

## The Act of Love in Coleridge's Conversation Poems

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When George McLean Harper first identified Coleridge's Conversation poems in an essay published in 1925, he wrote of them in a casual, elegant, and amateurish way that one recent critic dismissed as belletristic.<sup>1</sup> Harper begins by introducing a person—"a young poet whom I love"—and a problem: what should *he* write about Coleridge? What is more he begins with a particularity of personal reference that would amount to gross impropriety in a contemporary critical essay; the young poet, Harper says, "has just left my house and driven away in the soft darkness of a spring night, to the remote cottage in the Delaware valley where he meditates a not thankless Muse".<sup>2</sup> Contemporary literary criticism is, thankfully, subject to intellectual and scholarly rigours unknown to Harper, whose general approach arguably denied him access to the more profound and more subtle achievements of the poems.

There are two very good reasons, however, why his essay should not be dismissed as oblique and self-centred—though it is both at the beginning. The first is that the style and structure of the essay implicitly evaluate the style and structure of the Conversation poems themselves *by imitating them*. Both the essay and the poems record the apparently casual rhythm of the mind, expanding and contracting, and yet both are organized in a far from casual way. Both are "so natural and real, and yet so dig-

- 1 Kelvin Everest in *Coleridge's Secret Ministry: The Context of the Conversation Poems 1795-1798*, Sussex 1979, p. 186. Everest's excellent book is by far the best study of the Conversation poems available. Harper's essay, republished in his *Spirit of Delight* (1928), is readily available in M. H. Abrams (ed.), *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism* (1960).
- 2 *English Romantic Poets*, p. 144.

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he. He almost believes it. And when he is asked, 'What trick, what device', etc. he doesn't answer pat. Richardson paused a long time for Falstaff to come out of his imagination rôle (seeing himself fighting 4—7—11 men in buckram suits) and think up some excuse for himself. Falstaff almost has to slough off this rôle, then think, before saying, 'By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye'."

nified", as Coleridge said of the poetry of William Lisle Bowles,<sup>3</sup> and both use an immediate personal experience to dramatize a philosophical or abstract proposition. The Conversation poems also involve a loved one, or loved ones, and a problem; indeed for Coleridge, as for Harper, it is the act of love itself that helps to bring about a solution to that problem. This brings us to the second important contribution of Harper's essay. It recognizes, implicitly and explicitly, the importance of love and friendship in the Conversation poems—not in any abstract sense, but particular loves and particular friendships.<sup>4</sup>

This last point is crucial. The short poem which announced Coleridge's departure from the bardic mode—more specifically, from the mental and verbal bombast of *Religious Musings*—is addressed and entitled, significantly, "To a Friend" (Charles Lamb, as a matter of fact). "To a Friend" was designed to accompany the unfinished *Religious Musings*, and first appeared in a letter to Southey dated 29 December 1794:<sup>5</sup>

Thus far my scanty brain hath built the rhyme  
Elaborate and swelling

(ll. 1-2)

It was not as if the more ambitious "rhyme" were not all about love; all the beliefs that inform the Conversation poems are present in *Religious Musings*. "Yet", writes Coleridge, "the heart/ Not owns it" (ll. 2-3). The heart chooses instead to identify with a particular friend, sharing and comparing specific sorrows:

In fancy (well I know)  
From business wandering far and local cares,  
Thou creepst round a dear-lov'd Sister's bed

- 3 In his *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, Oxford 1907 (hereafter *BL*), I, p. 10.
- 4 For good general discussion of the subject, style, and structure of the Conversation poems, see, besides Harper's essay, Richard Harter Fogle, "Coleridge's Conversation Poems", *Tulane Studies in English*, 5 (1955), 103-10 (reprinted in his *The Permanent Pleasure*, Athens, Georgia, 1974, pp. 17-26); Albert Gerard, "The Systolic Rhythm: The Structure of Coleridge's Conversation Poems", *Essays in Criticism*, X (1960), 307-19; and M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric", in Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (eds.), *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, London, Oxford, and New York 1965, pp. 527-60.
- 5 See *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, Oxford 1912 (hereafter *PW*), I, pp. 78-9; and Earl Leslie Griggs (ed.), *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Oxford 1956-71 (hereafter *CL*), I, pp. 147-8.

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With noiseless step, and watchest the faint look,  
 Soothing each pang with fond solicitude,  
 And tenderest tones medicinal of love.  
 I too a Sister *had*, an only Sister—  
 She lov'd me dearly, and I doted on her!

