Enduring Coleridge:

‘The functions of comparison, judgement, and interpretation’

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This thesis is completely my own original work.

– Alison Cardinale

65,500 words.
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I acknowledge my grandmother, Coraline Milne, who bequeathed me her literary passions.
Abstract

My thesis, ‘Enduring Coleridge’, is a dialogic inquiry into poetic form in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge that admits the non-semantic, even irrational, quality of Coleridge’s poetry to identify a dramatic juxtaposition of voices in an authentically Romantic critical methodology. My thesis considers Coleridge’s poetry and philosophical writing as an organic whole, sharing the same preoccupations and the same rhetorical and imaginative techniques, in order to recover and characterise an informing experience of poetic rapture involving intimations of divinity. It is vital to return to Coleridge to articulate a theory of poetry in an age in which ways of knowing about ourselves and the world have been claimed by philosophers in the field of neuroscience, whose extreme physicalism represents a developed version of the reductive empiricism emerging in Coleridge’s time. This thesis will attempt to unite different epistemic models of understanding to recover, through Coleridge’s own writings, a broader cosmology akin to that envisioned by Plato and the German Idealists who exerted such a powerful influence on his work. My focus is on Coleridge’s program for the methodical cultivation of the mental powers through the exercise of the active contemplation of nature as creation.

Dissatisfied with the editing of the ‘Treatise on Method’ in the Encyclopedia Metropolitana, published in January 1818, Coleridge reworked his material for what he dubbed a rifacciamento of the 1809-10 serial publication of The Friend. The concept of the friend as reader, collaborator, and gentle auditor is central to Coleridge’s work and life. As readers, we are envisaged as retiring to our study with Coleridge, who aims to converse with us across time in a manner that enlarges our network of friends to include thinkers and theorists from Plato to A. W. Schlegel and poets from Shakespeare and Milton to William Wordsworth. It is my contention that, in this endearing enterprise, Coleridge has succeeded. In the four decades following the publication of
Barbara E. Rooke’s edition of *The Friend*, Coleridge’s posthumous scholarly network has expanded and crossed disciplines that were once discrete fields of academic endeavour.

The notion of friendship is central to the study of Coleridge, so it is worth reflecting on formative personal experiences when drawing conclusions about the significance of the title of *The Friend*. Accordingly, I proceed in this inquiry cognisant of Coleridge’s life experiences, from the trial and banishment of the social reformer William Frend in the early 1790s through to Coleridge’s historic entanglement with the Wordsworths as the decade drew to a close. Strict historicism, however, needs to be complemented by due consideration of the imaginative life of Coleridge as a self-conceived writer of far-reaching educative influence. To gauge Coleridge’s success in reaching his goals for *The Friend*, we need to shift the focus of inquiry from the politics of subscription to a consideration of his ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ in the second, 1818 edition. These essays, I argue, represent Coleridge’s attempt to reconfigure education through intellectual sociability and to guide readers of his early poetry.
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Preface

Honouring the principles of Coleridgean method:
the substantial act of writing and ‘the self-unravelling clue’

My inquiry into the principles of Coleridgean method is framed to meet the challenges of contemporary scholarship, conducted in an age in which the ways of knowing about ourselves and the world have been claimed by philosophers in the field of neuroscience, whose extreme physicalism and scientific modelling of the brain makes the empiricist reductiveness emerging in the nineteenth century appear positively soulful. My critical methodology takes seriously the emerging transitions of our own age that Gaston Bachelard, working across the disciplines of poetics and the philosophy of science, construes as instances of ‘epistemological rupture’.1 Coleridge’s enduring legacy may yet prove to be a way into a more humane future, made so through reconnecting with the literary and philosophical principles he held dear as crucial for the education of both the soul and the mind.

The methodological principle articulated in the subtitle of my Preface, ‘the self-unravelling clue’, points to ways to begin developing a theoretical framework for a discussion of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, ‘Frost at Midnight’, and ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. In relation to a strand of critical methodology developed in response to the two conversation poems in this group, Kelvin Everest comments that:

The conversation poems have most often been read in a context supplied by Coleridge’s own later writings, critical and philosophical, that bear on his Christian account of the pervasive unity that he conceived to inform experience. The best commentaries on ‘This Lime-Tree Bower’ and ‘Frost at Midnight’ have employed a critical framework derived from Coleridge’s later thought; usually, in fact, the endeavour has been to illustrate that thought by the reference to the way in which the earlier poetry works.2

A footnote to this passage identifies leading exponents of this critical tradition as R.A. Durr, Richard Haven, R.H. Fogle, R.C. Wendling, George Gilpin and M. G. Sundell. Durr was writing about ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ in 1959; the work by Fogle cited (The Idea of Coleridge’s Criticism) appeared in 1962; Richard Haven identified ‘patterns of consciousness’ in Coleridge’s work in 1969 and Gilpin and Sundell speculated on the ‘spiral of poetic thought’ in Coleridge’s works in 1972. Everest’s own inquiry into ‘Coleridge’s secret ministry’ appeared in 1979, so criticism in the two decades prior to this quite distinct inquiry receives due attention in his survey of the literature. Since then, however, four decades of fast-moving currents in the science of the mind have swept criticism along to a different vantage point from that available in the period from 1959-1972. Though my inquiry proceeds from that new position, it is continuous with the critical tradition saluted as ‘valuable’ by Everest, retaining, as it does, an indispensable sense of the relation between ‘the way in which the early poetry works’ and ‘Coleridge’s later thought’.

The title of my first chapter, ‘Designation’, indicates the need to distinguish between design in the sense of form, on the one hand, and designating, as in words designating objects, on the other. The first Coleridgean reference used in extrapolating the relevant principle here draws on the conclusion to Essay VI, on ‘Principles of Method’:

By some connatural force,  
Powerful at greatest distance to unite  
With secret amity things of like kind,\(^3\)

we find poetry, as it were, substantiated and realised in nature: at once the Poet and the poem! \(^3\)

The second reference in the title draws on Essay XI, particularly the notion of the ‘clue’:

In order therefore to the recognition of himself in nature man must first learn to comprehend nature in himself, and its laws in the ground of his own existence. Then only can he reduce Phenomena to Principles – then only will he have achieved the METHOD, the self-unravelling clue, which alone can securely guide him to the conquest of the former – when he has discovered in the basis of their union the necessity of their differences; in the principle of their continuance the solution of their changes. It is the idea of the common centre, of the universal law, by which all power manifests itself in opposite yet interdependent forces

\[\eta \gamma \alpha \delta \Upsilon \Lambda \Sigma \aei \pi\alpha \alpha \text{ Monoài ka\'dha\'i, kai no\'erais aerapei to\'mai} \]

that enlightening inquiry, multiplying experiment, and at once inspiring humility and perseverance will lead him to comprehend gradually and progressively the relation of each to each to the other, of each to all, and of all to each.⁴

Coleridge gives, as the ultimate object of method, the reduction of phenomena to principles. In doing so, he elucidates a rationale for the poems composed some years earlier, though the essays comprise a philosophical treatise.

Indeed, it is my contention that the essayist Coleridge in ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ is systematically writing into plain view the previously unarticulated and therefore obscure method earlier (and consistently) employed by the poet Coleridge. The ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’, then, are analogous to the publication of a neuroscientist’s set of programming rules designed to encode consciousness, bringing us closer to conceptualising the poem as a ‘scientific’ model challenging leading ideas and theoretically formulated explanatory principles.

In his notebooks, Coleridge refers to the philosophical writer as ‘belabyrinthed’,⁵ so the mythological conception of this ‘clue’ as a ball of thread to follow as it unravels is a rich one.⁶ Note that it is ‘self-unravelling’, too, which carries the double sense of, first, surrendering the self in the experience of following this clue, and, second, unravelling a spherical, impenetrable object to a distinct line if the right thread is

⁶ *OED*: clue (n.) 1590s, phonetic variant of *clew* ‘a ball of thread or yarn’ with reference to the one Theseus used as a guide out of the Labyrinth.
located and pulled. The ravel/unravel paradox that emerges here can be traced to the etymology of ‘ravel’, which carries the sense of ‘to untangle, unwind’, but also ‘to become tangled or confused’. The *OED* notes that ‘ravel’ and ‘unravel’ are both synonyms and antonyms, indicating that these ‘are reconciled by its roots in weaving and sewing: as threads become unwoven they become tangled’. The key act of interpretation of a poem, then, or of philosophical inquiry for that matter, is finding and following the thread that will unravel the whole and yet prevent the guided reader from becoming immediately lost to self in a surrender of autonomy that must be gradual and progressive. With Coleridge, the reader endures a self-effacing process yet emerges from the labyrinth sufficiently intact to tell the tale.

The two senses of ‘enduring’ designated in the title of my thesis are pertinent to the challenge of engaging with the processes of unravelling in such a way that one does not fall into a tangle in acquiescing to self-unravelling, but instead holds fast to the thread from beginning to end. At the end of this thread – in the moment of emerging from the labyrinth – in theory, a new clarity may be apprehended and articulated. In the fuller discussion of the conversation poems in the following chapters, this distinct challenge may prove to be ‘easier said than won’, as Seamus Perry has observed wryly. Perry’s insightful reappraisal of Coleridgean ‘muddles’, in which he identifies ‘a Platonic impulse to reach a totalising vision’ at odds with Coleridge’s characteristic ‘extraordinary, delighted, highly visual sensibility, alive to the various elements of the particular, phenomenal universe’, precisely identifies the ‘clue’ to understanding Coleridge’s poetic method of writing a unified nature and self into existence.

The challenging paradox identified by Perry as a kind of ‘double vision’ will be brought to the fore in the discussion of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ in the first

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8 Seamus Perry, *The Uses of Division*, 58.
chapter. Overall, the approach to ‘Enduring Coleridge’ in this chapter accords with
Thomas McFarland’s contention that an emphasis on Coleridge’s reputation, rather than
close engagement with major threads of inquiry, has long led to a misreading of
Coleridgean models for purposes quite other than those he developed, coherently, over a
lifetime. ‘Once we realise the intrinsically organic quality of Coleridge’s erudition’,
McFarland contends, ‘we shall have the basis for a genuine comprehension of his role
and stature as a philosopher.’⁹ Achieving this ‘genuine comprehension’ of both of
Coleridge’s roles as a practicing poet and as a speculative philosopher is my ultimate
objective.

The Ancient Quarrel between Poetry and Philosophy

Accordingly, the ensuing discussion of Coleridge’s thinking is firmly anchored in the
enduring Ancient Quarrel between poetry and philosophy raised in Plato’s Republic.
Paul Hamilton’s discussion of Coleridge in this context – with specific attention to the
German Idealists that exerted such a powerful influence on his work – is illuminating,
particularly in relation to the construction of subjectivity through dissolving the
boundaries between subject and object in the process of poetic creation. Opening with a
citation from Coleridge’s Notebooks, Hamilton develops a productive metaphor for the
drama of subjectivity. He then links Coleridge’s unfolding philosophy and poetry as an
enactment of Coleridge’s most Jungian ‘wild dream’, one of many recorded in the
Notebooks.¹⁰ Having situated the philosopher-poet in the ‘land of logic’– or, more
precisely, in a Coleridgean epistemic realm that has its own internal logic and
distinctive coherence, along with a generative creative power – Hamilton concludes that
‘Poetry and philosophy are each other’s extension. They are on the stage, at the same

¹⁰ Paul Hamilton, Coleridge and German Philosophy: The Poet in the Land of Logic (New
York: Continuum, 2007), 1.
time, in dramatic dialogue. The reader of both is the winner. This strong expression of the symbiotic and dialogic quality of Coleridgean prose and poetry casts engagement with it in the critical, interpretative mode suggested by both the Platonic dialogues and the plays of Shakespeare. It is a literary sensibility disciplined to interpret the insights of logical argument that is held up as the most fruitful approach to grasping the import of the contemplative, theorising prose and complementary poetic writings of the plurality of selves subsumed under the designation ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge’.

Yet Hamilton’s notion of a ‘dramatic dialogue’ entails the deployment of fully articulated propositional knowledge that Coleridge’s use of the phrase ‘wild dream’ tends to sit uneasily with. Hamilton’s theatrical metaphor begins to appear less apt as the now recognisably Jungian element latent in Coleridge’s phrase, ‘wild dream’, indicates that the subconscious (at the very least) ought to be brought into play to achieve a more precise metaphorical figuration adequate to the demands of capturing the experience of reading Coleridge. An alternative mode of non-semantic representation must be called upon, then, in service of an attuned reading of the poems and philosophic writings. In deference to George Steiner, I explore such a mode under the title of a ‘grammar of the imagination’. Using this conceptual framework, I will identify, in Chapter Two, the functional verb that unites subject and object poetically as Coleridge’s hitherto misunderstood *lene clinamen*. Chapter Three requires a structural swerve into the comedic carnivalesque in Coleridge’s early poetry, before I begin to summarise the findings of applying Coleridge’s principles in Chapter Four, under the aegis of ‘the art of Method.’

It is time to return to the poetry and philosophy of Samuel Taylor Coleridge as an organic whole in order to restore to today’s reader the possibility of a poetic rapture involving the whole soul in a momentary glimpse of the divine. While this mode of

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11 Paul Hamilton, *Coleridge and German Philosophy*, 12.
language is radically unfashionable in an increasingly secular age, it is important to open and traverse that worm-hole in the space-time continuum so vividly familiar to habitual readers, experienced as we are in unencumbered time travel. The ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ theorised by Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria* still operates as a choice freeing up the time-bound historic individual to engage with Romantic poetics in a way that is not possible for a perfunctory, ideologically driven criticism dismissive of Coleridge’s own onto-theological premises. In discussing Keats’ request for readers ‘willingly to suspend their disbelief’ in engaging with ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ – ‘as Coleridge did’ – Jerome J. McGann concludes that ‘Romantic agony focuses on the irrevocable loss of an entire area of human experience, as well as on the equally irrevocable loss of the meaning of that experience’. The second claim is contestable in terms of requiring us to accept that breaks with the continuities of the past must be viewed as so total that communion with the human experience of its peoples cannot be recovered, even partially.

Indeed, the ‘suspension of disbelief’ has been part of the reading contract for as long as individuals have been interested in expanding their consciousness beyond the contingencies of the physical here and now. Einstein’s conception of the empirically perceptible universe as but the tail of the lion exemplifies such imaginative seeking: ‘Nature shows us only the tail of the lion. But I do not doubt that the lion belongs to it even though he cannot at once reveal himself because of his enormous size’. The exercise of the sympathetic imagination in precisely this way has survived, fortunately, despite the contentiousness of twentieth-century critical culture wars that, while

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yielding some valuable tools for analysis, dampened an open and curious spirit of reading. Like Einstein in the early twentieth century, Coleridge struggled throughout his life and work with imaginative speculation on a ‘subtle’ God maintaining faith despite contemplation of the observable vicissitudes of life and the mysterious forces at play in the natural world.

As the twentieth century ended, the Romantic conception of poetry as a shaper of the soul became taboo. ‘The pre-eminence of Paul de Man’s essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality”’, argues Ewan James Jones, made ‘much of Coleridge’s own supposed conceptions of literature at best suspicious, at worst taboo’. Rather than surrender to an educative process that might lead one away from one’s own narrow orbit, criticism (from the 1980s onwards) tended to stay defensively within discrete critical bunkers. The hybrid philosophical-literary-scientific character of the present project is necessary to move the discussion beyond such limitations and proceed freely to an investigation that genuinely seeks to keep faith with Coleridge’s own wide-ranging speculation on humanity, poetry, and God in all the forms it took.

Recent scholarship is focusing on literary networks, gift-exchange, and intellectual sociability beyond a limiting historicist framework. Lucy Newlyn’s 2013 work on William and Dorothy Wordsworth is exemplary. Coleridge valued scholarly community, as is evident from his conviction that ‘when you retire into your study, in the books on your shelves you revisit so many venerable friends with whom you can converse’. The notion of amiable conversation chimes with the rationale of the present methodology. Accordingly, I will investigate the Coleridgean concept of harmonious friendship as an ideally unified ‘multeity’ with an emphasis on reconciling discordant

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voices. The first chapter opens with a treatment of two of Coleridge’s finest ‘Friendly’ poems, ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ and ‘Frost at Midnight’. Identifying the mechanism of transition in the conversation poems opens the way for a treatment of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ that is continuous with Coleridge’s principles of method in the 1818 edition of *The Friend*.

Working within the critical traditions of an indefatigable community of Romanticist scholars, my over-arching concern is to reopen conversations with a transhistoric community of writers and readers outside the terms of reference demarcated by Marxist and deconstructive readings, scientific positivism, and a narrowly conceived new historicist cultural materialism. Coleridge’s program for the methodical cultivation of the mental powers instead focuses on the exercise of the active contemplation of nature as creation. That being so, I read the early poetry through the critical lens Coleridge theorised in the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’. The subtitle of my thesis is drawn from ‘Conclusion of Section the Second’, Essay X:

> So little confirmation from History, from the process of education planned and conducted by unerring Providence, do those theorists receive, who would at least begin (too many, alas! both begin and end) with the objects of the senses; as if nature herself had not abundantly performed this part of the task, by continuous irresistible enforcements of attention to her presence, to the direct beholding, to the apprehension and observation, of the objects that stimulate the senses! As if the cultivation of the mental powers, by methodical exercise of their own forces, were not the securest means of forming the true correspondents to them in the functions of comparison, judgement, and interpretation.  

Emphatically, Coleridge refutes a scientific positivism that privileges knowledge formulated through sensory observation and only subject to empirical verification. Not surprisingly, his starting point is both introspective and interpretative. This clear statement of position is maintained throughout the subsequent essays and is fundamental to appreciating his intellectual stance, along with the ultimate objective of a remarkable series of proofs. In the chapters following, every reference to Coleridge’s

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stated principles of methodical inquiry is drawn from the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ in *The Friend* in an attempt to distill a working methodology of Romantic poetics from this relatively neglected philosophical treatise. The tone was set for critical neglect by the dismissive approach of early twentieth-century critics. In 1938, for example, Earl Leslie Griggs commented on the ‘impertinent interludes’ in the work.\(^\text{19}\) I examine these in the more charitable light of educative friendship in Chapter Seven.

My final chapters aim to recover Coleridge’s notion of education and friendship as intertwined and decidedly spiritual. My initial survey of the critical literature indicates that modern commentators now rarely grapple with the transcendental in relation to spiritual ecstasy (or agony). It is apposite, therefore, to return to the philosophical premises laid out by Coleridge himself in order to articulate a bold and vigorous theory of poetry to return us to an awareness of both poetic and human potential. This may attune a modern reader to the sublimity of Coleridgean music and to a complex harmony capable of enacting something like the mythological music of the spheres. While articulating a theory of Coleridge’s abiding philosophical principles requires additional recourse to his wider oeuvre, including the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge’s distinctive method is most readily discernible in *The Friend*.

**Coleridge’s prose in *The Friend*: ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’**

The notion of friendship is central to the study of Coleridge, so it is worth reflecting on formative personal experiences when drawing conclusions about the significance of the title of *The Friend*. Accordingly, we shall proceed in this inquiry cognisant of Coleridge’s life experiences, from the trial and banishment of the social reformer William Frend in the early 1790s through to his historic entanglement with the Wordsworths as the decade drew to a close. Strict historicism, however, needs to be

complemented by due consideration of the imaginative life of Coleridge as a self-conceived writer of far-reaching educative influence.

As early as 1804, Coleridge imagined a literary journal for his circle of friends on the model of *The Spectator*, established by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in 1711. In Donald J. Newman’s 2005 study of ‘emerging discourses’ in the inception, publication and reception of *The Spectator*, Terence Bowers explains that:

Addison’s and Steele’s aim, like Shaftesbury’s, is not simply to disseminate the results of higher learning to a wider audience, but to relocate and reconfigure the very institutions of learning. Philosophy is no longer to be confined in closed, walled-off realms (“Closets and Libraries”) and governed as the province of a select few; nor is it going to focus on the arcane matters studied in “Libraries, Schools and Colleges,” or employ the specialized discourses of those realms. Instead, it is to be brought out into the open, centred in social spaces (“Clubs,” “Tea-Tables,” “Coffee-Houses”), and discussed in ordinary language that all literate persons are able to understand. So with Coleridge, whose aims for *The Friend* developed within a context of projected educative sociability, as is clear from his 1804 notebook entry: ‘I should like to dare look forward to the Time, when Wordsworth & I with contributions from Lamb & Southey – & from a few others... should publish a *Spectator*’. Coleridge did indeed go on to employ a personified editorial voice along the lines of ‘Mr Spectator’, that of ‘the Friend’. He aimed his periodical’s ideas towards a wider network of learned readership than the publication’s original subscription roots amongst friends and the friends of friends (with a disproportionately Quaker representation, as Deirdre Coleman has expounded in her groundbreaking study of the first edition of *The Friend*). To gauge Coleridge’s success in reaching his goals for the periodical we need to shift the focus of our inquiry from the politics of subscription to a consideration of his ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ in the second, 1818 edition, and their attempt to reconfigure

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education through intellectual sociability.

Dissatisfied with the editing of the ‘Treatise on Method’ in the Encyclopedia Metropolitana, published in January 1818, Coleridge reworked his material for what he dubbed a rifacciamento of the 1809-10 serial publication of The Friend. Barbara E. Rooke’s scholarship has given us two volumes, the first following the text of the 1818 edition of The Friend with the earlier text given complete as an appendix. In her introduction, Rooke notes that The Friend ‘occupies a central position not only in Coleridge’s life, but also in his thought’. Similarly – psychologically and emotionally – the concept of the friend as reader, collaborator and gentle auditor is central to Coleridge’s work and life, as we shall see. As readers, we are envisaged as retiring to our study with Coleridge, who aims to converse with us across time in a manner that enlarges our network of friends to include thinkers and theorists from Plato to A. W. Schlegel and poets from Shakespeare and Milton to William Wordsworth. It is my contention that, in this endearing enterprise, Coleridge has succeeded. In the four decades following the publication of Rooke’s edition of The Friend, Coleridge’s posthumous scholarly network has expanded and crossed disciplines that were once discrete fields of academic endeavour.

In his suggestive daydream on ‘Popularness in Literature’ in the 1818 edition of The Friend, the scope of Coleridge’s ambition for his work is described with an amiable humility that disguises the hubris informing his authorial strategy:

In my cheerful mood I sometimes flattered myself, that a few even among these, … might yet find a pleasure in supporting the FRIEND during its infancy, so as to give it a chance of attracting the notice of others, to whom its style and subjects might be better adapted. Coleridge is alert to the pragmatic need to satisfy an immediate readership whose range and predilections fall well short of his projected circle of highly literate friends. He

eschews the alternative of pandering to the tastes of his actual, rather than potential, readers, however, as his speculation on the pleasures of dancing – an activity anathema to the pious Quakers pouring money into the infant *Friend* – attests. Coleridge is strategic, even cunning, but he does not meet the actual reader half-way. Instead, his writing is directed towards the more coveted reader of the future. The prospect of such a reader kindles Coleridge’s hopes, frequently enabling optimism to overcome the equivocal anxiety documented in Coleman’s study of the historical moment of the birth of *The Friend*.

Just two essays later, Coleridge expresses his distaste at compromise, invoking Epicurus in a memorable figuration whose significance for Coleridge’s motivation as a philosophical writer will be explored in the ensuing chapters. While Norman Fruman may be right that there is a complex psychological dimension to Coleridge’s contempt for ‘pious frauds’, his reading is restricted to Coleridge’s plagiarism and incriminating journal entries, which might be read more charitably as bouts of the imposter syndrome felt by any talented artist. Coleridge is sincere (and surely laudable) in his attempt to establish what we would now recognise as a network of literary scholarship. ‘I would not, I could not dare, address my countrymen as a Friend, if I might not justify the assumption of that sacred title by more than mere veracity, by open-heartedness’. Coleridge (in life) did not always manage the ‘open-heartedness’ of a writer claiming bonds of friendship with his readers. It is with reciprocal open-heartedness, however, that this critical inquiry will proceed such that the now familiar charge of intellectual plagiarism that has dogged Coleridge’s reputation, from the time of Thomas de Quincey to that of Norman Fruman, becomes irrelevant.

The revised edition of *The Friend*, on the other hand, ‘fails not for complex reasons but for a simple one’, writes Fruman: ‘it is dull. All but the most persistent

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reader must finally lose interest in so clogged and sclerotic a performance'.

While it is true there is an element of labour – even frustration – in enduring Coleridge’s prose, the present investigation aims to establish that, for the alert reader, persistence is repaid handsomely when reading *The Friend* alongside Coleridge’s early poetry. *The Friend* can be cast, as I do here, as an illuminating guide to Coleridge’s distinctive poetic method. Furthermore, the wrong stories have been foregrounded in a critical tradition that has obscured Coleridge’s genuine achievements. Accordingly, each chapter of this thesis opens with an emphasis on the contexts I deem more pertinent to his poetics. My main objective is to recover a more enduring Coleridge for the literary and educative networks now growing in fulfillment of the aspirations of *The Friend*.

In the ‘Pious Frauds’ essay, Coleridge defends the intellectual austerity of his work and, implicitly, the effort required of the worthy reader in terms of an ‘insensible clinamen’ threatening the freedom of the will to follow the leading light of the intellect unimpeded:

> Among the numerous artifices, by which austere truths are to be softened down into palatable falsehoods, and Virtue and Vice, like the atoms of Epicurus, to receive the insensible clinamen which is to make them meet each other halfway, I have an especial dislike to the expression, PIOUS FRAUDS.  

Coleridge must reconceive that clinamen or swerve, transforming an insensible motion of atoms into a gracious inclination, as we discover in the opening chapters of this thesis, which focus in the first instance on ‘transitions as method’ before turning to Coleridge’s crucial lene clinamen in Chapter Two. In the concluding chapter, we will return to Coleridge’s particular understanding of the ‘sacred title’ of *Friend* outlined in this Preface as beyond ‘mere veracity’.

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A dialogic inquiry into form and poetry

For Coleridge, speaking truly requires dramatising a complex interplay of voices made all the more dynamic by theatrical conflict and silence. A dialogic inquiry into poetic form, therefore, is most suited to the task of developing an authentically Romantic methodology. We must interpret Coleridge’s poetry (and philosophical writing) as, above all, a dramatic juxtaposition of voices. Voices from the transhistoric community in dialogue with Coleridge include those of Lucretius, Plato, Shakespeare, and Einstein, along with contemporary critics straddling the fields of literature and philosophy, including Paul Hamilton and George Steiner. To do justice to Coleridge in relation to the sacred, my methodology follows the tradition of the more theologically attuned voice of M.H. Abrams while being mindful of Jerome J. McGann’s ideological objections to criticism that keeps faith with Romanticism.

My thesis is informed by the critical traditions of twenty-first century scholarship including work by J. Robert Barth on Coleridge’s ‘religious imagination’ in relation to Coleridge’s notion of sacred friendship in my reading of ‘To William Wordsworth’; Murray Evans on ‘sublime Coleridge’ and architectural analogy in The Friend; and David P. Haney on ‘recent work in Romanticism and religion’ that affirms a shift in emphasis from ideology to philosophy. My framework accommodates Gavin Budge’s contrasting arguments predicated on ‘poetics and the philosophy of common sense’ by reconnecting Coleridge’s philosophical preoccupations to the eighteenth century Scottish ‘common sense realism’ of Thomas Reid.

My methodology aligns with the renewed emphasis given to the ‘philosophy of

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poetic form’³² by Ewan James Jones and Nicholas Reid.³³ As I expound Coleridge’s use of the Gothic mode, my arguments for taking Coleridge on his own terms in relation to the supernatural are informed by Gregory Leadbetter’s exploration of Coleridge and the ‘daemonic imagination’.³⁴ In broader terms, I consider Lucy Newlyn’s work on the reception of Romanticism in my reading of ‘Kubla Khan’.³⁵ My investigation of Coleridge as what I have dubbed a ‘Romantic invalid’ (in Chapter 5) draws on recent studies of melancholy in the eighteenth century by Jennifer Ford and Eric G. Wilson.³⁶ I read ‘The Pains of Sleep’ mindful of disrupted inter-subjectivity, the drama of dreaming and hypochondriasis. My thesis is well situated in the tradition of considering Romanticism in relation to the ‘science of the mind’, established by Alan Richardson.³⁷

The friendliest voice to emerge in twentieth-century literary criticism was that of Thomas McFarland, whose labour to establish the coherence of Coleridge’s writing included a call for ‘a more careful investigation of the meaning of the Platonic backgrounds of Coleridge’s thought’. McFarland sought a scholar ‘to demonstrate the ways in which his actual poetic production participated in the unity of his total effort’.³⁸ Reconceptualising Coleridge’s poetry as coherently dialogic addresses this gap in the critical literature, a gap that remains open despite James Vigus’ twenty-first century scholarship on ‘Platonic Coleridge’.³⁹

³² Ewan James Jones, Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form, 1.
³³ Nicholas Reid, Coleridge, Form and Symbol Or The Ascertaining Vision (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).
Setting the terms of inquiry: organic unity

Although ‘organic unity’ has had a difficult afterlife since the use Coleridge made of it, precisely setting the terms of my inquiry requires offering a brief outline of the life of the critical notion of organicism. Taking into account A.W. Schlegel’s formulations, along with those of Plotinus and other ancient thinkers as ‘important antecedents of German organology’, M. H. Abrams recognises that Coleridge ‘appropriated nothing that he did not assimilate into his own principles’. Indeed, Abrams claims that Coleridge ‘succeeded better than any of his predecessors in converting the organic concept of the imagination into an inclusive and practicable method for specific literary analysis and evaluation’.

The prime source of this notion, as formulated by Socrates in *Phaedrus* [1b], offers a less opaque sense of the term and re-opens its connection with phrases like ‘body of work’:

Soc. At any rate, you will allow that every discourse ought to be a living creature, having a body of its own and a head and feet; there should be a middle, beginning, and end, adapted to one another and to the whole?

Poetry, then, as an organicist discourse, should not escape from its designing intelligence, the poet, but move intelligently through a series of transitions that are logically distinguishable yet as fluid as the grace of a body in motion. This caveat has implications for a treatment of the meditative surrender in the conversation poems, as intimated in the preliminary discussion of Coleridge’s ‘self-unravelling clue’.

Let us consider the fate of the critical notion of ‘organic unity’ in the twentieth century in a little more detail. Abrams notes the reappearance of ‘organic unity’ in Cleanth Brooks’ hope for revitalising the study of poetry:

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One of the critical discoveries of our time – perhaps it is not a discovery but merely a recovery – is that the parts of a poem have an organic relation to each other… The parts of a poem are related as are the parts of a growing plant.42

More recently, in *Romantic Organicism*, Charles Armstrong has tried to revive the study of poetry through the recovery of this critical notion. His work opens with a useful summary of the difficult afterlife of ‘organic unity’, with its ideologically suspect baggage, in a changed and charged climate of critical turbulence. Armstrong sets out to rescue ‘organic unity’ in the following terms:

Nevertheless, organicism has in recent times been written off as an idealistic construction that must be banished to the scrap heap of history. Undoubtedly, it may be said to underlie some of those ‘metanarratives’ which Jean-François Lyotard has deemed to be inoperative to the postmodern condition. As such it is susceptible to criticism for being a mystifying and often dogmatic form that represses difference and alterity at the behest of ideology.43

Thirty years on from Jerome McGann’s *The Romantic Ideology*, the acute awareness of ideology characteristic of New Historicism has relaxed, allowing a more measured approach to the historical individual who wrote poems and had beliefs that were not necessarily sinister because they were systematic. A critic can address Coleridge’s poetry on its own terms, in the first instance, before taking account of the inevitable gaps and contradictions in the poet’s collected works.

On my considered view, the latest critical challenges are founded upon a contestable Marxist privileging of economic discourse combined with an implicit anti-realism of the ‘Dummettian variety’ that underlies the privileging of discourse analysis itself as the ground for truth-making claims.44 By spelling out these implications, as a kind of *reductio*, I aim to defend Romanticism’s focus on a humanist self predicated on philosophical Realism yet complicated by German Idealism. I make use of its emphasis on potential as a commitment to imagined futurity as well as to the recoverable past.

The recognition of the primacy of organic growth in relation to striving towards the sacred in Coleridge’s vision is integral to this defence.

The historic continuities I am working with must be subject to the kind of scrutiny suggested by Paul Hamilton’s charge that Romanticism stands as a ‘Coriolanus among discourses’, a complex criticism we shall return to in more detail in Chapter Seven.\(^4^5\) I will observe, though, with due respect to Hamilton, that the strategy of discourse analysis inevitably places the epistemological cart before the metaphysical horse. William Christie’s comparison between Jerome McGann’s response to René Wellek’s anti-empirical literary emphasis and Francis Jeffrey’s response to Wordsworth may be brought to bear on my considered riposte to the suspicious and the sceptical. Christie identifies a telling parallel ‘Between certain assumptions and strategies characteristic of the Edinburgh Review under Jeffrey’s editorship on the one hand, and, on the other, the assumptions and strategies of recent romanticist historicism.’\(^4^6\)

George Steiner, in his introductory comments on desacralisation as part of the modern zeitgeist in The Grammars of Creation, identifies a process of language becoming ‘opaque’ as a symptom of cultural decay, a metaphor extended throughout a work concerned with the state of scholarship at the end of the twentieth century. In formulating the spiritual malaise of our times as ‘the eclipse of the messianic’, Steiner claims that:

> on both the transcendental and the immanent levels of reference – these two being always closely related in a dialectical reciprocity – we are undergoing a displacement… Except in masters of poetry and speculative thought, language is conservative and opaque to nascent intuitions (hence the need for mathematical and logically formal codes in the swiftly moving sciences)… Grammars of nihilism flicker, as it were, on the horizon.\(^4^7\)


\(^{4^7}\) George Steiner, The Grammars of Creation (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 8.
Both Coleridge and Plato are exceptional in this regard (as ‘masters of poetry and speculative thought’), hence the need to investigate the writings of each with a considered grasp of their originary terms, even though these have lost currency in a secular age.

Indeed, ‘organic unity’ has been actively cast out as a critical concept in the aftermath of Nazi ideology. In response, Roger Griffin argues vigorously against yoking Romanticism and Nazism with the credible claim that ‘The Nazi exploitation of both Classicism and Romanticism is not the archaism of a society nostalgic for the past, but the modernism of a regime nostalgic for the future.’¹⁴ Yet, as M.H. Abrams pointed out in the aftermath of the Second World War, Coleridge’s commitment as a philosophical poet to the ‘root metaphor’ of organicism is problematic:

> The laws of the inanimate world, that is, are fixed and given laws, and operate without consciousness or the possibility of choice; so that in discarding external rules, Coleridge seems in danger of falling into a total artistic automatism.⁴⁹

Implicit in Coleridge’s poetry, on the other hand, is a less openly theorised faith in the gratuitous as a saving intervention for creative acts of free will.

Coleridge’s own philosophical poetry – which begins by drawing on a credibly secular metaphysical base – runs counter to the intellectual coolness of Lucretius’ highly influential philosophical poem, De rerum natura. Coleridge is driven by an emotionally charged theological need to drive out the Epicurean ‘demons of fanaticism’ from the thinking of his educated readership:

> The feelings will set up their standard against the understanding, whenever the understanding has renounced its allegiance to the reason; and what is faith but the personal realization of the reason by its union with the will? If we would drive out the demons of fanaticism from the people, we must begin by exorcising the spirit of Epicureanism in the higher ranks, and restore to their teachers the true Christian enthusiasm, the vivifying influence of the altar, the censer, and the sacrifice. They must

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neither be ashamed of nor disposed to explain away, the articles of prevenient and auxiliary grace.\textsuperscript{50}

It is, unfortunately, the characteristic nature of demons relentlessly to return to haunt when most earnestly banished. My reading of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ in this light in Chapter Two offers confirmation that Coleridge was so haunted and compelled to demonstrate the ‘vivifying influence’ of ‘the sacrifice’ in response.

As a prelude to a consideration of poetry shaping the soul, then – a purpose of which Coleridge was consistently mindful – it is necessary to consider Socrates’ figure of ‘the soul of the lyric poet’ as a bee in Plato’s \textit{Ion}:

\begin{quote}
Soc. And the soul of the lyric poet does the same, as they themselves say; for they tell us that they bring songs from honeyed fountains, culling them out of the gardens and dells of the Muses; they, like the bees, winging their way from flower to flower. And this is true. For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

The visible tip of Plato’s paradox and its implications for necessity and creative free will emerges in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, as we shall see. In Chapter One, the crucial ambivalence I identify in that poem, mindful of the above passage from \textit{Ion}, turns on the extent to which an inspired soul has more freedom over the poetic process of creation than a bee has in its instinctive gathering of nectar.

A further issue for the figuring of the lyric poet as a ‘bee’ emerges if one considers Von Frisch’s theory of the waggle dance of the bee and its implications for speaker competence in relation to grammar. The question is whether or not the rules of generative grammar need to be understood or merely respected at some level by a competent speaker. Are the rules, or principles, governing poetic method accessible to propositional formulation, or are they more like know-how than know-what? Michael

\textsuperscript{50} Samuel Taylor Coleridge, \textit{The Friend}, 1:107.

