composition. 'Co-existing with conscious will', the second phase for Coleridge 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate'. Wordsworth does not make an act of will decisive for the transition from the first phase to the second; he merely observes that if the 'passions [...] are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment.'

Wordsworth, in 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey', described a dreamlike state in which

we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things (lines 45–49)

In his gloss on these lines in March 1801, Coleridge cited Fichte in elucidating his own sense of how inspired perception depends on perception as apperception. To see 'into the *Life of things*', Coleridge asserted, we must see into ourselves, that is, we must recognise ourselves as 'the thinking Being' in the act of beholding.¹² This act of double consciousness, thinking the thinker, provides a crucial turn in the Conversation poems. On 23 March 1801, Coleridge rejected the philosophical materialism of Locke or Newton for describing the mind as 'always *passive* – a lazy *Looker-on*.'¹³ Just a month earlier, on 24 February 1801, Coleridge had taken up the same question of the apparent presence or absence of the will in acts of perception.¹⁴ If the world is not to appear blank and static, then our

own sentient activity must witness the motion it gives away to the things beheld. Coleridge, it will be recalled, described this giving away of motion in his dynamic metaphor of the clouds and the stars in 'Dejection: An Ode' (lines 31–32).

In Chapter 5 of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge commenced his account of the law of association with the fundamental principle that in proposing their 'own nature as a problem', philosophers constructed 'a table of distinctions' based on 'the absence or presence of the WILL'. The difficulty in discriminating 'between the voluntary and the spontaneous', is that 'we seem to ourselves merely passive to an external power'. Coleridge was reluctant to concede that in the act of perception the mind is merely 'a mirror reflecting the landscape'. Granting that 'sometimes our nature seemed to act by a mechanism of its own, without any conscious effort of the will', Coleridge nevertheless endeavored to identify deliberative choices informing any act of seeing (*BL*, i. 89–91). In this same chapter, he introduced from Juan Luis (Ludovicus Vives) the distinction between active and passive perception, the former involving 'the mental power of comprehension' and the latter the mere 'receptivity of impressions' (*BL*, i. 99).¹⁵ Coleridge's counter argument is that choices are made with such frequency and rapidity, that we are not fully aware of our split-second decisions. In addition, we forget our volitional determination of the act, because our attention is focused on the object of the action. Some modes of perception, however, are volitionally directed by fully alert and conscious mental engagement. This, he asserts in Chapter 12, is the prerequisite for 'the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of self-intuition' (*BL*, i. 241).¹⁶

The act of the will was pivotal of Coleridge, and it had become so long before he identified its necessary role in the transition from the Primary to the Secondary Imagination. Indeed, one can trace the increasing importance of the

will from the first to the last of the *Conversation Poems*, from 1795 to 1807. With the wind-swept Æolian harp as his metaphor for inspiration, Coleridge describes the essentially passive role of the mind:

as on the midway slope
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
Whilst thro' my half-clos'd eye-lids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the
main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquility;
Full many a thought uncall'd and
undetail'd,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various, as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

In these lines composed between August and October, 1795, there is no need for an effort of will. The wind blows, the harp sings. This passive receptivity is expanded into an ideal of universal accord:

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 utter passivity of the mind as organic harp is already modified just five to six months later in 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement' (March-April 1796). In order to attain receptivity, one must discipline the senses. The effect of the wind upon the harp is spontaneous. The effect of the sky-lark's song requires patient, attentive listening,

Oft with patient ear
Long-listening to the viewless sky-lark's note
The auditor must not listen passively, but with
a desire to hear; indeed, that desire must be
informed by a spiritual commitment:

The inobtrusive song of Happiness,
Unearthly minstrelsy! then only heard

When the Soul seeks to hear; when all is
hush'd,
And the Heart listens!'

One year later, in 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison' (June 1797), Coleridge again makes it evident that, no matter how glorious the scene, the revelation occurs only with a committed act of perception.

So my friend
Struck with deep joy 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.

At this juncture in Coleridge's development of the idea of an external source of inspiration, he still credits the apparently irresistible coercive power of the influence: 'the Almighty Spirit [. . .] makes/Spirits perceive his presence'.

In the next *Conversation* poem, 'Frost at Midnight' (February 1798), another year has passed and Coleridge has again reformulated his sense of the relationship between the external stimuli and the internal response:

so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

The 'Great universal Teacher' may, of course, have a few recalcitrant students. There is a significant difference between making the spirit 'perceive' and making it 'ask'. Asking is not followed inevitably by answers.

The act of will continues to gain importance to Coleridge. In April 1802, in 'Dejection: An Ode', he insists that action must be motivated

from within. No external blowing of the 'intellectual breeze' will suffice to stir the creative mind. The motivation and the action must come from within.

O Lady! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live:
Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!
And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
Than that inanimate cold world allowed
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
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 does not deny that there is a vitality in nature. He has simply come to the conclusion that the individual must make the choice between animate and inanimate, active and passive.