(ll. 6–13)

The retreat in “To a Friend” from the philanthropic generalizations of *Religious Musings* is not, however, a retreat from the eighteenth-century ideal of “Universal Benevolence”. It is an endeavour to *realize* that ideal more fully, to rediscover the universal in the particular. Naturally, without the manifest effort of *Religious Musings*, Coleridge’s identification with Lamb enables him to feel again the presence of God and brotherly love that he invokes without conviction throughout the *Musings*:

He knows (the Spirit that in secret sees,  
 Of whose omniscient and all-spreading Love  
 Aught to *implore* were impotence of mind)  
 That my mute thoughts are sad before his throne,  
 Prepar'd, when he his healing ray vouchsafes,  
 Thanksgiving to pour forth with lifted heart,  
 And praise Him Gracious with a Brother's Joy!

(ll. 26–32)

It is the first of many regenerating acts of sympathetic love in Coleridge’s poetry. As he wrote to Southey in July 1794, with his mind on the chilling Rationalism of William Godwin, “Philanthropy (and indeed every other Virtue) is a thing of *Concretion*—Some home-born Feeling is the *center* of the Ball, that, rolling thro’ Life collects and assimilates every congenial Affection”.<sup>6</sup>

For the early Coleridge and Wordsworth corrupt poetic diction or expression—their own as well as others’—was not just a lapse of taste but was also a moral lapse, an act of profound insincerity. It set up an opaque medium between the poet and the reader on the one hand, and Nature and God on the other. When in “To a Friend” Coleridge rejects the “elaborate and swelling” rhetoric of *Religious Musings*, therefore, he is also rejecting a way of relating to Man, to Nature, and to God. The conversational style and tone were essential to these new values of intimacy and “home-born Feeling” and are as symbolic of the altered consciousness as the new imagery and naturalistic detail—symbolic in the sense that Coleridge later defined it as both representing and partaking “of the Reality which it renders intelligible”.<sup>7</sup>

6 13 July 1794 (*CL*, I, p. 86).

7 In *The Statesman's Manual* (1816); see *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, VI: *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White, London and Princeton 1972, p. 30.

It should be apparent that I am not pleading for a more relaxed reading of the Conversation poems by invoking Harper; far from it. Stressing the particularized act of love only widens their emotional *and* intellectual range. This act is the initiating step in the dissolution of the Self, the caging and confining ego which is the "problem" of these poems, as it had been of mankind generally in *Religious Musings*:

Toy-bewitched,  
 Made blind by lusts, disherited of soul,  
 No common centre Man, no common sire  
 Knoweth! A sordid solitary thing,  
 Mid countless brethren with a lonely heart  
 Through courts and cities the smooth savage roams  
 Feeling himself, his own low self the whole

(ll. 146-52)

In that poem, a more abstract recognition that the "most holy name" of the all-pervading God is "Love" enables man to fly "from his small particular orbit"

With blest outstarting! From himself he flies,  
 Stands in the sun, and with no partial gaze  
 Views all creation; and he loves it all,  
 And blesses it, and calls it very good!

(ll. 110-3)

In the Conversation poems the reconciliation with creation is enacted rather than trumpeted, but it remains the ideal of the poet. The difference lies in the means by which it is to be achieved. The initiating, *unself*-conscious act of love, similar to the Ancient Mariner's blessing "unaware" of the watersnakes, enables the poet to find within the framework of individual poems, if only momentarily, the unity with Nature and God that he seeks. Failure to recognize the significance of this act can lead to misinterpretation of the Conversation poems, especially of the first and most controversial of the group, "The Eolian Harp".

## I

At the opening of "The Eolian Harp" the unity with nature, achieved through the mediation of Sara, is a *fait accompli*. As with all the Conversation poems the compatibility of mind and nature—how "exquisitely . . . fitted"<sup>8</sup> they are to each other—is

8 I am quoting, of course, from Wordsworth's "Prospectus" to *The Recluse* (ll. 62-8). See *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt (and Helen Darbishire), 2nd edn., Oxford 1940-49, V, pp. 3-6.

symbolized by the loving detail of the description:

My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined  
 Thus on my arm, most soothing sweet it is  
 To sit beside our Cot, our Cot o'ergrown  
 With white-flower'd Jasmin, and the broad-leav'd Myrtle,  
 (Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love!)  
 And watch the clouds, that late were rich with light,  
 Slow saddening round, and mark the star of eve  
 Serenely brilliant (such should Wisdom be)  
 Shine opposite! How exquisite the scents  
 Snatch'd from yon bean-field! and the world *so* hush'd!  
 The stilly murmur of the distant Sea  
 Tells us of silence.