Devitt insists on a distinction ‘between the theory of the bee’s “waggle dance” and the
time of the bee’s competence to dance’, to clarify the significance of this distinction:

A bee returning from a distant food source produces a waggle dance on the vertical
face of the honeycomb. The positioning of this dance and its pattern indicate the
direction and distance of the food source. These dances form a very effective
representational system governed by a surprising set of structure rules. It is the task of
a theory of that system to describe these structure rules. Karl von Frisch worked on
this task for decades finally completing his theory in the 60s. He won a Nobel Prize...
What von Frisch certainly did not win a Nobel for was a theory of how the bee
performs this dance. Indeed, the processing rules within a bee that enables it to
perform this remarkable feat remain a mystery to this day (pp. 18-21). In sum, the
representational system of the dance is one thing, the bee’s internal state of
competence to produce the dance, another. Thanks to Von Frisch we know a lot about
the former; nobody knows much about the latter.52

This raises the analogous question of whether the lyric poet is competent in the rules
governing composition, in the sense of being cognisant and able to articulate them, or
whether he or she is inspired and versifying beyond free will? Is verse produced by a
rigidly determined adherence to rules of which the poet is unaware and which he or she
is unable to articulate? If the latter is the case, then the inspired lyric poet could indeed
be somewhat ingloriously out of his senses, as suggested by Socrates, but Coleridge’s
active articulation of a theory of poetry suggests otherwise. That Coleridge’s poems
preceded his writings on method might also suggest less methodical composition,
particularly when the philosophical problem of speaker competence is compounded by
the poet’s reputation for opium use. A closer investigation of the logic of Coleridge’s
‘Essays on the Principles of Method’, however, may point to the former, more
philosophically robust characterisation of the poet as a lyric speaker in conscious
command of a set of generative rules of composition.

52 Michael Devitt, ‘Dodging the argument on the subject matter of grammars: A response to John
The present attempt to articulate a theory of poetics using Coleridge’s explicitly formulated principles of method is, to some extent, an inquiry into whether knowledge of the rules of poetic composition is commensurate with the articulation of propositional knowledge. Given this, the emphasis in the ensuing treatment of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ will be on the operation of Coleridge’s theorised methodological principles at the level of structure and poetic form. What distinguishes Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a lyric poet from a dancing bee, or even a run-of-the-mill linguistically competent speaker, is his capacity to theorise the structural principles of his own lyric performance. So a thesis on how the accessibility of this knowledge enables acts of the creative will that are not merely determined by a set of unconscious encoded rules rests on showing to what extent the principles articulated in the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ can be applied to the poems selected for treatment. In the process, part of my proof involves illustrating the ways in which these poems may be conceived as models of Coleridge’s philosophical inquiry in the sense of being, at one level, non-semantic representations of his central concepts of the mind and the self. The objective of this methodology is to articulate a theory of Coleridge’s Romantic poetry that takes stock of its underlying generative grammar. At each stage during the course of this investigation the argument raised in relation to syntax and semantic competence is one to bear in mind. Carefully handled, it may well assist in characterising Coleridge’s methodology both as philosophically coherent and as reformulating an organic theory of poetry along the lines of Steiner’s concept of a ‘grammar of creation’.
Chapter One: DESIGNATION

Continuous transition: *progressive singularity* or the individual living soul in time

To begin elucidating the first distinguishable principle of ‘continuous transition’, which I have taken to describe the relations involved in ‘the progressive singularity of the living soul in time’, it is necessary to turn to the specific reference from Essay IV of *The Friend*, from which this rule has been extrapolated:

But the man of methodical industry and honorable pursuits, does more: he realizes its ideal divisions, and gives a character and individuality to its moments. If the idle are described as killing time, he may be justly said to call it into life and moral being, while he makes it the distinct object not only of the consciousness, but of the conscience. He organizes the hours, and gives them a soul: and that, the very essence of which is to fleet away, and evermore to have been, he takes up into his own permanence, and communicates to it the imperishableness of a spiritual nature. Of the good and faithful servant, whose energies, thus directed, are thus methodized, it is less truly affirmed, that He lives in time, than that Time lives in him.53

Again, following Steiner, I believe it is necessary to take Coleridge on his own terms here, in conscious resistance to (and defiance of) secular constructs of the individual. This resistance is particularly requisite for developing a notion of the singularity of the individual to include the sense of a living soul in time. Such a designation is most

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definitely excluded if one were to discuss individuals in terms of their hard-wired capacities, for example, or the power of their central processing units.

It is significant that Coleridge opens Essay IV with a reference to Plato, specifically ‘Plato’s 2d Letter to Dion’ in which he sets out the terms of engagement with his philosophical treatise:

(Translation.) – Hear then what are the terms on which you and I ought to stand toward each other. If you hold philosophy altogether in contempt, bid it farewell. Or if you have heard from any other person, or have yourself found out a better than mine, then give honor to that, which ever it be. But if the doctrine taught in these our works please you, then it is but just that you should honor me too in the same proportion. 54

By implication, Coleridge is inviting the friendly reader to honour his own treatise on method. 55 By using Plato’s verb ‘honour’ in this context, Coleridge is priming the reader to recognise the ensuing Essay on Method as a work of distinction in scholarship that requires labour from the writer to earn fame or renown, as well as labour on the part of the reader in the spirit of a considered, civil response. Plato’s use of the value-laden term, ‘proportion’, invokes a whole philosophical theory of symmetrical relations. Coleridge is mindfully setting out a symmetrical relationship between the writer and reader which anticipates reader response theory in quite specific ways. The loaded term ‘proportion’ strongly suggests the pertinence of a Neo-Platonic aesthetic drawing on the Greek principle of unity-in-variety along with a dialectic method designed to integrate the Platonic Transcendentalis, Beauty and Truth. In Plato’s Philebus [65a], this connection is explicit: ‘Thus if we don’t want to capture the good in one form, let us

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summarise it in these three: beauty and proportion [symmetry] and truth’. 56

A first step towards establishing the Greek aesthetic principle of unity-in-variety is to make singularity evident. This is an excellent starting point for discussion of the particularities of Coleridge’s poem, ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, a poem in which even the specific demonstrative in the title, ‘This’, distinguishes the significance of a particular poetic setting. It follows that our reading of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ must explore what is singular about the language and structure of the poem in both senses of the word (individual and remarkable). The focus must move from particular notes in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ to its distinctive tonal shifts and dynamic harmony. Coleridge’s method for achieving a poetics of symphonic unity is best understood by examining ‘continuous transition’ through ‘progressive singularity’.

‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ – the opening clue

A distinct note of complaint opens ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, with the poetic speaker reacting to contingent events with a pitiful assessment of his plight as entrapment: ‘Well, they are gone, and here must I remain / This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison!’ (ll. 1-2). The imperative ‘must’ underscores the denial of freedom perceived in his remaining reluctantly behind, a complaint against being confined in a place that ought to be pleasant but seems to be threatening, drawing on the convention of the locus amoenus. An expectation of threat modulates into sympathetic identification with the speaker’s sense of loss upon reading the lines in the second declarative lament:

I have lost
Beauties and Feelings, such as would have been
Most sweet to my remembrance, even when age
Had dimmed mine eyes to blindness!

(ll. 2-5)

The value of walking with these particular friends on this particular evening is expressed as a potentially moving and abiding memory. While it may appear somewhat

maudlin to envisage old age as a decline into blindness, the irony here is that, in the poem’s youthful present moment, the speaker cannot see the beauty around him. The poem must imaginatively swerve from this initial error, from the blindness of a misinterpretation of the symbolic landscape. Simone de Beauvoir discusses spontaneity as ‘pure contingency, an upsurring as stupid as the clinamen of the Epicurean atom which turned up at any moment whatsoever … It remained absurd… human spontaneity always projects itself toward something.’ Coleridge’s reconceptualised lene clinamen is characterised as a merciful swerve, a saving spontaneity that is less absurd and more human if its apparent blind stupidity is viewed charitably as a gratuitous movement indicative of the action of Divine Grace.

The shade of the particular, pleasant setting at the opening of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ need not carry the associations of darkness in the sense of blindness to knowledge implied by the complainant. Housed in a temporal body, the soul might interpret its physical containment as an imposition on free will and movement, as the poem’s speaker does, but this would be to misread the relation of body to soul. The speaker is, rather, at odds with nature in a self-imposed state of apparently dissonant confinement. On a Platonic reading, insensibility to Beauty is the state that makes Truth, too, inaccessible. This insight is discovered as the poem progresses, yet its seed – ‘the self-unravelling clue’ – is discernible in the initial set up, where the speaker is literally in the shade, but he assumes this partial exclusion from the full light of knowledge is total. In this way, the beginning of the poem is adapted to the whole in the organic sense sketched by Socrates (quoted in the Preface). Partial individual perception of the world – the lot of a human speaker – is set up as the problem of the poem to be overcome with the aid of a transformative act on the part of the poet.

The transition from passive, confined physicality to active, spiritual freedom is enacted in the following stanza. As Coleridge makes explicit in the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’, the seed for the redemptive turn of this poem is present at the opening in the figure of the blind old man seeing the beauty of nature through an active imagination working through the temporal medium of memory. It is already realised at some level, that one does not need to move around in the company of friends to see the beautiful truth of the world. That state of attunement can be achieved in a still act of contemplation even from within the confinement of old age, in the tradition of the blind seer (rooted in the Greek myth of Tiresias).

A characteristically Coleridgean play on ‘vision’ is crucial to a reading of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ as a model of the principle of writing as a substantial act. The very particular detail of the imagined scene transfigures the objects of meditation into a substantiated vision during the course of the poem. In Coleridge’s 1813 ‘Lectures on Shakespeare and Education’, he declares that

Shakespeare, possessed of wit, humour, fancy and imagination, built up an outward world from the stores of his mind, as the bee builds the hive from a thousand sweets, gathered from a thousand flowers. He was not only a great poet, but a great philosopher.  

Coleridge, in the conversation poems, writes a harmoniously unified world of self, God, and nature into substance through meditative vision predicated on minute attention to the many singular organic forms of life after this Shakespearean model of poetic philosophy. Beehives have long been associated with temples, bees with pious community, and honey is an enduring symbol of religious eloquence. We will explore Coleridge’s response to Wordsworth’s poetry as ‘Hyblean murmurs of poetic thought’ in Chapter Six. Shakespeare’s most famous builder of inward worlds, Hamlet, cries: ‘O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself / a king of infinite space, were

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Careful consideration of the potential and potency of vision, in relation to the circumscription (or otherwise) of inner and outer worlds, is particularly pertinent to ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’. The structural mechanism for a surrender to a distinctively Coleridgean poetic logic in the poem is a transition marked by an inconspicuous turn, or *swerve*, which allows for harmonious progression.

**Reading temporal transitions: ‘comparison, judgement and interpretation’**

The first transition in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ enables Coleridge to deploy ‘comparison’, a significant function of reading and the first step to ‘judgement’, then ‘interpretation’, as we have seen. The next transition is signalled in the poem by temporal juxtaposition indicated by the word ‘meanwhile’ (l. 5). As the poet wonders what is going on in the elsewhere he is apparently barred from, he succumbs to self-pity in the fuller realisation of a loss of the experience of this particular walk in this particular company that might ‘never’ be recovered. The imperative, ‘Behold’ (l. 16), then returns the action of the poem to a present tense that consists of a description of what may be seen from the perspective of the absent walkers in real time. The striking singularity of the details of the scene effaces any sense of distant vicariousness and replaces it with a vivid feeling of immediacy. This is confirmed by the line beginning, ‘Now’ (l. 20), before another shift moves the temporal action of the poem to the past, specifically the suffering of Charles in the ‘City pent’ (l. 30). In this recollection, the poet’s immediate plight of incarceration gives way to the imaginative experience of his friend’s recent closely confined suffering.

A further transition moves the action on to a recollection of a longer phase of joint suffering in childhood, before returning to the present moment with the line

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beginning ‘Comes sudden’ (l. 45). In a series of temporal transitions, the physically stilled speaker begins to move through time until this point is reached and his living soul is ‘in Time’. Coleridge creates a structural unity between the immobilised poet in the shady arbour, whose soul is visibly trembling into motion towards the light of spiritual knowledge, and the ‘Unsunn’d and damp’ ash tree, whose leaves ‘yet tremble still, / Fann’d by the water-fall!’ (ll. 14-16). Here the verb ‘tremble’, suggestive of a precarious vibration, links the speaker with the tree in a powerfully transformative act of meditation that moves towards the antonym of trembling, which may be formulated as being calm. As Richard Fogle rightly argues, the ‘Unsunn’d’ ash is ‘almost hidden from the eye of God’ (the sun).\textsuperscript{60} Almost, but not absolutely, as there is in the dell – as there is in the bower and the imagined landscape – ‘added complexity in the subtle interplay of light and shadow, the mingled harmony and distinctiveness of object and hue’, that Fogle identifies in his reading of the poem with a kindred emphasis on structural connections and musical modulation.\textsuperscript{61}


\textsuperscript{61} Richard Harter Fogle, \textit{The Idea of Coleridge’s Criticism}, 33.
Method as ‘progressive transition’: preconceived distinctions that enable continuity

Our structural focus can be widened from the musical metaphor to include the sense of ‘Transition’ as a noun of action indicating an initial crossing over (from the Latin stem transire: to go or cross over, OED). Significantly, Coleridge is fully cognisant of the Greek for Method, ‘The Greek Μεθοδος, is literally a way, or path of Transit.’:

Speaking of the effect, i.e. his works themselves, we may define the excellence of their method as consisting in that just proportion, that union and interpenetration of the universal and the particular, which must ever pervade all works of decided genius and true science. For Method implies a progressive transition, and it is the meaning of the word in the original language. The Greek Μεθοδος, is literally a way, or path of Transit. Thus we extol the Elements of Euclid, or Socrates’ discourse with the slave in the Menon, as methodical, a term which no one who holds himself bound to think or speak correctly, would apply to the alphabetical order or arrangement of a common dictionary. But as, without continuous transition, there can be no Method, so without a preconception there can be no transition with continuity.62

A close reading of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, focusing on the principle of ‘progressive transition’ is, accordingly, best situated in the philosophic context of the ‘One-Over-Many’ problem with due attention paid to the complication of taxonomy posed by the indeterminate existential status of Universals.

‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ models a distinctive singularity in both Nature and the individual person with continuity provided by (a conception of) Divine order, with love as the prime moving spirit. Spirit as animation has been suggested in reference to the trembling ash of the poem and the poem’s total effect of figuring an animated – yet continuous and enduring – self, set in motion by this spirit of love.

Returning to the emphasis on singularity through ‘progressive transition’ to track this movement from a precarious, troubled state to the achievement of calm joy, it is necessary to dwell on the particularity of the semantic elements of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’. For example, the adjective ‘springy’ in the description of the

imagined ‘springy heath’ (l. 7) conveys the sensation of the experience of walking on a yielding surface:

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;

(ll. 5-9)

There is a hint here of the traditional Gaelic blessing: ‘May the road rise up to meet you’. This accords with the mood of the speaker left alone and contemplating a friend who has just departed on a journey.

The philosophical context of free will and determinism has a marked relevance to ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’. David Hume uses the term ‘spring’ in relation to the doctrine of necessity and the thorny question of human volition, seeking to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by shewing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials, from which we may form our observations, and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour.63

It is a difficult question, however, to try to determine the extent to which the movements of the poem involve genuinely free volition. The uncertainty may be seen in the manner of description of the walkers who ‘wander’ and ‘wind’ (l. 8). Alliteration links these verbs, which suggest both pleasant aimlessness and a purposeful downward spiral at this stage of the walk. At line eight, ‘perchance’ is suggestive of arbitrariness, too. It suggests that the friends’ walk substantiated by vision seems free in the sense of not being determined. Yet this reading subverts the controlling power of the visionary speaker who is making choices at each stage of the imagined progress of the walkers.

Coleridge establishes thereby, subtly, a sense of volition in a designed but not overdetermined universe.

Poetic vision asserts itself in the paradoxical description of the dell as ‘still roaring’ (l. 9). This pairs the double temporal notions of still there, with being motionless. Being still is quite contrary to the emphasis on vigorous movement and sound effected by the repetition in describing the ‘roaring dell’ (l. 10). This process enacts the paradox of the still speaker who is far from being confined in a nutshell, but explores infinite space here in an active resistance to the melancholy of bad dreams.

Coleridge’s discussion of Hamlet as a methodical thinker in Essay IV of the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ supports a sustained emphasis on inward and outward worlds drawing on a Shakespearean model. We will return to Hamlet’s fraught then calm relationship to the Providential at the conclusion of this chapter, to extend this initial reading of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, in light of the preoccupations of *The Friend*.

The poetic vision that unfolds from the description of the ‘roaring dell’ is driven by the principle of ‘progressive transition’. Vision attains a substance through the will of the visionary poet, so that the poem is more than dramatically enacting a principle, it is giving the logical consequences of a philosophical principle actual *substantiation*. At each stage of the enactment, the lexical stress is on contingency rather than causal necessity. The dell is enclosed, like the speaker, it is ‘o’erwooded’ (l. 10) and only partially in the light of the sun. This is presented as a merciful state so the branchless ash tree is a surprisingly dynamic presence in the poem, as indicated by the vigour of the verbs. Despite the lack of vitality suggested by ‘yellow leaves’ (l. 14), the ash ‘Flings arching like a bridge’ (l. 13). Here, the dynamic simile reinforces the scene of a singular individual organically striving towards unity. ‘Flings’ suggests both sudden impulsiveness and carelessness of consequences that hints at desperation while reinforcing contingency. The happy creation of the bridge may have happened otherwise. Contingency is reinforced again through happenstance. Progressively, the
reader is led through this strikingly realised imaginative scene to the tree with which the poet identifies in his melancholy abandonment in the shady confinement of the bower, thereby shrugging off his petulant mood. At this point of identification the poet is wholly taken to a singularly realised scene where the friends are revealed amidst the sensuous green, wet weeds and ‘blue clay-stone’ (l. 19).

A significant transition is marked by ‘Behold’ (l. 16), an imperative that commands the reader to partake of the vision. This verb, which privileges sight, marks the transition to the temporal ‘Now’ when the poet’s ‘friends emerge’ (l. 20), or come clearly into view in an elevated and open vantage with unobstructed views to the sea. Aurally, there is the suggestion of ‘merging’ with the group and the scene in this description. The singularity of the scene is underscored by the adjective ‘many-steepled’ (l. 22) which aids visualisation while implying a spiritual multiplicity united in the tract. Here, ‘tract’ evokes the associations of a religious tract, in keeping with the religious, meditative tradition from whence Coleridge’s conversation poems emerged, as elucidated by M. H. Abrams in his identification of the genre of the ‘Greater Romantic Lyric’.64 The imagined friends are successfully reading the spiritual plurality of the landscape in Coleridge’s joyous vision.

The potential for the particular to manifest in a vision of the universal is suggested by another term of probability, ‘perhaps’, used in relation to the possible appearance of a ship at sea. This includes the accidental or contingent sense of ‘hap’ that further evades the necessity of an actually viewed landscape:

Now, my friends emerge  
Beneath the wide wide Heaven — and view again  
The many-steepled tract magnificent  
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,  
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose Sails light up  
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles  
Of purple shadow! Yes! they wander on

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In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
My gentle-hearted Charles!

(ll. 20-28)

When ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ is read with mindful attention to
contingency, it is evident that the poem models how volition can be exercised in vision
by the inspired poet. It is a creative act that transforms the interpretative mood of the
poetic speaker from one closed to the sights and sites of his walking friends to one open
to their singularly imagined delights.

Focus then turns to the gladness of the particular friend, Charles, in this
expansive scene. The dark side of accident and contingency is recalled in the
recollection of the poet’s friend’s recent tribulations (involving madness and a mother’s
murder). This ‘strange calamity’ is cast as exacerbated by confinement in the city, a
confinement different in kind to circumscription within a fragrant bower of lime trees:

For thou hast pined
And hunger’d after Nature, many a year,
In the great City pent, winning thy way
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
And strange calamity! Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue Ocean!

(ll. 28-37)

The exhalation of ‘Ah!’ (l. 32) as the tension of this memory is relieved signals another
transition to a particular sunset on this most particular afternoon. Breathing and reading
poetry are intimately connected, indeed the poet could be said to be inspired through a
literal inspiration or a breathing in of the soothing scent of the lime blossoms under this
particular linden tree.

The final verse is a curiously imperative blessing, perhaps to drive out the
‘demons’ raised by Lucretius’ species of philosophical poem, with the purple flowers
commanded to ‘richlier burn’ (l. 35) in the yellow light of the setting sun. This curious
use of the fiat invites consideration of the Platonic background of distinguishing natural
kinds, described by A.C. Varzi as ‘fiat demarcations’ in Carving Nature at its Joints, a title which derives from Plato’s Phaedrus [265e], the classic locus of the ‘One-Over-Many problem’.

Coleridge’s cherished principle of distinguishing without dividing is celebrated in the climactic sensuality that is visually rendered so acutely in the unity of the blue sea, golden sky, and purple heath. The transition is to a definite major key as the poem draws to a close.

The prison of the bower is transfigured, as indicated by the use of the endearing ‘little Lime-Tree Bower’. The conversation resumes on a note of intimacy and meaning is drawn from the apparent happenstance of the singular vision flung forth by the poem:

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.

(ll. 37-41)

The senselessness of the silenced poet recalls Plato’s scathing Socratic formulation of the lyric poet as out of his senses in Ion [534a-b]. This representation of the Platonic senseless poet problematises Coleridge’s representation of volition in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’:

And that Walnut-tree
Was richly ting’d, and a deep radiance lay
Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps
Those fronting elms, and now with blackest mass
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
Through the late twilight: and though now the bat
Wheels silent by, and not a Swallow twitters,
Yet still the solitary humble-Bee
Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I shall know
That Nature ne’er deserts the wise and pure;

(ll. 52-61)

One cannot help detecting a Kubla Khanish, declamatory tone as singularity is firmly reinforced in the poem with reference to the demonstrative ‘that walnut-tree’ and ‘those

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fronting elms,’ along with the use of the definite article to describe ‘the ancient ivy,’
‘the bat,’ and, finally, ‘the solitary humble-Bee’ (l. 59). If taken as Coleridge’s heartfelt
refutation of Lucretius, the rousing, imperative conclusion to the poem may be
explained as a rather desperate philosophical riposte to the anti-theological implications
of atomistic materialism.

Part of the challenge, ultimately, is to evaluate the extent to which ‘This Lime-
Tree Bower My Prison’ succeeds in combining the notion of creation according to some
inherent masterful design (implicitly suggestive of a slavish set of behaviours
predicated upon implanted inward desires) with the freedom celebrated in the climactic
stanza of the poem. At the poem’s triumphant conclusion, the logic of metaphor dictates
that the poet’s soul has been released. The final transition is to a fully realised unity
symbolised by the blessing of the no longer ‘dissonant’ (l. 76) rook which now — in the
permanently captured present moment that is the still tableau of its passage across the
setting sun — encompasses the poet, friend and nature in a beautiful symmetry that
amounts to a liberating act. Liberation through an act of attunement becomes the means
to fulfillment of the poet’s initial desire to experience this setting alongside his
cherished, long-awaited companion:

My gentle-hearted Charles! 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; or when all was still,
Flew creaking o’er thy head, and had a charm
For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

(ll. 68-76)

Somewhat disturbingly, however, the lines one could draw from the speaker to the rook
to Charles might produce an eerily similar diagram to one a bee might mentally extract
from the triangulation involved in a fellow bee’s representational dance, which involves
using the sun as a navigational true North, then (through the movements of its dance)
drawing a map to navigate points between itself, the hive, and the flower which is its food source. It is far from certain whether Coleridge has escaped entirely from Socrates’ unflattering model of the senseless lyric poet in Plato’s Ion.

Coleridge’s model of a philosophical inquiry into teleological determinism and the space for free will may not convince a modern reader of the truth of its author’s cherished, but unstable, hypothesis regarding such a freedom from necessity. Neither the raucous call of the rook, nor the incessant, busy hum of the bees is out of place in the final scene of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, which draws the singular objects of meditation into a unified vision of animated nature, in tune with the self that is, in turn, attuned to each particular sound. This natural creation of the poet’s imagination has been brought forth by a sound as humble as the oft-unregarded music of bees gathering pollen. But this enchanting music does seem to determine the ways in which the poet is inspired, here, such that his understanding of the process may well be as limited as that of the active, yet very humble, bees around him. Richard Fogle takes up M.H. Abrams’ concern with ‘the role of spontaneity in the poetic process’, rightly arguing that strengthening our emphasis on human judgement goes some way to surmounting the issue of Coleridge depending on organic metaphor to the extent that it may ‘overbalance the critic toward necessity and unconscious process’. 67 That the challenge Coleridge is rising to is Lucretius’ ‘speculative atheism’ is made clear in his impassioned discussion of the ultimate equivalence of Pantheism with Atheism:

Now, I very much question whether in any other sense there is Atheism, i.e. speculative Atheism, is possible – and for even in the Lucretian coarsest & crudest scheme of the Epicurean Doctrine a hylozism, a potential life, is clearly implied, and in the celebrated “lene Clinamen” becoming Actual. – Bravadoes articulating breath into a blasphemy of Nonsense, with to which they themselves are attach no connected meaning, and which the wickedness of which is alone intelligible, there may be but a La Place, or a La Grand would & with justice, resent and repel the imputation of a belief in Chance, or a denial of Law, Order, and Self-balancing Life and Power in the World. Their error is, that they make them the proper,

underived Attributes of the World. – It follows then, that Pantheism = Atheism and that there is no other anteced Atheism other actually existing or speculatively conceivable, but Pantheism

The tiny swerve in ‘Frost at Midnight’

A comparable catalyst for transformation is invoked by the lexical choice of ‘flutters’ in ‘Frost at Midnight’ (l. 16), to invoke the presence of ‘the stranger’ in a ‘low-burnt fire’ (l. 14). Again, a tiny swerve takes the lyric speaker through time to an experience of integrated organic unity, similarly substantiated in the poem as Coleridge once more overcomes (temporarily) the dead weight of past suffering. This time, remembrance of personal childhood suffering is slower to surface and is ushered in via a gothic depiction of repressed hauntedness established by the midnight setting and the faltering but disturbingly loud hoot of a baby owl. Suffering recalled is similarly twice present in the poem as memory stirs, falters, and reaches a poignant crescendo in this meditation on quiet and the unquiet. Again, liberation from the symbolic spiritual prison of being the ‘sole, unquiet thing’ (l. 16) – on this occasion in a cottage whose ‘inmates’ (l. 4) are at rest – is achieved through sudden soothing attunement of a solitary soul through imaginative identification with another almost imperceptible, precarious vibration welcomed in the initially absent-minded yet increasingly vital observation of ‘the stranger’ in the grate. The gothic doubleness of the name of this phenomenon, ‘the stranger’, captures the polarity of a state of alienated homesickness coinciding with the joy of unity intimated by the coming of a friend.

Coleridge’s richly dynamic symbiosis of quietness and the will develops the cognate sense of acquiescence in ‘Frost at Midnight’ through deployment of the structural principle of ‘progressive singularity’. As in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My


69 Coleridge’s distinctive use of the tiny swerve receives further elaboration in the next chapter.
Prison’, temporality is introduced, varied, shifted and sustained into a profound meditative stillness in ‘Frost at Midnight’ in ways that serve the function of a middle transition (like a key change in a Sonata, for example). This characterisation of progressive key change, as in a Sonata, employs an etymologically apt metaphor to describe the manner of transition in these poems, one drawn from the most obviously temporal art, music. The homely setting in ‘Frost at Midnight’ is decidedly unheimlich in its opening moments:

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet’s cry
Came loud – and hark, again! loud as before.

(ll. 1-3)

Dramatic tension unnerves the reader in expectation of a ghostly visitation. The unnatural suggestion of motion without wind calls to mind the initially hopeful sighting of the Mariner’s ghost ship. In Coleridge’s ballad, hopeful welcome of the stranger represented by the arriving ship is complicated by the ghastly act of the Mariner biting his own arm to draw blood, then is followed by a sudden sense of impending dread when a similarly supernatural lack of wind to move the vessel is observed by the baffled, isolated storyteller.

By contrast, a cosy thatched cottage on a wintry night, home to a family with a snuffling, rhythmically breathing infant beside a new father ought to convey pastoral pleasantness but, as in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, Coleridge draws on the convention of the locus amoenus to convey a sense of threat in apparently charming and tranquil surroundings. Again, in the movement of this conversation poem, an expectation of threat modulates into sympathetic identification which imaginatively transforms the speaker’s keenly felt suffering. The speaker becomes ‘a living soul in time’ from a parallel initial state of imprisoned disturbance – that of the ‘unquiet’
thinker, whose soul is disturbed by the mind’s ‘Abstruser musings’ (l. 6) – to exquisite calm in a hushed world.

Coleridge achieves a less Kubla-Khanish, less declamatory, tone than that of the imperative conclusion to ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ in an uncanny quietness that encourages acquiescence in a larger will. He achieves a moment of poetic perfection in ‘Frost at Midnight’ with the climactic revelation of stilled, acquiescent witnessing of the silent mystery and rarely perceived dynamism of frost and moon in quiet conversation. For the reader, however, remembering the drama of agitated existential alienation may overpower the lingering memory of a transcendent moment’s unity in Coleridge’s early poetry. Despite achieving rare moments of spiritual peace in still calmness, Coleridge can lament being ‘the sole unbusy thing’ (‘Work Without Hope’ l. 5) decades later in a poem whose very existence is testament to the transitory nature of integrated reconciliation of the self with others and the natural world.\(^70\)

Nevertheless, there is a monumental achievement in that moment in ‘Frost at Midnight’ when the mystery of sublimity is glimpsed:

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

(ll. 65-74)

As Kelvin Everest observes, the ‘lines are an exceptionally fine realization of the unity, the subtle reciprocity, that has emerged in Coleridge’s experience’.\(^71\)

Furthermore, one may speculate that, under a full moon, a father may hush his infant with the old nursery song:

\(^{70}\) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Work without Hope’, 1825.
\(^{71}\) Kelvin Everest, *Coleridge’s Secret Ministry*, 269.
I see the moon and the moon sees me
God bless the moon and God bless me.

This ancient nursery song has its antecedents in a blessing, devised to ward off the evil spirits ushered in by the full moon. The memory of piteous vulnerability – in the image of himself as a schoolboy looking to the door for a visit from an estranged friend in ‘Frost at Midnight’ – informs Coleridge’s desperate plea for the protection of his own vulnerable child on a Winter’s night. Discussing the rhetorical figure of chiasmus as ‘a figure of divine harmony in nature’, Jan Plug foregrounds transitions in the poem, rightly arguing that the turn to its concluding apostrophe ‘intentionally swerves from the figure of the stranger’ and that ‘the intentional swerving of the voice, disrupts its own actualisation’. The significance of that swerve merits further investigation in the conversation poems.

**Inspired imagination in ‘The Eolian Harp’**

In ‘The Eolian Harp’, as in the opening of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, the lyric speaker is almost imperceptibly prompted to a meditative contemplation through awareness of the natural scents wafting over him, this time in the company of a ‘pensive’ partner. That adjective insinuates a mood of thoughtful melancholy to be overcome, compounded by the image of the day drawing to a close with clouds ‘slow saddening round’. In resistance to a developing atmosphere of wistfulness, the poet digresses from explicit thought to a sudden awareness of the small joy of the scents around him:

> How exquisite the scents
> Snatched from yon bean-field! and the world so hushed!
> The stillly murmur of the distant sea
> Tells us of silence.

(ll. 9-12)

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It is peculiar to describe the scent of a bean field as ‘exquisite’, when such lowly domestic crops were not regarded commonly as pleasantly odiferous (although Kelvin Everest suggests a precedent in Thomson’s Spring in the context of a discussion of Coleridge’s departure from the staleness of ‘stock diction’). Mythologically, bean fields were connected with the resting place of dead souls in both Greek and Egyptian legends, so the odd sense of a ‘snatch’ of this odour, like a ‘snatch’ of a tune briefly brought to awareness, suggests a fleeting flash of a spiritual world impinging on consciousness but not sustained enough to cause harm, as would a prolonged ghostly visitation. Subjective experience of an incongruous threat intrudes on the pastoral pleasantness here, as it does in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, provoked by a subtle shift in attunement to the natural world. Sudden awareness of an odd ‘snatch’ of a scent, imaginatively associated with death and disturbed spirits, is brought by the last gust of wind on a dying afternoon. It is peculiar enough to tilt the speaker’s awareness towards other-worldly meditation. Such connotations of ‘snatched’ are supported when the quietness, as after the wind has ceased, is emphasised by the declaration that follows.

At this point, the lyric speaker draws attention to a previously imperceptible, far-off sound that is described intriguingly as the ‘stilly murmur’ of the sea (l. 11). Surely the adjective ‘stilly’ may be read as an encouragement to be still, surrender to quietude and perhaps cease making declarative statements and instead attune to a natural language being spoken far off, barely audibly. This prepares the path to transition from a loudly declarative speaking subject at odds with his surroundings to a quietly conversational mode. That mode of attentive listening involves a surrender to unanticipated whispers of the wind that prefigures the poetic speaker’s participation in

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73 Kelvin Everest, Coleridge’s Secret Ministry, 168.
conversation, likened to the manner of music-making suggested by the central extended metaphor of the Eolian harp, itself.

There is a heady mix of scent in the opening stanza, necessarily so, to catch the attention of a speaker prone to reading the more ominous atmospheric signs in a more usual literary progression from pensiveness to dejection and perhaps thoughts of mortality in the setting of a dying day. Perfume makers have long mixed a funky base note to balance the sweeter and lighter fragrances of mood-lifting jasmine to create a richer allure. The snatch of bean-field scent is performing a similar function here, mixing in a dissonant note to enrich the harmony of the commonly aphrodisiac properties of jasmine combined with the myrtle, often worn as a wedding crown at this time. On a rational level, the speaker gives us ‘Innocence and Love’ (l. 5) to explain, rather awkwardly, his own poetic emblems but he is yet to learn to emulate the humble bee and, in effect, humble be. Nature quietly intervenes to still the egotistically certain poetic voice, momentarily silencing assured interpretation to allow a space for attunement to a more subtle experience and more nuanced reading of experience. This process is suggestive of a more appropriate preparation for ‘pairing’ than the kind of running exclamatory commentary given in the second stanza, particularly the gauchely spoken enthusiasm of being metaphorically tempted to ‘repeat the wrong!’ (l. 17) on another ‘coy mistress’ in an erotically-charged description of the harp and wind as lovers.

Progress is made as the poet settles down into entertaining thoughts ‘uncalled and undetained’ (l. 39), indicative of a more receptive, acquiescent mode that allows for quiet conversation, communion or less wilful responses to love, love-making and being in the natural world as opposed to commenting, set apart and certain, on all three experiences. Recall of the gentle swerve to humility and self-surrender prompts the
poem’s return to abashed self-flagellation, with the speaker casting himself as prone to habitually being:

A sinful and most miserable man,
Wildered and dark,

(ll. 62-63)

The circular progression of meditation has revealed, nonetheless, the poetic insight of the value of spiritual quietude as a digressive rescue from dejection. For Coleridge, dejection follows inevitably from the linear logic exemplified by a lyric speaker’s noisy declarations of complaint running down an habitually morose, well-worn track of self-absorption. This is a structural movement played out, as we have seen, in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’. In ‘The Eolian Harp’, there is a similarly saving grace offered by a subtle tiny swerve from habitue in thought and response to mindfulness of the barely legible signs, murmuring sounds, and subtle scents of nature as a living creation inviting conversation with ‘a living soul in time’ in unanticipated ways. Hence the pertinence of Coleridge’s later claim that: ‘The imagination is the distinguishing characteristic of man as a progressive being.’74 The significance of method as ‘progressive transition’ for Coleridge’s enduring philosophical stance and consistent poetic practice will be expounded further in Chapter Two through a more precise investigation of Coleridge’s use of the structural mechanism of the clinamen, or tiny swerve.

**Interpretation and judgement of Coleridge’s lene clinamen**

Harold Bloom cites Northrop Frye’s characterisation of Coleridge’s *modus operandi* as a persistent need to make ‘a clinamen to the ideal’. Bloom then makes the frank admission: ‘I now realize, Coleridge in his *Aids to Reflection* inaugurated the critical concept of what he called the “lene clinamen”, the “gentle bias” which I mistakenly

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thought I had invented for myself’. In this thesis, I am developing a different interpretation of Coleridge’s *lene clinamen* to recover its rather rich implications in the context of Coleridge’s early poetry, implications that have been clouded in modern literary criticism by Bloom’s authoritative commentary and appropriation of the term for his own purposes.