Ten more years were to pass before Coleridge insisted that the Secondary Imagination is only operative by 'co-existing with the conscious will. In the Conversation Poems he had already taken major steps to reformulate the imagination as an active faculty, not a mere passive respondent to external inspiration. In January 1807, Coleridge listened to Wordsworth read aloud the whole of *The Prelude*. He records his response in the Conversation Poem, 'To William Wordsworth':

Theme hard as high!
Of smiles spontaneous, and mysterious fears
(The first-born they of Reason and
twin-birth),
Of tides obedient to external force,
And currents self-determined, as might
seem,
Or by some inner Power; of moments awful,
Now in thy inner life, and now abroad,
When power streamed from thee, and thy
soul received
The light reflected, as a light bestowed—

Coleridge never pits absolute determinism against free will, but he repeatedly raises the question, as he does here, whether the poet's creativity is self-determined or simply a response to external influences. Is it a 'light reflected', a 'light bestowed', or somehow both? The question is as old as Plato's *Ion*, the dialogue in which Socrates asks the Rhapsode Ion whether he is, as he claims, merely a passive vehicle whose poetry is communicated through him during his inspired trances with no volitional control of his own.¹⁷ Ion is content in the role of an Æolian harp. But for Coleridge, responding to Wordsworth's declaration of 'fair seed-time [...] fostered alike by Beauty and by Fear' (*Prelude*, I. 200), the issue is discriminating 'tides obedient to external force' from 'currents self-determined, as might seem'.

In his first lectures on literature in 1808, Coleridge scorned not just the notion that poetry is born effortlessly in a moment of rhapsodic inspiration, but also that there is any value in an idle mode of reading. The bad poet infects others with the nervous twitchings of his own mental lethargy,

a sort of beggarly Day-dreaming, in which the mind furnishes for itself only laziness and a little mawkish sensibility, while the whole *Stuff* and Furniture of the Doze is supplied *ab extra* by a sort of spiritual Camera Obscura, which (*pro tempore*) fixes, reflects, & transmits the moving phantasms of one man's Delirium so as to people the barrenness of a hundred other trains under the same morbid Trance, or '*suspended Animation*', of Common Sense, and all definite Purpose.¹⁸

Just as the Conversation Poems exhibit Coleridge's increasing emphasis upon the decisively co-existent act of will in the creative process, so too thematically they reveal an increasing indictment of passivity as moral turpitude. Another shifting characteristic in

these poems is the role given to the conversational partner.

The first draft of 'The Æolian Harp' was written in August, 1795, at a time when Coleridge put his love for Mary Ann Evans behind him, and was resolved to make the best of his engagement to Sara Fricker. The movement in the poem from intimacy to fantasy to religious speculation is curtailed and redirected by Sara's look of mild reproof, and the poet's concluding apology, 'to walk more humbly with his God'. Depending on how one interprets Sara's 'pensive' mood in the opening line, the intimacy may be troubled. The poet, for his part, first appeals to the Æolian harp to conjure an erotic scene in which the reluctance is overcome in passionate acquiescence:

And that simplest Lute,
Plac'd length-ways in the clasping casement,
hark!
How by the desultory breeze caress'd,
Like some coy maid half-yielding to her lover,
It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong! And now, its
strings
Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
Over delicious surges sink and rise

The approach of the breeze-lover is 'desultory', its caresses languid. The harp is a 'coy-maid half-yielding, its 'sweet upbraidings' tempting the lover to 'to repeat the wrong'. The breeze is now aroused to more audacious action. The harp is 'Boldlier swept' and begins to pour forth 'long sequacious notes' and its 'delicious surges sink and rise'. With 'a soft floating witchery of sound' the metaphorical ground shifts, and the images conjure a fantasy world, a fairy land, a paradise. At this juncture the poet later intervenes, in 1803 and more importantly in 1817. The additions significantly alter the active/passive division of the 1795 drafts of the poem. In 1803 he omitted the Fairy-Land lines (21–25), and added lines which suggest that an intrinsic love itself is the primary mover and

that it is merely awakened by external nature (30–33). The more crucial addition came with the publication of the poem in *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) with the stunning passage on the 'one life'. Here the notion of dynamic nature and the dormant and passive self are replaced with an affirmation that the life principle is all pervasive, 'within us and abroad'. No longer disparate entities, the active breeze and the passive harp subsumed into an all-penetrating presence that is the 'Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where'. Not yet informed by the doctrine of the 'one life', the following lines of the original poem again resort to a division of breeze and harp when the poet again calls upon the metaphor to justify his apparent idleness:

And thus, my Love! as on the midway slope
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
Whilst thro' my half-clos'd eye-lids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the
main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquility;
Full many a thought uncall'd and
undetai'n'd,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various, as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

The poet is not being lazy: he is being receptive. Admittedly, he has an 'indolent and passive brain', but that passivity is the necessary condition to allow the free play of random thoughts 'uncall'd and undetai'n'd' and the 'many idle flitting phantasies'. Although stretching his 'limbs at noon' may look as if he is simply taking a nap, he is attaining a conscious awareness of the divine presence permeating all nature.