(ll. 1-12)

The poem then traces the wanderings of the poet's mind, instigated and informed by the interaction of the wind and the harp: the thoughts and "phantasies", "uncall'd and undetain'd", that move through his

indolent and passive brain,  
 As wild and various as the random gales  
 That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

(ll. 39-43)

First it is sexual fantasy, the provocative "upbraiding" of the harp (Sara) looking forward to the more serious upbraiding of Sara's eye at the end of the poem. This dissolves into a folkloric fantasy. If we ignore for the time being the lines 26 to 33 that finally found their way into the poem in 1828, after an appearance in the *errata* of *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), the poem then moves with the drifting consciousness of the poet back to a specific time and place:

on the midway slope  
 Of yonder hill I stretch my legs at noon

(ll. 34-5)

Finally we have the famous pantheistic speculation for which the speaker is reproved:

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

(ll. 44-8)

The last sixteen lines of the poem represent a retreat to a fundamental, orthodox Christian attitude that has frustrated critics ever since. Indeed the addition of lines 26 to 33—"O! the one Life within us and abroad"—suggests that they frustrated the poet himself, for, as Humphry House points out,<sup>9</sup> they invalidate the

9 Coleridge (*The Clark Lectures 1951-2*), London 1953, pp. 76-7.

dramatic conclusion of the poem by affirming, apparently, the very pantheism that the poet originally renounced.

Faced with a dilemma of Coleridge's own creation, criticism has chosen to stress the pantheistic discovery of the poem, and to treat the closing lines as an aberration for which the narrow-minded Sara is responsible. Just as Coleridge himself tended, unfairly, to hold her responsible for the breakdown of their marriage, so she is unfairly held responsible for what is an expression of Coleridge's own desperate need. A combination of our knowledge of Coleridge's and Sara's subsequently disastrous marriage and our overriding interest in Coleridge's fragmented philosophical speculations has led us to misplace the emphasis in the poem on what we imagine the poet would *like* to have said, had Sara not been there to reprove him. One thing that is consistently overlooked is Coleridge's pervasive ambivalence towards his own metaphysical speculation. Coleridge the thinker could be profoundly anti-intellectual. It is important to look at "The Eolian Harp" in the context of this ambivalence because if this is ignored, not only is the meaning of "The Eolian Harp" obscured, but the Conversation poems as a group are robbed of their formal justification.

The fantasy and speculation of "The Eolian Harp" represent not only a movement, but a movement *away*—a movement from Sara and back into the Self. While they are inspired by harmony, and seek only to find analogues for that harmony, they are ironically discordant in themselves as well as separative. It is no accident that in lines 34 to 43 Coleridge describes himself as alone on a hill-side, "tranquil mus[ing] upon tranquillity". This casual "flashback" hints at the sundering of the two lovers that takes place in the poem, and with it the sundering of the poet and his God. The ominous "saddening" of the clouds in the opening lines have already suggested that the paradisaical unity is tenuous; the darkening of the day looking forward and back to a state of spiritual darkness ("Wilder'd and dark", l. 63). This only makes sense if we accept Coleridge's own interpretation that speculations of the kind he indulges in are "shapings of the unregenerate mind" that cut him off from Sara, Nature, and God, and that the search for *intellectual* enlightenment leads, paradoxically, to an emotional and spiritual darkness. He finds himself as he was before he achieved the unity to which the domestic peace with Sara had given him access: "Wilder'd" or bewildered. It is a crucial word, and bewilderment is a familiar state in spiritual autobiography such as this.

Coleridge's protestations to his brother George that the "dazzle of Wit" and a fondness for "subtlety of Argument" had seduced him from the right religious path are often interpreted exclusively as a sign of Coleridge's unconscious conformity to the demands of a stronger personality.<sup>10</sup> (His brother George was, of course, an orthodox Anglican minister.) But the renunciation of "the dark & deep perplexities of metaphysic Controversy"<sup>11</sup> is as familiar a feature of Coleridge's private notebooks as it is of his correspondence. At its best, such speculation is impotent to cope with the demands, specifically emotional demands, of reality:

My philosophical refinements, & metaphysical Theories lay by me in the hour of anguish, as toys by the bedside of a Child deadly-sick. May God continue his visitations to my soul, bowing it down, till the pride & Laodicean self-confidence of human Reason be utterly done away.<sup>12</sup>

At its worst such speculation is seen as physically destructive and emotionally crippling. Throughout his life Coleridge recognized in metaphysics a Circean charm. He came to associate it, rightly or wrongly, with opium, even spoke of it in terms of an addiction: "I am so *habituated* to philosophizing", he told Southey in December, 1794, "that I cannot divest myself of it even when my own Wretchedness is the subject".<sup>13</sup> Like opium it seems to have offered an initial release, and yet it ultimately led, again like opium, to disaster. This is the attitude of "Dejection: An Ode":