Coleridge’s *clinamen* can be rendered as a swerve and *lene* is cognate with leniency. On the Neo-Platonic worldview that informs Coleridge’s thinking, philosophical error can be interpreted as a kind of transgression. Mercy for sin or leniency for crime comes with the swerve away from error. If punishment for the narcissism of the plangent poetic speaker is the genuine prison of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, liberation can be found in the swerve away from that all-too-human error. In ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, dramatising the swerve towards grace as an ultimately redemptive process is complicated by the increased role of chance and the drastic move away from the certainty of clear determinacy that hinders straightforward moral logic in the ballad, as we shall see in Chapter Two. Coleridge misread – or at least reconceptualised – the *lene clinamen* as a merciful swerve away from the philosophical context of Lucretius’ Roman version of classical Greek atomic theory in Book II of *De rerum natura*:

> but the mind would be down
> To inner necessities for our very least action
> And so defeated as to suffer and bear without choice
> If it were not for the tiny deflections which happen to elements
> In times and places which are in no way determined.  

From a contemporary scientific viewpoint informed by quantum physics, this classical formulation of a tiny swerve of atoms is extraordinarily prescient. It is just this tiny swerve at the sub-atomic level that has introduced probability and undermined a

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thoroughgoing atomistic material determinism that may now be reaching its end point in the philosophy of science.

Extreme physicalism now appears as an obstinate but fading legacy of W. V. Quine’s naturalised epistemology and starkly reductive ontological methodology. Romantic poetry is very far indeed from Quinean austerity, and the profound resonance of Romanticism’s crucial – and crucially arbitrary – gratuities (including aesthetic beauty, love and intimations of divinity) may be credibly felt anew in a twenty-first century grappling with even more mind-boggling and ontologically expansive speculation over multiverses. The outrageous extravagances of superstring theory make the humble Romantic contemplation of the language of God in nature appear less daft. Quine tackled an aspect of the Platonic background of Coleridge’s thought with an appeal to the elegance of reductive methodology to meet the challenges of enduring existential questions:

Nonbeing must in some sense be, otherwise what is it that there is not? This tangled doctrine might be nicknamed Plato’s beard; historically it has proved tough, frequently dulling the edge of Occam’s razor.\textsuperscript{77}

Decades later, one may surmise that it is Occam’s razor and Quine’s elegant parsimony that belong to the philosophical past, while Coleridge’s richer, messier, Neo-Platonic imaginative speculation appears oddly at home and, ironically, quite humble in its ontological claims amidst the strangeness of current scientific hypotheses about the generative power of dark matter and plural worlds beyond our ken. Coleridge speaks to a lingering critical anxiety about the existential status of the world (singular) we acknowledge on a common-sense view. His early poetry is concerned with refining the faculty of understanding, particularly as it is applied to our place in that familiar world. Simultaneously, it renders the horror that attends being out of place in the world for a

hapless individual whose understanding is darkened by doubt born of either melancholy or ignorance. Of necessity, a philosophical attempt to formulate an appropriate place for humanity in the world must be derived at least from an ethical and (more likely) theological understanding of being and nonbeing.

Coleridge’s conceptual model of vibration – as exemplified in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ and through the extended metaphor of ‘The Eolian Harp’ – can be seen as extraordinarily prescient in terms of modern superstring theory. The Quinean recourse to Occam’s razor loses its argumentative edge in view of the twenty-first century scientific discourses outlined above. Considering a musical, rather than an atomistic, model of the universe based on ‘point-like ingredients’ is returning contemporary physicists like Brian Greene to a remarkable recognition of scientific realist grounds for the poetic cosmic metaphors of complex unity employed by Coleridge:

From the ancient Pythagorean “music of the spheres” to the “harmonies of nature” that have guided inquiry through the ages, we have collectively sought the song of nature in the gentle wanderings of celestial bodies and the riotous fulminations of subatomic particles. With the discovery of superstring theory, musical metaphors take on a startling reality, for the theory suggests that the microscopic landscape is suffused with tiny strings whose vibrational patterns orchestrate the evolution of the cosmos. The winds of change, according to superstring theory, gust through an aeolian universe.78

Greene’s observation, with its suggestion of a prolific suffusion that would be anathema to the caution of Quine, clearly resonates with the philosophical background of Coleridge’s thought, particularly his sense of a Platonic breeze sweeping across the natural world. It takes us forward to a future where the claims of science and poetry can be reconciled in a tradition continuous with Coleridge’s philosophical writings and poetic practice.

The present investigation of the Coleridgean poetic lene clinamen began with a treatment of one of Coleridge’s finest Conversation or ‘Friendly’ poems, ‘This Lime-

Tree Bower My Prison’. Surprisingly, identifying the distinct use of the mechanism of the *lene clinamen* here opens the way for a treatment of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ that is continuous with the conversation poem and its philosophical concerns. Coleridge’s letter to John Thelwall of April 1796, though specifically concerned with his friend’s reception of ‘Religious Musings’, illuminates the Lucretian context of this surprising continuity:

I build all my poetic pretensions on the Religious Musings, — which you will read with a POET’S Eye, with the same unprejudicedness, I wish, I could add, the same pleasure, with which the atheistic Poem of Lucretius. A Necessitarian, I cannot possibly disesteem a man for his religious or anti-religious Opinions —

It is Coleridge’s ‘POET’S Eye’ that makes visible to the reader of his conversation poems the paradox of motion without foresight providing scope for creative free will. This paradox is resolved in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, as we have seen, through the tiny swerve in attention that brings a sudden attunement to the musical unity of nature: ‘Yet still the solitary humble-Bee / Sings in the bean-flower!’ (l. 59-60).

Through this tiny swerve in attention, Coleridge arrives at the central imaginative insight of the poem that ‘Nature ne’er deserts the wise and pure’ (l. 61).

Coleridge’s lifelong preoccupation with the structural principles of the organic faculties of the human mind along with their correspondent (if unseen) presence in objective reality — specifically in relation to the nexus between instinct and understanding — is demonstrable by way of reference to a key argument mounted in *Aids to Reflection*. With characteristically detailed contemplation of the stomach of a caterpillar, Coleridge establishes a crucial distinction that neither entirely divides concepts of attentiveness bound up with human thought and purposeful action nor cuts

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off possibilities for carefully nuanced interpretation: that of ‘volition rather than will’. After setting up premises that allow for an ‘arbitrary will to act without any reason,’ Coleridge concludes:

that if I suppose the Adaptive Power in its highest species, or form of Instinctive Intelligence, to co-exist with Reason, Free will, and Self-consciousness, it instantly becomes UNDERSTANDING: in other words, that Understanding differs indeed from the noblest form of Instinct, but not in itself or in its own essential properties, but in consequence of its coexistence with far higher Powers of a diverse kind in one and the same Subject. INSTINCT, in a rational, responsible, and self-conscious Animal, is Understanding.

A close reading of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ coupled with evaluation of an individual’s freedom over the process of making a fortuitous swerve in attention is enriched and complicated by an awareness of Coleridge’s peculiar view of instinct as noble and intimately connected with the higher power of human understanding, a view developed over many years through the philosophical arguments of The Friend, Biographia Literaria, and Aids to Reflection.

Coleridge’s critical term lene clinamen has its roots in an interesting species, a ‘scientific poem’. My contention is that Coleridge, too, is writing scientific poems or, more precisely, poems that model his scientific principles and hypotheses about the way the world is. Coleridge recasts Lucretius’ slavish necessity, in Book II of De rerum natura, as spiritual freedom. A space for that expansiveness is central to the problems of philosophical inquiry (and their solution) modelled by ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’. To recognise the implications of this insight, we must recall Coleridge’s habitual metaphorical use of plants to represent organic movement, from the notion of the seed to a movement in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ that is structurally akin to the observable swerve in the growth of a sunflower planted in the shade. Its directional movement is thereby diverted by a desire for the sun that both directs growth

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and provides evidence of a driving force within that seeks the light. In the use of such structural figuration there is an ambivalence discernible in regard to how free such control of growth spurred on by inward desire may be. The question of how, ultimately, Coleridge’s metaphorical organicism is construed returns us to dealing with that ambivalence over organic determination and the exercise of will I have elucidated in the example of the bee gathering nectar.

Despite Richard Fogle’s argument for giving human judgement its due, M. H. Abrams’ concern with the vegetative figures Coleridge employs in relation to his organic concept of the imagination, still must be acknowledged as serious.82 Abrams was the first to articulate the implications of the persistent use of the plant metaphor to articulate Coleridge’s theory of the organic imagination:

Indeed, it is astonishing how much of Coleridge’s critical writing is couched in terms that are metaphorical for art and literal for a plant; if Plato’s dialectic is a wilderness of mirrors, Coleridge’s is a very jungle of vegetation. Only let the vehicles of his metaphors come alive, and you see all the objects of criticism writhe surreally into plants or parts of plants, growing in tropical profusion. Authors, characters, poetic genres, poetic passages, words, meter, logic become seeds, trees, flowers, blossoms, fruit, bark, and sap. The fact is, Coleridge’s insistence on the distinction between the living imagination and the mechanical fancy was part of his all-out war against the ‘Mechanico-corporeal Philosophy’ on every front… This is the contra-distinction between atomistic and organic, mechanic and vital – ultimately between the root analogies of machine and growing plant.83

Recognising the value of such enduring metaphorical organicism in Coleridge’s prose – alongside a parallel reading of the early poetry that makes use of this crucial structural feature of his work – does give credence to Coleridge as both a philosophical poet and a coherent literary theorist. That being said, some of the more disturbing implications of Einstein’s special theory of relativity and the probability introduced by quantum mechanics will be taken up in the next chapter in my reading of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ in relation to Coleridge’s theory of the organic imagination and the

action of grace modelled through the poetic mechanism of the *lene clinamen*.

In order to appreciate such a quantum shift in thinking, we may recall W. V. Quine’s elegant but monochromatic and atomistic universe as formulated in his twentieth-century epistemic model over many years of philosophical writing. This was certainly mathematical but not in the least poetical. Quine argued against the literary critic encroaching in philosophy proper, restricting discussion to the objective of training aesthetic taste, a view resonant with the many attempts to exclude Coleridge’s philosophical writings as such:

Think of aesthetic matters…There is only a training of tastes. In part it proceeds by emphasizing skillfully selected elements of an object; by pointing them out or even by artificially accentuating them on a photograph of the painting or in the rendering of the music. It is here that the skill of the critic lies. The literary critic can bring various cunningly interlocking strategies into schematic relief and call attention to various symbolic associations and imagery in ways that afford new insights into what is going on in a literary piece. The thus increased familiarity with the structure of the aesthetic object can engender a liking, granted a suitable object in the first place. Such training is very unlike the deductions, the marshalling of observations, the assessing of Virtues of hypotheses, that figure in arguing for a belief.84

In the teeth of this twentieth-century demarcation of the philosophical and the literary, the present inquiry is investigating Coleridge’s poetry as a model of his philosophical method, secure in the belief that investigation into the structure of a particular poem will yield more than a sense of tasteful appreciation. The insight to be gained is into the quality of Coleridge’s thinking overall, an enterprise that draws support from George Steiner’s convincing formulation of thought as poetry.85 M.H. Abrams, too, has noted Coleridge’s capacity to dwell ‘on a poem as a process of mind’.86

Both Steiner and Abrams are sensitive to the potential generative grammar of this poetic way of thinking. Abrams comments on Coleridge’s conception of the poet as one who ‘brings the whole soul of man into activity’ through the synthesising power of

the imagination, ‘the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities’, in precisely these terms:

> The concept [of the Imagination], it is important to note, is not adventitious in Coleridge’s criticism, nor even specifically aesthetic in its origins. It is merely the application in the province of aesthetics of the generative principle which underlies Coleridge’s metaphysical system in its totality.  

Abrams gives unusual acknowledgement to the systematic, methodological work of Coleridge, taken as a total unity. That same credence is a driving force of the present inquiry. Coleridge’s appropriation of the term *lene clinamen* in *Aids to Reflection* comes in the context of a discussion of ‘a love of truth for its own sake’. Beauty, Truth and the Good appear intricately woven into the fabric of Coleridge’s thought even here. Again, this Platonic background can be brought into an evaluation of Abrams’ insight that ‘by Coleridge’s analysis, an organism is inherently teleological’. This design may be conceptualised as a version of the Good, but again this leaves an uncomfortable space for the possibility of individual volition in any creature, plant or human, understood in terms of teleological creation.

Evaluating whether Coleridge, *qua* poet, succeeds in simulating a model of the exercise of free will in the midst of teleological creation requires augmenting the investigation of the Platonic background of Coleridge’s thought with the influence of the Cambridge Neo-Platonists, who primarily drew on the writings of Plotinus in *The Enneads*. Abrams notes that ‘Plotinus was the chief begetter of the archetype of the projector’ in discussion of the analogies of ‘mind as receptor or projector – as mirror or lamp’. The clearest elucidation of the Plotinian background to Coleridge’s thought as it pertains to the climactic unity achieved in the final stanza of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ is in William Christie’s discussion of Coleridge’s philosophically formative

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87 M.H. Abrams *The Mirror and The Lamp*, 118.
influences, which includes a pertinent citation of a passage from *The Enneads* evidently known to the youthful Coleridge:

This Principle, of which the sun is an image, where has its dawning, what horizon does it surmount to appear?
It stands immediately above the contemplating Intellect which has held itself at rest towards vision, looking to nothing else than the good and the beautiful, setting its entire being to that in perfect surrender, and now tranquilly filled with power and taking anew beauty to itself, gleaming in the light of that presence.
…indeed, not in vision but in identity, all duality annulled.  

This does appear to be the source of the power of a Miltonic ‘secret amity’ noted in the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’, as cited in the Preface, as well as of the ultimate structural unity achieved in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’. In this context it would be a serious, not a creative, misreading to judge the soul as hard-wired with the desire to seek the unity achieved on this poetic model. It is clear, though, that this poetic model of inquiry enacts processes bound up with a key philosophical principle that emerges from the Neo-Platonic cast of Coleridge’s thought.

Earlier we noted that ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ offers a series of comparisons then follows a change of key in a middle transition to a state of sympathetic identification with, first, the bridging ash tree, then the specified friend, Charles, who is the immediate object of Coleridge’s ‘amity’. This friend is imagined to be delighted in so particular a way that this process becomes the ‘self-unravelling clue’ to successful reading within the world of this poem for both the actual reader and the poetic persona in a transition marked by a Coleridgean lene clinamen. While the particularities of the lyric speaker’s initial plight dissolve in this sympathetic flight, identity is retained. The poem, in this way, ‘substantiates’ the poet in Nature thereby providing a practical scientific model of this hypothesised process.

Given that Essay IV of Coleridge’s *The Friend* invokes *Hamlet* along with Plato

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at the outset, it is fitting to observe the principle of ‘progressive singularity’ in Shakespeare’s play, as viewed through the particularly Coleridgean lens afforded by the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’. Just as the lyric speaker in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ attains a sensibility that can poetically observe the last flight of a rook in a dying day, so, too, does Hamlet progress to the level of sensibility that can see a ‘special providence in / the fall of a sparrow’.\(^{92}\) This masterful Shakespearean transition could be seen to prefigure a movement from loud declarations of self-pity during a dissonant moment when Time itself is perceived to be ‘out of joint’ (‘O cursèd spite, / That ever I was born to set it right.’) to quiet resignation and a degree of acceptance of the teleological nature of this world.\(^{93}\) Similarly, the petulance of the poetic speaker in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ is overcome as an organic unity establishes itself late in the poem.

In considering these questions, one may invoke Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy and the suffering thus communicated to surmise that here, at least, the lyric speaker has done more than ‘suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’.\(^{94}\) Instead he learns to \textit{endure} them, thus providing a richer model than any cursory comparison to the non-semantic representational system generating the dance of a bee or to the instinctive gathering of nectar. On the other hand, a close examination of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ as a model of the principle of ‘progressive transition’, establishing singularity ahead of harmony, indicates a less certain achievement of organic unity than is suggested by the poem’s triumphant declaration that ‘No sound is dissonant which tells of Life’ (l. 76). An element of uncertainty enters as the poetic model runs, generated by unspoken principles that admit uncertainty in practice, despite rather loud assurances at the semantic level.

\(^{93}\) William Shakespeare, \textit{Hamlet}, 1. 5. ll 189-90.
\(^{94}\) William Shakespeare, \textit{Hamlet}, 3.1. ll 58.
Given my unique emphasis on philosophical uncertainty in Coleridge’s poetry, the following chapter explores his principles and poetry in relation to quantum theory. While scholars like Nicholas Halmi have suggested a link between Coleridge’s poetics and Lucretius, the implications of this link for a reader versed in the uncertainty of quantum mechanics are yet to be explored.\textsuperscript{95} Peter Thorslev is ‘not so much concerned’ with origins of cosmological theory and their ‘continuity in modern physics’ but his acknowledgement of the ‘emotional implications’ of these in relation to the ‘concepts of freedom and destiny’ provides a starting point for my unconventional reading of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ in Chapter Two.\textsuperscript{96}


Chapter Two: THE TINY SWERVE

A post-Heisenberg understanding of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’

For today’s readers of Romantic poetry, ‘uncertainty’ – with its implications of a post-Heisenberg philosophical worldview – carries a great deal of scientific baggage. If, then, we allow for the ‘Uncertainty Principle’ and admit probability at the micro level of a poem requiring certainty, the issue of volition and determinism becomes less straightforward than it may appear on a conventional reading of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. That Coleridge models unwittingly the quantum leap of sub-atomic physics in terms of freedom from causal necessity is entirely plausible, given a view of the poetry as premised on his principles of method formulated in response to enduring philosophical issues. The consequences of poetic freedom from iron-clad necessity may not be entirely benign, however, as a transition marked by a tiny swerve of atoms might be reconceptualised, upon close reading of Coleridge’s poetry, as a very uncertain rescue beyond mere human understanding. A mysterious swerve can be represented by Coleridge as a kind of inexplicable happenstance in a universe that is irredeemably arbitrary and unknowable. The agony dramatised in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ reflects Coleridge’s extremely prescient intuition of those inscrutable and unforeseen nightmares of logical causation encapsulated by Einstein’s dismayed statement: ‘God doesn’t play dice with the world’.  

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Einstein’s dismay was matched by the shock of physicist, Niels Bohr, who discovered the unknowability of an electron’s location during a quantum jump. As Manjit Kumar explains: ‘In Bohr’s atom, an electron could not occupy the space between orbits. As if by magic, it disappeared while in one orbit and instantly reappeared in another’. Kumar’s imaginative reconstruction of ‘the great debate about the nature of reality’ sparked by the revolution in physics cites Bohr’s observation that ‘Those who are not shocked when they first come across quantum theory cannot possibly have understood it’.

Werner Heisenberg’s famous paper on the ‘Uncertainty Principle’ – which precisely elucidates the limits of certainty in the context of sub-atomic physics – concludes with sounding the death knell of Newton’s deterministic, and empirically knowable, universe: ‘It follows that quantum mechanics establishes the final failure of causality’. This statement reverberates beyond the shore of physics to enrich philosophical debates about the nature of reality and our capacity for more than non-semantic representations of it. Astrida Tantillo notes that ‘Heisenberg further compares Goethe’s rejection of Romanticism with his rejection of the abstract symbols of modern science’. Heisenberg’s father was a Professor of Classics and the physicist himself was observed reading Plato’s Timaeus (in Greek) on his lunch breaks. Inspiration drawn from Greek philosophy may have set in motion the thought experiments in which he modelled his radical principle. Coleridge’s early poems might be considered as similar experimental models drawing from the same well. A liminal space at the shoreline of certain knowledge is a place for the Romantic imagination and a likely threshold to cross from scientific inquiry into Coleridge’s poetics. In terms of the broader critical

98 Manjit Kumar, Quantum: Einstein, Bohr and the Great Debate about the Nature of Reality (New York: Norton, 2009), 103.
context, M.H. Abrams comments astutely that Schelling in Germany and Coleridge in England ‘feed back into scientific thought some of the most productive hypotheses of the nineteenth-century and modern physics’. ¹⁰¹

Within this fertile, cross-disciplinary context, Coleridge’s body of work invites a reappraisal of his characteristically organicist way of thinking, proceeding on intuition through vitally metaphorical transitions. By contrast, a more doggedly rational, philosophical method is pulled up short at the limits of propositional knowledge, once the empiricist hits the literal limit of a scientific materialist conception of the world. It is just this limit that is illuminated by the uncertainty established by the work of Heisenberg on quantum mechanics in the 1920s. We now live with probability at the level of the deep structures of the universe and have grown familiar with intrinsic indeterminacy. It might be the case that Coleridge intuits, with horror, its implications and gives the experience rich and resonant expression in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. That poem’s focus on the uncertainty of progression and the nightmare of stasis akin to an unpredictable spiritual paralysis suggests that this may be so and the blessedly merciful, yet inconspicuously small, swerve from this state is beyond all control and genuine understanding, whether human, poetic, or divine.

It is the periodic lack of motion in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ that stuns both the reader and the wedding guest, along with the uncannily becalmed Mariner himself. The friendlier ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ is a conversation poem – a form that Coleridge pioneered – yet swerves markedly from it on his nightmarish descent into the world of a Mariner whose soul is won in a dice game. For this descent he adopts the ballad form and its associated distance from the lyric speaker. Yet ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ uses a semantic emphasis on contingency that may be

read as a benign foreshadowing of the extremities encountered by the Mariner. The poem models the way in which volition can be exercised in vision, in contrast to the way volition appears crippled at times in Coleridge’s decidedly less friendly ballad. In ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, this process is complicated by the increased role of chance.

Coleridge’s ‘presumption of a something analogous to the causality of the human will’, formulated in Essay X of his ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ and celebrated in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, finds even less stable expression in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. Such instability is indicative of his evidently tormented response to a threat identified by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie in discussion of the ‘provocation of Lucretius’ poem’ from the seventeenth century to the Scientific Revolution and beyond:

In every field of inquiry, from chemistry and physiology to meteorology and cosmology, the Lucretian rejection of teleology, immaterial spirits, and divine and demonic intervention into the lives of men and the phenomena of nature provided an explanatory ideal, even when it was scorned as inadequate to the phenomena or rejected as a threat to morals, politics and religion.

Coleridge’s complex formulation of volition is dependent on human agency grounded in the Divine will, so the rejection of the threat posed by Lucretius reflects his deeply insightful understanding of the implications of *De rerum natura*. More than that, as Nicholas Halmi observes, in a discussion of the Epicurean and stoic background to the *Opus Maximum*: ‘Coleridge was well aware of the hidden threat posed by their doctrine’ and, crucially, he was ‘threatened by Stoicism not because it was an ethical philosophy far distant from his values, but because it was so extremely close to those very

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values.’ \textsuperscript{104} ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ is suffused with the resultant repressively horrified ambivalence.

Open Christian hostility towards Lucretius was fuelled in Coleridge’s lifetime by the slurs on the ancient poet first made by St Jerome in 94 BCE. Stephen Greenblatt argues, convincingly, that

Modern Classical scholarship suggests that every one of Jerome’s biographical claims [the madness and suicide of Lucretius] should be taken with a heavy dose of scepticism. They were recorded — or invented — centuries after Lucretius’ death by a Christian polemicist who had an interest in telling cautionary tales about pagan philosophers. \textsuperscript{105}

Greenblatt’s extensive research into the recovery of Lucretius’ poem and its reception since the Renaissance supports Halmi’s argument for an historical distortion of Epicurean claims because the ancient philosopher ‘taught that the world was formed by the blind play of Atoms — that there was no Providence.’ Yet while these were ‘Doctrines his Disciples fully embraced,’ ‘his moral precepts they forgot or perverted’. \textsuperscript{106} For Coleridge, this degenerating metaphysical strand of Epicureanism was very threatening indeed, not least because of its poetically seductive expression in Lucretius’ \textit{De rerum natura}.

Part I of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ opens with the abrupt logic of the ballad form that establishes chance as a defining feature in the world of the poem:

\begin{quote}
It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
‘By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp’st thou me?

‘The Bridegroom’s doors are opened wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
May’st hear the merry din.’

He holds him with his skinny hand,
‘There was a ship,’ quoth he.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{104} Samuel Taylor Coleridge, \textit{Opus Maximum}, xlv.
\textsuperscript{106} Samuel Taylor Coleridge, \textit{Opus Maximum}, xlvii.
‘Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!’
Eftsoons his hand dropt he.

He holds him with his glittering eye—
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years’ child:
The Mariner hath his will.

The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:
He cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner.

(Part I, ll. 1-20)

The Mariner ‘stoppeth one of three’ (Part I, l. 2) – an event characterised by an inscrutable probability later reinforced by the glossarist when he adds that ‘three gallants’ are ‘bidden to a wedding-feast’. Here the emphasis is on explicable presence and socially defined duty, underscoring the rich connotations of ‘bidden’. Meanings of ‘bidden’ include the sense of being asked or invited along with the stronger association of doing someone’s bidding, which entails surrendering to the will of another.

The Mariner, according to the gloss, ‘detaineth one’ and so begins the tale unbidden, as it were. Or, indeed, bidden – as they (both the ancient Mariner and the wedding guest) are bidden to experience the tale. The hearer is detained from his duty against his will, logically asking for the reason for his being so detained at the threshold of the wedding. The reader, too, is curious to hear the answer to the question he addresses to the Mariner: ‘Now wherefore stopp’st thou me?’ (Part I, l. 4). The even rhythm of the following stanza and the balanced syntax of the line – ‘The guests are met, the feast is set’ (Part I, l. 7) – indicate the social logic and predictability of the wedding guest’s course of action here. No logical explanation is offered by the Mariner, who simply diverts him from his perfunctory course of action. It is an unexpected, apparently tiny, swerve in the narrative action, marking a shift into a world where the natural laws of causation no longer apply. The mysterious act of mesmerism here enacts
the *lene clinamen* that can appear in an inconspicuous turn of events. A seemingly small action thus delivers momentous consequences.

The act of killing the albatross may be regarded in this way, too, particularly in terms of its disproportionate consequences and of the shift in the orientation of the speaker towards his situation and relations to others. Note the initial reaction of the hale gallant: ‘Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!’ (Part I, l. 11). Here, the exclamatory tone indicates an attempt to assert both will and reason in the presence of an apparent lunatic. Aural association with lunar madness reinforces the gothic terror of the poem’s opening shift from the merry, quotidian world of the young men on their way to celebrate a social and sacramental occasion to the strange world of the Mariner’s tale of woe. The tiny swerve is crucial to the displacement and disruption that starts an inexorable process of defamiliarisation that is itself strangely familiar when cast in terms of that bizarre, sub-atomic quantum jump into indeterminacy identified by Bohr’s discovery of the discontinuous trajectory of electrons. Bohr’s comment on the ‘magic’ of this curious feature of electrons resonates with Coleridge’s use of magic and Medievalism in a ballad that explores unpredictability and defies everyday logic at every turn. Looking backwards and forwards from the poem, there is evidence for an odd continuity between a Medieval and a quantum understanding of the world.

A sea voyage, too, begins metaphorically with leaving the shore of certainty and entering a realm characterised by vulnerability to the unforeseen, particularly larger forces like the weather that may be at odds with the human will. Accordingly, the Mariner’s tale begins with a small shift from co-operative weather: ‘The Mariner tells how the ship sailed southward with a good wind and fair weather, till it reached the line.’ Again, there is no immediately forthcoming explanation of why the weather takes such a turn for the worse but there is yet another instance of a threshold demarcating the ordinary from the chaotic in a simple description that, by withholding an explanation,
intimates both inexorability and disaster. Just as the mesmerised wedding guest is
compelled to hear the tale, there is a simply noted inevitable compulsion in the
description of ‘The ship drawn by a storm toward the south pole’. The intensity of this
shift, in contrast to the unadorned gloss, emphasises both the Gothic qualities of this
experience and the loss of volition:

And now the storm-blast came, and he  
Was tyrannous and strong:  
He struck with his o’ertaking wings,  
And chased us south along.  

(Part I, ll. 41-44)

The Shakespearean intensity of the personified force indicated by the striking
compound description ‘storm-blast’ (Part I, l. 41) is bolstered by connotations of will-
defeating power in the adjectives ‘tyrannous’ and ‘strong’ (Part I, l. 42). This gothic
storm is unbidden and unforeseen. More than this, however, it asserts a will over the
Mariner by the powerful mythic image of ‘o’ertaking wings’ and the active verb
‘chased’ (Part I, ll. 44-45) which suggests an intent beyond any natural storm. The
Mariner is both chased and chastened, ultimately cleansed of sin and made chaste in the
turn of events ushered in by the storm.

The ‘unbidden’ calls to mind the notion of ‘taboo’, only recently coined as an
adjective in Cook’s ‘A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean’ with the meaning given as both
‘consecrated, inviolable, forbidden, unclean or cursed’ and (from the Tongan) as
marked by the sacred (according to the OED). There is a virtually atomic collision of
the sacred and the unclean as the energy of the ‘storm-blast’ is unleashed and the moral
order becomes impossible to navigate. The sudden menacing storm, redolent with an
Elizabethan conception of disruption to the Great Chain of Being, introduces a chance,
discontinuous jump in the trajectory of the Mariner’s course. For a modern reader
drawing on quantum understanding, the drama of interpreting Coleridge’s use of such a
powerfully disorientating imaginative shift increases exponentially as Bohr’s disturbing physicist ‘magic’ meets Medieval mayhem.

**Disorientating indeterminacy, category confusion and collapse**

The swerve here is to a symbolic, interior landscape that the Mariner cannot consciously negotiate. The disorientating indeterminacy of the land of ice is dramatically rendered in the Mariner’s negative descriptions of the Dantesque scene: ‘Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken – / The ice was all between’ (Part I, ll.57-58). Unable to determine the familiar categories, physical vision becomes useless as a means of distinguishing form and a nightmarish blurring of perception segues into the visceral sounds of the ice as another supernatural beast: ‘It cracked and growled, and roared and howled, / Like noises in a swound!’ (Part I, l. 61-62). Strong verbs here emphasise, through sound, the nightmarish quality of the Mariner’s shift to an entranced state. The repetition of the conjunction ‘and’ here gives no indication of causality but inexorably lists the growing threat that is beyond the ken of the speaker, the hearer, and the reader.

The sudden arrival of the albatross is associated with the swerve into a different reality, though the causal link is by no means clear. The glossarist comments on the transition to the splitting of the ice and the change in the weather that coincides with the arrival of the bird with the exclamation: ‘And lo!’. This Biblical exclamation directs the reader to look without a genuine explanation of how the albatross effects this change, beyond the unsupported claim that it ‘proveth a / bird of good omen’, to which a reader may be inclined to ask ‘What kind of proof is this?’. The uncertain interpretation of the albatross’s presence is clarified momentarily: ‘For all averred, I had killed the bird / That made the breeze to blow’ (Part II, ll. 93-94). Yet the unreliability of unanimous crowd sentiment, as dramatised in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, for example, is then enacted with the sudden reversal of opinion regarding the significance of the albatross:
‘Then all averred, I had killed the bird / That brought the fog and mist’ (Part II, ll. 99-100).

**Arbitrary reversals – la nausée and primordial super-fecundity**

Contrary to the expected laws of physics and causation, the ship is then ‘suddenly becalmed’. Again, in an apparently arbitrary reversal, the motion is disturbed and a threat ushered in by a tiny swerve in the narrative. There follows the memorable description of physical and spiritual torment culminating in the intensity of:

`The very deep did rot: O Christ!  
That ever this should be!  
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs  
Upon the slimy sea.`

(Part II, ll. 123-126)

There is a kind of grisly super-fecundity in this scene and a disturbing equivalence between the Mariner and the creatures of some primordial slime that conjures a repugnance towards the unclean, non-sacred origins of life. This equivalence is reinforced later in the poem, following the death of the crew, as the Mariner laments ‘And a thousand thousand slimy things/Lived on; and so did I’ (Part IV, ll. 238-239).

The sacred, the unclean, and even the cursed are held in tension until the Mariner suddenly blesses the water snakes: ‘A spring of love gushed from my heart,/And I blessed them unaware’ (Part IV, ll. 283-84). Like the lyric speaker in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ imagining the ‘springy’ walk of his friend, here the act of blessing is tied to a causality associated with Humean springs of action. Again, however, there is no causal explanation of this tiny swerve towards redemption through reconciled unity of self and other. While it can be assumed that love is the prime moving spirit here, too, its arrival seems more precarious. Through acting ‘unaware’ (Part IV, l. 284) momentarily, then, this further tiny swerve sees the poem veer out of a veritable swamp of sin and error towards the cleansing rain which alleviates raging spiritual thirst and, for a time, offers respite to a suffering Mariner.
Looking westward towards the setting sun, perhaps, the Mariner notices ‘a something’ that is stubbornly indeterminate and possibly connected to the direction of his gaze – or not:

When looking westward, I beheld
A something in the sky.

At first it seemed a little speck,
And then it seemed a mist;
It moved and moved, and took at last
A certain shape, I wist.

A speck, a mist, a shape, I wist!
And still it neared and neared:
As if it dodged a water-sprite,
It plunged and tacked and veered.

With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,
We could not laugh nor wail;
Through utter drought all dumb we stood!
I bit my arm, I sucked the blood,
And cried, A sail! a sail!

With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,
Agape they heard me call:
Gramercy! they for joy did grin,
And all at once their breath drew in.
As they were drinking all.

See! see! (I cried) she tacks no more!
Hither to work us weal;
Without a breeze, without a tide,
She steadies with upright keel!

The western wave was all a-flame.
The day was well nigh done!
Almost upon the western wave
Rested the broad bright Sun;
When that strange shape drove suddenly Betwixt us and the Sun.

And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,
(Heaven’s Mother send us grace!)
As if through a dungeon-grate he peered
With broad and burning face…

And is that Woman all her crew?
Is that a DEATH? and are there two?
Is DEATH that woman’s mate?
Her lips were red, her looks were free,

Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thickens man’s blood with cold.

The naked hulk alongside came,
And the twain were casting dice;
‘The game is done! I’ve won! I’ve won!’
Quoth she, and whistles thrice.

(Part III, ll. 147-198)

So it is that an indeterminate ‘something’ (Part III, l. 148) heralds the first appearance of the grim supernatural pair who dice for the soul of the Mariner, an act that represents a climax to the poem’s obsession with the chance and probability inherent in the deep structure of the universe. This climactic shock of uncertainty resonates at the heart of a post-Heisenberg understanding of Romantic poetry for today’s sadder, wiser reader.

Ultimately, Coleridge’s reconceptualised ‘lene clinamen’, along with his attempt to formulate principles of method in resistance to the ‘speculative atheism’ of Hellenic atomism, was key in a characteristically tragic-heroic – yet surprisingly overlooked – Romantic attempt to grapple poetically with enduring issues in the philosophy of science. The philosophical issues discussed here have poignant resonance for the scientifically literate lover of literature in the twenty-first century (who ought to remain suitably shocked by quantum theory, as Coleridge was shocked by Lucretian atomistic materialism). Thus it is evident that Heisenberg’s ‘Uncertainty Principle’ is a powerful modern heuristic for a deeper, empathetic understanding of Coleridge’s agonised response to Lucretius, particularly considering the poet’s articulated sense of fighting the demonic forces seemingly unleashed by De rerum natura. The dramatic resurgence of these forces in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ indicates that, as haunted philosophical poet, Coleridge valiantly attempted to reassert the crucial role of gratuitous reversals as evidence of a gentle bias in a radically uncertain world.
Yearning for dynamic reciprocity in a friendly universe

Coleridge writes in his notebooks:

But in every noble heart there burns eternal thirst for one more noble, a thirst in every beautiful heart for one more beautiful; such a heart desires to see his Ideal outside himself as a physical presence, an idealised or imagined body, in order that he might reach it more easily, because a superior man will only mature in contact with a superior man, just as diamonds are only polished by diamonds.\textsuperscript{107}

If this desire seems beyond the ken or capacity of the Catholic, Medieval Mariner of the ballad, it is surely not beyond the yearning impetus of the wildest dreams of his creator. The associative jump made here is not merely a spurious one predicated on the coincidence of the verb ‘burns’. We find support here for the claim made in our Preface that, at the deepest levels, the concept of the ideal friend is central to Coleridge’s early poetry and the aspirations of the philosophical prose significantly titled ‘The Friend’.

Such a claim can be supported by reference to Camille Paglia’s analysis of ‘sexual personae’ which yields the insight that Coleridge is a presence in the poem as all three creations:

My theory is this: Bridegroom, Wedding-Guest, and Mariner are all aspects of Coleridge. The Bridegroom is a masculine persona, the self comfortably integrated in society. This virile alter ego is always perceived longingly and at a distance, through an open door through which comes bursts of happy laughter. The Wedding-Guest, “next of kin” to the Bridegroom, is an adolescent supplicant aspiring to sexual fulfillment and collective joy. To achieve this, the Wedding-Guest must merge with the Bridegroom. But he is always prevented from doing so by the appearance of the spectre self, the Mariner, the male heroine or hermaphrodite self who luxuriates in passive suffering.\textsuperscript{108}

A propos of a discussion of the gothic doubling and merging of identities in ‘Christabel’, it is significant to note that Paglia conceives of that poem as more ‘daring’ than ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’.