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
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?

Many years later, Coleridge was to quote this passage in a lecture on philosophy to illustrate the idea of the corporeal world being manifest as the *natura naturans* in the infinite mind of God, but perceived only as *natura naturata* in 'the finite minds on which it acts'. 'The bodily world' is thus 'even as the tune between the wind and the Eolian harp.'¹⁹ Recognising the entrapment, Coleridge was forced to reject the metaphor. 'The mind does not resemble an Eolian Harp', he wrote in his marginalia to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, suggesting that a better analogy would be a violin 'played on by a musician of Genius'.²⁰ Coleridge, who became increasingly disturbed by his own attraction to pantheism, happily has Sara's 'more serious eye of mild reproof' to put a stop to 'such thoughts/ Dim and unhallowed', 'These shapings of the unregenerate mind'. Recanting as 'A sinful and most miserable Man' Coleridge endeavors to appease Sara in the poem's last lines, but he leaves his 'unregenerate' speculations intact. Indeed, he returns to them in later years to refurbish them with the idea of the 'one life.'

Providing a setting very similar to 'The Æolian Harp', Coleridge in 'Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement' also opens with the cot, the entwining myrtle and jasmine, the murmur of the sea. The first stark difference is an interloper: Coleridge sees 'A wealthy son of Commerce saunter by' on a Sabbath day, pausing at their cottage to bless the place and its dwellers. The blessing and the contrast between the poet's occupation with the commercial world is crucial to this poem, which again undertakes a defence of what the poet does when he leave the sanctuary and ascends the hill. In 'The Æolian Harp', the poet made it no further than 'the midway slope/ Of yonder hill' before paused to stretch his limbs. On this occasion he is more ambitious and climbs to the very top:

But the time, when first
From that low Dell, steep up the stony Mount

I climb'd with perilous toil and reach'd the top,
Oh! what a goodly scene! *Here* the bleak
mount,
The bare bleak mountain speckled thin with
sheep;
Grey clouds, that shadowing spot the sunny
fields;
And river, now with bushy rocks o'er-brow'd,
Now winding bright and full, with naked
banks;
And seats, and lawns, the Abbey and the wood,
And cots, and hamlets, and faint city-spire;
The Channel *there*, the Islands and white sails,
Dim coasts, and cloud-like hills, and shoreless
Ocean—

The view, he claims, seems to reveal the omnipresence of God and his working in the whole world here somehow '*imag'd* in its vast circumference'. With such a view before him, he declares that it would be wrong to persist in his passive role:

Was it right,
While my unnumber'd brethren toil'd and bled,
That I should dream away the entrusted hours
On rose-leaf beds, pampering the coward heart
With feelings all too delicate for use?

At the conclusion, the re-evocation of the cot, roses, myrtle, and jasmine is not a return to the sanctuary but a temporary farewell. He may be able to return one day when wretchedness has been overcome. In the meantime, he must 'join head, heart, and hand, / Active and firm, to fight the bloodless fight'. The poet does not register Sara's 'mild reproof' because he left her after their six-week honeymoon. After their marriage on October 4 1796, they lived in a cottage in Clevedon, then Coleridge returned to Bristol to resume his political activism.

In Bristol Coleridge issued his *Conciones ad Populum* (1795), argued for an end to the war with France, launched his periodical *The Watchman* (1796), and published his *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796). Sara became pregnant in January. In May, Thomas Poole invites

Coleridge and Sara to stay with him in Nether Stowey. The Coleridges also stay in Darley, where he had hopes for a position as tutor. On September 19, his son Hartley is born; on September 22, Coleridge's long-time friend Charles Lamb discovers that his sister has killed their mother in a fit of insanity. Coleridge takes on Charles Lloyd as a private pupil. Lamb, Lloyd and Coleridge collaborate on *Sonnets by Various Authors* (October 1796). In December, Thomas Poole purchases a cottage for the Coleridges adjacent to his own property on Nether Stowey. He commences his friendship with Wordsworth. In June, 1797, William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd have all gathered in Nether Stowey. Together they set out to see the waterfall near Alfoxden, but Coleridge is forced to stay behind because Sara has accidentally scalded his foot. This, of course, is the occasion for 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison.'

There is no pleasant sanctuary described in the opening lines, only the resignation that he is forced to stay behind and the exaggerated lament that may never see his friends again:

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! They,
 meanwhile,
 Friends, whom I never more may meet
 again,
 On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
 Wander in gladness, and wind down,
 perchance,
 To that still roaring dell, of which I told.