. . . not to think of what I needs must feel,  
But to be still and patient, all I can;  
And haply by abstruse research to steal  
From my own nature all the natural man—  
This was my sole resource, my only plan:  
Till that which suits a part infects the whole,  
And now is almost grown the *habit* of my soul.  
(ll. 87–93—my emphasis)

This "abstruse research", the attempt to unravel the "perplexities of metaphysic Controversy", always had for Coleridge the Faustian overtones that it had in the letter to Benjamin Flower quoted above: "the pride & Laodicean self-confidence of human Reason". He was never far away from the fundamentalist conviction that "*Incomprehensibility* is as necessary an attribute of

10 See the letter to George, 30 March 1794 (CL, I, p. 78).

11 Kathleen Coburn (ed.), *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, New York and London 1957 (hereafter CN), I, 27 (c. 1795–6).

12 Letter to Benjamin Flower, [11 December 1796]; CL, I, p. 267.

13 11 December 1794 (CL, I, p. 133—my emphasis).

the First Cause as Love, or Power, or Intelligence".<sup>14</sup> "The Eolian Harp", that is, is neither the first nor the last time that we hear him say that

never guiltless may I speak of him,  
The Incomprehensible!

(ll. 58-9)

Distinguishing between two kinds of knowledge in an early note, Coleridge asserts "the superiority of the knowledge which we have by faith to the knowledge which we have by Natural philosophy". Precisely where this superiority is manifested is important to the Conversation poems: "in its dignity, in its moral effects, & lastly in the comforting of sorrow, in the giving of New Joy, & the exaltation of natural pleasures" (CN, I, 6). Joy was to become the powerful, creative emotion of "Dejection: An Ode" which enabled the poet to see *and* feel how beautiful was the world around him—enabling, that is, the "exaltation of natural pleasures".

Even more important is the statement in his Philosophical Lectures that "in joy all individuality is lost",<sup>15</sup> for it brings us back to the escape from the Self that is the achievement of these poems. In another early note the same two kinds of knowledge help to distinguish between two kinds of life, the Human and the Divine:

Human life—in which for the sake of our own Happiness . . . & Glory we pursue studies and objects adapted to our intellectual faculties.

Divine life—when we die to the creatures & to self and become deiform. (CN, I, 256)

The self-centredness of intellectual pursuit is also the theme of Wordsworth's description in the sixth book of *The Prelude* of Coleridge at Cambridge, and of his analysis of "the airy wretchedness/ That battered on [Coleridge's] youth" (and we may be sure that the description and evaluation were encouraged by Coleridge himself):

I have thought  
Of thee, thy learning, gorgeous eloquence,  
And all the strength and plumage of thy youth,  
Thy subtle speculations, toils abstruse  
Among the schoolmen, and Platonic forms  
Of wild ideal pageantry, shaped out

14 As he wrote in a letter to the Rev. John Edwards, 20 March 1796 (CL, I, p. 193).

15 *The Philosophical Lectures of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, London and New York 1949, p. 179.



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From things well-matched, or ill, and words for things—  
The self-created sustenance of a mind  
Debarred from Nature's living images,  
Compelled to be a life unto itself.<sup>16</sup>

Wordsworth, typically, stresses the lack of Nature, but the disease is the same. Behind the passage lies the familiar metaphor of the spider weaving from its own entrails; in the Renaissance the Schoolmen were often compared to spiders.

This pattern of paradise lost through metaphysics and regained through emotional attachment was one that Coleridge consistently discovered in his own life. The action of "The Eolian Harp" is but one example. It is with this pattern in mind that the final lines of the poem should be read:

Well hast thou said and holily disprais'd  
These shapings of the unregenerate mind;  
Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break  
On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.  
For never guiltless may I speak of him,  
The Incomprehensible! save when with awe  
I praise him, and with faith that inly *feels*;  
Who with his saving mercies healéd me,  
A sinful and most miserable man,  
Wilder'd and dark, and gave me to possess  
Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honour'd Maid!  
(ll. 54-64)

Coleridge's occasional dread of the seductions of metaphysics—its self-involution and alienation from man, Nature, and from God—may seem unjustified, even evasive, but it was real enough to the poet.

Probably the best known example of Coleridge's rescue from the mires of metaphysics occurs in the first chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*, and it confirms my suggestion above that a suspicion of abstract thought also accounts for the form of the Conversation poems:

At a very premature age, even before my fifteenth year, I had bewildered myself in metaphysics, and in theological controversy. Nothing else pleased me. . . . but from this I was auspiciously withdrawn, partly indeed by an accidental introduction to an amiable family, chiefly however, by the genial influence of a style of poetry, so tender and yet so manly, so natural and real, and yet so dignified and harmonious, as the sonnets &c. of Mr. Bowles! Well were it for me, perhaps, had I never relapsed into the same mental disease.  
(*BL*, I, pp. 9-10)

16 *The Prelude*, 1805, VI, 305-14. The text I am using is *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850* (Norton Critical Editions), ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, New York and London 1979.