Finally, the significance of the Mariner’s thirsting spiritual agony might be cast in terms of that strangely familiar, inexplicable chance exclusion from the love that

\textsuperscript{107} Samuel Taylor Coleridge, \textit{Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge}, CN I: 4277.
\textsuperscript{108} Camille Paglia, \textit{Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson} (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 323.
nurtures self and soul, often unconsciously sought after by the humblest among us. It is a variant of the kind of loving friendship celebrated in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ that so often, in poetry as in life, can appear and vanish quite mysteriously even though our fundamentally uncertain lives depend upon it. The role of gratuitous grace, grace freely given as indicated by gratia gratis data, will be explored in Chapter Three in relation to Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’ and a lesser known early comedic poem that unleashes the energy of the moon’s ‘mad passion’ in response to poetic intrusion in the quest for dynamic reciprocity.
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Chapter Three: THE CARNIVAL OF THE MOON

Analogues of Divine Grace

Contemplating relations, deducing laws and positing the Universal from the particular: ‘presumption of a something analogous to the causality of the human will’. 109

But a man’s principles, on which he grounds his hope and his faith, are the life of his life. We live by faith, says the philosophic Apostle; and faith without principles is but a flattering phrase for wilful positiveness, or fanatical bodily sensation. Well, and of good right therefore, do we maintain with more zeal, than we should defend body or estate, a deep and inward conviction, which is as the moon to us; and like the moon with all its massy shadows and deceptive gleams, it yet lights us on our way, poor travellers as we are, and benighted pilgrims. With all its spots and changes and temporary eclipses, with all its vain halos and bedimming vapours, it yet reflects the light that is to rise on us, which even now is rising, though intercepted from our immediate view by the mountains that inclose and frown over the vale of our mortal life. 110

110 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Friend, 1:100
PART I: CONTEXTS, STRANGE AND FAMILIAR

For Coleridge, there are implications of over-reaching pride in the value-laden term, ‘presumption’, used alongside an inherited theological expression that recalls Aquinas: ‘the causality of the human will’. Discussion of volition so far has focused on problematic intentionality or the intervention of chance in human affairs, yet Coleridge’s ‘presumption of a something analogous to the causality of the human will’ directs us to a broader context of considering a First Cause of action, ‘a something’ beyond ‘wilful positiveness’ or the fates that thwart us. In this theologically enriched context it is tempting to cast the inexplicable, unanticipated tiny swerve implicated in Coleridgean causation as the action of grace in a Providential scheme. That temptation is suggested by the leniency of the lene clinamen (as I have elucidated it in relation to ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ in Chapter Two, a discussion which first raised the principle of ‘a something analogous to the causality of the human will’).

The principle of positing the Universal from the particular is predicated on the ‘presumption of a something analogous to the causality of the human will’. It is proposed by the enduringly Christian Coleridge – naturally inclined towards faith but ever subject to doubt – as a way of inferring an intelligence capable of the kind of warm reciprocity that might welcome the human spirit home or wish us well on our wending way to joyful arrival. Eolian ‘Random gales’ are beyond the control of any will, so cannot be an analogous cause of inspired speech – the mediated voice of Divine afflatus – unless volitional causality itself is not linear, logical, or within the bounds of conscious desire. Consciousness must involve rational forethought and desire must be enacted by a freely creative impulse to move a reader, spontaneously. The unpredictable nature of the causality of the human will is the logical outcome unspoken in Coleridge’s poetic equivocation, with the apparent consequence of an inescapable reliance on arbitrary chance to set the world, and thought itself, in motion, discussed earlier in
relation to ‘The Eolian Harp’. In the precise context of the causality of the human will, this consequence is intimated by the adjective ‘random’ paired with the loud, stormy, and destructive connotations of ‘gales’, at odds with the serenity one might hope for from a Divine wind. In an act of ventriloquism, it is the poem’s speaker who ends the conversation opened up by ‘The Eolian Harp’ mired in poetic ambivalence and using the self-convincing declarative tone that is the least convincing manifestation of Coleridge’s poetic thought.

From the self-conscious confines of apology for the presumptuous unself-conscious imaginative audacity that dared to articulate spiritual mystery earlier in ‘The Eolian Harp’, the speaker banishes his own philosophical poetry and retreats into Christian humility and gratitude for domestic blessings:

Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break  
On vain Philosophy’s aye-babbling spring.  
For never guiltless may I speak of him,  
That Incomprehensible! Save when with awe  
I praise him, and with faith that inly feels;  
Who with his saving mercies healed me,  
A sinful and most miserable man,  
Wilderied and dark, and gave me to possess  
Peace, and this cot, and thee, heart-honoured Maid!  

(ll. 56-64)

Exemplary pious humility is conveyed with the use of the personally charged ‘Wilderied’, an adjective Coleridge uses in his notebooks to indicate being both bewildered and lost in the wilds of a metaphysically intense, passionate rather than social frame of mind. It is an archaic verb with the sense of being led astray linked etymologically to ‘wilderness’ by the OED that dates the term from the early seventeenth century, with the example, ‘unknowne Lands, where we have wildered ourselves’. Here the sublimity of the verb is suggested by a poetic context indicating that one is stunned into silence in this shocking state of contemplation. ‘Wilderied’, then, is suggestive of a pensive (in the Miltonic sense), melancholy fear of being

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intellectually driven to cross the threshold of the socially sanctioned domestic, marital pleasures that ought to suffice for happiness on a homely Christian view. The calm and quiet enjoyment of such pleasure is, for Coleridge, at cross-purposes with his irresistible drive towards the temptation of a transgressively boundless metaphysical speculation. Uriah Heep could not be more humble than the speaker at the close of ‘The Eolian Harp’, which ends with a closure of the conversation so tantalisingly begun, with speech bubbles bursting into remorseful silence that betrays the courage of Coleridge’s theological convictions in relation to philosophical inquiry.

A second context for the principle at hand is philosophical in the sense that Coleridge would have understood it, a context rich with the legacy of neo-Platonism, the influence of Kantian Idealism and a common-sense grasp of the reality of the world of lakes and mountains, of moonlight not understood in the current sense of ‘earthshine’, but as a light reflected from an unobservable entity that Coleridge would have had no problem designating as ‘God’, the creator of living nature. The philosophical context we inhabit now is continuous with the rich one outlined above, although God rarely gets a mention, let alone confident designation.

In our discussion of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, I drew on A.C. Varzi’s formulations of ‘fiat demarcations’ in Carving Nature at its Joints, a title that, as noted earlier, derives from Plato’s Phaedrus, the classic locus of the ‘One-Over-Many’ problem. Varzi wrestles with ‘the ghost of Berkeleyan idealism’ in the same essay in parallel ways to Coleridge’s struggle in relation to the principle of the ‘presumption of a something analogous to the causality of the human will’. We have considered the modern philosopher ‘hacking the carcass’ in relation to Plato’s metaphor of carving nature at her joints for Universals and have touched on the issue of the classification of

112 Plato, Phaedrus [265e].
natural kinds or other categories along lines that are more than arbitrary but less than Linnaean. Coleridge’s reading of Kant is an obvious influence on his own philosophical position in relation to this difficult and unsettling question.

**Kantian categories – Devitt’s critique of the ‘cookie-cutter theory’**

Michael Devitt’s characterisation of Kantian categories as a ‘cookie-cutter theory’ of reality is helpful in terms of bringing out the implications of Coleridge’s principle as it relates to a generative First Cause.\(^{114}\) Devitt’s metaphor casts the noumenal world as the dough, concepts as cookie-cutters, and appearances as cookies. He then asks, ‘But how could cookie-cutters in the head literally carve out cookies in dough that is outside the head’?\(^ {115}\) Rejecting the claims of neo-Kantian constructivists, Devitt concludes that ‘it is false that we construct the world by imposing concepts on the world, it is plausible to suppose that we construct theories of the world by imposing concepts on experience of the world…The vacillation helps to make the falsehood seem true’.\(^ {116}\) Devitt has more to say along these lines in relation to ‘the gap between the knowing mind and the Realist world’ as part of his rejection of Kuhn and Feyerabend’s Incommensurability Theory. Acceptance of that same theory has led to quite extreme claims about the world changing as our theories change.

To bring out the parallels of category confusion and uncertainty with which Coleridge contends in formulating principles, we must recognise this twenty-first century philosophical debate as – to use Gavin Budge’s phrase – a ‘turn to the

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ontological". Writing from a tenaciously realist position, that has its antecedents in the eighteenth century Scottish ‘common sense realism’ of Thomas Reid, Devitt writes:

The linguistic turn has dominated Anglo American philosophy in the 20th century… What is the explanation of this turn?... a dissatisfaction with the metaphysical excesses of much 19th Century philosophy, particularly that emanating from Germany… Many thinkers in several fields have been led to forms of neo-Kantian relativism; Benjamin Lee Whorf in anthropology; Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend in the philosophy of science; the structuralists in just about everything.

One of the several fields affected is literary criticism, as is evident in the adoption of philosophical positions that lead to the kind of epistemic slippage from metaphysics to theories of things discernible in Kathleen Wheeler’s otherwise astute criticism of Coleridge. In her essay on the ‘Art of thingifying’, Wheeler’s anti-realism is, on a staunchly philosophical analytical view, unhelpfully muddled, ‘thought and thing are different, but not essentially different. Moreover, they may only be facts of experience, not of reality, in the absolute sense’. On my view, we ought not to fall into the error of underestimating Coleridge’s resistance to Kantian idealism as he tries to reconcile Baconian and neo-Platonic modes of inquiry in The Friend.

Coleridge struggles to articulate the relations between the concrete and the abstract in poetic creativity and poetic creation. On the one hand, the tension of this struggle emerges as a kind of usurping Divine fiat or act of ventriloquism as inspired speech and on the other, there is a poetic emphasis on subtler transitions to less wilful acquiescence in the conversation poems. When Coleridge does reach for poetic unity through symmetry, he aspires to a beautiful analogue of the living process of God’s Creation, an analogous process in which an attuned lyric speaker and sympathetically listening reader can freely partake.

The focus in this chapter is on ‘contemplating relations’ as suggested by the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ which include an entire essay on laws as relations (Essay III) and an entire essay on relations as theory (Essay IV). Despite our commitment to realism, Coleridge’s earlier, prefatory discussion of Hamlet as the methodical thinker par excellence in the first of the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ suggests, as we have seen, that we must contemplate a vision of a Providential world in terms of how our ends are divinely shaped, as opposed to being rough hewn or hacked by ourselves or our scientists in the service of a strictly physicalist worldview: ‘There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will —’. In this chapter, we will shift our contemplation of these relations to a broader Shakespearean context of humour and, in turn, a long tradition of philosophical comedy.

**The place of infinite jest in an uncertain Providential scheme**

In considering the infinite, it is requisite to make a tiny, structural swerve into explicating the principles of infinite jest and the Coleridgean carnivalesque. The poems for treatment in this context are Coleridge’s gothic ballad ‘Christabel’, set in the days preceding Lent – a prime time for Medieval Carnival celebrations – and a lesser known comic poem that enacts Coleridge’s literary grasp of the serious joke in the tradition of ‘learned wit’, ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being In A Mad Passion –]’. The energy of humour may be requisite to dodge Coleridge’s self-imposed penance of turning away from onto-theological speculation because it is subjectively experienced as driven by hubris (which generates great guilt). In the comic drama of Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*, a song with poetic and philosophical ramifications may be sung more easefully in times of tumult:

Or when fleeing the storm, we went Down to the depths, and our choral song Wildly roused to a loud and long

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Coleridge refers to Aristophanes in *Biographia Literaria* and Essay VI of *The Friend* (‘thoughts brisk as bees’) and is alive to the energetic vitality of utterance, in the dialogic sense evident in the lines above. Coleridge’s excursions into drama are influential in both his poems and Friendly essays. Following Aristophanes, Coleridge situates his dramatic personae in relation to Heaven, the Underworld and Earth, the three planes subject to the logic of carnival on Bakhtin’s reading of Menippean satire. Aristophanes’ play, *The Clouds*, ends with Socrates’ house being burned down for invading the privacy of the moon.

It is for this transgression that Coleridge places presumptuous poets, himself included, on trial in a seldom discussed piece of distinctly Coleridgean carnivalesque inversion: ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’. The Aristophanic exuberance of that poem is a dramatic rendering of Bakhtin’s notion of the problem of encrusted meanings in direct concrete reference applied to poetry’s long-held fascination with the moon:

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\text{Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object of which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist – or, on the contrary, by the ‘light’ of alien words that have already been spoken about it.}^{123}
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Bakhtin’s insight into the workings of the ‘dialogic imagination’ is worth bearing in mind as we consider both the cloud-shrouded moon in ‘Christabel’ and a moon fed up with poetic figuration of its moon-ness in ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’. The latter, comic poem opens with the moon in high dudgeon speaking against persecution by poets, including Coleridge himself:

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Now as Heaven is my Lot, they’re the Pests of the Nation!
Wherever they can come
With clankum and blankum
‘Tis all Botheration, & Hell & Damnation,
With fun, jeering
Conjuring
Sky-staring,
Loungering,
And still to the tune of Transmogrification –
Those muttering
Spluttering
Ventriloquogusty
Poets
With no Hats
Or Hats that are rusty.
They’re my Torment and Curse
And harass me worse
And bait me and bay me, far sorer I vow
Than the Screech of the Owl
Or the witch-wolf’s long howl,
Or sheep-killing Butcher-dog’s inward Bow wow
For me they all spite – an unfortunate Wight.

(ll. 1-22)

A proliferation of fast rhyming compound (and newly coined) verbs capture the energy of an utterance in what Bakhtin calls ‘a dialogically agitated and tension filled environment’. It is a fitting description and an apposite semiotic context for reading the odd humour of the gothic opening of both the moon soliloquy and the dramatic narration of ‘Christabel’.

Together, then, these contexts suggest a way of reading Coleridge back through the absurd, through the kinds of swerves that I have elaborated as tiny but with disproportionate consequences that usher in the incongruence of the bleakest comedy. Incongruity generates the awkward, pregnant silences of farce that undercut solemnity; the ‘surdity’ – deafness, muteness, the silence of the stunned – that is simultaneously as pathetic, funny and harrowing as Hamlet’s ultimate silencing. If, in Hamlet, Shakespeare dramatises the inability to speak of the nothingness that defeats us all then Coleridge, too, is capable of likewise losing poetic faith in vertiginous moments of spiritual crisis. The tragedy (and farce) of doubt is played out in Coleridge’s early
gothic verse. At times, he saves himself and his readers by deploying a redemptively
gentle swerve from the bitterest nihilism.

Nothingness of this kind is pervasive in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, from
Cordelia’s eloquent ‘Nothing, my lord’, in the first scene, to Lear’s ironic reply,
‘nothing will come of nothing’ – a nothing commented upon explicitly by the
philosophical Fool throughout the play. Silence turns tragic amidst the dramatic pathos
and irony of Edgar’s impersonation of Poor Tom, directed to cease babbling on the
heath. Gloucester soothes the wordy, seeming madness of Poor Tom’s nonsense, as one
would soothe a disturbed child, with the concise ‘No words, no words. Hush.’. The
final syllable is an imitation of maternal soothing silence, in a play in which the absence
of the mother leaves the innocent unprotected, as in Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’. ‘Hush’
mimics the rhythmic whoosh that first touches our ears in the fluid quietness of the
womb before we have to come to terms with our sentience, our separateness, and the
performative verbosity that inhibits genuine connection with others and the world. It is a
bodily consolation, not essentially linguistic, let alone artistic in character. The
immanent nihilism of *King Lear* offers an existentially absurd model of negation for
Coleridge’s philosophical poetry. Accordingly, the tension between the Christian piety
of the glossarist of ‘The Ancient Mariner’ and the intensity of alienation from God
dramatised in the narrative itself cannot be resolved harmoniously – any more than it
can in the unfinished companion piece, ‘Christabel’.

Silence manifested in the enforced muteness of Christabel and the enchanted
deafness of Sir Leoline takes on extraordinary expressive power when considered from
the literary perspective of absurdity sketched here ahead of our discussion of

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Coleridge’s strange yet ‘common Faery Tale’.\textsuperscript{125} With an eye on Romantic recovery of the folkloric past and the unclouded perspective of the child, Susan Manning regards the tales of the nursery as silenced philosophy:

Less readily recuperable… were a series of ‘Nursery Songs and Popular Rhymes’ and (anticipating William Blake’s \textit{Songs of Innocence and Experience}) pared-down, laconic lyrics such as ‘The Nurse’s Song’. Their diction stripped of literary sophistication and resistant to hermeneutic translation, recovered ballad verses as poetic embodiments of pure presence available to an earlier state of society and subsequently lost in the process of refinement… mocked in Peacock’s \textit{Melincourt} (1817), in which Mr Derry Down, having expended ‘a great quantity of midnight oil, over ponderous tomes of ancient and modern learning’, ‘found, or fancied he found, in the plain language of [Percy’s \textit{Reliques}], glimpses of the truth of things, which he had vainly sought in the vast volumes of philosophical disquisition.’\textsuperscript{126}

The absurdity of primitivism is particularly relevant to the poems selected for treatment in this chapter. It is central to a ubiquitously discernible and characteristically Coleridgean self-satire that anticipates the kind of mockery that Peacock brings to life. Manning highlights the complexity of Romantic naïvety and an ideology of the child introduced by Blake, developed by Wordsworth and problematised by Coleridge’s doubts (which frequently obstruct a graceful submission to silence). ‘In what sense can the child be thought of as a “mighty prophet,” or a “seer blest”?’, asks Richard Fogle, citing Coleridge’s misgivings over appropriating ‘magnificent attributes’ to a child.\textsuperscript{127} Coleridge writes dismissively, in \textit{Biographia Literaria}, that these attributes are ‘equally suitable to a \textit{bee}, or a \textit{dog}, or a \textit{field of corn}’ on Wordsworth’s logic.\textsuperscript{128} Yet Coleridge, in his early poems, dares to take a powerful poetic imagination through a will-negating impasse wrought by his own distinctively personal conflicts of faith and doubt, naïve intuition and an over-developed literary sensibility. The result is frequently shocking, a strange admixture that comprises a seeking for ‘pure presence’ from the vantage of impure existence confronting absence of the most nullifying kind.

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\textsuperscript{125} Samuel Taylor Coleridge, \textit{Biographia Literaria}, 2:238.
\textsuperscript{127} Richard Harter Fogle, \textit{The Idea of Coleridge’s Criticism}, 87.
Childhood is re-imagined not just as a place of nostalgic comfort that perhaps never was, but also as the site of hopes deferred. A child-like state is a catalyst for imaginatively awakening those nightmares steadier adults pay scant attention to in their stoutly Appollonian focus on the day-lit quotidian (supported by a belief in the happily ever after of a remote celestial afterlife). Dionysian Coleridge sees the moon and experiments, in the early poetry, with dramatically rendering the ramifications of his distinctive vision. Coleridge’s early poetry, from around 1797, tends to invest hope in the fairytale moon that leads us to a fresh, close treatment of the gothic, diseased moon of ‘Christabel’ and that absurd moon in soliloquy in his comedic poem on poetic method, ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’. Both poems invoke a child’s intense capacity for hope and despair alongside an incongruous delight in the ridiculous and the mysterious.

**An Aristophanic Mariner searching for Dionysus**

A fearless breaker of idols, Coleridge gave us ‘Idoloclastes Satyrane’ along with the Mariner, who is partly wrought by at least a nod to the dramatic comedy of Aristophanes. In Aristophanes’ famous play, in which frogs speak nonsense as Dionysus searches the Underworld for a poet to save Athens, the dramatist gives us Heracles warning Dionysus:

> A parlous voyage that,  
> For first you’ll come to an enormous lake  
> Of Fathomless depth.

To which Dionysus replies with the question, ‘And how am I to cross?’ The stunning bathos in the less earnest answer guides us to understanding much of Coleridge’s admixture of tragedy and comedy in connection to safe voyaging through treacherously silent seas:

> An ancient mariner will row you over
In a wee boat, so big. The fare’s two obols.\textsuperscript{129}

What we have here is a sudden swerve into the prosaic and the quotidian that creates a comically charged moment at the edge of doom with intriguing resonance in terms of Coleridge’s most famous ballad, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. Reading the poem anew, along with the companion ballad ‘Christabel’, in a comic tradition continuous with Aristophanes is not too fantastic a jump as for Coleridge both humility and humour suggest themselves as saving graces. Accordingly, a comic response to the high drama of the vast cosmic joke in which we are ensconced, perhaps, might be to laugh. Faith is cheerful as well as mortally serious and doubt can evoke both horror and laughter, which sit quite closely together in the human psyche – most particularly so in the mind of a child.

For Coleridge, then, besides ‘contemplating relations’ in meditative quiet, another way defiantly (and uproariously) to evade the dominance of a rational, controlling voice that over-directs and limits conversation might be to encode theologically volatile materials in a complex comedic mode. Coleridge designated himself ‘Ess-Tee-Cee’ in a richly evocative play on Punic Greek that does not quite translate as ‘I have stood’ (so others may stand).\textsuperscript{130} Coleridge is ever alive to the punning potential of language and was fond of riddles, as many of his surviving letters testify. Coleridge’s letter to John Prior Estlin (July 4\textsuperscript{th}, 1796) is exemplary:

\begin{quote}
I would write Odes & Sonnets Morning & Evening – & metaphysicize at Noon – and of rainy days I would overwhelm you with an Avalanche of Puns & Conundrums loosened by sudden thaw from the Alps of my Imagination. – My most respectful & tenderest Love to dear Mrs Estlin – and ask her – ‘If a Woman had murdered her cousin, and there were no other proof of her guilt except that she had an half-barrel Cask in her possession – how would that convict her?[’] – Answer. It would be evident, that she had kild-er-kin. – ’ as I know that now she cannot mortify me by pretending not to enjoy the joke, she will laugh most intemperately, do not ask her the next till a quarter of an hour’s intermission – why
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{130} Seamus Perry, ‘Coleridge’s Names’, \textit{The Coleridge Bulletin} New Series 11 (Spring 1998), 44.
Satan sitting on a house-top would be like a decayed Merchant? – Answer –
Because he would be imp-over-shed.  

Coleridge emerges from his works as a profound thinker who was not above the folkloric or the delightfully disarming rhymes of the nursery. In his poetry, Coleridge is prone to drawing on conventions of comedy that extend from Aristophanes through the entire tradition of Menippean satire alongside the rollicking romps of the Commedia dell’Arte’s violent, magic slapstick.

In his favourite passage from The Friend, Coleridge casts himself, rather comically but simultaneously seriously, in the role of ‘Chamois-hunter’:

Alas! Legitimate reasoning is impossible without severe thinking, and thinking is neither easy nor an amusing employment. The reader, who would follow a close reasoner to the summit and absolute principle of any one important subject, has chosen a Chamois-hunter for his guide. Our guide will, indeed, take us the shortest way, will save us many a wearisome and perilous wandering, and warn us of many a mock road that had formerly led himself to the brink of chasms and precipices, or at best in an idle circle to the spot from whence he started. But he cannot carry us on his shoulders: we must strain our own sinews, as he has strained his; and make firm footing on the smooth rock for ourselves, by the blood of toil from our own feet.

The chamois is a creature that looks down for danger and so must be hunted from above, hence Coleridge’s strategy of figuratively heading for the summit. The folkloric underpinnings of Coleridge’s remarkable figure of himself as a kind of Alpine guide are significant. The tale highlights the sense of both terror, trespass, and the fairytale logic of sudden, inexplicable bouts of extreme, almost comic violence. Its funny and violent conclusion mixes both tragic and comic modes:

The hunter levelled his bow and took aim at the prey; and as the Dwarf did not appear, he was just pulling the trigger, when the Dwarf stole behind him, took him by the ankle, and tumbled him down the precipice.

The ‘Chamois-hunter’ might suddenly awaken a vengeful dwarf in much the same manner as an Arabian genie might rise wrathfully from a well, a circumstance quite apt

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131 The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1:223.
as a manner of understanding the tiny swerves into disproportion in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. Coleridge’s comment on that poem’s logic, made in reply to Anna Laetitia Barbauld, could well be applied to the fairytale ‘Christabel’:

It ought to have had no more moral than the Arabian Nights tale of the merchant’s sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well, and throwing the shells aside, and lo! a genie starts up, and says he must kill the aforesaid merchant, because one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie’s son.\(^{134}\)

Coleridge identifies wild disproportion as a key source of humour. What is different about Coleridge’s poetic description of the moon that haunts ‘Christabel’ from that recorded in Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal or Wordsworth’s lines in ‘A Night-Piece’, according to Humphry House, is ‘that cloud and moon are behaving oddly and ominously, just out of the way of ordinary behaviour, as if proportion is thrown out and normal vision perplexed.’\(^{135}\) As noted in our discussion of the killing of the albatross in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, it is the swerve into the horror of disproportionate consequences that fuels the intensity of that poem.

These elements must be combined to identify a precise method in Coleridge’s poetry that lays emphasis on disproportion, yet recovers an encoded comedic anarchy to dispel the horror before the poet in full imaginative flight. There may be a certain saving grace in a playfulness that attempts no baldly serious justification of the ways of God to men. Coleridge revels in anarchic freedom from the moral brake of Christian orthodoxy to let loose, at times, the full energetic vigour of his imaginative speculations. Identifying a gap in the critical literature on Coleridge’s carnivalesque impulses, William Christie observes: ‘The real value of Bakhtin’s work on Menippean satire and on carnival (from *Rabelais and His World*, 1965, onward), and of his


valorisation of the heterogeneous text, with its interactive voices, is yet to be felt.\textsuperscript{136} We may address that gap by considering the tragi-comedy of ‘Christabel’, a poem that Coleridge claimed ‘pretended to be nothing more than a common Faery Tale’.\textsuperscript{137}

**PART II: STRANGE AND FAMILIAR MOONS**

In ‘Christabel’, Geraldine’s ancestors are a species of the ‘monstrous feminine’ explored by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in relation to Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. The parallels with Coleridge’s dark fairytale in ‘Christabel’ are striking:

The first book of Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* introduces a female monster who serves as a prototype of the entire line. *Errour* is half woman, half serpent, “Most lothsam, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine” (1.1.126). She breeds in a dark den where her young suck on her poisonous dugs or creep back into her mouth at the sight of hated light, and in a battle against the Red-crosse Knight, she spews out a flood of books and papers, frogs and toads. Symbolizing the dangerous effect of misdirected and undigested learning her filthiness adumbrates that of two other powerful females in book 1, Duessa and Lucifera. But because these other women can create false appearances to hide their vile natures, they are even more dangerous.

Like Errour, Duessa is deformed below the waist… But significantly, Duessa deceives and ensnares men by assuming the shape of Una, the beautiful and angelic heroine who represents Christianity, charity, docility.\textsuperscript{138}

For present purposes, it is more important to note the track that Gilbert and Gubar’s chapter follows, from Ancient Greek comedy to Swiftian satire, than the implications of their groundbreaking critique of literary paternalism. That track through the traditions of complex comedy mirrors the one I have sketched in Part I. Additionally, Gilbert and Gubar’s feminist critique of ‘mimetic aesthetics’ can be brought to bear on Coleridge’s principle of a ‘something analogous’ to the Logos of creation:

Defining poetry as a mirror held up to nature, the mimetic aesthetic that begins with Aristotle and descends through Sidney, Shakespeare, and Johnson implies that the poet, like a lesser God, has made or engendered an alternative, mirror-universe in which he actually seems to enclose or trap shadows of reality. Similarly, Coleridge’s Romantic concept of the human “imagination or esemplastic power” is


\textsuperscript{137} Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2:238.

of a virile, generative force which echoes “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM”… In all these aesthetics the poet, like God the Father, is a paternalistic ruler of a fictive world he has created… Simone de Beauvoir has commented that the human male’s “transcendence” of nature is symbolized by his ability to hunt and kill… In *The Battle of the Books*, for instance, Swift’s “Goddess Criticism” clearly symbolises the demise of wit and learning.\(^\text{139}\)

In *The Friend*, Coleridge envisioned his role of guide in terms that might give us pause on this account, in light of the observation made by de Beauvoir on the masculine urge to express dominion over nature through hunting. In ‘Christabel’, however, one cannot easily distinguish between the dominated and the submissive, the guilty and the innocent. It is a strange fairytale, indeed.

**Christabel’s midnight walk in the woods**

In Part I of ‘Christabel’, written in Somerset in the Spring of 1798, the moon appears veiled by ‘thin gray cloud’ (Part I, l. 16) that echoes the reference in the second verse paragraph to ‘my lady’s shroud’ (Part I, l. 13). The dog guarding the castle seems to respond uneasily to an apparition at the tolling of the bells that ceaselessly mark the memory of the lady of the house, Christabel’s dead mother. The ‘lady’ is linked throughout the poem to Our Lady, as Heaven’s Holy mother is invoked superstitiously against harm to the innocent child-woman of the castle, ‘Jesu, Maria, shield her well!’ (Part I, l. 54). The moon, which might give protective light to damsels in distress in the woods, is not playing her part in the tale. Though full, the light given is half-hearted, as though there is a refusal to play the part of the Greek ‘Selene’, the Mother Goddess associated with the mythological full moon. As with Christabel’s mother, there is absence, a failure to protect and a deadness to the shrouded moon of the opening section. The moon first appears indistinctly in a narrated description that sets the stage for Christabel’s midnight walk in the woods. The fairytale danger of a girl on the cusp of sexual maturity straying from home into the woods is not lost on the reader of ‘Little

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Red Riding Hood’ and ‘Snow White’. But where is the moon and how is it behaving? We are told that ‘The moon is behind, and at the full, / And yet she looks both small and dull.’ (Part I, ll. 18-19). This moon is not hiding, but its light is partially hidden. The qualification ‘And yet’ alerts the reader to the riddle of its contradictory state being a full moon that is neither big nor bright. The small, dull eye in the sky is not on the lookout for danger in the midnight woods.

Oddly, when Christabel encounters her, Geraldine is brighter and whiter than the full moon one would expect in a gothic tale. She eclipses our lady, the moon, and ‘wildly glittered here and there’(Part I, l. 64). The sense of a wild, glittering supernatural presence by moonlight recalls the Mariner and his ‘glittering eye’. A glitter is not a source of light, but a bright, intermittent reflection. The ambiguously bright dark lady in the woods is flagged as ‘wildly’, unnaturally bright beneath a faraway and dully non-reflective moon. If the moon being lit by the light of the unobservable sun is a recurring religious metaphor for the way to infer the presence of the light of Christ in Coleridge’s writings, then here the moon is not signalling the hope of this consoling invisible presence. It is dull and small and as Christabel and Geraldine walk together, they are ‘Now in glimmer, and now in gloom’ (Part I, ll. 169). Note that this is not the ‘luminous gloom’ of Plato’s world of forms, but a flickering state between a sickly glimmer and a melancholy darkness. In Coleridge’s ‘Notebook entries separated by at least six years’, James Vigus observes the recurrence of ‘The polarity of nonsense and truth, “dark with excessive bright”’.140 In ‘Christabel’, by the time the maiden on the cusp of marriage carries the ‘damsel bright’ (l. 58) from the dim forest, the moon absents herself from Christabel’s chamber despite the lady’s vulnerability to the creature she has carried over the threshold of her castle home.

140 James Vigus, Platonic Coleridge, 21-22.
Part I concludes with the climactic horror partially wrought by the off-duty moon. Sir Leoline, the ‘mastiff bitch’, Christabel’s mother and the moon are all sleeping on the job at the point at which the fairytale heroine most needs a shield, a guard, maternal protection or light to guide her:

The moon shines dim in the open air,  
And not a moonbeam enters here.  
But they without its light can see  
The chamber carved so curiously.

(ll. 175-78)

The suspenseful moment when the footlights go down on the stage is strangely comic as well as frightful. The withholding of light from the voyeuristic reader intensifies the sense in which we ought not to be peering into this lady’s chamber. The lights go down and the inner chamber is penetrated by the stranger in darkness, a darkness that does not deter the ostensibly innocent maid, now no longer kneeling in the moonlight in prayer, as in the earlier tableau of Christabel’s chastity and supplication.

A non-reciprocal moon and a terrifying reciprocity – ‘Christabel’ Part II

Part II of the poem was written in the Summer and early Autumn of 1800 and remains unfinished, despite the tacked-on conclusion with the giddy elfin child and chiding yet loving father. The odd, small, dullness of the moon is re-iterated in this fragment, as Geraldine gives a Christabel cursed into near-silent acquiescence the malocchio (evil eye) in the presence of the lady’s father, whom Geraldine seduces into pity with a tale of her connection to Sir Leoline’s estranged friend. Like Christabel, who takes pity on Geraldine as a damsel in distress in disarray after her ride with her abductors – ‘Dear lady! it hath wildered you!’ (Part I, l. 217) – Sir Leoline is moved to charity and hospitality and moved away from duty to his own dear daughter.

The malocchio, according to superstition, is visited upon the innocent, often motivated by envy and with effects ranging from misfortune, headache and malaise to death and loss. At the second invocation of Christ and Mary to protect Christabel, the
dramatic horror of the *malocchio*, felt only by the victim in a manner that cannot be explained nor witnessed by bystanders, is unveiled to the reader:

A snake’s small eye blinks dull and shy,  
And the lady’s eyes they shrunk in her head,  
Each shrunk up to a serpent’s eye,  
And somewhat of malice, and more of dread,  
At Christabel she looked askance! –  
One moment – and the sight was fled!  
But Christabel in dizzy trance  
Stumbling on the steady ground  
Shuddered aloud, with a hissing sound.

(Part I, ll. 583-91)

The Italian etymology of ‘askance’ (‘*a scancio*’), which seems most apt in consideration of the curse of the *malocchio*, gives us ‘obliquely, slantingly’ and is cognate with ‘askew’. The moon and the ladies of ‘Christabel’ behave oddly indeed as Coleridge skew(s) innocence and culpability through gothic doubling. The resultant uncertainty generated by the poem is neatly summarised in Paul Magnuson’s observation that ‘Christabel finds a figure that demands interpretation yet at the same time resists intelligibility’.141 As in the companion ballad, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, Coleridge brings uncertainty to the fore in ‘Christabel’ along with the unsettling philosophical implications of a radically uncertain worldview.

**Gothic machinery and another non-cooperative moon**

Today’s reader might sense the bathos in a dramatic situation that figures fantastic shape-shifting. The lesser known poem in which the moon resists transmogrification – ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’ – echoes the carnivalesque horror of Coleridge’s ballad in a more recognisably comedic mode. Yet the comedy is predicated on the same kind of serious joke that underlies Hamlet’s foolery in dialogue with Polonius in relation to ‘yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a

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camel?…like a weasel…Or like a whale’.\textsuperscript{142} In Coleridge’s strangest poem, Geraldine is almost a damsel in distress, like a demon, or like a snake and Christabel is uncertain how to interpret the stranger then falls silent. Indistinct categories bring us close to madness and in ‘Christabel’ it is the loss of the expected reciprocity of the moon that allows Geraldine to have her will. It is a dark underside to ‘something analogous to the human will’, a disturbing and absurd inversion that resists closure and explicit conclusion.

There are points of continuity between the gothic machinery and knowing theatricality of ‘Christabel’ and ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’, the latter written between May and June in 1802, on the cusp of the well-documented crisis of creativity that Coleridge endured after Wordsworth decided not to publish ‘Christabel’ in the second edition of the \textit{Lyrical Ballads}. There is a serious purpose to the joke, here, as I suggested in my discussion of the Shakespearean negation of meaningful speech. Both Wordsworth’s theory of poetry in the preface to the \textit{Lyrical Ballads} and Hamlet’s cloud conversation with Polonius are suggested in comic ways in Coleridge’s ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’. The dramatic term ‘soliloquy’ and the stage directions in the brackets of the title – ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’ – indicate the playfully comic tone, reinforced by the inversion of the form of the usually serious soliloquy as an act of ‘ventriloquogusty’. Thus, Coleridge dramatises a down-to-earth and hot air deflating perspective on her majesty the moon. A discussion of this poem is enhanced by awareness of the potentially dark and bathetic energy of Aristophanic comedy that is more volatile than Seamus Perry’s comment on Coleridge’s ‘pure whimsy’.\textsuperscript{143} In Coleridge’s early poetry, what is ‘substantiated’ in Nature is a recognisable relationship

\textsuperscript{142} William Shakespeare, \textit{Hamlet} 3.2. ll 339–343.
\textsuperscript{143} Seamus Perry, \textit{The Notebooks}, 99.
or ratio, a symmetry that becomes apparent in ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She
Being in a Mad Passion]’, particularly in the dramatic focus on spontaneity and
reciprocity. What is significant in this poem is not mimetic representation as shapes but
figuration as relations.

The earthy humour of this moon poem is fuelled by Coleridge’s commitment to
realism, as indicated in Logic: ‘the logician, as far as he is treating of the forms of logic,
abstracts his attention from the outward world without denying its reality or the reality
of the connection of the mind.’ \(^{144}\) Coleridge shows awareness in this treatise of the
limitations of formal logic, which supports the discussion of the importance of the
folkloric in the contexts of these poems, both of which employ a fairytale
expressiveness that energises relations in a way that a less dynamic, logical
categorisation ever could: ‘logic by itself… is but a cabinet of many drawers and
pigeonholes, all empty’. \(^{145}\) For present purposes, the relation to be contemplated (rather
than logically inferred) might begin with a treatment of Coleridge’s poem in terms of its
horror and comedy via the shock of disproportion. The fulcrum for the polarity
identified in this way is the curious appearance of the moon, in line with Coleridge’s
stated desire for expressing ‘a deep and inward conviction, which is as the moon to us;
and like the moon with all its massy shadows and deceptive gleams, it yet lights us on
our way, poor travellers as we are, and benighted pilgrims’, in the passage which
opened the present chapter.