The dramatic gesture of self-pity enables Coleridge to elide the real tragedy that Charles Lamb has just confronted. The first verse paragraph continues with the poet visualising the familiar sights that he knows his friends will

be seeing. In the second verse paragraph he imagines them stepping forth into a broad meadow, and bestows upon Charles Lamb the blessing of the place. Charles will experience, as he has, 'the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes/ Spirits perceive his presence'. Charles is twice referred to as 'gentle-hearted', as a 'sad yet patient soul,' and as one who has won his way 'through evil and pain /And strange calamity'. Coleridge says of Charles that he was 'In the great City pent', In 'Frost at Midnight' he applies the same phrase to himself, 'I was reared/ In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim'. And Wordsworth in the *Prelude* repeats the phrase in describing Coleridge: 'Thou, my Friend! Were reared/ In the great City, 'mid far other scenes' (II. 466-67).²¹ The echoing of voices reinforces the collaborative spirit of their friendship.

In the final verse paragraph, Coleridge acknowledges that the lime-tree bower has not been 'prison' but a blessed sanctuary, offering its own visual stimulation

Nor in this bower,
 This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
 Much that has sooth'd me. Pale beneath the
 blaze
 Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd
 Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
 The shadow of the leaf and stem above
 Dappling its sunshine!

Coleridge then affirms, 'Henceforth I shall know/ That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure'. A year later, Wordsworth was to express to Dorothy a similar faith, 'this prayer I make,/ Knowing that Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her' (121-123)²²

January 1798 commenced well for Coleridge. He had long been struggling with financial difficulties. Since life as a poet did not promise prosperity, his only alternatives were to choose a career either as a journalist or as a minister. His problems were solved when the Wedgwoods promised him £150 for life so that

he might devote himself to poetry and philosophy. Coleridge at the time had calculated that £100 a year would suffice to maintain himself and his family. As described in 'Frost at Midnight', the winter night, February 1798, in his Nether Stowey cottage was a time relative tranquillity. The modulation of the active and passive is nowhere more exquisitely wrought among the Conversation poems than in this poem. 'Frost at Midnight' achieves its effect through its minimalism. By insisting upon absolute silence and calm, the slightest activity gains in portent.

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owl's cry
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and
wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and
wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams!

Following the brief disruptive sound of the owl's cry at the poem's opening, all again lapses into silence. Not even a breath of wind stirs the 'secret ministry' of the frost. The exterior world, man and nature alike, slumbers in 'extreme silentness'. The poet is situated in a passive languor, in the midnight hour he habitually reserved for his opium reveries.²³ As the poet sits amidst the silence, his attention is captivated by the 'sole unquiet thing':

the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,

Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.

Coleridge elsewhere argues, well in advance of Freud,²⁴ that one projects one's own moods or feelings onto external nature. He observes this sort of psychological projection in 'The Nightingale', and he returns to it again in 'Constancy to an Ideal Object'. The fluttering ash is animated by the flame, but it seems to mimic the motions of the poet's mind and thus becomes 'a companionable form'. The poet's 'idling Spirit' is utterly captivated. Rather than the mind assuming active control over its perception of the ash, the ash dominates and 'makes a toy of Thought'. With a grand leap of association, the poet is then drawn back into a tormented childhood memory, a time when he was eager to believe that the ash hovering over the flame would 'portend the arrival of some absent friend.'²⁵ As a 'charity boy' at Christ's Hospital, he longed to see a visitor from home. Conjuring the memories of childhood gives this Conversation poem its Wordsworthian resonance:

But O! how oft,
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
To watch that fluttering *stranger!* and as oft
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birth-place, and the old
church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my
dreams!
And so I brooded all the following morn,
Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye

Fixed with mock study on my swimming
book:

Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
For still I hoped to see the *stranger's* face,
Townsmen, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
My play-mate when we both were clothed
alike!

The poem makes yet another associational leap in the next paragraph, for the recollection of his own childhood prompts his thoughts of what may lie ahead for the infant babe that sleeps at his side. He imagines Hartley experiencing a Wordsworthian childhood amidst the Lakeland fells, where he 'shalt learn far other lore,/ And in far other scenes!' Coleridge repeats for himself the phrase that he had applied to Charles Lamb: 'For I was reared/In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim'. Just as in 'The Lime-tree Bower', he had bestowed the blessing on Charles, here he describes Hartley as recipient of the divine tutelage, that 'shall mould/ Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.'

In the midst of the final verse paragraph, in lines describing the advent of a warmer season (lines 67–70), Coleridge introduces several spondees that create a counter cadence in his blank verse, before he re-evokes the 'trances of the blast' and, from the opening lines of the poem, 'the secret ministry of frost . . .':

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the night
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the
eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

In April 1798, two months after 'Frost at Midnight', Coleridge writes 'The Nightingale', a Conversation poems addressed to William and

Dorothy Wordsworth, and testifying to richness of the collaboration during the previous months. Coleridge has completed 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', the first part of 'Christabel', 'The Dark Ladie', 'The Three Graves', and 'Fears in Solitude'. Informed that they must leave Alfoxden in mid-summer, the Wordsworths have agreed upon a plan to travel with Coleridge to Germany. They have also commenced the joint enterprise that will become the *Lyrical Ballads*.