The local irony here is that chapters five to thirteen of the *Biographia* itself are preoccupied with just such "metaphysicks" and "theological controversy". But it is in the lost and regained paradise that our interest lies, and in the key word "bewildered". The "amiable family" is, of course, the Evans family; Mary Evans had been Coleridge's first love. It is, however, a *literary* life that Coleridge is writing and the mention of Bowles, indeed the priority given to Bowles's poetry, has far-reaching literary implications. If we go back to 1794 and Coleridge's analysis of the rescue effected by Bowles's poetry not long after the time that he first read it, we find the same story:

... when the *darker* day of life began,  
And I did roam, a *thought-bewilder'd* man!  
Thy kindred lays a healing solace lent

(II. 6-8)<sup>17</sup>

Again, "Wilder'd and dark", Coleridge finds salvation in the heart; according to the *Biographia*, Bowles was "the first", with Cowper, "who reconciled the heart with the head" (*BL*, I, p. 16).

Coleridge's early letters make it clear that it was thought to *the exclusion of feeling* to which he objected, rather than to thought *per se*. "I *think* too much for a Poet", he wrote to John Thelwall in December 1796. He believed Southey, on the other hand, thought too little, and suggested that a great poet might be made by "*amalgamating*" the two of them (*CL*, I, p. 299). The suggestion may not have been entirely whimsical; throughout his life Coleridge instigated literary collaboration—first with Lamb, then with Southey, and later with Lloyd and Wordsworth. Perhaps he naively felt that he could find in these "amalgamations" the right "balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" that he felt characterized imaginative activity (*BL*, II, p. 12).

Coleridge found in the blending of thought and feeling in Bowles's poetry a naturalness and an ease which his own rhetorical and philosophical style lacked:

I cannot write without a *body* of *thought*—hence my *Poetry* is crowded and sweats beneath a heavy burthen of Ideas and Imagery!  
It has seldom Ease.<sup>18</sup>

There followed this discovery a period in which a misguided belief in the superior dignity of this "weighty" style persisted and in which, as he says in the *Biographia*, his own "judgement was

17 *PW*, I, p. 84 (my emphasis).

18 Coleridge to Southey, 11 December 1794 (*CL*, I, p. 137).

stronger, than were [his] powers of realizing its dictates" (*BL*, I, p. 3). But that he found in Bowles's sonnets, and in Cowper's blank-verse *The Task*, a congenial model from which to work is proved by the Conversation poems themselves. The precise nature of that debt has been amply discussed elsewhere,<sup>19</sup> and need not concern us here. It is enough that the rescue from a too exclusive and selfish attention to theological and philosophical issues which has seemed regrettable in "The Eolian Harp", lay behind the Conversation poems as a group.

## II

"This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" presents the clearest example of all the Conversation poems of the redeeming power of love, and emphasizes the point that for Coleridge the movement away from the Self is both a poetic technique and a moral and spiritual imperative. The poem begins on a note of petulance and self-preoccupation, the casual particularity of the poet's imprisonment within the lime-tree bower subtly suggesting his imprisonment within the Self:

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.

In his imagination, however, the poet accompanies his friends, first, down "the still roaring dell", and then out under "the wide wide heaven". By the time the poet identifies specifically with Lamb's "gladness", all thought of his own discomfort has been lost in sympathy for the "evil and pain/ And strange calamity" from which Lamb is thought to emerge. This unconscious act of sympathetic identification inspired by love is the point of departure from the Self; "Love", Coleridge insisted in an early note, "transforms the soul into the object loved" (*CN*, I, 189). Lamb's journey has become his own, in more ways than one. There are in fact four journeys: firstly, the literal journey that occurs outside the poem and the poet's imagination; secondly, the poet's imaginative recreation of that journey; thirdly, Lamb's symbolic journey from pain to gladness, from the city (darkness, imprisonment) to Nature (freedom and light); and finally the poet's own, spiritual journey, *via* Lamb's, from self-centredness

19 Most commentators discuss the debt. For Coleridge and Bowles see, for example, M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric", and for Coleridge and Cowper see House, pp. 71-83.

(darkness, imprisonment) to selfless participation in Nature and God (freedom and light).