Following on from the energetic indication of the opening of Coleridge’s moon
soliloquy, Wordsworth is figured as a wizard conjuring rhymes that do violence to the
homely integrity of the moon that lights our way:

Jackson, Routledge and Kegan Paul Bollingen Series LXXV (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
1981), 41.

\(^{145}\) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Logic*, 204.
A Night or two after a worse Rogue there came,
The head of the Gang, one Wordsworth by name –
‘Ho! What’s in the wind?’ ‘Tis the voice of a Wizzard!
I saw him look at me most terribly blue!
He was hunting for witch-rhymes from great A to Izzard,
And soon as he’d found them made no more ado
But chang’d me at once to a little Canoe.
From this strange Enchantment uncharm’d by degrees
I began to take courage & hop’d for some Ease,
When one Coleridge, a Raff of the self-same Banditti
Past by – & intending no doubt to be witty,
Because I’d th’ ill-fortune his taste to displease,

He turn’d up his nose,
And in pitiful Prose
Made me into the half of a small Cheshire Cheese.
Well, a night or two past – it was wind, rain & hail –
And I ventur’d abroad in a thick Cloak & veil –
But the very first Evening he saw me again
The last mentioned Ruffian popp’d out of his Den –
I was resting a moment on the bare edge of Naddle
I fancy the sight of me turn’d his Brains addle –

For what was I now?
A complete Barley-mow
And when I climb’d higher he made a long leg,
And chang’d me at once to an Ostrich’s Egg –
But now Heaven be praised in contempt of the Loon,
I am I myself I, the jolly full Moon.

(ll. 26-52)

From the comic vantage of a reformed rhapsode, Coleridge rightly accuses Wordsworth (and himself) of belching forth distancing poetic figurations. The moon’s delightfully, but poignantly imagined speech in ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’ blusters at this misuse by poets until a small, unbidden (yet very homely) recognition of reciprocity enters authentic consciousness: ‘I am I myself I, the jolly full Moon.’ (l. 52). Coleridge’s wonderfully loquacious poem crystallises into a simple, beautiful rendering of the lullaby blessing, curse-dispelling, mirror-structured realisation that: ‘I see the moon/And the moon sees me.’ The playfulness of this poem’s serious joke reminds us not to give too much (dispiriting) credence to poetic metaphysics, despite the genuine stakes of the dice game identified in relation to the horror of an arbitrary universe in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’.
Instead of a storm-chased Mariner, we have, in this poem, a delightfully anthropomorphised despondent moon, comically haunted by pesky poets and hiding from the sententiousness of their frosty rhymes. In Coleridge’s famous letter to John Thelwall (December 1, 1796), he makes a disparaging pun on Gorgias – Plato’s ‘dear gorgeous Nonsense’ – then ends by effecting a retreat from wordy attempts to articulate Platonic ‘Harmony’, instead substituting the symmetrical truism he can be sure of: ‘I have rather made up my mind that I am a mere apparition – a naked Spirit! – And that Life is I myself I! which is a mighty clear account of it’. Such clarity, even nakedness, is sought by the complex voice of Coleridge’s own gorgeous nonsense, ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’.

The ‘ventriloquogusty’ in this poem, at line 12, includes ‘venting’, at some level seriously suggestive of the wind and airing anger, of being spoken through or spoken for, as is the poor old moon of poetry. The syntactically balanced assertion ‘I am I myself I’ (l. 66) that emphasises untroubled identity through repetition is reiterated emphatically at the close of the poem where the long vowel of ‘moon’ signals calm as the energy of the manic soliloquy’s punning utterance is spent:

yet my heart is still fluttering –
   for I heard the rogue muttering –
he was hulking and skulking at the skirt of a wood
when lightly & brightly on tip-toe I stood
   on the long level line of a motionless cloud
and ho! what a skittle-ground! quoth he aloud
and wish’d from his heart nine nine-pins to see
   in brightness & size just proportion’d to me.
so I fear’d from my soul,
   that he’d make me a bowl,
but in spite of his spite
   this was more than his might
and still heaven be prais’d! in contempt of the loon
I am I myself I, the jolly full moon.

(ll. 53-66)

The thing-in-itself remains ‘jolly’, notwithstanding the outlandish efforts of inspired
sublunary speakers, and how reassuring that is. Such reassurance suggests a gracious
spontaneity that enacts the principle of ‘a something analogous to the causality of the
human will’ in a memorable conclusion to a poem that affirms the inspired imagination
in communion with nature.

It is manifestly inappropriate to use the hammer of analytical logic to smash the
Humpty’s egg of Coleridge’s freewheeling, nonsensical, yet searching meditation on the
moon. The poem itself resists blow-by-blow technical analysis of ‘whirling words’ that
ultimately have a spectacular cumulative effect. Catherine M. Wallace, writing in
relation to the quotation discussed in Part I that figures Coleridge as the guide of The
Friend as a ‘Chamois-hunter’, observes of Coleridge’s metaphor that:

The image of such sticky, bloody feet may be lurid, but it has very often seemed
to me entirely apt. Owen Barfield grants that the relation between subject and object
is no doubt the pons asinorum of Coleridge’s philosophic endeavor, but then argues
that “the concept, and perhaps the experience, of thinking as an act, or as an ‘act and
energy,’ are the toll-gate in the middle of the bridge, the barrier that has to be opened
before we can get across.” Barfield demonstrates how thoroughly this central concept
influences all of Coleridge’s thought; my major concern is the way in which it shapes
his composition.147

Wallace’s use of the Latin phrase ‘pons asinorum’ gives the rather aptly comic ‘bridge
for asses’ to cross in our departure from strictly formal logic. The ‘energy’ identified
by Barfield is palpable in Coleridge’s impassioned moon soliloquy.

From the outset, the moon of this curious poem is ‘uncharm’d’, resistant to
tries at poetic enchantment, which become increasingly ludicrous as the poem
proceeds through a list of the actual imagery employed by (amongst others)
Wordsworth and Coleridge, cast here as a ‘wizard’ and a ‘ruffian’ respectively. In The
Friend, Coleridge notes the practice of ruffians of inflicting pain on themselves ahead
of tribulations to come as a kind of practical exercise in stoicism: ‘Who like the old

https://sites.google.com/site/catherinemileswallace/Home/coleridge/the-function-of-autobiography-in-
biographia-literaria
Buccaneers, had been used to inflict torture on themselves for sport'.

It is the pattern of self-tormenting poets over-reaching for metaphysical meaning that emerges from the many and various intertextual allusions in this mad soliloquy. Coleridge’s body of writing displays a similar pattern of excess, with more than one anxious aside that the ‘illustrations threatened to swallow up his thesis’ or that his verse ‘sweats’ ‘with the weight of too much straining after understanding’ that might be direct, simple and child-like after all, as is a nursery rhyme or song. Sound patterns matter in children’s verse. Musicality and a departure from everyday logic offer a permissible anarchic freedom at this stage of life. It is appropriate, then, to read this poem in the spirit of play, with our poet standing comically guilty before the moon (as God is my witness).

**Silly poets, canny philosophy**

It is, ultimately, the foolishness that stands out upon reading the lines: ‘Poets / With no Hats/ Or Hats that are rusty.’ (ll. 13-14). Recalling the guilt-ridden, backward looking character in ‘The Ancient Mariner’ that figures the dread of persecution – possibly drawn from Dante – the caricature of the poet, Coleridge, skulks and the moon stands on tip-toe in what amounts to a game of hide-and-seek in the poem. Thus, Coleridge inverts the fearful seriousness of being pursued to create a comic tableau in ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’. The Mariner’s remorse or the inner voice of self-criticism and despair is wonderfully transformed into the harmless, excessively silly enchanted images of ‘the Screech of the Owl / Or the witch-wolf’s long howl, / Or sheep-killing Butcher-dog’s inward Bow wow.’ (ll. 19-21)

Here the extravagant use of compound descriptions rises to a feverish comic pitch as the

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149 Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and The Uses of Division*, 150 and CN II 2372.
151 Coleridge describes Fichte as a ‘cur’ but discussion of this poem as a Fichtean satire is beyond the scope of this chapter.
self-accusatory voice of reason or conscience that has haunted poetry is evaded in the freedom of surrendering to the joyful venting of exasperation. In so doing, Coleridge renders that threatening, sometimes crippling, voice as nonsensical as the onomatopoeic bark of the nursery or the villainous howls enjoyed in gothic horror tales. Techniques of comic drama are in play here, including reversal and outrageous incongruity.

The poem is a daring feat of derring-do, displaying breathtaking virtuosity and inviting amusement at the shared folly of readers and writers of poetry, particularly the folly of audacity that leads us astray from what can be directly realised if we just took an uninhibitedly childish look at the moon, indeed the Heavens, above. It is here that we might presume to find ‘a something analogous to the human will’. In sum, through the energetic act of immoderate soliloquy, furnished with nonsensical verse in which association is given precedence over logical connection, Coleridge gives vent to his feelings with full poetic licence in order to guide the reader to experience the process of thinking freely. Elsewhere, writes Coleridge:

> I would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of Words & Things, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too. All the nonsense of vibrations etc you would of course dismiss. If what I have here written appear nonsense to you, or commonplace thoughts in a harlequinade of outré expressions, suspend your judgement till we see each other.¹⁵²

‘Harlequinade’ directs us to the clowning of Hamlet’s gravediggers where the heart-wrenching terror of mortality and transgression plays out in the nonsense of exchanges which yet catch something of Shakespeare’s most pressing, least utterable metaphysical concerns. The reassurance of ‘I see the moon/And the moon sees me’ may offer the consolation of laughing reciprocity to assuage the fear of delusion.

Coleridge comes close to expounding the need for an eclectic approach to poetic exegesis in Essay VI of his ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ in the claim that ‘the

lunatic, the lover, and the poet suggest each other’. Here, the reference to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* reinforces the significance of Coleridge’s serio-comic sense of ‘infinite jest’ in both ‘Christabel’ and ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’. Harlequin is a descendant of Medieval Carnival tradition, which returns us to the applicability of a Bakhtinian analysis to these poems:

Clowns and fools… are characteristic of the medieval culture of humor. They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season. Like Triboulet at the time of Francis I, they were not actors playing their parts on a stage, as did the comic actors of a later period, impersonating Harlequin, Hanswurst, etc., but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance. As such they represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar midzone as it were, they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors.

Ultimately, there is an enduring, high stakes human investment in the presumption – or intuition – of divinity inhering in the relations that form the spiritual architecture of the early poems. These precious relations are masked by the carnivalesque madness that energises Coleridge’s poetic method.

Such presumption is another version of Coleridge’s self-unravelling clue, the seed at the beginning of an inquiry – whether it be philosophical or poetic – that instantiates, in miniature, the unfocused yet pre-existing shape of knowledge that is to be revealed to the understanding. Coleridge’s thought processes fuse poetic creation and scientific method in the context of that Ancient Quarrel between poetry and philosophy identified in the Preface. Making the effort to endure Coleridge at the juncture of theological emotional urgency and imaginative philosophical speculation requires some suspension of disbelief in the spiritual, the supernatural, or the ‘something analogous’ with which we are here concerned. It is my point of departure from philosophical realism at its most physical, in which God is formulated as an empty referent.

Exercising the imagination through engagement with Coleridge’s early poetry might

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enable us to recover an enhanced understanding of ‘something analogous to the
causality of the human will’ that is yet mysterious but open to the possibility of grace.
Chapter Four: THE ART OF METHOD

Poetic intentions and correlative ends / ‘unity in multeity’

We appeal to the notorious fact that ZOOLOGY, soon after the commencement of the latter half of the last century, was falling abroad, weighed down and crushed, as it were, by the inordinate number and manifoldness of facts and phenomena apparently separate, without evincing the least promise of systematizing itself by any inward combination, any vital interdependence of its parts.

– Essay VII, The Friend ¹⁵⁵

The assumption of intention, the correlative end to this initiative

In this chapter, I emphasise the ‘multeity’ of contraries over the ‘polarity’ of opposing forces in order to clarify the art of Method of both ‘Kubla Khan’ and the ‘Dejection Ode’. Coleridge’s famous poem ‘Kubla Khan’ opens with an emphasis on fiat creation:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree:

In this opening (ll. 1-2, taken alone rather than working through the well-documented drama of its relationship to its preface in arguments that need not be rehearsed here), there is no uneasy self-consciousness accompanying the most dramatic wielding of the theatrical ‘slapstick’. As we have seen, the batocchio was represented traditionally as a dangerous instrument with potent powers of both magical creation and oddly comedic

yet tragic destruction. In ‘Kubla Khan’, the baton of creativity, violence, and transformative magic is the ruling rod of a ‘commanding genius’, as distinguished from ‘absolute genius’ in Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria, one who serves as an unambiguous analogue to the Divine creator familiar from Genesis.

Invoking a world from chaos, the Christian version of a Platonic Demiurge voices a version of that familiar imperative: ‘Let there be light’. There is no doubt about the power wielded here by a God-like voice in a garden. As the stage lights go up for this performance, we experience the evocative scent of ‘many an incense-bearing tree’ (l. 9). The phrase creates a dangerously mingled atmosphere of religious ritual intoxication and foreboding of wrathful repercussions. The performance opens, in other words, with the expectation of inciting the anger of the gods (given the Greek tragic convention of supernatural beings becoming incensed with the hubris of mere mortals). Through the use of the distinctive verb, ‘decree’, Coleridge announces a resolute manifestation of powerful intent. The particularity of the perfumed garden and the commanding quality of the voice of dominion set the stage for a predictably ruinous chain of events.

Theatrical delight in downfall is schadenfreude writ large, but if the hero is deserving of his doom we can take (dubious) moral comfort in our enjoyment of the spectacle of the ritual humiliation of the over-confident speaker. A twenty-first century reader is primed to respond to an exercise of dominion over nature with anticipatory glee, given the modern experience of tyrannical world leaders and environmental destroyers. These effectively displace Coleridge’s contemporary figures of awe (represented by Napoleon and Robespierre). Nuanced fascination and repulsion from the man of power, per se, is less suited to modern tastes, particularly those informed by

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third-wave feminist critiques of patriarchal capitalism.\textsuperscript{158} Outside North Korea, a modern woman no longer ‘adores a Fascist’ (as suggested with the bitter irony of Sylvia Plath) but we still enjoy the spectacle of his come-upance.\textsuperscript{159} Living in the shadow of the madmen of history’s assertions of the will, we now have a necessarily complicated view of dome building.

There is no effort to disguise the controlling creative decisions of the visionary poet at the outset of ‘Kubla Khan’, of the kind we noted with reference to less obvious acts of substantiation in poetry in Chapter One with reference to ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’. By contrast with ‘Religious Musings’, William Christie observes that in ‘the Conversation Poems, the reconciliation with creation is enacted rather than trumpeted, but it remains the ideal of the poet.’\textsuperscript{160} In these poems, that reconciliation is enacted with more pronounced humility and therefore less overt use of theatrical machinery, including the complex ‘slapstick’ of the Harlequin tradition, the \textit{batocchio}. Coleridge’s ‘harlequinade’ expressiveness came to the fore in the previous chapter in my discussion of poems composed around the time of ‘Kubla Khan’ (if the 1797 date of composition is accepted). The rhythmic master strokes of ‘And there’ then ‘And here’ give us two claps of the \textit{batocchio} to punctuate the opening fanfare of ‘Kubla Khan’:

\begin{quote}
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.
\end{quote}
(ll. 8-11)

My reading of the poem’s opening ‘clue’ accentuates a latent threat of retributive justice in the form of comedic violence. ‘Kubla Khan’ dramatises a brazen creation that

\textsuperscript{158} Cynthia Cockburn, ‘On The Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men and Technical Know-How’ (\textit{WSQ}, Vol. 37, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring/Summer 2009), 269-273. Cockburn’s analysis of ‘gender hegemony’ and sociopolitical discussion of historical ‘brute male power’ in these terms is exemplary.


\textsuperscript{160} William Christie, \textit{Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Literary Life}, 68.
takes spectacular imaginative audacity beyond its limit and dispenses with the fear of hubris related to the theological presumptuousness discussed in Chapter Three.

The inclusion of the obfuscat ing qualifications ‘Or, A Vision in a Dream’ and ‘A FRAGMENT’, however, manifest the characteristic Coleridgean attempt to retreat from conviction. These additions are indicative of a recoil from the bold manner in which Coleridge has substantiated the vision of a ‘commanding genius’. As Heidi Thomson argues, the preface is ‘integral’ to the poem as a whole:

Coleridge uses circularity to rather better effect in ‘Kubla Khan’, and with the addition of the 1816 preface he encircles the verse with an enchanting, media-savvy, commanding message of his own absolute genius to potential readers. If we think of ‘Kubla Khan’ in circular terms, we can see the overlapping stories of Kubla and the visionary poet in the verse part of the text take on the shape of two interconnecting circles, very much like the ones described in the ‘Prospectus and Specimen of a Translation of Euclid’ (PW, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 33–8) which Coleridge had included in a 1791 letter to his brother George (CL, vol. 1, pp. 7–9). The equilateral triangle embedded in the overlapping circles accommodates, loosely, the ‘dome in air’ which in the shape of shadow or air floats over both narratives. The preface adds a third interconnecting circle to this configuration. Nonetheless, if we interpret Coleridge’s recoil as triggered by a recognition of the danger of allowing the body to enter the trance-like state of the shaman so that the soul might fly out, we have moved to the darkest mystic element of divine ventriloquism known to the ancient world as ‘belly-speaking’. Rather than possession by an external spirit, what we are confronting in imagining this state through to the closing lines of ‘Kubla Khan’ is the spirit within made visible (in the Hebraic sense of ‘enduring’).

The consequences of this process for the shaman include leaving the material body inert or dead.

For the poet, protection might be found in the strategic use of melodrama and masks; theatrical masks that convey layered subjectivity through multiple personae, some with different genders (as in Greek theatre). For any self-conscious artist working

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in a potentially hostile critical environment, not telling it straight serves the purpose of forfending criticism. Accordingly, Coleridge hovers somewhere between the princely creator, the awe-inspiring poet, the frustrated mortal writer lamenting forgetfulness after intense inspiration, the wailing woman bereft of a guardian spirit and the chorus of anticipated disapproval. The polyvocal agon of ‘Kubla Khan’ surely merits the application of Bakhtin’s notion of ‘heteroglossia’. Identities, actors, and commentators shift and merge in the drama of the poem as they do with such striking effects in ‘Christabel’ and ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. Through this art of method, the three poems and their pre-occupations are continuous and united in a common purpose. Blame for the actions of any of the *dramatis personae* is neatly shifted from Coleridge’s door.

The poet’s power comes to the fore in the act of imaginatively inhabiting the striking theatrical attitude of Kubla Khan for a moment, and that moment requires of us a similarly imaginative reading of Coleridge’s character as a way into the poem, with its precariously poised dome and its many hovering voices. Following Camille Paglia’s theory of ‘sexual personae’ in relation to ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, we may imagine Coleridge in the role of the wailing woman, as the voices in the poem mingle:

A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail:
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;
And ’mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

(ll. 14-30)
The device of ‘hovering’ voices is identified as ‘Schlegel’s term’ in Peter Thorslev’s defence of critical thinking in the context of ‘Romantic contraries’, which goes beyond the usual focus on dialectic reasoning in relation to the Method of Romantic poetry.162

I contend that a relaxed loosening of the reins of inhibition, with one rein being the disempowering self-consciousness of theological humility and the other being awareness of the risk of crippling critical castigation, accounts better for the influence of opium on the creation and reception of ‘Kubla Khan’ than the drug’s hallucinatory properties. What is certain is that in ‘Kubla Khan’, the ebullience of the poet in the act of creation is unharnessed in the poem’s decisively energetic opening where though the voice be Kubla’s (as opposed to Coleridge’s) the wonderful musicality is indicative of the poet’s own uninhibited exuberance. It is the energy of Prometheus unbound, a preoccupation that Coleridge’s 1825 lecture on Aeschylus raises with a theological focus indicative of the marriage of Greek mythology and Christian narrative that is an enduring emphasis of Coleridge’s worldview.

Morton D. Paley’s sense that Coleridge attempts to ‘footnote’ his own poetic presumption into ‘innocuousness’163 is no better demonstrated than here by nervous, revisionary additions to a poem that concludes with fearful recognition of the visionary poet as a figure of alienated dread, beyond the pale of domesticated Christian consolation:

> And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
> His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread,
> For he on honey-dew hath fed,
> And drunk the milk of Paradise.

(ll. 49-54)

162 Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., Romantic Contraries, 183.
The energetic, expressive musicality of Coleridge’s conclusion is indicative of the
‘accelerating eagerness’ that Thomas McFarland characterises as typical of the ‘tone
one repeatedly encounters in great meontic statements’, as though the speaker were
‘rushing toward the void that is also the home of true being’.\textsuperscript{164} Indeed, there is an
overwhelming sense of transgression in the speculative imaginative presumption of
‘Kubla Khan’. It is too much for a mortal to exhibit the kind of visionary audacity that
sounds so splendid in these climactic lines, in which the simultaneously proud and
shame-conscious poet reminds the reader that such a recklessly empowered speaker is
dangerously over-reaching into God’s domain.

Such transgression could well require remedial acts of protective magic,
particularly those intended to keep the demonic well beyond the threshold of the safe,
Christian domicile. Obedient Christian readers, outside the pagan circle, ought to turn
away in order to shun such a doomed Faustian poet with whom an almighty deity would
be mightily displeased. To avoid bringing down the wrath of God, the orthodox reader
is obliged to shut her/his eyes to startling temptation. Such fearful motivation is richly
painted by the connotations of ‘holy dread’ (l. 52), particularly those related to genuine
awe, that terrible aspect of the sublime in its original sense of causing terror (from the
Latin, ‘\textit{terrere}’, to frighten). Yet, despite the overt warning at the semantic level,
readers surely remain at risk of being seduced by the stunning imagery and irresistibly
incantatory rhythm of Coleridge’s sublime poetic creation.

Modern women are less open to seduction involving the objectification of our
bodies as parklands of pleasure and the originary metaphor of Mercutio’s bawdy
‘demesnes’ is now even more tawdry to a woman’s ears.\textsuperscript{165} Perhaps this accounts for

\textsuperscript{164} Thomas McFarland, \textit{Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, the Modalities of
\textsuperscript{165} William Shakespeare, \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, ed. Rex Gibson, 3\textsuperscript{rd} Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge
Elisabeth Schneider’s witty dismissal of overly symbolic treatments of breast and phallic imagery in the imaginary landscape of the poem with her dry question about the required change in the measure of an angle that takes us symbolically from the dome as hill to the entire edifice as just another ubiquitous phallic symbol. Schneider does not ‘imply that psychoanalytic thought has nothing to offer for the illumination of literature’, but her questioning of the measure ‘that might be found to transform a mountain from a breast to a phallic symbol, or the determination of a dome as breast or womb according as the poet is outdoors or in’ raises a valid concern about interpretative credibility. The alliterative phrase, ‘measureless to man’ (l. 4), is the key indicator that generic ‘man’ is not the measure of the wilderness of the poem. That becomes a more important issue with regard to Method than any psychoanalytic interpretation of symbolism in the fluctuating reception of Coleridge’s poem, which is sometimes over-interpreted and, at other times, under-appreciated.

The Bakhtinian emphasis on polyphonic voices in ‘Kubla Khan’ that I have adopted – while giving wide berth to overly psychoanalytic interpretations of the poem – situates my argument in the critical tradition Peter Thorslev develops in his measured, common-sense approach to ‘Romantic Vitalism and Dialectic’:

The doctrine of man as the measure of all things, the microcosm who represents in himself all the forces and elements of the macrocosm, has a long history in the alchemical tradition, and in the Kabbalah, where Blake’s Albion, the primeval and perfect man before the fall, has his prototype in the Adam Kadmon.

Coleridge is writing in a critical tradition rich in miscellany, indeed, yet still within the scope of orchestration along the lines suggested thus far, in terms of the distinctive and particular unity of Coleridge’s art of Method. Desire for unity with our world as creation is set in ‘Kubla Khan’ in the alarming context of an environment in which the

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167 Elisabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan*, 10.
human is set apart and Nature, though imbued with the spark of the Divine, is not set up for man’s pleasure. Anthropomorphism meets its own doom in the poem’s ‘savage’ and ‘enchanted’ (l. 14) locale.

The more serious correlative question becomes, if we are not the centre of our world, then how are we to classify its teeming multiplicity? Logical taxonomy collapses without recourse to functionality and form primarily understood in terms of the human. As Stuart Curran observes in a comprehensive discussion of Romantic form and genre, ‘The hegemony of neo-classical rules with their simple minded and impossible clarity, broke down in the eighteenth century and with it a facile means of taxonomy.’\(^{169}\) This contextual shift is the most central phenomenon for our purposes in interpreting the drama of ‘Kubla Khan’ alongside our reluctance to let go of clear boundaries for natural kinds, despite current philosophical awareness that these demarcations no longer hold for, at least, the higher taxa.

In Aristophanes’ play, The Birds, which parodies Orphic ‘theogeny’,\(^{170}\) a verse spoken by the chorus has particular resonance for the pagan aspects of Coleridge’s poetic vision, with distinct verbal echoes of the reckless abandon of the mysterious energy of creation in ‘Kubla Khan’ that ‘flung up momently the sacred river’ (l. 24). The Latin root of ‘moment’ gives us ‘momentum’ along with ‘movere’, to move, so the lexical emphasis on movement and momentous momentum of the kind required for an heroic feat is suggested in relation to the past participle ‘flung’, which in the Middle English intransitive sense carries the secondary meaning of ‘making a try’, indeed a desperate attempt. Recklessness is the hallmark of the Faustian over-reacher.


In the passage that concludes the first volume of *The Friend*, Coleridge draws the evocative connotations of poetic language together in a discussion of ‘the correlative to truth’ that is central to the concerns of this chapter:

To a creature so highly, so fearfully gifted, who, alienated as he is by a sorcery scarcely less mysterious than the nature on which it is exercised, yet like the fabled son of Jove in the evil day of his sensual bewitchment, lifts the spindles and distaffs of Omphale with the arm of a giant, Truth is self-restoration: for that which is the correlative of Truth, the existence of absolute Life, is the only object that can attract toward it the whole depth and mass of his fluctuating being, and alone therefore can unite Calmness with Elevation. But it must be Truth without alloy and unsophisticated.¹⁷¹

Creative alienation is linked here with seeking the truth that will restore selfhood to one so ‘fearfully gifted’. That truth is not propositional but is embodied in a leading principle integral to authentic identity united by resolute conviction. Such resoluteness provides a stabilising psychological salve for Coleridge. The poet excuses himself for finding an unalloyed truth’s correlative vitality through acts of imaginative audacity by claiming, for example, that these were undertaken in the trance of composing ‘Kubla Khan’. Temerity in pursuit of truth is excusable in the bewitched. Reaching for a pure life-force through accessing an unsophisticated yet powerful truth is a means of sparing the uncertain individual from the discomforting inward experience of existential being as an erratic series of discontinuities. It stills the agitated oscillations of the will, as does religious faith. In terms of the principles I have derived from *The Friend*, Coleridge’s early poetry may be read as expressive of method (*Μεθοδος*) as a way of crossing over to access divinity. Ultimately, that is the correlative end of Coleridge’s poetic intention in ‘Kubla Khan’.

In the quotation from Essay VII of *The Friend* with which this chapter opened, ‘inward combination’ is stressed in relation to managing the force of ‘crushing’ superfluity in the newly uncertain field of Zoology. ‘Dejection: An Ode’ confirms the importance of this countering force as both the energetic source of guiding principles and the basis for a literary theory of imaginative poetry:

> 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.

(ll. 39-43)

Similarly, through highlighting the counterpoised forces of polarity represented by the figure of the eddy, Coleridge emphasises the crucial role a vital joy plays in experiencing life with the full force of a ‘living soul’, in time, in tune, and in a state of lightness of being:

> Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;  
> To her may all things live, from pole to pole,  
> Their life the eddying of her living soul!

(ll. 134-136)

Such an active attunement of existence appears in contemporary German metaphysical speculation as *Bestimmung*. Hope for achieving harmony with the external weather – a harmony native to the German noun ‘*stimmung*’, which makes no distinction between internal and external atmosphere – is the gift of the benediction with which ‘Dejection’ closes, as we shall see in a close reading of the poem in the next section of this chapter.

As Stephen Prickett rightly argues in his consideration of ‘unity and creativity’:

‘For Coleridge, in *Dejection*, joy is itself the harmony, the “strong music of the soul”’, and, further, that both his creativity and unity ‘depend on joy – “one of the

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springs of action” in the mind’.\textsuperscript{173} It may be almost beyond Coleridge’s poetic speaker to escape the stasis of spiritual dejection in the ‘Dejection Ode’ but the first distinguishable principle of method we examined, that of ‘continuous transition’, underwrites the relations envisaged for the addressee such that the glorious joy of ‘the progressive singularity of the living soul in time’ may be achieved, at least vicariously.

With the metaphor of a circle of harmony, Coleridge’s preface to the \textit{Encyclopedia Metropolitana}, his ‘introductory dissertation on the Science of Method’, introduces Treatises on a now curious miscellany of subjects from Logic and Rhetoric to the History of Greek Literature and Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy:

As the Philosophical arrangement is, however, most conducive to the purposes of intellectual research and information, as it will most naturally interest men of Science and Literature; will present the circle of Knowledge in its harmony; will give that unity of design and of elucidation, the want of which we have most deeply felt in other Works of a similar kind, where the desired information is divided into innumerable fragments scattered over many volumes, like a mirror broken on the ground, presenting, instead of one, a thousand images, but none entire; this Division must of necessity have that prominence in the prosecution of our design… \textit{we are guided by Principle, not by caprice}; nor do we ever recur to them as our only means of escape from an exigency.\textsuperscript{174}

Coleridge’s sustained emphasis on principle as a guide to a circle of understanding affirms the centrality of aspiration towards the kind of Enlightenment clarity that Curran has deemed ‘impossible’ for a Romantic writer and, by extension, reader. Anxiety over arrangement in the passage above reinforces Curran’s sense of dissolving demarcations of knowledge in the early nineteenth century and Coleridge’s principled stand against fragmentary distortion and arbitrariness in the form of casual division drifting on the whims of an unacknowledged and undiscriminating ‘caprice’.

\textsuperscript{174} Samuel Taylor Coleridge, \textit{A DISSERTATION on the SCIENCE OF METHOD; or, THE LAWS AND REGULATIVE PRINCIPLES of EDUCATION} (6\textsuperscript{th} Edition, London and Glasgow: Richard Griffin and company, publishers to the University of Glasgow, 1854), 72-3. (my italics).
The principle of ‘unity in multeity’

"Prom. O thou bright heavenly sky, and swift-winged
breezes, ye river-springs, and thou innumerable dimpling
smile of the ocean waves, O universal Mother Earth, and
thee, all-seeing orb of the Sun, I call – behold what I, a
God, am suffering at the hands of the Gods!"

The ‘Greek mind’ of Coleridge’s ‘art of Method’

There is a broader Greek background to Coleridge’s ‘art of Method’ that includes the
embodiment of the principle of ‘unity in multeity’ that Coleridge modified from the
Greek aesthetic of ‘unity in variety’. Leo Spitzer identifies the latter principle as key to
understanding Greek thought and art operating through the dialectics of integrated
contrast:

The Greek mind has been able to see harmony in discord, to see the triumph of
“symphony” over the discordant voices… the two antagonistic forces of
harmonious unification and discordant manifoldness.

The connection with the Platonic concept of ‘the One’ underwrites this influential
Greek aesthetic position. Plotinus countenanced the spiritual aspects of the principle,
elevating aesthetics to connection with the ‘world soul’. As Andrew Smith observes,
‘The reconciliation of unity and plurality, particularly at the level of the NOUS,
provides one of the main philosophical problems of the Enneads.’

A principle that defines the self bestows the gift of permanent identity through
time, so it is apt that Lucy Newlyn’s ‘case study of Coleridge’ in the context of the
relationship between reader and writer that is so central to the objectives of The Friend,
identifies the principle of ‘unity in multeity’ as Coleridge’s lifelong ‘personal creed’.

In the ‘sorcery’ passage from The Friend, cited above, the habitual association of

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175 Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound in The plays of AESCHYLUS, Trans. Walter Headlam (London: George
Bell & Sons, 1909), ll 88-92.
176 Leo Spitzer, Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an interpretation of
177 Andrew Smith, ‘Potentiality and the Problem of Plurality in the Intelligible World’in Neoplatonism
and Early Christian Thought, ed. H. J. Blumenthal and R. A. Marhus (London: Variorum Publications,
178 Lucy Newlyn, Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception, 55.
esoteric magic with Coleridge’s creed is made clear in the rapid movement from destiny as a fearful gift to the mysteries of ‘sensual bewitchment’. These associative jumps take Coleridge to a remarkable mythological allusion to the barbarous queen who owned Heracles as a slave. The mighty strength of the hero fuels the shaming pathos of being at the mercy of a woman, a shame dramatised by Sophocles in *Trachiniae*. Coleridge dubbed ‘Kubla Khan’ a ‘psychological curiosity’ but, for Coleridge, the psychological is infused with the fabulous, the mythological and the heroic born of years of feeling immersion in the dramatised trials and tribulations of the Greek mind. These play out, in the various tragedies, in ways suggesting to the poet the power of combining parodic comedy, esoteric shamanistic lore and Platonic laws.

Amazed and bewitched by ‘Kubla Khan’, the reader might look to the structures of ‘the Greek mind’ for a clue to understanding the implications of the ‘miracle’ of Coleridge’s poetic song of ‘mingled measure’. In the dramatic comedy, *The Birds*, for example, Aristophanes’ choral speakers invoke a queenly master, a muse of varied artful song, which figures the Greek aesthetic principle of ‘unity in variety’:

My muse of varied artful song  
On trees and from high mountain peaks  
Tio-tio-tiotinx  
To your notes I sing along  
In my leafy ash tree seat  
Tio-tio-tiotinx  
From my tawny throat I fling  
My sacred melodies to Pan.  
In holy dance I chant and sing  
Our mother from the mountain land  
Toto-toto-toto-toto-totink  
Here Phrynichus would always sip  
Ambrosial nectar from our tone  
To make sweet music of our own.

(II 739-752)

Similarly, Coleridge has imaginatively transformed a leafy bower and an ash tree to fling forth a poetic vision in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, but in ‘Kubla Khan’

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the poet has sipped ‘Ambrosial nectar’ and set up a ‘holy’ chant to inspire dread in the terrified listener.

Darker and more threatening is the relationship between the transgressiveness of ‘Kubla Khan’ and the summoning of the infernal Erinyes (the avengers) in the third part of the tragedy of the Oresteia. At this point in the drama, Aeschylus invokes the Greek Eumenides (associated with self-cursing and chthonic nature), whose presence in Coleridge’s poetic psyche may provide a demonic counterpoint to the friendlier Meliae of the ash tree. In Greek mythology, both the Meliae and the Erinyes appeared from the drops of blood spilled by the castration of Uranus and the race of men sprung from the Meliae. Concern with ‘holy dread’, totemic birds, trance-states, violent birth and destruction takes us to the heart of Greek irrationality, alongside the neo-Platonic inheritance which surely informs Coleridge’s perception of the creative’s ‘fearfully gifted’ plight. In opposition to the received view of Greek culture as the triumph of rationalism celebrated during the English Enlightenment, E.R. Dodds speculates that Empedocles ‘represents not a new but a very old type of personality, the shaman who combines the still undifferentiated functions of magician and naturalist, poet and philosopher, preacher, healer, and public counsellor... the synthesis was personal, not logical.’180 The style of synthesis identified by Dodds is of a piece with the multiple roles of the theatrical Coleridgean self and its habit of hovering among manifold voices that I read as continuous throughout his prose and poetry.

The unity rather than polarity of personeity

The continuity of self through time established through applying, then theorising, poetic principles is captured statically by Thomas McFarland’s image of the unity of Coleridge’s philosophical artistry as a ‘mosaic’. My reading of Coleridge grows out of

this critical tradition but proposes a more dynamic model that brings the principle of polarity into play. I would go further than Lucy Newlyn, too, in conceptualising ‘unity in multeity’ as Coleridge’s personal creed to suggest that it is the defining principle of Coleridge’s person, his very personeity. A stable self over time that endures fluctuation is built on principles, not properties, so the recent critical dismissal of any essentialist concept of human nature is apt to foster reductive treatment of identity in terms of the psyche in modern material and medical metaphors of disease and dysfunction. In the ancient, esoteric figuration of a poet-philosopher as an undivided self roaming freely between the undistinguished private and public realms of preaching, healing, and statesmanship we have a richer model for an integrated, continuous self to support my claim for a stable – albeit distinctively complex – Coleridgean self over time.