'The Nightingale' opens with a description of the light on the Western horizon just after sunset:

No cloud, no relique of the sunken day
Distinguishes the West, no long thin slip
Of sullen light, no obscure trembling hues.

These are lines that will be echoed in 'Dejection: an Ode', but in this poem the poet is concerned with dispelling dejection. He invites his conversational partner to join him on a mossy bench, where together they listen to the nightingale. The notion that the nightingale is 'a melancholy bird' is dismissed a projection of a melancholy mind. Some poet has put that interpretation into poetry and it has stuck there as a cliché:

But some night-wandering man whose
heart was pierced
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
(And so, poor wretch! filled all things with
himself,
And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,
First named these notes a melancholy strain
And many a poet echoes the conceit;

In the lines that follow Coleridge again picks up the paradox of apparent idleness as condition of the poet's industry. Rather than labouring at his desk in 'building up the rhyme', access to true inspiration is better sought when the poet,

like Coleridge himself in 'The Æolian Harp', stretches his limbs in seeming laziness:

Poet who hath been building up the rhyme
When he had better far have stretched his limbs
Beside a brook in mossy forest-dell,
By sun or moon-light, to the influxes
Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements
Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song
And of his fame forgetful!

The act of will that is recommended here is to attune one's self to nature. Not surrendering as passive instrument to be played upon by an exterior power, the poet must become consciously aware of the spirit of nature. As an example of that attentive awareness, he cites a circumstance described by Dorothy Wordsworth. Several instances of Dorothy's keen response to nature have been identified in the poetry of her brother. The following lines show how Coleridge, too, could profit from her perception. This 'most gentle Maid', Coleridge writes, has listened carefully to the singing of the night birds, and has recognised the intervals of silence that occur in the darkness when the moon is obscured:²⁶

she knows all their notes,
That gentle Maid! and oft, a moment's space,
What time the moon was lost behind a cloud,
Hath heard a pause of silence; till the moon
Emerging, hath awakened earth and sky
With one sensation, and those wakeful birds
Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy,
As if some sudden gale had swept at once
A hundred airy harps! And she hath watched
Many a nightingale perch giddily
On blossomy twig still swinging from the
breeze,
And to that motion tune his wanton song
Like tipsy Joy that reels with tossing head.

In 'The Æolian Harp', Coleridge wondered whether 'all of animated nature/ [might] Be but organic Harps diversely framed'. That speculation recurs, for the birds sing 'As if some

sudden gale had swept at once/ A hundred airy harps!' In the final verse paragraph, Coleridge offers 'a father's tale' as a part of his farewell to the nightingale and to his friends. Having already argued that the poet should be attuned to nature, it is reasonable for him to 'deem it wise' to make Hartley 'Nature's play-mate'. Responsive to the presence of the 'universal Teacher' in nature, little Hartley even alerts the adults: 'he would place his hand beside his ear,/ His little hand, the small forefinger up, And bid us listen!' Unlike the melancholy poet, Hartley perceives the joy in nature and laughs with the moon. Coleridge had previously recorded Hartley's responses in his notebook,²⁷ and repeats them here in affirming that there is a joy and harmony to be learned from nature.

Four years elapse between 'The Nightingale' and 'Dejection: An Ode'. In April 1798 he affirmed joy; in April 1802, he resigned himself to despair. With the Wordsworths in Goslar and Coleridge in Göttingen, the trip to Germany didn't turn out as expected.²⁸ After their return, the Wordsworths move to Grasmere, and Coleridge to Greta Hall in Keswick. The second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* is published, and the volumes are now more Wordsworth's than Coleridge's. He translated Schiller's *Wallenstein*, and he wrote prolifically for the *Morning Post*. He declared his love for Sara Hutchinson, and his marriage lapsed into severe discord. His bout with rheumatism at the beginning of 1801 led to increased doses of opium. 'The Poet is dead in me', he wrote to William Godwin, explaining that his 'imagination [. . .] lies, like a Cold Snuff on the circular Rim of a Brass Candle-stick, without even a stink of Tallow to remind you that it was once clothed & mitred with Flame.'²⁹ As several critics have recognised, 'Dejection: An Ode' was written as a response to the first four stanzas of Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality',³⁰ but 'Dejection: An Ode' also presents the impasse of volitional action in far more complex terms than any of the previous

Conversation poems. Introduced with lines from the ballad of 'Sir Patrick Spence' forewarning that the breeze shall become 'a deadly storm', the wind and the harp are once again introduced as symbols of the exterior energy and the individual response:

Well! If the Bard was weather-wise, who made
The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,
This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade
Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes,
Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes
Upon the strings of this Æolian lute.

Even in this opening lull before the storm, the motifs of idleness and industry begin to turn: the night is 'tranquil' and 'unroused', the clouds scattered in 'lazy flakes', becoming a 'dull sobbing draft' that 'moans' through the harp. 'Sobbing' and 'moaning' are not happy sounds, and the mood is about to become more desperate. What was once a creative stimulus has turned destructive. But even a raging storm is more welcome than the persistent dullness of inactivity:

And oh! that even now the gust were swelling,
And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!
Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,
Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move
and live!