Much of the argument is carried on by the imagery, especially by the compound image of the sun and sunlight. The "roaring dell" it will be noted, was "only speckled by the mid-day sun"; the "branchless Ash/ *Unsunnd*" (my emphasis) is even more benighted. Once under "the wide wide heaven", however, everything lives "in yellow light". Here the image suggests God, particularly God *as Love*:

. . . one Mind, one omnipresent Mind  
 Omnific. His most holy name is Love.  
 (*Religious Musings*, ll. 105-6)

There is ample justification for reading the sun as a symbol of Divinity in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison". The association is common in Coleridge's early work. "Man knows God only by revelation from God", he noted in 1797, "as we see the sun by his own light" (*CN*, I, 209). In the passage from *Religious Musings* which I quoted early in this essay, Coleridge says that once man is liberated from "his small particular orbit" or Self, he

Stands in the sun, and with no partial gaze  
 Views all creation  
 (ll. 111-12)

Another passage from *Religious Musings*, however, not only likens the sensation of Divinity to the sensation of sunlight, but also provides a key to the complex operation of the image in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison". Coleridge describes the development of "the Elect" from a state of selfish solicitude—a state in which

thirty cares  
 Drink up the spirit and the dim regards  
 Self-centre  
 (ll. 89-91)

—to a state in which, thanks to "supernal grace", these passions are converted to selfless ones, "Enrobed in light, and naturalised in Heaven". "As when", Coleridge continues

a Shepherd on a vernal morn  
 Through some thick fog creeps timorous with slow foot,  
 Darkling he fixes on the immediate road  
 His downward eye: all else of fairest kind  
 Hid or deformed. But lo! the bursting Sun!  
 Touched by the enchantment of that sudden beam  
 Straight the black vapour melteth, and in globes  
 Of dewy glitter gems each plant and tree;  
 On every leaf, on every blade it hangs!

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Dance glad the new-born intermingling rays,  
And wide around the landscape streams with glory!

(ll. 94-104)

The elaborate simile is pregnant with implication for the poetry of both Wordsworth and Coleridge. The ascent of Snowdon, the spear-grass passage in *The Ruined Cottage*, and "Ode. Intimations of Immortality" of Wordsworth, for example, spring immediately to mind. But more evident still is its importance for a reading of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison". There the poet begins self-centred by "dim regards", cut off from Nature ("all else of fairest kind/ Hid or deformed"), and there also the first movement of the poem ends with a landscape streaming with a sunlit glory that automatically invokes the "Almighty Spirit". "Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb", prays the poet

Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!  
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!  
And kindle, thou blue Ocean! 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.

(ll. 34-43)

Not only is the landscape that Coleridge imagines transformed by the sunlight, but the very bower which had once been a prison becomes a witness of this translucence of God in his creation:

Pale beneath the blaze  
Hung the transparent foliage

(ll. 47-8)

The idea of transparency confirms the dissolution of these prison walls, the movement outwards of the poet's mind and spirit enabling the movement inwards of the sun. Coleridge's act of love participates in the Divine love which creates and sustains all existence, as the sun sustains the natural world. "Soaring aloft", Coleridge says in *Religious Musings*, he was able as a member of "the Elect" to breathe

the empyreal air  
Of Love, omnific, omnipresent Love,  
Whose day-spring rises glorious in my soul  
As the great Sun

(ll. 414-7—my emphasis)

God, as Love, in other words, is both within and outside man, could he but purify himself of selfish desires. "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" is an untheoretical expression of Coleridge's sense of "the one Life, within us and abroad", a sense which he

also discovered in Hebrew poetry: "In the Hebrew Poets each Thing has a Life of it's own, & yet they are all one Life. In God they move, & live, & *have* their Being".<sup>20</sup> In the final, brilliant image of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" the rook—a black and traditionally unattractive bird—is momentarily swallowed up by the sun, gathered into the "one Life":

when the last rook  
Beat its straight path along the dusky air  
Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing  
(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)  
Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,  
While thou stood'st gazing . . .

(ll. 68–73)

The poet, Charles, and the rook, all with a life of their own, become one life in this last image; the creaking of the bird's wing, once "dissonant", like the opening mood of the poet, is now subsumed by a larger harmony:

No sound is dissonant which tells of Life. (l. 76)

In the same letter to William Sotheby of September 1802, in which Coleridge records his discovery of the Hebrew poets' sense of unity, he also related it to the faculty which, as poets, they appeared to him to possess "beyond all others": the Imagination. But he had suggested an association between the "one Life" and the poetic Imagination at least eight years earlier when, in *Religious Musings*, he addresses the Elect under a different name:

Contemplant Spirits! ye that hover o'er  
With untired gaze the immeasurable fount  
Ebullient with creative Deity!  
And ye of plastic power, that interfused  
Roll through the grosser and material mass  
In organizing surge! Holies of God!