Coleridge, in ‘Kubla Khan’ particularly, flings forth a vision of the poet that includes a shamanic voice expressing the undifferentiated desires of the magician and naturalist. It is a travesty to treat a quintessentially Romantic poem as a mere thing of this world. Coleridge disdains ‘mere veracity’ in *The Friend*, as we have seen. The ‘holy dread’ in ‘Kubla Khan’ manifests as both the terror and the wilful triumph of the shamanistic artist facing a ‘unity in multeity’ described by Nietzsche as the ‘mysterious Primordial Unity’ in terms that fit Coleridge’s mystical revelation of self as ‘world-artist’ rather than visionary.

In the introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the effect of lifting the ‘veil of Maya’:

> In song and in dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak; he is about to take a dancing flight into the air. His very gestures bespeak enchantment…just as the earth yields milk and honey, so from him emanate supernatural sounds. He feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy, like to the gods whom he saw walking about in his dreams. He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art; in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself to the highest gratification of the Primordial Unity…the sound of the chisel strokes of
In deploying the voice of Kubla Khan, Coleridge is uncannily close to identifying with the supreme Dionysian artist, twenty years before Schopenhauer’s notorious interpretation of the Hindu ‘veil of Maya’ as constituted by the categories of space and time. For Schopenhauer, the dissolution of the veil allows the individual to escape the confinement of ordinary cognition and have access to a revelation of the will that is continuous with self yet inheres in all things.

Shelley’s translation of Socrates’ magnet speech in Ion resonates with Coleridge’s ‘symphony and song’ at its most rhapsodic, particularly in the passage in ‘The Defence of Poetry’ on supernaturally inspired poets, who,

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\text{during this supernatural possession, are excited to the rhythm and harmony which they communicate to men; like the Bacchantes who, when possessed by God, draw honey and milk from the rivers in which, when they come to their senses, they find nothing but simple water.}^{182}
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‘Harmony’ derives from the Greek *harmos* (‘joint’) so the sense of joining the unlike together is crucial to the central principle of Coleridge’s poetic ‘miracle’ of ‘transmogrification’, of substantiating a vision built in air on the Greek foundation of ‘unity in variety’. This act amounts to unification if the joining is imagined through Coleridge’s frequently deployed metaphor of ‘yoking together’. Paradoxically, multeity as a principle constituting self can support the abstract notion of a continuity of identity through a lifetime. Coleridge, in philosophical literary commentator mode, marvellously reconceptualises an ancient theory representing a value-laden aesthetic ideal as an *art of Method* based on ‘unity in multeity’.

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‘Dejection’: imaginative defeat as poeticised literary theory?

In the role of defeated imaginative poet, Coleridge mourns the loss of joy and power in the figure who rises from the ashes of burning intensity in ‘Dejection: An Ode’, written in draft form in a letter of April 1802, significantly revised, then published in October 1802. The provenance of the poem in a letter to Sara Hutchinson reinforces its pathos as a blessing to those unaffected by dejection as the cruel antithesis of a playful, creative joy. The shame of Heracles, bound to a queenly mistress, colours the pathos of the poem’s tone with an unhealthy tint of repressed humiliated anger carried over from its source, the letter to ‘Asra’. An intuitive sense of this mixed motivation leads to a recognition of the complexity of the poem’s tone. From the intimations of doom conveyed by the quotation from the ‘Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence’, the speaker begins in an almost comically vernacular mode speculating on the ‘weather-wise’ aspects of the presage of doom that a nobleman utters in the ballad ahead of a sea-voyage. Modern science affirms the fear of sailing at the time of a new moon, given its effects on tides, but this is hardly the point. Surely, utilising a tragic ballad as a weather cock introduces a sense of bathos. As in the opening ‘clue’ of ‘Christabel’, there is an unsettling admixture of levity and horror in the opening tone of ‘Dejection: An Ode’, as gothic symbols of impending stormy doom are introduced with the oddly positive exclamation ‘Well!’ (l. 1). Maintaining a disciplined focus on the opening ‘clue’ of a poem to witness Coleridge’s ‘self-unravelling’ yields stronger insights into his ‘art of Method’ than a conventional reading can.

Accordingly, it is significant that in ‘Dejection: An Ode’ there is a healthy exercise of the Romantic Imagination in the recovery of the superstitious Medievalism of the verse from the ‘Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence’ that opens the poem. Coleridge’s choice is continuous with the lively impulse to engage us imaginatively with the
otherness of ordered worlds of the past, with the pagan elements that persist in
superstitions about an inscrutable moon, with a bearing on the affairs on earth below. In
‘Dejection’, however, the carnival is almost over. Country folk will know that a ring
around the moon indicates rain, but the sight of:

the new moon
With the old Moon in her arms;
And I fear, I fear, my Master dear!
We shall have a deadly storm.

indicates that Coleridge cites these lines to show a break in continuity in reading the
moon as a useful aid to navigation and a symbol of reciprocal recognition. The speaker
from the ballad knows that shipwreck awaits, but nobly accepts the mission to save a
king’s daughter. Reading the signs of Nature does not spare a noble fellow a cruel and
seemingly inevitable fate in the ballad.

Poetic intention is distorted at the outset of ‘Dejection: An Ode’, with the Divine
wind of earlier poems reduced to a:

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

(ll. 6-8)

The correlative to this distortion is utter dissonance, the passivity of impotent
intellectual surrender and the music that is so out-of-tune (‘absurd’) that it would be
better if there was dead silence (not even ‘surdity’). The ‘old Moon’ is cradled, sick in
the lap of the new in an inversion of the maternal associations of ‘Selene’, the Mother
Goddess. The small, dull moon of ‘Christabel’ was like a mother not playing her role of
protecting the innocent. More alarmingly, here, the moon is not just sleeping on the job,
but appears to be dying. The ghostly apparition is not in the woods, but above, in the
source of light and consolation, of protection and reciprocity. The moon herself is
spectral, ‘And overspread with phantom light’ (l.10).
Besides the somewhat consoling modulation in the tone of the wind, there is little redemptiveness in the tiny swerves in ‘Dejection’, nor are there any straight lines to navigate by. Under a peculiar moon, the storm is sending the rain down ‘slant’. The speaker’s soul is not trembling into sympathetic motion with a bridging ash tree but is motionless, numb, and separate. The tension relieved in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ with the exclamation ‘Ah!’ is not matched here, as the failing speaker describes a deadly state of dejection:

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,  
A stifled, drowsy unimpassioned grief,  
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,  
In word, or sigh, or tear –

(ll. 21-24)

There is no determinate cause to this despondency, it is ‘grief without a pang’ (l. 21), so empty and dark as to be not even as interesting as being ‘wilder’d’. It is ‘dreary’ instead, the very antithesis of liberated spiritual expansiveness. Language breaks down to express the inexpressible here, from the choice of adjectives ‘stifled, drowsy’ (l. 22) to the monosyllabic reference to the non-language of a ‘sigh, or tear’ (l. 24). Even these fail to appear as relief in the least pregnant silent moment of Coleridge’s poetry, a frozen moment marked by the punctuation which ends the line with an inarticulate dash.

The Wordsworthian ‘sky-canoe Moon’, parodied in the energetic moon soliloquy discussed in Chapter Three, appears to the eyes of the poet but without the feeling required to drive vision. The ‘correlative end’ of ‘poetic intentions’ fails to materialise as the will cannot be mobilised by the poet, who is left truly alone. There is, accordingly, a disarming pathos in the complaint, ‘I see them all so excellently fair, / I see, not feel how beautiful they are!’ (ll. 37-38). For a poet whose philosophy springs from strong feelings, this dire change indicates the end of joyous speculation on the unity of self, God, and Nature. Nature is a flat picture presented to an unfeeling eye so
lacking in generative power as to merit the adjective that describes the nothing of a
cypher: ‘blank’.

Yet there is a tiny swerve from the initial thoughts of doom and despair at the
sound of the ‘throstle’, known from the first act of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s
Dream* as a most tuneful songbird (introduced into the drama at the edge of a forest,
where delusion and despair await the play’s characters). In the third scene, Bottom calls
attention to ‘The throstle with his note so true’. Truth, beauty, harmony, and song are
triggers for a shift in attunement in Coleridge’s meditative poetry, one that in
‘Dejection’ stirs ‘other thoughts’ but fails to ally these to refreshed feelings:

To other thoughts by yonder throstle woo’d,
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!

(ll. 26-38)

Coleridge’s celestial imagery of beautiful exchanges of motion portrays the flux of the
world as a choreographed symmetry of movements of light and shade, yet the feeling of
the beautiful music of a twilight evening eludes the speaker, even as his song may
inspire a more successful shift of attention in the reader. In Chapter Six, I will examine
Coleridge’s reappraisal of the song of the nightingale, another bird who sings merrily by
day and night, thereby managing to move the lyric speaker from melancholy to a joyful
outburst of poetic song. That joyful song breaks off in ‘Dejection: An Ode’ but its
presence is indicative of a pulse in the poet even as he proclaims his own demise. After
all, the failure of Coleridge’s ‘genial spirits’ is not marked by utter blank silence in the
poem.
Similarly, there is some extraordinarily evocative sky painting going on in ‘Dejection’ – with the memorable image of ‘that green light that lingers in the west’ (1.45) – though the poetic vision is deemed dying, ‘green’ and sickly like the moon. Thomas McFarland notes the significance of the imagery in the context of antagonism with Wordsworth, observing that ‘the phrase “green light”’ is a dismal echo of the 1795 ‘phrase “green radiance” [that] had been the talisman that signaled the beginning of the symbiosis’ between the poets. Alarmingly, the green snake of ‘Christabel’ returns for a swansong performance in the last assertion of will, as the poet cries: ‘Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind’. Ultimately, the pathos of the gap between ‘poetic intentions’ and their ‘correlative ends’ in ‘Dejection’ becomes a crossing that the poet cannot make in Coleridge’s most distressing lament for the loss of his own poetic powers, a lament more pitiful than the unanswered call of the Lucy figure, the lost child crying for her mother in the increasingly disturbing wails of the wind. The mythology that underpins the method of the early Conversation poems is represented as shrivelling to a private, personal nightmare of stasis. The poet cannot escape by shaping his deadening spiritual dejection into a sustained movement from despair to hope, despite the innovative use of the Ode form and a changing rollcall of addressees to protect the innocent and guilty.

As we have noted, however, a crucial reciprocity emerges as latent potential in the invocation of bestimmung at the poem’s conclusion. It is preceded by a shift to the relieving sigh of ‘Ah!’ in the lines:

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!

(ll. 53-58)

183 Thomas McFarland, Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin, 77.
The poetic exclamatory sigh indicates Coleridge’s yearning for the kind of redemptive grace ushered into the conversation poems through the mechanism of transition that I have identified as Coleridge’s distinctive *lene clinamen*. Eric G. Wilson reads the ‘quick circuits’ of the poem as more than the abrupt transitions that we might expect from the ode form asking:

> Where are we in these quick circuits? Through three stanzas, the poet, in mercurial conversation directed toward an absent Lady… has swerved from his introspective stasis to consider powers beyond his ego… But he swerves again, keen to gain vigor from inner resources. Though inconclusive, these self-conscious turns keep the poet revolving, perhaps towards a redemptive union with his interlocutor.184

Given my emphasis on the significance of the tiny swerve in Coleridge’s early poetry, I believe Wilson is correct to note the presence of multiple swerves in ‘Dejection’ and that, further, these tiny swerves are the means by which the poet makes any transition towards progression (and hope) at all.

‘Dejection’ draws to a close with a glimmer of hope in the modal verb ‘may’, suggestive of future possibilities in the curious metaphor, ‘And may this storm be but a mountain-birth’ (ll. 129). Birth suggests a fruitful labour, that after terrible trial new life may come. The extent of the tribulation is suggested by ‘mountain’ as an adjective in this evocative compound description. But more is evoked here. There is an antithetical current running at cross-purposes to the hope of birth and new life if we consider Aesop’s cautionary fable of a mountain struggling to give birth to a ridiculous mouse, in an inordinately disproportionate manner. Horace’s famous treatise, the *Ars Poetica*, which began life as a letter of advice on composing poetry in the same tradition as Aristotle’s *Poetics*, references Aesop’s mouse and capitalises on the bathos of the fable. The *Ars Poetica* is distinctive as literary criticism in combining the setting of standards for literature with lively autobiographical details and it may have served as one of the

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imaginative prototypes for Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* mixing ‘Biographical Sketches’ with ‘Literary Life and Opinions’. Horace advises:

> Nor should your exordium be like that of the cyclic poet of old: ‘I’ll sing the fate of Priam, and the famous war of Troy.’ What will this writer produce worthy of such mouthing? it will be a case of ‘mountains in labour and – a mouse comes out!’

Given the sense of poetic shame we have discussed in relation to Coleridge’s awareness of presumptuous hubris, both Horace’s warning and the folkloric wisdom of the original fable may be darkly and bathetically undercutting the emergence of hope as the ‘Dejection Ode’ concludes.

Horace sets a precedent for the principle of ‘unity in multeity’ that Coleridge developed from a distinctively Greek aesthetic. In considering ‘unity and harmony’, Horace cautions against disruption to the beauty of ‘unified form’ in a manner that evokes Coleridge’s viper metaphor in ‘Dejection’. That metaphor’s vividly grotesque appearance in ‘Christabel’, as the coupling of a bright green snake and a white dove, is prefigured by Horace:

> SUPPOSE a painter wished to couple a horse’s neck with a man’s head, and to lay feathers of every hue on limbs gathered here and there, so that a woman, lovely above, foully ended in an ugly fish below; would you restrain your laughter, my friends, if admitted to a private view? Believe me, dear Pisos, a book will appear uncommonly like that picture, if impossible figures are wrought into it – like a sick man’s dreams – with the result that neither head nor foot is ascribed to a single shape, and unity is lost.

> ‘But poets and painters have always had an equal right to indulge their whims.’ Quite so: and this excuse we claim for ourselves and grant to others: but not so that harsh may mate with gentle, *serpents be paired with birds*, lambs with tigers.

Coleridge, at the height of his poetic powers, did ‘dare anything’, in Bard Bracy’s vision of Christabel and Geraldine entwined in the midnight wood. In this light, one might reconceptualise the paradoxically *daring* and self-consciously bathetic energy of Coleridge’s soliloquy for the moon, written in the months following the composition of ‘Dejection’, as a much-needed release of tension. It is a ‘stifling’ tension born of a

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growing awareness that for all of poetry’s storm-blasted mountains, its creations may emerge not so much as analogues to the Divine Logos but as devastatingly ridiculous, like little mice.

Yet the presence of the true song of the throstle in the poem alerts us to Coleridge’s valiant attempt to render a unified orchestration of sorrow akin to his 1803 notebook entry on the experience of dejection, which represents stifled despair through a striking musical metaphor:

Unspoken Grief is a misty medley, of which the real affliction only plays the first fiddle – blows the Horn, to a scattered mob of obscure feelings &c. Perhaps, at certain moments, a single almost insignificant Sorrow may, by association, bring together all the little relics of pain & discomfort, bodily and mental, that we have endured even from Infancy. 187

The ‘Dejection Ode’ enacts a critical commentary on method as well as confessing the devastating loss of the ‘shaping spirit of Imagination’ so valued by Coleridge. The musicality of modulation and contrapuntal unity that is the hallmark of Coleridge’s ‘art of Method’ survives the poet’s spiritual affliction in ‘Dejection: An Ode’.

Information vegetable, animal and mineral – systematising the poetic and the philosophical (in order categorical)

Coleridge’s reworking of the Greek principle of ‘unity in variety’ ultimately gives valence to the miscellaneous. The digressive, the insignificant, and the fragmented are not to be overlooked, but can serve as useful indicators of the limits of categorical assumptions. As discussed in earlier chapters, Coleridge wrote at a time when teleological taxonomy was collapsing into the chaos we have inherited. Albeit anxiously, he aspired to tame the vast and compendious knowledge enshrined in the Enlightenment model of the Encyclopedia that has since been viewed with enough distaste to become the object of parody from George Eliot’s Edward Casaubon to the Modern Major General of Gilbert and Sullivan. Just as the high seriousness of opera

gives way to the less lofty comic operetta, the learned treatise gives way to the less ambitious essay in a shift in attitude to ‘knowledge’ marked by a formal change in the dominant mode of academic discourse. Of course, ‘knowledge’ is now rarely used in the singular without scare quotes to acknowledge our Foucauldian sense of ‘the order of things’. An essay is an explorative attempt to draw together the implications of logical argument, evolving from precedents as diverse as Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and Galileo’s *The Assayer* (1623), which defended the mathematical principles of the universe with the warning that ‘without these, one is wandering around in a dark labyrinth’.188

Discussing ‘Enlightenment, Romanticism and the fate of system’, Clifford Siskin questions the sense of ‘period shift in the late eighteenth century’ with respect to knowledge. He makes a fair claim in the observation that, ‘Both the actual genre of system, as well as the manifestation of its spirit in… ambitious attempts at comprehensiveness from encyclopedia to treatises, are widely recognised markers of aspiration’. His conclusion is significant in terms of the critical reception of the Romantic fragment as a model of ‘unity-in-multeity’: ‘Students of Romanticism, however, will be on less familiar terms with system, in part because our standard literary histories have fixed upon a different set of terms and genres to signal and embody the spirit of the age: genius and imagination, fragment and lyric’.189 I am applying an earlier set of formative terms to the exposition of Coleridge’s manner of articulating principles that may be recovered as an important legacy to both poetry and criticism. It is a legacy worthy of the ‘aspirations’ Siskin ascribes to the author of both a *Treatise on Method* and a series of friendly ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’.

Coleridge not only wrote as a poet and then literary critic but assumed the voices

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suited to each role in a genuinely *dialogic* imaginative attempt to render systems of thought, feeling, and being. There is a complex ‘unity in multeity’ in the interplay of theatrical voices in Coleridge’s best poetry and prose where the use of masks amplifies meaning as though we were in attendance at a festival of Dionysus appreciating ‘the croaking chorus of the Frogs of Aristophanes’. As W.S. Gilbert well knew, the cheery news about the ‘hypotenuse’ is that it may be figured indirectly and relationally, through squaring adjacent sides. Accordingly, Coleridge’s ultimate principle of unity is best approached through a sustained attempt at formulating an understanding of the relations of adjacent elements in his work. The hybridity celebrated in Coleridge’s artistic practice, particularly at the level of form and genre, is testament to a creative energy that is, at times, unharnessed in Coleridge’s poetry with enough force to overflow traditional and epistemic boundaries such that rocks dance. If unity is the goal of Method then there can be no leftovers after the world is carved up, hence the miscellaneous itself signifies the need to distinguish kinds more precisely to identify the likeness not normally attributed to the odds and ends of the world.

Translated into aesthetic practice, the principle Coleridge affirms might be dubbed ‘unity-in-miscellaneity’. Stuart Curran’s comprehensive discussion of genre bears this out with his claim that Coleridge’s ‘Dejection Ode’ is neither strictly Pindaric nor an instance of another pure, traditional genre but mixes the two leading Classical influences on poetry in the late eighteenth-century to situate a ‘Horatian voice’ in a ‘Pindaric form’. By pushing the boundaries of genre, Coleridge can accommodate a distinctive unity with the geometrical satisfaction in beautiful symmetry that the mathematical mind feels in division that spawns no leftovers but allows for the emergence of the wondrous utility of irrational numbers. Pythagoras revered the mystical realm that emerges when relations are given due philosophical prominence.

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190 Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, 71.
Situating the principle of unity in the miscellany of Coleridge’s oeuvre

In order to derive pleasure from the occupation of the mind, the principle of unity must always be present, so that in the midst of the multitude the centripetal force be never suspended, nor the sense be fatigued by the predominance of the centrifugal force. This unity in multitude I have elsewhere stated as the principle of beauty. It is equally the source of pleasure in variety, and in fact a higher term including both. What is the exclusive or distinguishing term between them?191

Laying aside Coleridge’s controversial borrowings (this time from Schelling’s Academy oration of 1806), it is clear that the emphasis on a particular kind of energy in the face of ‘multeity’ is continuous across Coleridge’s essays, lectures, poems and the ultimate miscellany of the Biographia itself. The last word of this chapter and our pleasurable dwelling on variety belongs to an earlier section of this work than the one quoted above. It has several points of synergy with the above passage on contrasting yet complementary forces; my emphasis on the Greek mind; the dramatised agon of tragic-comic theatre; and on unravelling the mystery of Coleridge’s methodical dramatisation of the creative power of the imagination. Coleridge explains that,

to contemplate the ANCIENT of days and all his works with feelings as fresh, as if all had then sprung forth at the first creative fiat; characterises the mind that feels the riddle of the world, and may help to unravel it.192

Feeling this world’s ‘riddle’ is the precise sort of pleasurable irritation that moves us to work to understand dynamic relations particularly once we have been arrested by the beauty of their symmetry. The organic hybridity of Coleridge’s early poetry at the level of form exemplifies the ‘vital interdependence’ of parts stressed in Essay VII of The Friend, with which this chapter opened. I have located the complex principle of ‘unity in multitude’ in the interplay of theatrical voices and strategic use of masks in ‘Kubla Khan’ and ‘Dejection: An Ode’. As we have seen, Coleridge’s miscellany is far from capricious in its relations to a dialogic unity akin to an ideal teleological taxonomy.

192 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Table Talk, 2:200.
Chapter Five: MADNESS IN THE METHOD

Electric currents and gothic undercurrents: generating the persona of the invalid as a form of Romantic self-exploration.

For of Plato’s works, the larger and more valuable portion have all one common end, which comprehends and shines through the particular purpose of each several dialogue; and this is to establish the sources, to evolve the principles, and exemplify the art of METHOD. This is the clue, without which it would be difficult to exculpate the noblest productions of the divine philosopher from the charge of being tortuous and labyrinthine in their progress, and unsatisfactory in their ostensible results.


The explicit goal of Coleridge’s manner of proceeding in this passage is exculpation of Platonic dialogic method. Indeed, it may be said of *The Friend* that exculpation as method is Coleridge’s distinctive form of Romantic self-exploration. As the passage continues he defends Plato’s deliberate, precise, and distinctive use of a circuitous progression of argument. Coleridge’s own labyrinthine argumentative route is implicitly defended as similarly purposeful, though far from linear. The logic employed by Coleridge may be inferred from his claim for Plato ‘that the EDUCATION of the intellect, by awakening the principle and method of self-development, was his proposed object’. 194 The Latin *tortuosus* foregrounds the sense of a twisting progression that deploys a similar leap in logic to Coleridge’s *lene clinamen*, or tiny swerve. A twist gives unexpected pleasure and delight. It is unanticipated and therefore likely to disturb the reader’s complacency. Circuitousness defies pre-conceptions of the purpose of

progression as the anticipated line of argument turns unexpectedly to become more like a spiral. As with the swerve into the hellish, however, there is no guarantee that tortuous progress might not, at times, be torturous. The metaphor of the labyrinth underscores the extreme danger of the circuitous route to be followed. It suggests an interpretative framework for two of Coleridge’s poems, ‘The Pains of Sleep’ and ‘Limbo’, which moves beyond the reductive explanatory power of the effects of opium addiction and withdrawal on the capacity for an affective response to life.

By exculpating Plato ‘from the charge of being tortuous and labyrinthine’, Coleridge is engaging in a parallel exculpation of his own manner of progression in the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’. Our friend and guide will wind upwards in a spiral motion, like a mountain-climbing ‘Chamois-hunter’, and the cost of attending to the guiding spirit of inquiry – of following Coleridge in his self-appointed dramatic role as ‘The Friend’ – will be bloodied feet. As noted when discussing the mythic elements of the labyrinth and the fable of the chamois hunter in Chapter Three, painful sacrifice is embedded in the metaphors of methodical inquiry in The Friend.

An exemplary twist to advancing an argument on method in the interest of arriving at a surprising unity is evident in Coleridge’s metaphor derived from the polarity of electricity and the dialectic forces at play in magnetism. ‘The Pains of Sleep’ (September, 1803) and ‘Limbo’ (April-May, 1811 as a notebook entry) were written in the years slightly preceding and following the composition of the first edition of The Friend. Both poems experiment with fusing the mythic and scientific metaphors imagined in Essay VII. Acknowledging these distinctive features of Coleridge’s writings, sustained over this period of time, gives due credence to the method that can appear superficially as muddle or madness. Laurence S. Lockridge’s essay ‘Explaining Coleridge’s Explanation’ takes up Byron’s witty challenge to Coleridgean circuitousness by recasting it as muddled verbosity. Recognising Coleridge’s habitual
self-exculpation as his abiding method illuminates the coherence of the several voices deployed by Coleridge. His frequently complex tone fuses a distancing irony with earnestly vulnerable faith. That vulnerability is never so prominent as in the raw poetry of ‘The Pains of Sleep’. ‘Limbo’, on the other hand, gives voice to a weary cynicism oddly inflected with black humour. Lockridge uses the strangely inappropriate metaphor of an anchor to support such an interpretative orientation to Coleridge: ‘one way of finding continuity, movement and drama in what may otherwise appear to be miscellaneous or contradictory reflections [is] by anchoring them in a life and personality which, though tormented and crippled, still offer their own kind of elucidation.’195 The emphasis on the dramatic suggests that a profitable way of proceeding would be to stay with Coleridge as he ventures into the labyrinthine paths of his enduring philosophical and poetic pre-occupations.

What emerges is the figure of the invalid as a means of self-exculpation and Romantic self-development. It is necessary to extend Lockridge’s analysis by focusing on the self-dramatisation involved in Coleridge’s self-presentation as ‘tormented and crippled’. It is also crucial at this juncture that the reader continue actively to participate in methodical inquiry rather than passively receive a dead and static explanation that might prevent winning insight through the labour of thinking that Coleridge models for us. Waiting for the product of his energised poetic thought processes is not an option. It is important to allow for continuity in thought, feeling and the life of Coleridge when discussing the principle of polarity in ‘The Pains of Sleep’ and ‘Limbo’. Lockridge’s argument for incorporating a ‘Structural Interpretation’ alongside a ‘genetic interpretation’ of Coleridge’s thought introduces the problematic notion of the ‘ideal reader’, though, which merits further consideration:

Accordingly, the ideal way to read Coleridge, would not be to begin with the first installment of *The Friend* or the first volume of the *Opus Maximum* or Chapter I of *Biographia Literaria*, let alone entry I of the *Notebooks*, and then plow on through. Rather one would read him after his scattered speculations have been assembled and interpreted by the scholar, who has provided something of the unified construction which Coleridge so admired and did not himself achieve. To this end, the scholar who builds with Coleridge should also literally present him, quoting extensively and avoiding paraphrase as much as possible. When thus spliced together Coleridge’s writings on any topic, will reveal continuities – the continuities of an internal dialogue, as it were – more than total consistency in doctrine or steady development toward some settled point of view.196

Taking up the issue of ‘the ideal way to read Coleridge’, one might begin with Jerome Christensen’s review of Kathleen Wheeler’s attempt to foreground the heuristic function of the *Biographia Literaria*, a review that is almost as dismissive as Byron on Coleridge’s mode of explanation:

> her book, though not comprehensive in its account of the ‘processes’ of the *Biographia* and not fully convincing on those aspects of the *Biographia* it does consider, is nonetheless evidence of the success of Coleridge’s rhetoric. It vindicates the capacity of the *Biographia* to design a reader who will give it an indulgent reading.197

The capacity to train a philosophically disengaged and complacent reader to think for themselves is no mean feat, however, as any teacher of literature concerned with encouraging independent thought and genuine engagement with poetic processes would confirm. To answer Christensen in full, it is necessary to consider the complexity of the ways of reading inscribed in the arguments in The ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ in *The Friend*, as I have done here.

Lucy Newlyn’s exploration of the ‘anxiety of reception’ draws a similar conclusion. Discussing Kathleen Wheeler’s work on the *Biographia* alongside Elinor Schaffer’s work on the poetry as providing evidence that Coleridge tends to create an ‘ideal reader’, Newlyn observes, ‘We can of course choose to resist becoming Coleridge’s ideal reader’.198 So either Coleridge’s rhetoric is strong enough to produce such effects by design – Newlyn dubs it ‘coercive’ – or it is immethodical enough to be

dismissed as empty verbosity. I contend that the strength of Coleridge’s rhetoric is
evidence for his peculiar methodical coherence. Whatever the ideological implications
of surrendering to Coleridge’s rhetorical machinations, a sense of the cunningness of
circuitous argumentation in Coleridge’s prose emerges from these critical debates. From
giving credence to purposeful twisting progression it is but a short step to ranking
Coleridge alongside Plato as an imaginatively dialogic thinker worth the pain of his
artful prose method and poetic processes. As Jack Stillinger observes in relation to
‘Romantic complexity’ and the Biographia Literaria, Coleridge is ‘still the best modern
theorist about what readers do in the act of reading’.199

The separate issue raised by Paul Hamilton of the politics of surrendering to
Coleridge’s ‘rhetorical absolutism’ may be considered through giving careful
consideration to the way Coleridge deploys the principle of generative polarity. It is
fitting to note, however, Lucy Newlyn’s observation, ‘The chameleon rhetoric of
Romanticism is irregular, sometimes uncomfortable, and its dialectical structure is often
incomplete’.200 While the logic of polarity foregrounded in this chapter as a key
principle of method is generative in both poems, structural incompleteness is the flaw in
Coleridge’s art of method that allows for a more fluid interplay of principles than
The Friend suggests. Coleridge’s irregularity is not as immethodical as it may appear,
initially, if due credence is given to the significance of his principles of method in
The Friend.

The role of the Romantic invalid self in Coleridge’s method

How does the self-dramatisation of the poet as a ‘tormented and crippled’ human
influence our interpretation of the scenery and affecting scenes we witness and
participate in, when reading ‘The Pains of Sleep’ and ‘Limbo’? To answer this question,

199 Jack Stillinger, Romantic Complexity: Keats, Coleridge, and Wordsworth (Urbana and Chicago:
University of Illinois Press, 2006), 193.
200 Lucy Newlyn, Reading, Writing, and Romanticism, 332.
we need to take full account, not just of the bare biographical details of Coleridge’s life, disappointments, and addictions, but also of the complex self that Coleridge continually dramatises in all his work. The Mariner pleads with the hermit to ‘shrieve me’, an archaic verb with etymological roots in the Latin scribere which gestures towards a manner of redemptive blessing that includes the necessity of confession and might be formulated as ‘write me’. Indeed, the verb ‘shrieve’ is almost entirely associated with sacramental confession. In the confessional poem, ‘The Pains of Sleep’, Coleridge characteristically writes himself into coherence, compulsively attempting the self-composition that gives continuity to a self over time and makes sense of the crippling torment of his most misunderstood and artful persona, the self as Romantic invalid. On the concept of Coleridge as a suffering ‘culture-hero for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’, Marilyn Butler observes: ‘In “The Ancient Mariner” and “Dejection: an Ode” Coleridge gives poetic form to the concept, but it is no less expressive that he lived it.’

Butler’s research into the Romantic period from the theoretical perspective of cultural materialism gives appropriate emphasis to the view that the life and work of Coleridge must be read as an organic unity because, beyond the spirit of the age, he was an individual struggling to reconcile his literary meditations and philosophical inquiry with the lived experience of a (tormented) Christian self.

In this chapter, my elucidation of Coleridge’s methodical approach to poetics – explaining his explanation – begins with an emphasis on embodied revelation, bodily organisation and disorganisation, and the crucial motif of self-composition as a means of both self-exculpation and self-development. The dramatic motif of composing a self recurs throughout Coleridge’s intriguing oeuvre and makes sense of his approach to literary miscellany. The poems under discussion in this chapter, ‘The Pains of Sleep’

and ‘Limbo’, require an active reading influenced by an informed understanding of method to conceptualise Coleridge’s peculiar concern with the soul’s relation to the body during nightmarish states of privation, ranging from pains to the isolation of blindness. As active, if not ideal, readers we submit to the Baconian model of education, outlined in the preface to Essay V, before tracking the polar forces of attraction and repulsion in the poems to arrive at a manifestation of a surviving self. That dramatised self is partly constructed by the ‘third thing’ dynamism known to us today as limbic resonance and recognised by Coleridge as the self-sustaining communion achieved through love. Our keeping faith with Coleridge’s principles allows us to skirt the dangers identified by Thomas Pfau in his discussion of trauma, the ballad form and lyrical poetry in the period 1800 to 1815, the period in which both poems were written. Pfau cautions against importing ‘psychoanalytic theory into literary texts’ as a mismatched method ‘tends to undermine the authority of the very discipline that sponsors the reader’s interpretative activity’. The discipline of literary criticism grounded in attentiveness to the text is requisite for an active reading of Romantic poetry that draws on the alignment between the imaginatively and bodily engaged reading self with the particular self composed through a particular poem.

Pfau’s concept of intersubjectivity, predicated on full-bodied engagement with Coleridge’s most painfully affecting poems, invokes the idea of limbic resonance in reading Coleridge:

> Beyond all propositional language, the affect of sympathy attests to a deep-seated intersubjective logic at work within a given individual and indeed constitutive of his or her humanity. What feeling instantiates in the individual is the fact of its social connectedness—Coleridge metaphorizes it as an ‘electric force’ (Coleridge 1983, 1:199)—as well as an ethical obligation that is also intrinsic to such ‘feeling’: namely, to extend the social potentiality experienced in the aesthetic feeling of ‘communicability’ into a livable reality.  

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The reader, then, experiences the process of agon and agony dramatised in these poetic shapings of lived experience along lines suggested by Bacon and quoted in *The Friend*: ‘you may be able, by this means, both to review your own scientific acquirements, re-measuring as it were the steps of your knowledge for your own satisfaction, and at the same time to transplant it into the minds of others, just as it grew in your own.’ There is an electric force at play in our receiving these poems in the spirit in which they were written. While a far cry from ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ and ‘Frost at Midnight’, both poems are, in their own ways, acutely Coleridgean conversational poems at the far end of the pole that, following Bakhtin, we have been characterising as energised by a poetic use of the ‘dialogic imagination’.

**What is it like to be a Romantic invalid?**

Coleridge’s understanding of the ‘law of polarity’ – as it is rendered in Essay VII of the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ in *The Friend* – is best approached with a kind of double historicism. We need to focus on the historical context of Romantic debates on pertinent issues in the philosophy of science, as well as on recent attempts to grapple with a biological exploration of the brain’s limbic regions. Pfau’s insightful attempt to frame inter-subjectivity can now be developed along the lines of ‘quantum entanglement’. Coleridge, as we have seen, exhibits signs of such entanglement with Shakespeare’s tragic personae. By foregrounding the implications of such characteristic literary entanglement, I aim to show the ways in which Coleridge’s poetry can illuminate those intractable questions about the quality of subjective experience raised by the formerly materialist philosopher, Thomas Nagel. Nagel is still irritated into productive inquiry by the intriguing question ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ posed some

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decades ago yet gaining new traction as the limits of physicalism in neuroscience become increasingly apparent.

Coleridge’s screams in the night, dramatically represented in ‘The Pains of Sleep’, along with the purgatorial world of a materialist philosophy dramatised in ‘Limbo’, take on a new urgency for a readership isolated on a wide sea, ‘unpiloted and unprovisioned’, in the secular philosophical landscape of the twenty-first century. The first part of the double historicisation has been successfully mapped in relation to Coleridge’s ‘law of POLARITY’ in the historicist recovery of Romantic ‘bodies of knowledge’ undertaken by Fulford, Lee and Kitson:

The material contexts of polar exploration and the science of terrestrial magnetism, however, have not yet been fully taken into account when discussing Romantic metaphors of polarity… Coleridge further described Stoicism’s attempt to understand the divine essence as like that of ‘a mole [who,] after turning up a few inches of Soil’ might feel confident to ‘describe [the] central fire, or the magnetic Nucleus of this Planet’ (Lects 1795, pp.1222, 157).

What remains to be added to this useful discussion of the material contexts of Coleridge’s thought is inquiry into the philosophical implications of the quandaries of our inherited materialism, (pre)figured using the trope of mole-like blindness in ‘Limbo’.

Thomas Nagel now formulates the problem of the soul communicating with the material world using aptly medical terminology that accords with this chapter’s focus on the bodily limbic, threshold regions of the imagination:

And if physical science, whatever it may have to say about the origin of life, leaves us necessarily in the dark about consciousness, that shows that it cannot provide the basic form of intelligibility for this world. There must be a very different way in which things as they are make sense, and that includes the physical world, since the problem cannot be quarantined in the mind.

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In 1974, Nagel expounded the problem of being ‘necessarily in the dark’ like the sad inhabitants of Coleridge’s den in the 1811 poem ‘Limbo’, available to us in manuscript form and unpublished in the poet’s lifetime:

It would be fine if someone were to develop concepts and a theory that enabled us to think about those things; but such an understanding may be permanently denied to us by the limits of our nature. And to deny the reality or logical significance of what we can never describe or understand is the crudest form of cognitive dissonance.  

Similarly, Alan Richardson’s work on Coleridge’s historical context of ‘neural Romanticism’ provides a plank in the present two-plank strategy of developing an understanding of reading Coleridge back through a neuro-scientific understanding of the body. Accordingly, my reading of ‘The Pains of Sleep’ will focus on organisation along with bodily disorganisation. Discussing John Hunter’s legacy, Richardson observes: ‘A key issue, then, would be to argue the dependence of thought, traditionally associated with the transcendent mind or material soul, on the organization of the brain.’