In 'Intimations of Immortality', Wordsworth laments that he has lost his sense of reciprocity with nature: 'The things which I have seen I now can see no more' (l. 9). Coleridge's declaration that 'I see, not feel, how beautiful they are', admits to a similar loss, but one that

reaches deeper into his being:

All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
Have I been gazing on the western sky,
And its peculiar tint of yellow green:
And still I gaze – and with how blank an eye!
And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
That give away their motion to the stars;
Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:
Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

That the sense of reciprocity can be only an illusion, Coleridge makes evident in specifying the optical illusion of motion that makes it seem that those thin clouds passing across the night sky 'give away their motion to the stars.'³¹ In 'The Nightingale' Coleridge is not saddened that the Western horizon reveals 'no long thin slip / Of sullen light, no obscure trembling hues'. Here, even though the phenomenon is visible, it brings no pleasure: he gazes, but 'with how blank an eye!' In the stanza that follows, Coleridge explains why the eye is blank:

It were a vain endeavour,
Though I should gaze for ever
On that green light that lingers in the west:
I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains
are within.

Because his 'genial spirits' have failed, he sees only the surface of things, the *natura naturata*, not the *natura naturans*. In terms of his later distinction between the Primary and Secondary Imagination, the failure of his 'genial spirits' is not just the failure of will to transform

perception into poem, it is a failure of inspired perception.

As a Conversation poem, 'Dejection: An Ode' is complicated by the hesitation and concealment in identifying the conversational partner. The earlier version of the poem, addressed to Wordsworth as 'Edmund' or 'William', originally appeared in the *Morning Post* (4 October 1802), the day of Wordsworth's wedding to Mary Hutchinson, also the seventh anniversary of Coleridge's marriage to Sara Fricker. As later published in *Sibylline Leaves*, the 'Lady' of the poem is Sara Hutchinson.

'To William Wordsworth', written after Coleridge's return from Malta and Rome five years later, recalls the self-accusations of 'Dejection: An Ode' but also endeavours to refute them. Having doubted his own powers as a poet, Coleridge now declared those powers rekindled:

Ah! as I listened with a heart forlorn,
The pulses of my being beat anew:
And even as Life returns upon the drowned,
Life's joy rekindling roused a throng of pains—
Keen pangs of Love, awakening as a babe
Turbulent, with an outcry in the heart;
And Fears self-willed, that shunned the eye
of Hope;
And Hope that scarce would know itself
from Fear (61–68)

Although passive as a listener, Coleridge claims an active engagement in the poetry. That animation is depicted again in the image of the motion given to the stars. Coleridge also adds an image that echoes the Ancient Mariner's blessing of the water-snakes:

In silence listening, like a devout child,
My soul lay passive, by thy various strain
Driven as in surges now beneath the stars,
With momentary stars of my own birth,
Fair constellated foam, still darting off
Into the darkness; now a tranquil sea,
Outspread and bright, yet swelling to the
moon. (95–101)

The passive Æolian harp is swept into sound by the breeze. The imagination of the passive and silent listener is 'Driven as in surges' to generate his own images. The stars in sky are replicated in the poet's sea of thought, sparkling in the 'Fair constellated foam' of the ship that sails in his memory. As Coleridge's own note to this line makes clear, he refers to watching the phosphorescent lights flashing in the foam swept up by the ship that carried himself, William and Dorothy across the Channel to Cuxhaven on September 16, 1798:

A beautiful white cloud of Foam at
momentary intervals coursed by the side of
the Vessel with a roar, and little Stars of
Flame danced and sparkled and went out in
it; and every now and then light detachments
of this white cloud-like foam darted off from
the Vessel's side, each with its own small
constellation, over the sea and scoured out of
sight.³²

Wordsworth's memories of the past in *The Prelude* have stirred Coleridge's memories and, as he claims here, restored his own active imagination.

Among the many factors that link these poems together, Coleridge's deliberations on the active vs. passive attributes of the mind are among the most persistent and thematically relevant. Read in sequence, the 'Conversation Poems' reveal Coleridge's increasing concern with the function of the will to lift the mind from 'blank' perception to an awareness of the mind's own constitutive role. In order to give meaning to sensation, there must be industrious thought in the idleness of meditative reception.