(ll. 402–7)

Continuing this association of the "plastic", modifying power of genius on the one hand, and the creating and informing power of God on the other, the sunlit landscape of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" represents, as well as Divine unity, the world transformed by the poet's Imagination. Coleridge uses precisely this analogy for the effects of Imagination at the opening of the fourteenth chapter of the *Biographia*:

During the first year that Mr Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a

20 10 September 1802 (*CL*, II, p. 866).

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faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination. The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or *sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape*, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both.

(*BL*, II, p. 5—my emphasis)

Once “delight/ Comes sudden on [his] heart” in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”, and the poet’s attention is withdrawn from vision to reality, he then remarks the bower itself modified by the colours of the setting sun. The transformation represents the shapings—to adapt line 55 of “The Eolian Harp”—of the *regenerate* mind:

I watch’d  
Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov’d to see  
The shadow of the leaf and stem above  
Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree  
Was richly ting’d, and a deep radiance lay  
Full on the ancient ivy . . .

(ll. 48–53)

But the Imagination, for Coleridge, needed love or joy—some “home-born Feeling”. “Love is the vital air of my Genius” he wrote to his wife on 10 March 1799 (*CL*, I, p. 971). Only “the heart/ Awake to Love and Beauty” unifies, idealizes, and animates the world of Nature,<sup>21</sup> as God perpetually creates and sustains Nature. The lines

Henceforth I shall know  
That Nature ne’er deserts the wise and pure  
(ll. 59–60)

are often likened to Wordsworth’s claim in “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” that

Nature never did betray  
The heart that loves her.

(ll. 122–3)

There is, however, a significant difference, and one that might fairly be said to differentiate the priorities of the two poets. In Coleridge wisdom and purity precede a love of Nature; Nature never did betray the heart that *loves*. “Love”, he wrote in an early letter to Southey, “makes all things pure and simple like itself”.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”, it is only after the act of love takes place, and the poet is assimilated into the unity of God and Nature, that the Imagination can operate. It is in this sense that, as Coleridge says in “Dejection: An Ode”, “in our life alone does Nature live” (l. 48).

21 I am, of course, paraphrasing the famous definition of the secondary imagination at the end of the thirteenth chapter of the *Biographia* (*BL*, I, p. 202).

For Wordsworth the Imagination depends on love only at the very outset, when the child's soul

Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul  
Doth gather passion from his mother's eye.

(1799, II, ll. 272-3)

Yet despite their differences, the long passage in *The Prelude* (1799) in which Wordsworth describes the awakening and nurturing of the creative spirit offers an important gloss on Coleridge's idea of love in the Conversation poems. Exactly how long this natural bond is required Wordsworth does not say, just that "Subjected to the discipline of love" the child not only becomes more sensitive, but more creative as well:

In one beloved presence—nay and more,  
In that most apprehensive habitude  
And those sensations which have been derived  
From this beloved presence—there exists  
A virtue which irradiates and exalts  
All objects through all intercourse of sense.

(ll. 285-90)

These lines recall the pantheistic spirit of "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" which "rolls through all things" (l. 102), implicitly associating love, Imagination, and the "one Life within us and abroad" as Coleridge does in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison". Out of context they would make a perfect epigraph for Coleridge's poem. The child, Wordsworth goes on to say, is "no outcast" then, as Coleridge is at the beginning of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison", and before Sara's rescuing him in "The Eolian Harp"—neither "bewildered", Wordsworth says, nor "depressed". Rather he is an inmate of this "active universe" (a position which Coleridge achieves during the course of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison"):

his mind  
Even as an agent of the one great mind,  
Creates, creator and receiver both,  
Working but in alliance with the works  
Which it beholds.

(ll. 301-5)

### III

"This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" has the reconciliation of informality with tight formal organization, and of intricate natural detail with philosophical argument, that are universally identified



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as the achievement of the Conversation poems. There are, however, occasional awkwardnesses. The explicit moral of lines 64 to 67, for example, has a prissy self-consciousness, even self-righteousness, that strains against the attitude of humility that is so crucial to the argument:

sometimes

'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,  
That we may lift the soul, and contemplate  
With lively joy the joys we cannot share.

The lines are bathetic in their explicitness. Coleridge himself attributed to Bowles's "perpetual trick of *moralizing* everything" his decline as a poet. What this "trick" indicates is an alienation of mind from nature, of Self from not-Self—an alienation, that is, of the kind that the poet in the Conversation poems endeavours to overcome. Coleridge is not crudely moralizing Nature in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison", but the same distinction and difference between the poet and Nature is implied. In the same letter to Sotheby, Coleridge expands on his criticism of Bowles:

never to see or describe any interesting appearance in nature, without connecting it by dim analogies with the moral world, proves faintness of Impression. Nature has her property interest; & he will know what it is, who believes & feels, that every Thing has a Life of it's own, & that we are all *one Life*. A Poet's *Heart & Intellect* should be *combined, intimately combined & unified* with the great appearances in Nature.<sup>23</sup>

In "Frost at Midnight" this unification is complete.