It is my contention that Coleridge, in his poetry and by developing poetry’s principles in the distinctive method of The Friend, aimed to provide us with the poetical means of thinking about intractable philosophical problems at ‘the limits of our nature’. These include the nature of consciousness and, more particularly, the imaginative limbus that is the locus of inquiry for both ‘The Pains of Sleep’ and ‘Limbo’.

‘The Pains of Sleep’
The visceral plural ‘Pains’ in the title of Coleridge’s poem ‘The Pains of Sleep’ immediately ushers embodied experience onto the stage of this dramatic yet sincerely confessional meditation on gradations of prayer, itself a recurrent subject for meditation in Coleridge’s Notebooks. Though Coleridge might be drawing on a Medieval ballad tradition on the pains of love, as exemplified by Guillaume de Lorris’ allegorical dream

209 Thomas Nagel, “What is it like to be a bat?”, 4.
210 Alan Richardson, British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind, 25.
vision, *The Roman de la Rose* written in 1295, he dispenses with allegory to experiment with a confessional mode that is both personal and startling. The several pangs that cause the poet grief, as recorded in the *Notebooks*, are here imagined as grievous bodily harm. ‘Viscera’, in the plural, refers to ‘the interior organs in the great cavity of the body… esp. in the abdomen’ (*OED*). Coleridge’s chronic (opium-related) abdominal strife is the locus for the lively, even lurid, dejection that represents sleep robbed of its restorative power in this painful poem centred on the struggle for self-composure. Coleridge turns to verse seeking orderliness, restraint, and the composition of a credible narrative of self from autobiographical experiences both real and imagined.

In Gothic terms, the putrefaction of waste in the abdominal cavity attracts the demonic for Coleridge, ‘Spirits = Hypochondriacal Appearances &c from Faeces accumulated in the lower bowels. But is the converse true affirmable? Are hypochond. &c = Spirits?’211. This is a question to be specifically addressed in considering these poems as the work of Coleridge as a Romantic invalid. In Shakespearean terms, nightmares presage a glimpse of self-awareness before imminent doom, as in Richard III’s speech upon waking in fright, alone with himself as it were, fearfully confronting his murderous, diabolical self. Combining these literary modes might yield the horror of a tragic encounter with the doppelgänger in the night, which suggests a way of reading the method of ‘Pains of Sleep’ while remaining mindful of the significance of bodily suffering in this poem. Like Shakespeare’s bodily and morally malformed anti-hero, the Coleridgean persona of ‘The Pains of Sleep’ experiences several pains along with a ‘throng’ that threatens the speaker, as it does Richard III:

> All several sins, all used in each degree,  
> Throng to the bar, crying all, ‘Guilty! guilty!’212.

The presence of a divided self struggling for composure is indicated by the odd syntax of ‘My spirit I’, which calls to mind Shakespeare’s divided Richard pained by a self-revelatory nightmare comprising the accusatory, unquiet spirits of his victims, arriving sequentially and in clusters to curse him to ignominious death and defeat in battle.

Shakespeare’s masterful creation of the narcissistic, unloved, ruthless monarch inevitably attracts the pathologically tortured genius of the poet to the extreme pole of Coleridge’s darkest theatrical double. Additionally, Richard III may be read in his own pains of sleep speech as a monster in distress, kindred to the Geraldine of Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’. Geraldine has a comparable level of fleeting self-awareness and similarly attracts the Lady Anne-like polar opposite, Christabel, the ‘innocent’ maiden whose name includes the three letters of the poet’s own preferred moniker, STC. Under such a framework, the poem enacts Coleridge’s distinctive principle of generative polarity as a kind of sado-masochistic attraction; necessitating both complex, ritualistic prayer and an urgently simple plea for love.

In the weakness of his near-invalid condition at this stage of his life, the poet Coleridge examines his own nightmares as a kind of bold scientific experiment on his own psyche and somatic state. It is a poetic experiment driven by the principle of polarity that might generate a third way of being, ensuring the psychological survival of uncertain spiritual crisis. The ill-proportioned distemper of illness demands the medicinal blowtorch of a brave attempt to shape and order nightmare vision in ‘The Pains of Sleep’. That dismembered self may then be methodically recomposed, figuratively forged together from the scattered remains of the poet.

It is the body in soliloquy that the reader hears in ‘The Pains of Sleep’ with such strong limbic resonance. The poem’s concluding guilt-stricken, yet simultaneously guileless, plea dramatically renders the last shreds of innocence an individual in crisis can muster through the pathos of genuine suffering. ‘The Pains of Sleep’ memorably
enacts the drama of an often silent, perhaps unutterable, process of Orphic self-annihilation punctuated and punctured by screams in the night. Following Shakespeare’s cue, Coleridge dramatises, with some daring, the macabre business of composing a self from the scattered remains of dire self-recrimination as a method of effecting a desperately roundabout rescue from remorse.

Richard III’s nightmare speech in the third scene of the final act of Shakespeare’s play emphasises the force of the ‘several’, the cumulative impact of a crowd of ghostly visitations during the night:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain. …

I shall despair. There is no creature loves me;
And if I die, no soul will pity me.\(^{213}\)

In mythic terms, the verbal echo, ‘Throng’, recalls the Thracian women who dismembered Orpheus. There is a sense of anticipation of Orphic dismemberment in the opening ritual of Coleridge’s poem, too:

Ere on my bed my limbs I lay,
It hath not been my use to pray.

(ll. 1-2)

Recalling the quietism and acquiescence of the lyric speaker in ‘Frost at Midnight’, ‘The Pains of Sleep’ begins with a prologue calling for hush before the nightly ritual drama of painful nightmare unfolds. Before the poet lays himself down to sleep, he does not pray in a conventional way, but instead describes a process of laying his ‘limbs’ to sleep. This idiosyncratic expression is less whole, less wholesome, than a traditional ‘Before I lay me down to sleep’ nightly prayer, in that it indicates a bodily separation strongly suggestive of a dissociated consciousness. Limbs are possessed yet not owned by the speaker, which dramatises the alien sensation of aching limbs made unfamiliar when colonised by several pains.

Painful joints may preclude the poet from praying conventionally, ‘With moving lips or bended knees’ (l. 3), which the odd beginning informs us is not his ‘use’ (l. 2), his custom. This bodily observance of prayer may be deemed useless by the poet because it is transgressive to claim a unique ritual for bedtime prayer. Coleridge may be dimly conscious of an unacknowledged, yet potentially haunting, moral weakness implicit in the move to a more idiosyncratic mode of prayer in response to bodily infirmity. The Germanic origin of ‘limb’ has the root ‘lei’: ‘to bend, be movable, be nimble’ (OED). The reader, then, is presented with limbs that by their very definition should bend – as the Christian supplicant bends to the will of God – not being put to that use but wilfully stilled, sung to sleep by the lullaby of the liquid ‘l’ alliteration that is the poet’s lay as he prepares for restless rest.

The Latin limbus, on the other hand, suggests ‘border’, so on the edge of sleep, the daylight self is preparing to meet the Gothic double of the night self, as Richard III had done before him, waking to the confusion of identity signified by the famous anxious assertion ‘I am I’. The similarly Hebraic syntax and repetition in the carefully expressive ‘my limbs I lay’, paired with ‘My spirit I to Love compose’ (l. 5), which occurs shortly afterwards, indicates an existential anxiety over who is acting on what and whom in this fearful effort at composure. The poet here dramatises the characteristically Coleridgean preoccupation with composing a self, in this case aiming for love and charity through quieting a bodily self disposed to a painful lack of flexibility or motion. ‘In the Biographia Literaria, his “Literary Life”, Coleridge sought to compose himself’, William Christie argues, ‘to compose an idealized image of himself, that is, and at the same time, more simply, to regain composure’. In accordance with this view, it is my contention that the Biographia Literaria is testament

to the extent of Coleridge’s compulsion to write a coherent self into being, perhaps to ‘shrieve’ himself.

Just prior to King Richard’s nightmare, the physically and morally mis-shapen character is dispirited and bemoans his state in bodily terms that suggest a limbic resonance with Coleridge’s speaker:

I have not that alacrity of spirit
Nor cheer of mind that I was wont to have.²¹⁵

‘Alacrity’ is characteristic of the nimble limb, just as audible speech ought to be characteristic of ‘moving lips’, yet neither associations pertain to the recollection of the prayer ritual that opens ‘The Pains of Sleep’, a poem composed when the poet, too, was bereft of ‘alacrity of spirit’, indeed in a desperate crisis of faith. Given the tendency for Romantic poets to pepper their musings with extended reference to Shakespeare, the precise resonance of the phrase analysed here could well have been influential in the composition of Coleridge’s poem. In 1803, Coleridge was guilty of ‘that anxious inquietude which is justly chargeable with distrust of heaven’, as the more stoic (yet frequently depressive) Samuel Johnson would have it.²¹⁶ The Coleridgean persona of ‘The Pains of Sleep’ dramatises the silence as he stills himself for sleep at the outset of a poem of culpably ‘anxious inquietude’. He attempts silently to shrieve the body that is distempered by pains.

The suffering body – still partly conceived on the Shakespearean model of temperament turning to distemper due to imbalanced humours – is called to account under the strong pressure of turn-of-the-century Protestant moral self-inquiry and found wanting. Indeed, in ‘The Pains of Sleep’, Coleridge is languishing for a want of love that none can now judge with Johnsonian severity. When the dangerous experiment of exploring the imagination’s borderland of nightmare begins, Coleridge adopts the poetic

form of a previous age as a means of control, at odds with the self-unravelling required of this particular Orphic song:

Ere on my bed my limbs I lay,  
It hath not been my use to pray  
With moving lips or bended knees;  
But silently, by slow degrees,  
My spirit I to Love compose,  
In humble trust mine eye-lids close,  
With reverential resignation.

(ll. 1 – 7)

Paradoxically, ‘The Pains of Sleep’ is a bodily performance, its ritualistic nature underscored by the initial use of tight couplets, a form which the poet resorts to in a crisis poem summoning a nightmare vision not in Christ’s name but in His alarming absence. The half-rhyme, then, at the end of the first section of ‘The Pains of Sleep’ signifies control breaking down:

A sense o’er all my soul impress  
That I am weak, yet not unblest,  
Since in me, round me, every where  
Eternal strength and Wisdom are.

(ll. 10-13)

The rhyme for ‘every where’ might easily have been ‘air’, but the easy breathing of the meditative ritual begins to elude the speaker. The poem’s opening clue, ‘Ere’, is aurally suggestive of ‘air’ and the final word withholds it as though the breath (intimately connected with inspiration and afflatus in Coleridge’s poetry) is unavailable.

The Gothic turn of ‘The Pains of Sleep’ is signalled at the beginning of the second section with the recollection of a dramatic nightmare and a swerve into suffocating guilt and remorse. In stark contrast to the ritual described earlier, at the poem’s first volte, the speaker breathlessly relates one of several tales of nightmares that provoke loud prayers (and screams):

But yester-night I prayed aloud  
In anguish and in agony,  
Up-starting from the fiendish crowd  
Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me:  
A lurid light, a trampling throng,  
Sense of intolerable wrong,
And whom I scorned, those only strong!
Thirst of revenge, the powerless will
Still baffled, and yet burning still!
Desire with loathing strangely mixed
On wild or hateful objects fixed.
Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!
And shame and terror over all!
Deeds to be hid which were not hid,
Which all confused I could not know
Whether I suffered, or I did:
For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,
My own or others still the same
Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame.

(ll. 14-32)

In the final line, the liquid lullaby of the opening, the poet’s lay, is stunningly
supplanted by a beautifully-poised but painful-to-articulate jumble of fricatives and
hissing sibilance that enacts the sleeper’s confusion and struggle for breath under the
weight of nightmare. The collapse of distinguishable categories, recalls the horrors of
‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. This swerve, though, is anything but merciful and
suggests a suffering of the kind inscribed in the Mariner’s exclamation of anguished
disbelief at being so agonisingly alone:

And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony!

(ll. 234-235)

That ‘saint’ was replaced by ‘Christ’ in Coleridge’s amendment of the ballad indicates
that separation from Christ’s mercy is the hellish aloneness that haunts Coleridge’s
poems in the years leading up to the 1803 crisis of religious faith. It finds dramatic
expression in ‘The Pains of Sleep’, with its poetically self-referential, intertextual
echoes of the Mariner’s burning, ‘powerless will’.

Coleridge’s 1798 letter to his brother George, affirming his belief in Original
Sin, illuminates the connection this anti-Rousseauvian theological idea has to the sense
of disorder that the orderly rhyme scheme of ‘The Pains of Sleep’ seeks to contain:

I believe most stedfastly in Original Sin; that from our mother’s wombs our
understandings are darkened; and even where are understandings are in the light,
that our organisation is depraved, our volitions imperfect.\textsuperscript{217}

Note the absence of the first person singular, as the writer gestures towards self-exculpation and denies personal ownership of these blameworthy states. The crucial concept of organisation, specifically depravity of organisation, goes some way towards explaining Coleridge’s emphasis on bodily organisation and distemper in ‘The Pains of Sleep’. Far from the joyful affirmation of the ‘I am myself I’ of the moon soliloquy, we have here a dejected speaker who is torn apart and overwhelmed, split in a process of Gothic doubling and painfully gasping out the poignant aphorism, ‘To be beloved is all I need, /And whom I love, I love indeed.’

In ‘The Pains of Sleep’, the principle of polarity is applied most effectively to dramatise the lostness of the poetic speaker along with a characteristically Coleridgean turn from self-annihilation to fragile wisdom. The loss of self necessary to arrive at imaginative insight, of the kind we have encountered in the blindness of the prison of self in the daylight conversation poem, ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, is figured again in ‘The Pains of Sleep’ in the nightmarish, compulsive coupling of:

\begin{quote}
Desire with loathing strangely mixed
On wild or hateful objects fixed.
\end{quote}

(ll. 23-24)

While guilt at this disorganised state of depravity is partially displaced by the absence of a personal pronoun indicating full ownership of loathsome desires, it is rendered as the dreaming subject’s haunted awareness of being complicit in the conjuring of a perverse polarity of abject attraction and ineffectual repulsion. It is the dreamer’s disordered dream after all. Dismembered or not, the poetic self cannot entirely evade responsibility for the wild creation of an encounter with a Jungian shadow self. It is Coleridge’s own imagination that here bodies forth the diabolic in the shapeless shape

\textsuperscript{217} Samuel Taylor Coleridge, \textit{Collected Letters} 1:396.
of uncanny terror signified in the poem by the nightly arrival of the Gothic doppelgänger.

Like the Mariner in the land of ice, then, the speaker of the ‘The Pains of Sleep’ is unable to distinguish categories or navigate a symbolic reality of his own making. The disingenuous protestation, ‘I could not know’ (l.28), suggests a problematic innocence. While there may be reduced culpability for heinous wrongdoing in the midst of nightmare, we commonly ascribe guilt to the neglect of exercising restraint as a habit of character. Educated in such habitual restraint, we avoid the consequences of expressing or even countenancing our undisciplined desires. Spontaneous action born of unrepressed desire brings on unpredictable, disastrous consequences in Coleridge’s early poetry, where the stress on memorably disproportionate results of seemingly inconsequential acts is consistent with the kind of inexplicable suffering brought down by the Mariner’s shooting of the albatross.

There is the aural suggestion, however, in the utterance ‘I could not know’ that foregrounds the guilt of lacking the moral strength to say no to unconscionable deeds. To problematise the issue further, the speaker is unclear on the identities of the perpetrators and victims of such deeds, whether ‘My own or others still the same / Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame’ (ll 31-32). As with Richard III’s experience of nightmare, however, the unwelcome ghostly visitations can only be the product of the poet’s own disordered consciousness. Whether they are owned in the poem, they proceed, as nightmares do, from the self at war with itself. The mind in conversation with itself is a familiar trope, yet here it is queerly inverted so that conversation is replaced by somatic sensations representing the body speaking its own language of pain(s) to the mind, which then enters a state of sympathetic suffering in a kind of embodied psychodrama. The poem effectively dramatises the Romantic invalid as
dynamically ‘psychosomatic’ (Coleridge’s own term), caught between the mental pole and the bodily.\textsuperscript{218}

It may be radically unwise to surrender self in preparation for a sleep that leaves the body vulnerable to the entry or emergence of darker spirits, the supernatural possession that prefigures our current scientific understanding of the psychologically conflicted and thus disordered individual in danger of overwhelming psychosis. The madness in Coleridge’s method is beyond poetic control and ought to be approached with more caution by a body as weakly constituted as that of the opium-damaged poet of 1803. Neil Vickers has demonstrated in his study of Coleridge’s medical imagination that ‘Beddoes’ account of the mental experience of nervous disease remained fundamentally important for Coleridge’s projected “‘Consolations and Comforts” in \textit{The Friend}.\textsuperscript{219} In Vickers’ reading, there is a welcome validation for discerning in the early poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge the construction of a distinctively Romantic invalid, according to principles later formulated in the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ in \textit{The Friend}. It is the principle of polarity that Coleridge bravely applies in the dramatic, experimental Gothicism of ‘The Pains of Sleep’.

The ‘several’ voices in ‘The Pains of Sleep’ subside in the third section and a calm and temporally distanced narrative voice enters the drama. Relief from tension appears in a moment of reflection on the mad dramatic action of the previous night’s disturbance:

\begin{quote}
So two nights passed: the night’s dismay
Saddened and stunned the coming day.
Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me
Distemper’s worst calamity.
\end{quote}

(ll. 33-36)

\textsuperscript{218} Alan Richardson, \textit{British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind}, 43.
The measured story-teller mode of ‘So two nights passed’ belies the horror of the unravelling self in the preceding stanza. ‘Distemper’ has the Latin root ‘temperare’, to mingle, so the kind of malady described here is one of disastrous mixture in the wrong proportion. The experience of reading these lines is one of being given air at the point of suffocation, as though similarly waking from the incantatory trance of the preceding barrage of tortured rhymes. The description of sleep as a ‘wide blessing’ echoes the sentiment expressed in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ linking sleep to the capacity for love, with a nod to Coleridge’s cherished principle of polarity:

O sleep, it is a gentle thing  
Belov’d from pole to pole!  

(ll. 284-285)

In ‘The Pains of Sleep’, the disordered individual in crisis is not granted the ‘wide blessing’ of restorative sleep bestowed by heaven. The narrator ruefully but resignedly reflects upon ‘Distemper’s worst calamity’ (l.36) with the unreverential resignation of the confirmed invalid. Used to chronic pains, and used by them, given to individualistic and superstitious rituals to ward off pains, the invalid is constituted as disbarred from the balanced temperament of the proportionally-humoured, healthy individual. He endures altered states ranging from terrified submission to weary faith in the last force left worth living for: to be loved, even wept over.

The sanely calm narrator distances himself from the fragmentation brought on by an insanely distressing nightmare in the ensuing lines, as an invalid might depersonalise pains as ‘the illness’ and so abnegate responsibility for a perceived moral failure to regulate their systems (an unjust perception that often haunts the conscience of the chronically sick). Framed as weakly constituted, however, the invalid may be exonerated even amidst the drama of suffering that should surely evoke pity:

The third night, when my own loud scream  
Had waked me from the fiendish dream,  
O’ercome with sufferings strange and wild,
I wept as I had been a child;

(ll. 37-40)

At this point, the scream is definitely owned – not just ‘my’ scream, but ‘my own’ loud scream. Yet ‘the’ dream is disowned and projected onto a Gothic ‘fiend’, as if a fiendish visitation has overpowered the sleeper’s will. Oddly, the speaker resists the internal interrogation one might expect of a person in the wake of a particularly disturbing nightmare. Words do not have the power to soothe, here, but tears do:

And having thus by tears subdued
My anguish to a milder mood,

(ll. 41-42)

It is the physical response of a child to suffering, strictly somatic and reactive, whilst being uncomplicated in efficacy for bringing relief to night terrors. Children seldom own their culpability, even to themselves.

Emerging from this child-like state of simplicity, the speaker does begin to reflect on the meaning of bad dreams as penance:

Such punishments, I said, were due
To naturesdeepest stained with sin,—

(ll. 43-44)

The lines beg the question of to whom the poet was speaking when this observation was made. Is it said aloud, following the tears, to the self? Thereafter the self, the ‘I’ caught up in the storm of a nightmare is oddly displaced as ‘aye’:

For aye entempesting anew
The unfathomable hell within,
The horror of their deeds to view,
To know and loathe, yet wish and do!

(ll. 45-48)

In these lines, the threatening chaos of the nightmare is embodied in a vigorous polysyllabic departure from the calm simplicity of the poem’s opening. The plosive ‘entempesting’ and the fricative adjective ‘unfathomable’ also contrast with the polysyllabic fluidity of composing a self to ‘reverential resignation’. The speaker then neatly disowns foul deeds done in full knowledge of their abhorrence, rendering them as
‘their deeds’. Those ‘natures’ as morally deformed or inherently wicked as Richard III might deserve such hell, but the speaker? Child-like, still subdued by tears, the painful question emerges: ‘But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?’ (l. 50). The physical weight of such punishment falling on Coleridge, the Romantic invalid, is emphasised as the reader recalls the crushing quality of the nightmare recollected.

It is transgressive from a Christian viewpoint, predicated on the doctrine of Original Sin, not to take the penance due to all mortal sinners, to frame the question: ‘Why me, Lord?’. To claim special significance in a Providential scheme appears quite desperately childish here. Likewise, there are horrifyingly inexplicable moments of cosmic indifference throughout ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ that the parallel simplicity of prayer for all creatures great and small, similarly, cannot hope to dispel. If that ballad fails to recompense the stunned reader, then the return to idiosyncratic prayer in ‘The Pains of Sleep’ is predictably self-defeating, yet rather heroic. There is no spell sufficient to dispel the effects of bodily pains and spiritual suffering in ‘The Pains of Sleep’, but Coleridge attempts it in the concluding aphoristic couplet: ‘To be beloved is all I need, / And whom I love, I love indeed’ (ll. 51-52). Ultimately, the Orphic song of Coleridge reaches beyond the narrow confessional to dramatise a Gothic encounter with a doppelgänger self, at the borderline of sleep and wakefulness. It is a valiant experiment during the course of which the poem’s shifting narrative voice observes and reports back to us, even from the brink of self-annihilation.
‘Limbo’

In common with ‘The Pains of Sleep’, the rhyming couplet form is used to control the experiment into the horror of nightmare in ‘Limbo’ yet the absence of a dramatic ‘I’ renders this poem less immediate and less threatening. It tells of a ‘weary Space’ in a weary manner, akin to the hopelessness of the chronic experience of the invalid body. There is an underlying tone of bleak, black comedy in the incongruity of the conversational observation that opens the poem that continues through to the exclamation regarding the absurdity of reading daylit time by the light of the moon:

‘Tis a strange place, this Limbo! – not a Place,
Yet name it so; – where Time and weary Space
Fettered from flight, with night-mare sense of fleeing,
Strive for their last crepuscular half-being;
Lank Space, and scytheless Time with branny hands
Barren and soundless as the measuring sands,
Not mark’d by flit of Shades, – unmeaning they
As moonlight on the dial of day!

(ll. 11-18)

As capitalised personifications, ‘Time’ and ‘Space’ belong to the earliest, weaker poetry that Coleridge refined from the allegorical bombast of ‘Religious Musings’. The late return to this outmoded expression is indicative of further experiment with poetic style to dramatise an existential crisis.

The complexity and range of Coleridge’s tone is clear even from a cursory comparison of ‘Limbo’ and ‘The Pains of Sleep’. As ‘Limbo’ proceeds, a surprisingly whimsical element emerges amidst the bleakness that energises the poem just as the tone of faux exasperation energises the more obviously comedic moon soliloquy. Like ‘The Pains of Sleep’, which opens indirectly before the dramatic action, ‘Limbo’ opens with a scene of strangeness that is neither a set place nor a set time. It is a ‘night-mare sense of fleeing’ that sets the atmosphere of this uneventful mini-drama, with its memorable tableau of a blind man with upturned face seeming to experience the reciprocity of the experience of limbic resonance in a borderland at once sealed off and
purgatorial. Reading the scene is beyond familiar sensory experience. It is ‘soundless’ rather than silent, indicating a lack rather than the potentially generative silence of the conversation poems. It requires another mode of experiencing the Kantian categories of time and space than the observation of shadows or the ‘measuring sands’ (l. 16) of an empirical approach to the time.

The wrong-headedness of this approach to time and space in the limbo that is negatively defined as ‘not a Place’ (l. 11) is made clear by the comparison of the pointlessness of trying to read a sun-dial by moonlight. In the ‘Barren’ (l. 16) region of ‘Limbo’, we are far from the unity imagined in Andrew Marvell’s ‘green thought in a green shade’. Rather, thought is blank, ‘unmeaning’ and the shadows are opaque, ‘unmeaning they/ As moonlight on the dial of day!’ (ll. 17-18) Coleridge’s ‘Limbo’ is in polar opposition to ‘The Garden’ of Andrew Marvell, yet both represent a kind of liminality. Coleridge’s ‘Limbo’, however, represents a counter to generative metaphysical speculation through poetry. Moonlight, so often redemptive and suggestive of divine reciprocity, is here meaningless and the symbolic landscape is indecipherable. The poem enacts – though with an absurdist’s sense of theatrical stasis – a suffocating metaphysical drama envisaged as ‘night-mare’. Unlike the vividness of the personal recount of nightmare experience in ‘The Pains of Sleep’, the dreariness of ‘Limbo’ has the poet describing a non-place at the end of space-time where the human soul is reduced to a cipher, the blankness of which recalls the ‘blank’ eye of the ‘Dejection Ode’.

Careful study of the textual instability of the manuscript version of ‘Limbo’, of the kind undertaken by Morton D. Paley, locates the poem in a ‘constellation’ of meditations on negation and privation that includes the companion piece ‘Moles’. That poem similarly employs the trope of blindness, briefly, to describe blank materialism as an unproductive orientation towards the world. ‘Ne plus Ultra’ then extends the
principle of polarity to apostrophise the most extreme negative pole of divinity. Paley’s research alerts us to the context of these manuscript poems and their partial appearance in *The Friend*, with its emphasis on exploration of truth from the ‘material pole’ in the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ that I am concerned with here:

The poems known as ‘Limbo’ and ‘Ne Plus Ultra’ are part of a longer piece of prose and verse in Coleridge Notebook 18. In 1818 Coleridge printed five lines of this material in *The Friend* (I:494n) under the title ‘Moles’.

If we return to the context of Coleridge’s polar principles, we can look more closely at the mole motif in the lines printed under the title of ‘Moles’ in *The Friend* and the connection to ghosts which recalls Hamlet’s reference to his father’s purgatorial ghost. That ghost’s cries emanate from beneath the stage as the ‘old mole’: ‘Well said old mole, canst work i’th’ earth so fast?’ Hamlet’s antic humour here is mirrored in ‘Limbo’ to achieve similarly twinned effects of seriousness and jokey consideration of the pathos of human mortality and its limitations.

Hamlet’s graveyard speech is exemplary in this regard so consideration of the complex tone achieved there may serve to illuminate the complexity Coleridge brings to existential contemplation in ‘Limbo’. In Shakespearean terms, a ‘mole’ is also a flaw or defect that has deleterious effects on the fate of a tragic character. Recall, then, in our prior discussion of the historically situated import of the Romantic metaphors of polarity that ‘Coleridge further described Stoicism’s attempt to understand the divine essence as like that of ‘a mole [who,] after turning up a few inches of Soil’ might feel confident to ‘describe [the] central fire, or the magnetic Nucleus of this Planet’.

Now, let us consider the similarly oddly comic mole and ghost imagery that usher us into Coleridge’s ‘Limbo’:

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220 Morton D. Paley, ‘Coleridge’s Limbo Constellation’, *Studies in Romanticism* Vol. 34, No 2 (Summer, 1995), Boston University, 189-90.

221 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1.5. 1 162.

The sole true Something—This! In Limbo’s Den
It frightens Ghosts, as here Ghosts frighten men.
Thence crossed unseized—and shall some fated hour
Be pulverised by Demogorgon’s power,
And given as poison to annihilate souls—
Even now it shrinks them—they shrink in as Moles
(Nature’s mute monks, live mandrakes of the ground)
Creep back from Light—then listen for its sound;—
See but to dread, and dread they know not why—
The natural alien of their negative eye.

(ll. 1-10)

The setting is literary, recalling the den of Limbo in Virgil’s *Aeneid* which, in the sixth book, gives a sketch of Charon and his ferry – two obols to cross with that old mariner – along with the melancholy plight of infants in the ‘den’ of Limbo. If it is Virgil’s underworld (more so than Dante’s) that provides the literary context, we might surmise that this is a place for souls to do penance through bodily suffering. Lines 982-3 tell of souls poisoned, ‘By mortal bodies, their free essence dimmed./ By earthiness and deathliness of flesh’.223 These lines occur in the context of a conversation between Aeneas and the sad ghost of his father whose memory brought him to ‘the threshold of this place’ (l. 934). In a fragmentary, highly compressed set of parenthetical observations, Coleridge appears to allude to the crossing over into a liminal space that resonates with both the flesh disgust of *Hamlet* and the poisonous effects upon the soul of being embodied.

For an invalid writer, representing himself to himself as caught between health and death, this imaginative liminal state is particularly poignant while the literariness of the imagery speaks of cunning amusement on the poet’s side. Coleridge is as much trickster as philosopher in the incarnations of his complex voice that emerge in the ‘Limbo’ series. Coleridge’s polarity of body and soul is complicated further by his multifaceted understanding of the body, inflected as it is with revulsion for the ‘deathliness in flesh’ of the ‘Pauline body’ (*Romans* Chapter 7 verse 24, ‘O wretched

man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?'). Suzanne Webster explicates the influence of this theological conception of the body in tracing Coleridge’s pre-occupation with it in the Notebooks composed many years later (1827-34). One example attests to the abiding nature of this inflected reading of the body and has strong resonance with the ‘spirit-jail’ of ‘Limbo’:

then, would it not follow that the Body is a moveable Dungeon with Windows, and Sound-holes – & that we might well exclaim with the great Apostle, Who shall deliver me from the Body of this Death?

Hamlet, he of the too solid, too sullied flesh, is similarly haunted by a mole-ghost that, on Coleridge’s reading of the play, places upon a sensitive youth an intolerable burden of remembrance. As readers of ‘Limbo’, we are burdened with the task of remembrance in the shape of an antiquated Catholic prayer for the soul of an invalid poet, whose body has betrayed him not just through its ‘pains’ but through its ‘poison’.

The awakened reader is encouraged to see past dread and hear the plaintive request of the melancholy speaker whose literary self is here aligned with figures suffering the discipline of punishment of Virgil’s underworld and the purgatorial torment of Hamlet and his father’s busy ghost. John L. Mahoney’s formulations of Coleridge’s later works as ‘poems of the tragic imagination’ focuses on the ‘Dejection Ode’, but could well be applied here:

Coleridge would have the reader see and feel his physical condition as complete. Indeed stanzas 2-3 dramatize a psychological predicament, a sense of deadness within, a sadness that transcends physical pain and that cannot be adequately conveyed in the language of common speech.  

Mahoney refers us to the ‘grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear’ of the ‘Dejection Ode’ in considering the tragic quality of Coleridge’s dramatisation of the self as Romantic invalid that becomes a memorable incarnation of the poet in these years of

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melancholia. The comic quality of Coleridge’s despair has received less attention.

Coleridge’s poetic imagination is more than tragic and he is, at times, desperately funny.

The term ‘Romantic invalid’ is a precise and fitting way to designate Coleridge, considering that the Latin stem ‘validus’ may be translated as ‘strong’. In support of this designation and its inflections, Neil Vickers observes the contrast between sickness and strength in Coleridge as ‘probably an allusion to Brown’s distinction between sthenic and asthenic conditions’. These terms alert us to the Greek *sthenos* for ‘strong’ so a casual polarity between fugitive disease and a normative health is less precise, less fitting than the oppositions of sickliness and strength in the singular dramas of the self played out in ‘Limbo’ and ‘Pains of Sleep’. Joanna Bourke’s research into chronic pain patients brought her to the conclusion that ‘The body is mind-ful and the mind is embodied’. The chronic nature of Coleridge’s pains leads George Rousseau to ask, ‘What role did chronic sickness play in the development of the type of man of feeling Coleridge imagined so crucial to his actual practice of sensibility?’ The closing sentiment of ‘Limbo’, that Hell is a far worse prospect, is surprisingly unsentimental. It carries wry amusement along with the world-weary tone of the chronic sufferer who has penance done and can expect to do more.

The transcendent moment of limbic resonance intimated by another version of Coleridge as the memorialised statue figure of the Old Man, who,

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having moonward turned his face by chance,
Gazes the orb with moon-like countenance,
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(ll. 23-24)

provides no hope for the poet walled in by the spirit jail of limbo. The closing

consolation is that the purgatorial curse suffered here might be worse and, ultimately, unendurable:

A lurid thought is growthless, dull privation,
Yet that is but a Purgatory curse;
Hell knows a fear far worse,
A fear – a future state; – ’tis positive Negation!

(ll. 35-38)

In these tightly controlled rhymes, the poet arrives at an exclamation that figures the failure of the generative principle of polarity. The adjective ‘growthless’ suggests an absence of generative power. The thought is inorganic and the ambience is dull and cut off from any resonance with the light of the Divine. The stasis is the lesser of two evils, however, as the speaker finds the aporia of the invalid’s mole-hill preferable to the progressive transition that can only be envisaged here as hellish annihilation. That the ‘Something’ of ‘Limbo’ is better than a nothing that cancels out existence is very small consolation indeed.

**Dim apprehension as a stage of prayer: the ‘dream of pain and disease’**

If the literary construction and dramatisation of the Romantic invalid is a helpful way to understand the poems ‘The Pains of Sleep’ and ‘Limbo’, the latter is less likely than the former to elicit the first stage of prayer described by Coleridge in his notebooks as ‘the pressure of immediate calamities [that] without earthly aidance makes us cry out to the Invisible’. Nonetheless, the purgatorial setting of ‘Limbo’ invokes prayer for the damned, as it does in *Hamlet*, and the reader is led into the *second* stage of prayer, in response to chronic pain, expressed in the same notebook entry from the period 1795-1800 as ‘Second Stage – the dreariness of visible things to a mind beginning to be contemplative – horrible Solitude.’ As we have noted, the emphasis on visual perception becoming drear recalls the dull sorrow of the ‘Dejection Ode’ along with the

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229 Preface to ‘Kubla Khan’.
230 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, CN I: 257. G254*
melancholy world that is so bleakly represented in Coleridge’s ‘Limbo’. Yet, as with
Coleridge’s ‘Dejection Ode’, the vital energy of the mole-ghost imagery and the heroic
hovering in the underworld that gives the poem such force and resonance belies the
hopelessness of the self written here. That self, whose body is inscribed with the chronic
pain of the Romantic invalid, is present to us as the poems explore states of extremity,
including alienation from a merciful God. With his characteristic delight in suggestive
etymologies and cryptic allusions, Coleridge stages his own version of the
Shakespearean mole-ghost’s imperative request: ‘Remember me’. Sara Coleridge
referred poignantly to her father’s incomplete completeness in the introduction to the
most striking example of Coleridge’s writing as self-composure, his Biographia
Literaria. As readers attuned to the method of Coleridge’s poetry we can continue to
contemplate the madness in the method of Coleridge, the Romantic invalid:

He loved to go forward, expanding and ennobling the soul of his teaching, and
hated the trouble of turning back to look after its body. To the healthful and
vigorous such trouble appears nothing, simply because they are healthful and
vigorous; but to feel all exertion a labour, all labour pain and weariness, this is the
very symptom of disease and its most grievous consequence. 231

Coleridge’s latter-day version of Molière’s comic hypochondriasis does not, on such a
sympathetic reading, render the Romantic invalid Coleridge’s poetic method invalid.
George Watson’s discussion of ‘The Last Poems’ accords with the emphasis placed
here on Coleridge’s purposeful self-dramatisation: ‘It is true, of course, that he was a
philosopher, sage and invalid too; but he chose to play all three roles, so to say, in
literary dress’. 232 In Chapter Six I examine Coleridge in the role of educator and friend
to conclude this exploration of the dialogic elements of his poetry and prose, with
reference to the two literary poems, ‘The Nightingale’ and ‘To William Wordsworth’.

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231 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria I:xvii-xix.
Chapter Six: ‘Hyblean murmurs of poetic thought’

Coleridge conversing in the role of soulful teacher, mindful friend

What is that which first strikes us, and strikes us at once, in a man of education?
... It is the unpremeditated and evidently habitual arrangement of his words, grounded on the habit of foreseeing, in each integral part, or (more plainly) in every sentence, the whole that he then intends to communicate. However irregular and desultory his talk, there is method in the fragments.