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NOTES _____

1. *Poetical Works*, ed. J.C.C. Mays, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 (3 vols, Princeton, 2001), i. reading text, Part 1: 'The Æolian Harp', 231–35; 'Reflections on having left a

- Place of Retirement', 260–63; 'This Lime-Tree Bower', 349–54; 'Frost at Midnight', 452–56; 'The Nightingale', 516–20; (Part 2) 'Dejection: An Ode', 695–702; 'To William Wordsworth', 815–19.
- George McLean Harper, 'Coleridge's Conversation Poems' (1928), in *English Romantic Poets. Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M.H. Abrams (Oxford, 1975).
 - Richard H. Fogle, 'Coleridge's Conversation Poems', *Tulane Studies in English*, 5 (1955), 103–110.
 - M.H. Abrams, 'structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric', in *From Sensibility to Romanticism. Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York, 1965); also collected in M.H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze. Essays on English Romanticism* (New York, 1984); Abrams, 'Coleridge's "A Light in Sound": Science, Metascience, and Poetic Imagination' (1972) collected in Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze* (1984). See also James D. Boulger, 'Imagination and Speculation in Coleridge's Conversation Poems', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 64 (1965), 691–711.
 - Reeve Parker, *Coleridge's Meditative Art* (Ithaca, 1975); Michael E. Holstein, 'Poet into Priest: A Reading of Coleridge's "Conversation Poems"', *University of Toronto Quarterly: A Canadian Journal of the Humanities*, 48 (1979), 209–25; Marie-Jeanne Vosluisant, 'Les "Conversation Poems" de Coleridge: Rêves d'harmonie?', *Visages de l'harmonie dans la littérature anglo-américaine* (Reims, 1982) 71–79; G. S. Morris, 'Sound, Silence, and Voice in Meditation: Coleridge, Berkeley, and the Conversation Poems', *Christianity and Literature*, 55. 1 (2005), 51–71.
 - Morris Dickstein, 'Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the "Conversation Poems"', *Centennial Review*, 16 (1972), 367–83; William Christie, 'The Act of Love in Coleridge's Conversation Poems', *Sydney Studies in English*, 7 (1981), 12–31; Charles Armstrong, 'The Deferences of Friendship: Between Poetry and Prayer in Coleridge's Conversation Poems', *Coleridge Bulletin: The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge*, 14 (Fall 1999), 40–46.
 - Jill Rubenstein, 'Sound and Silence in Coleridge's Conversation Poems', *English: The Journal of the English Association*, 21 (1972), 54–60; Scott Simpkins, 'Coleridge's "Conversation Poems" as Speech Genre', *Semiotics* (1995), ed. C. W. Spinks and John Deely (New York, 1996), 242–49; G. S. Morris, 'Sound, Silence, and Voice in Meditation: Coleridge, Berkeley, and the Conversation Poems', *Christianity and Literature*, 55. 1 (2005), 51–71.
 - Kelvin Everest, *Coleridge's Secret Ministry. The Context of the Conversation Poems* (Hassocks, 1979); Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford, 1988), 263–274; Paul Magnuson, 'The "Conversation" Poems', *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge, 2002), 33–44.
 - Albert Gérard, 'The Systolic R[h]ythm: The Structure of Coleridge's Conversation Poems', *Essays in Criticism*, 10 (1960), 307–319; Edward E. Gibbons, 'The Conversation Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Coleridgean Art and Coleridgean Theory' (Diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1969); Ronald C. Wendling, 'The Art of Coleridge's Conversation Poems' (Diss. Case Western Reserve, 1970); Ronald C. Wendling, 'Dramatic Reconciliation in Coleridge's Conversation Poems', *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, 9 (1973), 145–60; Frederick Garber, 'The Hedging Consciousness in Coleridge's Conversation Poems', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 4 (1973), 124–38; Christian La Cassagnère, 'La Perte et le désir: Pour une poétique des Conversation Poems', *Coleridge: Etudes poétiques*, ed. Christian La Cassagnère (Paris, 1993), 63–76; K. M. Wheeler, 'Aesthetic Experience and Moral Good in S. T. Coleridge's Conversation Poems', *Coleridge: Etudes poétiques*, ed. Christian La Cassagnère (Paris, 1993), 47–62; Nicholas Reid, 'Coleridge: The Conversation Poems', *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 91 (Summer 1995), 143–56.
 - Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. W. J. Bate and James Engell, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 7 (2 vols, Princeton, 1983), i. 304. Hereafter, *BL*.
 - Wordsworth, Preface (1800) to *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London, 1963), 240, 260.
 - The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Volume 1: 1794–1804, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York, 1957; hereafter *CN*), note 921 (March 1801): 'By deep feeling we make our *Ideas dim* – & this is what we mean by our Life – ourselves. I think of the Wall – it is before me, a distinct