Justly considered the finest of the Conversation poems, "Frost at Midnight" follows the pattern of redemption from self-centredness that has been traced in "The Eolian Harp" and "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison". The poem begins with a calmness that is almost preternatural, but it is a calmness from which the poet is excluded; rather he is bound within

that solitude which suits  
Abstruser musings.

(ll. 5–6)

Again, what alienates him is the self-involution of "abstruse research", the vice of "The Eolian Harp" and "Dejection: An Ode". That the calmness should disturb the poet is an indication of his being out of phase with the natural world. The peaceful slumber of the poet's child, on the other hand, identifies him with the universal calm.

23 10 September 1802 (*CL*, II, p. 864).

The film that flutters on the grate the poet unfairly describes as the "sole unquiet thing"—unfairly because it is his "idling Spirit" interpreting Nature according to "its own moods". He projects his dissonant mood onto the film as the artificial poet had projected his melancholy onto the nightingale in Coleridge's poem of the same name. It is he alone who is "unquiet". All the while, however,

The frost performs its secret ministry,  
Unhelped by any wind.

(ll. 1-2)

What this mysterious ministry is, is only revealed—and then obliquely—in the final image of the poem. Enough at this stage to know that some beneficial change is being secretly wrought.

In the subtlest transition of all in the Conversation poems, the second verse paragraph (ll. 23-43) moves to memories of the poet's schooldays. The connection is obvious enough; watching the film, the poet recalls the superstition that "the films were called *strangers* and supposed to portend the arrival of some absent friend", and with this recalls the number of anxious hours spent as a schoolboy hoping for the arrival of a loved one. But the arbitrariness of the connection should not obscure the complex and suggestive relationship between the state of the poet now as expressed in the opening lines (ll. 1-23) and the state of the poet as a child. From his initial isolation as a meditative adult we have moved to his isolation as a child (and with his interest in psychology Coleridge would have been the first to relate the two); in terms of the poem it is an isolation from love and nature. From the dream-like inaudibility of the world outside the mature poet, we have moved to the dreams of his "sweet birth-place" and voluntary dreams of "soothing things". From the child Hartley we have moved to Coleridge the child. What links the two verse paragraphs more than anything else, however, is the film, not because it prompts the memory, but because it expresses in a paradox the movement in the poem from estrangement to love and reconciliation. The film, though called a *stranger*, is believed to usher in love.

Accordingly, at line 44, the poem returns to the present and the poet begins the familiar movement out of the Self. A pre-occupation with his own isolation, present and past, changes to a promise to his child that he will not suffer as the poet has suffered. "I was reared" deprived of love and Nature, the poet says,

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In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,  
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.  
But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like the 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 . . .

(ll. 51-8)

Coleridge describes himself as a youth with eyes "Fixed with mock study on a swimming book", unable in his anxiety to focus on the language of men; Hartley, on the other hand, shall

see and hear  
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
Of that eternal language, which . . . God  
Utters.

(ll. 58-61)

This transition also takes place in the present, however, and for the benefit of Coleridge himself. Although the poem opened with his musing on some abstruse point of metaphysics—man's language—he now finds himself reading and recreating the language of God in his imaginative anticipation of Hartley's youth. Through his child he has rediscovered a home in the world beyond the confines of the "thirsty cares" and "dim regards" that "self-centre". After the reference to "*my babe*" in line 54 the first person pronoun disappears altogether, an extraordinary thing in a lyric poem and an index of the success of the poet's self-effacing act of love.

The best index of all, however, is the beautiful and moving combination of prayer and benediction with which the poem closes:

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 nigh thatch  
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.

(ll. 65-74)

The frost, like the sunlit landscape of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison", has transformed the landscape—as has Coleridge's Imagination, regenerated by love and faith. Coleridge has become a part of the landscape. No longer the outsider, the *spec-tator ab extra* of the opening lines and the "sole *unquiet* thing",

he has now been assimilated into Nature, and the contrasting quietude is stressed ("*Quietly* shining to the *quiet* Moon"). But the landscape has also been assimilated by the poet. In an *imagined* landscape Coleridge has unified present and future, summer and winter, man and child, God and Nature. No better instance exists in all of Coleridge's poetry of "the Poet's *Heart & Intellect . . . combined, intimately combined & unified* with the great appearances in Nature".

Though casually introduced, the act of love in the Conversation poems that Harper stressed by imitation in his essay of 1925 is not a casual thing. It is at the centre of Coleridge's theology in the 1790s, of his related philosophy of mind, and of his further related philosophy of literary form.