- image – here. I necessarily think of the *Idea* & the Thinking I as two distinct & opposite Things. Now (let me) think of *myself* – of the thinking Being – the *Idea* becomes dim whatever it be – so dim that I know not what it is – but the Feeling is deep & steady – and still this I call *I* – the identifying the Perceptient & the Perceived'. In her note to this passage, Kathleen Coburn refers to Wolff, to Kant, to Schelling, and to Theses VII and VIII, in chapter 10 of *BL*, i. 184–185. She has missed the actual source, which is Fichte's *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1797): 'When you thought of your table or your wall (deine Wand), you, my intelligent reader, *you* who are conscious to yourself of the activity of your thought, you were yourself *the thinker* in your thinking, but *the thing-thought-of* (*das Gedachte*) was for you not yourself, but something different from yourself. In short [...] the thinker and the thing-thought-of must be two. But when you think of yourself, you are not only the thinker, but also at the same time the thought-of (*das Gedachte*); thinker and thought-of must therefore be one'. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Sämtliche Werke* (8 vols, Berlin, 1845–1846), i. 522.
13. Coleridge to Thomas Poole, 23 March 1801, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (6 vols, Oxford, 1956–1971), ii. 709.
 14. Coleridge to Josiah Wedgwood, 24 Feb 1801, *CL*, ii. 688. Summarising Descartes's concept of 'vivid' ideas (*Meditatio Sexta*), Coleridge writes: 'When he first began to *think* himself out from that state in which he, like every body else, suppose themselves to perceive objects immediately without reflecting at all either on their minds or their senses, he saw that those ideas, which referred him to Objects as externally present, were more vivid & definite than those of memory or imagination & were not connected with volition'.
 15. *BL*, i. 99. As Bate and Engel point out in their notes, this section and much of Chapter 5, are derived from Johann Gebhard Ehrenreich Maass, *Versuch über die Einbildungskraft* (Halle, 1792; 2nd ed. Halle and Leipzig, 1797).
 16. *BL*, i. 241. On perception informed and exalted by intellectual intuition, Coleridge cites Plotinus, *Ennead* 3.8.4: 'we ought not to pursue it with a view of detecting its secret source, but to watch for it in quiet till it suddenly shines upon us; preparing ourselves for the blessed spectacle as the eye waits patiently for the rising sun'. Coleridge cited this same passage as early as 1796–97, *CN*, i. 209; and again in November 1803, *CN*, 1678.
 17. Plato, 'Ion', trans. Lane Cooper, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, 1961), 215–228.
 18. *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 5 (2 vols, Princeton, 1987), i. 124.
 19. *Lectures 1818–1819: On the History of Philosophy*, ed. J.R.D.J. Jackson, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 8 (2 vols, Princeton, 2000), ii. 557; Lecture 13, 22 March 1819.
 20. *Marginalia*: Part 3. (Irving to Oxlee), ed. H. J. Jackson and George Whalley, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 12 (Princeton, 1992), 348 (dated between 1800–1808).
 21. *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed (2 vols, Ithaca, 1991), i. 135.
 22. 'Lines. Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798'. *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, 1992), 119.
 23. Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (Berkeley, 1968), 191–200. Coleridge had commenced taking laudanum for an eye infection in April of 1796. In November, an attack of neuralgia in the right side of his face prompted him to increase his dosage to 25 drops every five hours, sometimes raising it to 70 drops. When he wrote 'Kubla Khan' in October 1797 he recorded taking two grains of opium (21 drops of laudanum). By 1814, he was taking 20,000 drops a day. He regularly chose to take his drops during the night time hours. See also: Frederick Burwick, *Thomas De Quincey: Knowledge and Power* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, and New York, 2001), 114–115, 120. The response to opium, in Thomas De Quincey's account, involved in its peak phase an absolute torpor of body yet alert senses and lucid reverie.
 24. Sigmund Freud, from 'The Uncanny' [*Das Unheimliche*] (1919), *Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey (London, 1955), xvii. 217–256.
 25. *Poetical Works*, i. (Part 1), 454. As source for Coleridge's lore of the 'fluttering stranger', Mays cites William Cowper, 'The Winter Evening', *The Task* (1785), IV. 286–310.

26. Dorothy Wordsworth, *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford, 2002), 279, 298.
27. *CN*, i. 129.
28. Burwick, 'Wordsworth in Goslar', *Anglistik*, 9. 1 (1998), 81–99.
29. To William Godwin, 25 March 1801, *CL*, ii. 714.
30. Among the first studies of the dialogue represented in the two poems are: Newton Phelps Stallknecht, 'The Doctrine of Coleridge's Dejection and Its Relation to Wordsworth's Philosophy', *PMLA*, 49. 1 (1934), 196–207, and Fred Manning Smith, 'The Relation of Coleridge's Ode on Dejection to Wordsworth's Ode on Intimations of Immortality', *PMLA*, 50. 1 (1935), 224–34. See also: John L. Mahoney, 'Teaching the Immortality Ode with Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode"', *Approaches to Teaching Wordsworth's Poetry*, ed. Spencer Hall and Jonathan Ramsey (New York, 1986), 92–95.
31. *CN*, i. 875 (19 December 1800), Coleridge notes an instance in which the moon, in a space apart from the clouds, is not caught up in the illusory motion: 'The thin scattered rain-clouds were scudding along the Sky, above them with a visible interspace the crescent Moon hung, and partook not of the motion'.
32. *Poetical Works*, i. (Part 2): 819; the note is quoted from *The Friend* (23 November 1809), ii. 193.