– S. T. Coleridge
Essay IV, The Friend

Cheerful deployment of the polar logic of ‘Positive Negation’ to contemplate the state of melancholy is discernible in the 1798 conversation poem, ‘The Nightingale’, by contrast with its dramatic function in the two poems discussed in Chapter Five, ‘Limbo’ and ‘The Pains of Sleep’. ‘The Nightingale’ opens with a negative dismissal of the obvious options for depicting the melancholy sublime:

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

(ll. 1-3)

It is evening, but it is a fresh start as the repetition of ‘no’ indicates. Like Plato clearing the road by allowing the reader to explore and then dismiss the ‘contrary’ path, Coleridge guides the reader to imagine and then banish the tired metaphors of eventide as the remains of the day. The first line raises and then veers away from the unhappy

associations of the state of grief or falling into vice conjured by nightfall. In the poem’s first sentence, Coleridge foresees and forestalls readerly expectations. The method of the poem’s opening lines accords with the notion of ‘arrangement’ highlighted in Essay IV of *The Friend* with which this chapter opens, particularly in regard to a process of methodically arranging words ‘grounded on the habit of foreseeing’. The poet playfully represents the logic of rhythm that can take a reader of poetry from a ‘sunken’ (l. 1) day to considering the associative projection of a ‘sullen’ (l. 3) light. The thrice occurring ‘no’ (ll. 1-3) then denies the reader that train of associations, bidding us to reconsider our conditioned use of the familiar trope of descending gloom that reads early evening light as ‘sullen’.

The Frenchified noun ‘relique’ (l.1) connotes a holy remnant from the Late Latin *reliquiæ* (plural) ‘remains of a martyr’ (*OED*). Coleridge encourages us to relinquish conventional expectations of a poem that takes as its subject the bird usually identified with the suffering and sorrow of the silenced Philomela.

The literary antiquarianism of Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) is invoked in the archaic spelling of ‘relique’. Percy’s collection includes verses by Sir Roger L’Estrange in which the speaker identifies himself with the nightingale and sings of solitude and spiritual freedom.²³⁴ Out of the ruins of a literary tradition, Coleridge reconstructs the nightingale from a Romantic perspective. The experience of the poem proceeds according to an alternative principle of unlearning embedded in desultory fragments of dense literary allusion in the opening verse paragraphs of ‘The Nightingale’. Simultaneously, the petulant folly of remaining alone through ill-humour is foregrounded through the use of the adjective ‘sullen’, itself derived from the Latin *solus* indicative of being by oneself, alone. The scene is not

clouded over by pre-conceived judgements and assumptions born of a lifetime of reading poetry and mythology. It is dark, but not darkened by trembling obscurity. Direct imaginative perception of the natural world might begin with an inversion of what we expect to see, and given that such expectations invariably colour perceptions, it is best to overthrow them at once in order to retrain the mind’s eye to achieve clarity of vision. In this single opening sentence, therefore, the educative purpose of Coleridge’s poetic arrangement of words is exemplified.

Yet the opening focus on remains (‘relique’) leaves a trace. The cunning of the opening stratagem allows the poet to have it both ways. While raising, then dismissing, the literary baggage of the bird, Coleridge predisposes the reader to contemplate traces of the key metaphor of transformation as we turn from Ovid to look again at the lover (Philos) of song (melos) that is Philomela, the nightingale. The poem continues with direct imperative address marked by the inclusive pronoun of friendship, ‘we’ (l. 4), which marks this experimental piece of meditative blank verse as a Coleridgean conversation. The poem’s subtitle, ‘a Conversational Poem’, appeared in its first publication in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. The innovative Romantic genre of the conversation poem has its roots in one of Coleridge’s first friendly invitations to the reader to observe, as the lyric speaker does, from a place of immersion in an actively imagined pastoral scene. The stillness of meditative contemplation signals the beginning of a profoundly transformative process of literary unlearning:

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Come, we will rest on this old mossy bridge!
You see the glimmer of the stream beneath,
But hear no murmuring: it flows silently,
O’er its soft bed of verdure. All is still,
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(ll. 4-7)

Having cleared the busy murmuring of the mind ahead of a moment’s meditation, the poet invites us to pause and ‘rest on this old mossy bridge’ (l. 4). While the exclamation is not restful, the enormity of clearing the mind is emphasised by the punctuation. The
imagined stillness of the observational pause figures a means of transit, a method, through a pastoral scene and its traditional accompanying melancholy that is represented here as overgrown layers. While superficial observation of these layers covers the object’s function as a bridge across a metaphorical stream of ideas, Coleridge invites the reader to perceive the bridge more directly. In doing so, we enact the process of method as a way or transit, flagged in Chapter One as a foundational principle of Coleridge’s poetic method drawing on Plato’s *Meno* [82-85b].

The ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ in *The Friend* consistently figure enduring principles as a way, a path of transit, that a reader must discover by navigating circuitous paths, guided by the friendly Coleridge. Imaginatively engaging with such figuration is the role assigned to the reader as corresponding friend to the writer. It is the verb that matters in what I have termed in the Preface to this thesis Coleridge’s ‘grammar of the imagination’. While there is some explicit indication of Coleridge’s long-held and demonstrably sustained principles throughout *The Friend*, the emphasis in Coleridge’s prose is on recreating a parallel embodied experience of these principles as a way of thinking for the reader. Thus the act of interpreting *The Friend* becomes a means of reimagining the world for the reader willing to submit to a radical process of unlearning that paradoxically requires all the literary learning one can bring to it.

With the poet as guide, the moss may be experienced as soft and inviting as a Coleridgean resting place, a structural device employed to strategic effect throughout *The Friend*. Moss is characteristic of boggy places and the danger of sinking in such a bog is flagged here, even as the reader is invited to pause momentarily. The Germanic adjective, ‘mossy’, connotes organic encrustation along with a ‘green verdure’ that literally obscures the way of transit: the bridge. Yet a mossy bridge also figures a soft covering that might tempt a child as a bed of heather may do. Lulled into receptivity, we are directed to begin seeing with
the partial perception that is, on both visual and auditory levels, reminiscent of the beginnings of meditation in ‘Frost at Midnight’. As discussed in Chapter One, that meditative process of quietism through acquiescence is one Coleridge pioneered in the early conversation poems.

Coleridge’s attempt at a direct concrete representation of the nightingale is ‘contrary’ to Milton’s ‘Il Penseroso’. The singular ‘nightingale’ of Coleridge’s poem is at once concrete and abstract (but not as generalised as it would be in Augustan verse). So, too, is the poetic method – which requires both imaginative striving and a humbling acquiescence – though the negation of the abstract is explicit at the surface level of the poem’s argument. ‘Extremes meet’, as ever for Coleridge, such that passivity is a path to the getting of wisdom. Coleridge’s speaker is sentient throughout the processes of directly apprehending the nightingale for both all it actually is and all it means, in glorious independence from the cultural conditioning of a human perceiver steeped in literary convention that distorts natural sights and sounds. An extension of the implications of the moon soliloquy discussed in Chapter Three is equally valid here. Recalling that chapter’s application of ‘Bakhtin’s notion of the problem of encrusted meanings in direct concrete reference’ to ‘poetry’s long-held fascination with the moon’ (page 84 of my thesis), we may now return to the problem of striving for an individual, distinctive and fresh reading of nature in a relaxed, meditative mode in terms of actively liberating one’s self from the ‘obscuring mist’ with which literary tradition has enveloped the nightingale.

Genuinely creative and original insight comes unbidden to the acquiescent speaker with whom we need to align ourselves in simple empathy, particularly when the first murmurs of clichéd resistance have been silenced. Similarly, by restraining the too eager reader, Coleridge gestures towards a ‘soft bed of verdure’ (l. 7) where one might experience ‘a green thought in a green shade’. Coleridge’s habitual literary allusiveness
does not overwhelm the quiet surrender of the reader required here. As with the process of meditation, where thoughts arise and are noted, but not allowed to disrupt the slower process of cultivating a state of mindful awareness, the reader is directed to see a ‘glimmer’ of sub-conscious knowledge, ‘the stream beneath’ (l. 5). Coleridge’s complex method of reader response, involving a distinctive ‘negative faith’, was more famously and more simply theorised by Keats. Indeed, Keats saw in the restless inquirist, Coleridge, a failure to harness ‘negative capability’. Recovering Coleridge’s own principles in relation to his poetry, with close reference to The Friend, restores the more subtly nuanced philosophical basis of Coleridge’s pioneering conversation poems and poetics of meditative transformation through quietism.

In accordance with Coleridge’s concern with transformative experience, ‘The Nightingale’ draws on the poetic tradition of the reverderie, the return of the Spring. The speaker again employs an inclusive pronoun to direct our thoughts, mood and thinking processes. Following an exclamation that recharacterises the night as ‘balmy’, the poet continues in a mild temper with the lyrical resistance to melancholy asserted in the melodious lines:

A balmy night! and though the stars be dim,  
Yet let us think upon the vernal showers  
That gladden the green earth, and we shall find  
A pleasure in the dimness of the stars.  

(ll. 8-11)

Along with Coleridge, the receptively primed reader can experience an unexpected joy at this stage of the poem. A sense of the pleasure of learning afresh is evoked by the lovely, child-like delight of the alliterative expression ‘That gladden the green earth’ (l. 10), which arranges words lightly and methodically in apparently spontaneous but perfect order. It is as though Coleridge suddenly bursts into song here, as do the chorus

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of nightingales honoured faithfully in this resolutely cheerful poem. There is an irrepressible dynamism in the observation of bedimming stars here that runs counter to the expectation that the loss of starlight on a rainy evening might bring our spirits down. The speaker is actively seeking pleasure in a darkling light that ought to be daunting, yet is not, at all. If our mortal lights go out, as do the day’s, then the model of the mind surrendering stale thoughts in a freshly receptive state of meditation must surely console for the glimpse of death’s coming that every literary reader subliminally registers in reading a poem set at twilight. That the twilight is transformative, rather than statically ‘crepuscular’ (as in the horror of ‘Limbo’), gives Coleridgean joy precedence over dejection in a poem composed in the happier times of April 1798.

Yet, even amidst the energising joy of early wedded happiness and fresh friendship with the Wordsworths, Coleridge’s demonstrably habitual method of expressing joy through the negation of melancholic associations gives an indication of just how embedded in the continuous method of poetics the principle of polarity is. The mindfulness of Coleridge’s friendly poems is attentive to the joy of vital relationships, not oblivious to the sorrow of mortality. If in a secular age we have any hope of recovering the glimpse of the Divine afforded by Coleridge’s poetry it is surely by succumbing to the invitation to be educated extended by ‘The Nightingale’.

Accordingly, the silently joyful poet bids us listen to the song of the nightingale with our own ears:

And hark! The Nightingale begins its song,
‘Most musical, most melancholy’ bird!
A melancholy bird! Oh! Idle thought!
In nature there is nothing melancholy.

(ll. 12-15)

Immediately, though, an intrusive thought wreaks havoc with the carefully composed meditative stillness. A volley of exclamations unquietly follows, as the poet wrestles
with the lazy thinking that cultural conditioning breeds (addressed by Wordsworth in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*).

Coleridge’s definitive tone, however, begs the question of the right to joyousness. If not melancholy, why joy? As if to remonstrate with this buried doubt, the disturbed lyric speaker speculates on the folly involved in the pathetic fallacy:

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.

(ll. 16-22)

Whole-hearted appreciation of joy is precluded by the less-than-whole individual, one whose heart has been painfully ‘pierced’. A whole self, a healthy self – not mired in the memories that ‘distemper’ produces – must be composed in order to find the sacred communion that faltering begins here. The limbic resonance of attuned receptivity requisite for the purest communication of love is impossible to reach until further ground clearing is undertaken to dispense with the sorrow of narcissism.

It becomes clear that poets, the ultimate makers, are held accountable for the narcissism that makes ‘all gentle sounds tell back the tale’. True conversation can begin once this false monologue can be exposed for what it is:

And many a poet echoes the conceit;
Poet who hath been building up the rhyme
When he had better to 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! so his fame
Should share in Nature’s immortality.

(ll. 23-31)

There is a rich complexity to the deployment of ‘poetic echoes’ in this poem celebrating a receptiveness to the nightingale’s singular song and achievement of diverse unity through participation in choral joy. The poem invokes the polyphonic voices of its
metaphysical predecessors, with their abstract conceits, yet calls for a more humble and
direct experience of nature. Furthermore, unlearning the conceit of pride in literary
knowledge is integral to Coleridge’s method. If an echo is a limiting mode of
communication, it is also a vital means of navigation through darkness. Coleridge is
self-citing and, in the process of dramatising the experience of becoming authentically
self-sighting, represents and makes available to the reader the dual reward of seeing for
oneself and directly seeing one’s self as part of a greater whole.

In ‘Frost at Midnight’, written in February 1798, Coleridge aims to educate his
infant son along the lines suggested in the verse quoted here, particularly in relation to
perceiving the flux of nature, in the verbal echo of the lovely ‘shapes and sounds’:

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.

(ll. 58-62)

Unlike the usurping poet, God does not tell back the tale but is inscribed in it, in the
natural world and in the attuned perceiver of its loveliness. Witness to the miracle of
Spring, the poet can at best teach in like manner. Just being in nature, rather than
straining after meaning, is likely to be more conducive to revelation. Stretching the
limbs and surrendering whole to the natural world, to no instrumental end, is far likelier
to bring that deep transformational knowledge and insight that remains the highest goal
of education. Here we have Coleridge’s quietly dynamic version of Wordsworth’s ‘wise
passiveness’.

One of Coleridge’s dearest adjectives for gesturing towards the loving
communion that is the purest goal of the conversation poems – ‘lovely’, as it appears in
‘Frost at Midnight’ – is echoed as the speaker of ‘The Nightingale’ continues to
minister to the poetically distempered. He does so with normative prescriptions for the
kind of stilled awareness that is more quietly enacted and inscribed in ‘Frost at
Midnight’. Arguably, ‘The Nightingale’ is a less elegant poem as it retains more evidence of the struggle to surrender and graciously acquiesce in unlearning. For example, the explicit telling of the conclusion that the reader is expected to draw is apparent as Coleridge exclaims self-righteously (where a whisper might do):

\begin{verbatim}
A venerable thing! and so his song
Should make all Nature lovelier, and itself
Be loved like Nature! But ’twill not be so;
And youths and maidens most poetical,
Who lose the deepening twilights of the spring
In ball-rooms and hot theatres, they still
Full of meek sympathy must heave their sighs
O’er Philomela’s pity-pleading strains.
\end{verbatim}

(ll. 32-39)

Ironically, the first verse paragraph finishes with an instance of the compound adjective frequently deplored by Coleridge as a hindrance to direct expression. It features the capitalised personification of nature and names the nightingale ‘Philomela’ as though the fixity of a literary identity is inevitable for the degenerate youths and maidens to whom this utterance is attributed. That the undercut voice belongs to the young people shut up inside, and therefore estranged from nature, is evidence of a proto-typical example of free indirect discourse that indicates the genuinely dialogic character of the verse.

The poet then turns our attention to the less burdened state of youthful pleasure. The Wordsworthian ideology of the child places too much faith in the young choosing their pleasures without the guidance Coleridge provides in friendly fashion. Experience of nature as guide may be insufficient to direct the growth of the ‘philosophic mind’, after all. Just because the educated need to unlearn with humility does not mean that the uneducated can be trusted to choose their pleasures wisely without the guidance of a friendly conversation. This is the crux of Coleridge’s argument with Wordsworth’s preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* in his *Biographia Literaria*. 
Accordingly, youths are depicted as lost to the insights to be gleaned patiently from the ‘deepening twilights of the spring’ (l.36), established at the outset of the poem. Prematurely schooled in the inauthentic sensibility that is the by-product of a poetic tradition that lauds the performance of sentiment, such sadly comical ‘youths and maidens most poetical’ (l.35) are described with the ironic adjective underscoring the folly of performing indoor sensibility. The young couples that Spring calls in all other natural settings are cut off from both jouissance and the delightful insight that communion with the natural world affords for those in love. Instead, the far from ‘poetical’ couples mis-spend their potential in the artificial social spaces that entrap and substitute a superficial set of pleasures for the unbounded joy of genuine sympathetic engagement with the natural delights of a Spring evening. Amidst such contemporary scenes of entertainment and facile courting, the nightingale is reduced to a utilitarian vehicle for a second-hand pleasure in performance, a poor copy of the startling original that Coleridge’s conversation poem seeks to uncover for our transformative edification and deeper, revitalised pleasure.

**Conversation with the Wordsworths**

Coleridge opens up the conversation in the second verse paragraph of ‘The Nightingale’ to directly address his companions William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy, the latter claimed as a mutual sister by the use of the pronoun ‘our’ (l. 40), a Northern expression that reinforces the bond between individuals in this particular poetic coterie. In contrast to the closeted, profane entertainments of the ball-room and theatre, these open-air friends are depicted as being in contact with the sacred as they communion with the natural world according to ‘A different lore’ (l. 41). The precisely chosen noun, ‘lore’, indicates a principle that suggests the folk wisdom of a pre-literate age. The Germanic origin of the noun passes through Old English with the sense of instruction so
the connotation of learning is apt in a poem designed to educate the reader into a fresh
perception of the poem’s subject, the nightingale:

My Friend, and thou our Sister! we have learnt
A different lore: we may not thus profane
Nature’s sweet voices, always full of love
And joyance! ‘Tis the merry Nightingale
That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates
With fast thick warble his delicious notes,
As he were fearful that an April night
Would be too short for him to utter forth
His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul
Of all its music!

(ll. 40-48)

As the mythic Philomela is left behind, Coleridge’s nightingale is gendered male and
ascribed motives that align him closely with the poet in the full flight of effusion. The
sensuality of the adjectives ‘sweet’, ‘fast thick’ and ‘delicious’ characterise the poetic
joy of song in erotically charged terms suggestive of jouissance and inspirational for
Keats. Given the Spring setting, attunement to the dynamic reproductive energies of the
natural world at this time of year seems more fitting than misreading the landscape
through the lens of long-dead poets tending towards melancholic projection. On such a
night as this, and in such company, who could not cast off the habits of melancholia for
the delight that comes with unguarded receptivity to ‘joyance’? As it happens, the
archaic term for the act of enjoying oneself in so delightful a manner was coined by
Spenser, so even in the act of letting go of the burden of the literary past there is another
poetic echo in the representation of the bird’s soulful ‘love-chant’ (l. 47). Again,
Coleridge has it both ways. The perceived urgency of the bird’s song emphasises the
momentary supreme joy of pleasure following the mortal cycle of sexual energy and the
magical compound description ‘love-chant’ emphasises both the mysteriousness and the
transitory nature of the spell of the song and, by implication, the fleeting nature of our
spellbound attention to the incantatory rhythm of the poem.
The incantatory ‘Kubla Khan’ more insistently figures the Dionysian joy-dejection dynamic that here appears more child-like in the presence both of a fear of cessation of pleasure and of the vertiginous giddiness of the poet’s experience of letting go momentarily to experience a diffuse and sacred love. In the kind of projection criticised in earlier poets singing of the nightingale’s song – including his own effort on the subject in 1795, quoted dismissively in the present poem – Coleridge proceeds to describe (ambiguously) Dorothy Wordsworth in the role of an unnamed ‘gentle Maid’ (ll. 69), watching the birds ‘perched giddily’ (ll. 83). Perhaps it is the poet himself who is made giddy by the unexpected surrender to joy and made fearful from being perched precariously at such heights of human experience. For the reader of ‘The Nightingale’, what is most instructive about this train of associations is achieving the understanding that the need to surrender to moments of joyfully loving abandon is crucial despite rational awareness of mortal limitations and our subjection to temporal inexorability. If Keats felt poetry on the pulse and freed the nightingale from the concerns of temporal mortality in his ode, then Coleridge’s influential poetic effusion allows the time-bound reader to experience the rhythms of his verse as a quickening of the pulse, too. The sense of joy communicated is enhanced by reminders of the fear of its transitory nature.

Reciprocity is an explicit concern in the description of the gentle maid in the grove near a castle that echoes ‘Christabel’ in its Gothic wildness. The nightingales, like the poets of the poem, are in productive communion,

They answer and provoke each other’s song,
With skirmish and capricious passagings,

(ll. 58-59)

The later conversation poem, ‘To William Wordsworth’, the focus of the second half of this chapter, can be approached with these lines from ‘The Nightingale’ in mind. If this section of ‘The Nightingale’ appears structurally at odds with the rest of the poem, then perhaps it can be read as a Gothic fragment, mindful of Coleridge’s warning, quoted at...
the outset of this chapter, ‘However irregular and desultory his talk, there is method in the fragments.’ Coleridge’s only encounter with a young Keats comes to mind, here, in a conversation that ranged from nightingales to mermaids. The beautifully complex phrase ‘capricious passagings’ (l. 59) is noteworthy in terms of its precise arrangement at the heart of the figurative description of poetic reciprocity, even as the concrete is lauded in a poem that ostensibly rejects literary abstraction. Given Coleridge’s philosophical concern with fortuitous chance, its links with grace through unlikely and unexpected attention and attunement to the natural world, ‘capricious’ bears quite a load in the description of the birdsong as an arbitrary occurrence. Furthermore, the odd plural noun ‘passagings’, which makes such a melodious fitaurally, similarly carries a good deal of theoretical weight in terms of the principles of poetry that concern us here. Passage suggests a way – a transit, a crossing – and a method, as Coleridge informs us in *The Friend*.

The sense of crossing over in the moment of attunement to song, both natural and poetic, is crucial to the distinctive success of ‘The Nightingale’, as it is in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ where the murmurs of the bees bring on a switch in attention and consciousness for the confined lyric speaker. I have re-interpreted this moment as an instance of a peculiarly Coleridgean *lene clinamen*, a tiny merciful swerve that by chance brings redemption as a spiritual salvation. Here, such a transition concludes with an emphasis on the arbitrary nature of such redemptive encounters:

You may perchance behold them on their twigs,  
Their bright, bright eyes, their eyes both bright and full,  
Glistening, while many a glow-worm in the shade  
Lights up her love-torch.  

(ll. 66-9)

It is not too much of a stretch to imagine the lyric speaker at the opening of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, with thoughts bedimmed by the lonely contemplation of mortal suffering, as just such a ‘glow-worm in the shade’ (l. 68). That speaker is insignificantly
dwelling in partial darkness yet is capable, too, of being re-connected with friendly and, ultimately, divine communion.

In the third verse paragraph, the speaker glories in the spontaneous joyance of the nightingales whose song bursts forth suddenly after the temporary loss of the moon that, once again, is a vehicle for reciprocity with the reflected divine. The re-appearance of the moon is the catalyst for a lene clinamen into the unconstrained pleasure of selfless communion. The Eolian harp metaphor is invoked in the presence this time of a maid cast as less pensive an observer than the Sara of that poem, composed on August 20th, 1795 under the title, ‘Effusion XXXV’. Yet the precarious giddy celebration and Bacchanalian imagery underscores the danger in unrestrained delight, as though a loss of sober control might lead into the anarchic realms of the imagination and a loss of methodical poetic control:

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 these 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 perched 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.

(ll. 75-86)

The readiness of the birds to respond joyfully to a change in the light and the silent pause that recalls ‘Music slumbering on her instrument’ in ‘The Eolian Harp’ (l. 33) testifies to the purposefulness of the nightingales, whether still or in motion, silent or singing with natural abandon. The Spring setting is conducive to an ‘awakened earth and sky’ (l. 78). Contrary to the expectations of the twilight scene and despite the falling darkness, the nightingales are similarly ‘wakeful’, with the partial repetition of the verb underscoring their readiness to reciprocate. As Gregory Leadbetter argues in
his work on the ‘daemonic imagination’ in Coleridge’s poetry, ‘The nightingales’ potent
minstrelsy is a metonym for the poetry that Coleridge was now writing and wanted to
pursue’. 236

Coleridge executes a characteristic retreat from the potential dangers of the
imagination in the final verse of ‘The Nightingale’, which ends with a domestic blessing
for his child and the Wordsworths as the lyric speaker bids the birds adieu. As the
poet’s thoughts turn homeward he is delayed by the lay of the nightingales, identified as
a musical ‘strain’:

And now for our dear homes. – That strain again!
Full fain it would delay me! My dear babe,
Who, capable of no articulate sound,
Mars all things with his imitative lisp,
How he would place his hand beside his ear,
His little hand, the small forefinger up,
And bid us listen!

(ll. 90-96)

The multiple exclamations in the first few lines here dispel the harmonious quietude of
the evening in a protracted farewell, complete with a last family anecdote about his
beloved child’s precocity. As the poet says, apologetically but suggestively, ‘It is a
father’s tale’. In her reading of ‘The Nightingale’ ‘through the lens of Coleridge’s
thoughts on children, language, and nature’, Samantha Harvey rightly recognises that:

a child’s wordless, innocent, and intuitive appreciation of the nightingale’s song is
a truer ‘reading’ of nature’s language than the storied literary tradition of
melancholy nightingales.237

Coleridge’s anti-intellectual argument in ‘The Nightingale’ accords with the moon
soliloquy’s conclusion that poetic figuration is inadequate to the task of capturing the
thing itself, either ‘the jolly, full moon’ or the joyful song of the nightingale.

Coleridge’s last conversation poem, ‘To William Wordsworth’, was a further reaction
against the ‘storied literary tradition’ identified by Harvey. Coleridge habitually works

236 Gregory Leadbetter, Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination, 124.
237 Samantha Harvey, “Wordless Words: Children, Language, and Nature’s Ministry in “The Nightingale:
in complex ways using interlocking stories as fragments in a poetic method that encourages the adult reader to reactivate hushed receptivity. Coleridge’s vignette on his actively listening child, Hartley, who ‘bids us listen’ (l. 96), intuitively, contributes to our attainment of receptive attunement to the silence of grace.
‘To William Wordsworth’: Coleridge’s choral minstrelsy

A wand’ring minstrel I —
A thing of shreds and patches,
Of ballads, songs and snatches,
And dreamy lullaby!
My catalogue is long,
Thro’ ev’ry passion ranging,
And to your humours changing
I tune my supple song!
I tune my supple song! 238

Emphasis in the twentieth century on Romantic authenticity has obscured the complexity of the literary pastoral tradition with which Coleridge engages in response to Wordsworth’s ‘Orphic song’. Taking the conventions of such a complex tradition as a crucial context for apprehending the unity towards which Coleridge aspires yields a different depth for a reader of Coleridge guided by the principles that drive The Friend. As noted in our preface, I do not believe that the right contexts have been foregrounded in the critical tradition, which has grown to obscure Coleridge’s genuine achievement of a coherent method. Throughout this inquiry, a close reading of Coleridge’s early poetry has been preceded by a discussion of the intersecting contexts of the work in question as informing Coleridge’s unconventional splicing of poetic genres. Indeed, surprising adaptations of poetic conventions are vital to re-interpreting the fragments of Coleridge’s Method in a fresh yet faithful way. My reading of ‘To William Wordsworth’ is informed by the significance of the interlocking conventions of the Classic tradition of pastoral song exchange between poets in the guise of shepherds.

In minstrel mode, Coleridge is more playful than the rather dour Wordsworth and, like Gilbert and Sullivan’s Nanki-Poo, tunes his supple song to blend artfully with the passions of the listener. Even as our ears respond, our critical taste retreats from artifice as a vehicle for authentic experience. A critical adjustment, therefore, must be

Words by Sir William S. Gibert and music by Sir Arthur S. Sullivan, from The Mikado, Act 1, No. 2 – Song and Chorus.
made to retune receptiveness to Coleridge’s poetic strategies. In a helpful discussion of ‘The Role of Humankind in the Poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge’, J. Robert Barth affirms the distinction between Coleridge and Wordsworth to which our discussion tends: ‘Wordsworth’s primary subject is the relationship between himself and Nature, or Nature seen through the prism of the self; Coleridge’s subject, even in the face of Nature, is the relationship between persons, especially love’. 239 David P. Haney observes of Barth that he is ‘a different kind of critic. He aligns himself with the older school of critics who see Romanticism as a philosophy to be engaged with rather than an ideology to be unmasked. But even more important is the fact that in this book he writes unabashedly as both a Romanticist and a Jesuit priest’. 240 Reading Coleridge interpretatively through the literary contexts acting as clues to his methodical fragments recovers a unity dear to the poet all his life in a similarly unabashed Romanticist approach that keeps faith with both Coleridge and his Method.

Coleridge’s residual Enlightenment focus on the encyclopedia as a systematic approach to knowledge is evident in the forerunner to the second edition of *The Friend*, his ‘Treatise on Method’ in the *Encyclopedia Metropolitana*, published in January 1818. Though this focus does not fit with the received idea of Romantic fragments, it sits well with the observation in Essay IV of *The Friend* with which this chapter opened, particularly with the self-positioning question: ‘What is that which first strikes us, and strikes us at once, in a man of education?’ Coleridge characterises education as a habit of mind expressed in and through the distinctive grammatical structure of expression in examples drawn from Shakespeare’s plays, in order to make a claim for a spontaneity that draws, nonetheless, on a lifetime of reading: ‘It is the unpremeditated and evidently habitual arrangement of his words, grounded on the habit of foreseeing, in

each integral part, or (more plainly) in every sentence, the whole that he then intends to communicate’. Far from using the Wordsworthian child as a model for education, Coleridge complicates the issue of intuitive organic apprehension of unity and relations by insisting that the steady ground of forethought must be cultivated through the active dialogue that reading entails.

As readers of The Friend, we are encouraged to engage with masterful literary forbears fully conversant with traditions of poetic song, particularly in the pastoral genre. Coleridge argues in the Biographia Literaria,

But if it be asked, by what principles the poet is to regulate his own style, if he do not adhere closely to the sort and order of words which he hears in the market, wake, high-road, or plough-field? I reply: by principles, the ignorance or neglect of which would convict him of being no poet, but a silly or presumptuous usurper of the name! By the principles of grammar, logic, psychology.

Foregrounder the significance of Coleridge’s later reluctance to jettison such a rich cultural heritage in what he came to see as a misguided attempt to imitate the innocence of the child leads to the resolute conclusion that ‘However irregular and desultory his talk, there is method in the fragments’. Method is, as we have seen, both musical and contrived. It depends on the habits of systematic thinking developed through the exercise of reading – of ‘comparison and judgement’ – that grounds inquiry in an education with more solid foundations than the guileless receptivity of a child or an actual shepherd.

The entry on Pastoral Literature in the online Encyclopaedia Britannica is illuminating when reading ‘The Nightingale’ and ‘To William Wordsworth’:

The pastoral convention sometimes uses the device of “singing matches” between two or more shepherds, and it often presents the poet and his friends in the (usually thin) disguises of shepherds and shepherdesses. Themes include, notably, love and death. Both tradition and themes were largely established by Theocritus, whose Bucolics are the first examples of pastoral poetry. The tradition was passed on, through Bion, Moschus, and Longus, from Greece to Rome, where Virgil (who transferred the setting from Sicily to Arcadia, in the

242 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, 2: 281.
Greek Peloponnese, now the symbol of a pastoral paradise) used the device of alluding to contemporary problems—agrarian, political, and personal—in the rustic society he portrayed. His Eclogues exerted a powerful effect on poets of the Renaissance, including Dante, Petrarch, and Giovanni Boccaccio in Italy; Pierre de Ronsard in France; and Garcilaso de la Vega in Spain. These were further influenced by medieval Christian commentators on Virgil and by the pastoral scenes of the Old and New Testaments (Cain and Abel, David, the Bethlehem shepherds, and the figure of Christ the good shepherd).

In the ‘singing matches’ between Wordsworth and Coleridge, it is Coleridge who displays a more methodical, yet more deeply heartfelt understanding of the ‘icy fang’ of fallen Nature, as represented in the Forest of Arden by Shakespeare. ‘Wordsworth glosses over some of the complexities of previous pastoral’, observes Jonathan Bate, in his exploration of a poetic ‘language that is ever green’.244

The first verse paragraph of ‘To William Wordsworth’, says Ewan James Jones, is ‘some of the clumsiest music Coleridge ever wrote’.245 His observation that it ‘is the only conversation poem worthy of the name’,246 however, aligns with my reading:

‘To William Wordsworth, Composed on the Night after his Recitation of a Poem on the Growth of an Individual Mind’ is composed at a distance of nine years from ‘The Nightingale’, and marks both the recovery of the conversation poem idiom, and its definitive terminus… The conversation poem comes to concede, however grudgingly, what first came naturally to it: a non-reactive passivity necessary for the natural world to feel like a world at all. Coleridge’s word for this is finally Empfindung, or ‘Self-finding’ But that is only a quasi-philosophical term, and as such inadequate to the process undergone. Coleridge’s blank verse teaches us a truth not to be found in any etiquette manual: that conversation turns on the possibility of interruption.247

That crucial structural ‘possibility of interruption’ may be read as Coleridge’s distinctive use of the lene clinamen. Read together, these two conversation poems illuminate Coleridge’s desire to join the communal song, despite the fear of being ‘a jarring and a dissonant thing/ Amid the general dance and minstrelsy’, as expressed in 1797 in ‘The Dungeon’. The title of the earlier poem, ‘The Dungeon’, finds an echo in

245 Ewan James Jones, Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form, 50.
246 Ewan James Jones, Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form, 51.
247 Ewan James Jones, Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form, 49-50, 55.
the confinement from which the poet’s hope temporarily escapes in ‘To William Wordsworth’, ‘The dread watch-tower of man’s absolute self’ (l. 40). Similarly, Paul Magnuson’s exploration of ‘a lyrical dialogue’ between the poets recommends ‘a dialogic reading of the sequence of Conversation Poems’ by Coleridge and Wordsworth: ‘each utterance is a momentary one, generative and valuable if it provides a turning point for further utterances.’

When we read the conversation poems alongside the ballads as snatches of song, the chilling undertone of dread in ‘Frost at Midnight’, discussed in Chapter One, is explicable in terms of the unified tonal complexity of a series of ballads and dreamy lullabies. That complex tone attests to Coleridge’s more attuned response to a complex pastoral tradition. Coleridge would be particularly alert to the darker aspects of Duke Senior’s speech in Act 2, Scene 1 of *As You Like It*:

> Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,  
> The seasons’ difference? – as the icy fang  
> And churlish chiding of the winter’s wind,  
> Which, when it bites and blows upon my body,  
> Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say  
> ‘This is no flattery: these are counsellors  
> That feelingly persuade me what I am.’ …  
> Sweet are the uses of adversity,  
> Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
> Wears yet a precious jewel in his head."

The rather complex, dynamic symbol of absorption with which ‘Frost at Midnight’ closes may be read as a liberating moment of blending with the pastoral tradition that, similarly, Coleridge understands and sings ‘aright’ in the dark reprise of ‘To William Wordsworth’, written in agonised response to hearing Wordsworth’s sustained song of *The Prelude*. The fracturing of the friendship with Wordsworth from 1802 until a more decisive break in 1810 can be seen, in hindsight, as a turning point in Coleridge’s trajectory from poetry to metaphysics and then theological speculation. What is less

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249 William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2.1. ll 5-14.
obvious in the stories foregrounded when discussing the famous friendship is that, while hope in adversity is parenthetically questioned in ‘To William Wordsworth’, it is nonetheless given substantiation in a final worthy conversation poem that rediscovers faith through Empfindung. Coleridge does so rather heroically, by drawing heavily on the pastoral convention of a series of ‘singing matches’ identified above.

It is crucial to read the last great conversation poem, ‘To William Wordsworth’, not just in terms of the symbiotic reciprocity figured in the earlier conversation poem, ‘The Nightingale’, but by taking into account the ‘skirmish and capricious passagings’ (l. 59) that attends the act of provoking one another into song. ‘Skirmish’ connotes the aggression of battle – with a sense of defensiveness carried through from the etymological root of the Old High German verb, skirmen, ‘to protect’ (OED) – so poetic provocation may well fall short of the ideal of friendly exchange for Wordsworth and Coleridge as they imagine each other, themselves and their poetic conversations. As Lucy Newlyn observes, a ‘borrowing which may appear on the surface to express shared assumptions and common aims can register, on a more submerged level, disparity, aggression, or unease.’

If ‘The Nightingale’ expresses ‘an ideal poetic symbiosis’, as Gregory Leadbetter has observed, then ‘To William Wordsworth’ figures a less than ideal symbiotic poetry and friendship.

On hearing Wordsworth recite the first two books of the unpublished poem, ‘The Prelude’, over a series of fireside gatherings in the Summer of 1807, Coleridge returns the gift of song exchange with the last of his great conversation poems. The poem strives to express the experience of blending with both the poet and the poem, as the ambivalent climax indicates:

And when – O Friend! my comforter and guide!
Strong in thyself, and powerful to give strength! –

251 Gregory Leadbetter, Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination, 124.
Thy long sustainèd Song finally closed,  
And thy deep voice had ceased – yet thou thyself  
Wert still before my eyes, and round us both  
That happy vision of belovèd faces –  
Scarce conscious, and yet conscious of its close  
I sate, my being blended in one thought  
(Thought was it? or aspiration? or resolve?)

(ll. 102-110)

The theological context suggested by these closing lines confirms Nicholas Reid’s suggestion that Coleridge’s ‘ascertaining vision’ was dependent on the kenotic sacrifice that is at the heart of the Coleridgean process of poetry as a means to prayer. It is sufficient at this stage of our reading of ‘To William Wordsworth’ to note Reid’s endnote argument against a post-deconstructionist view that:

fails to see the particular direction of Coleridge’s interest in myth, which… lies in his symbolic view of the mind and its concomitant implication that only in myth can universal symbols be internalised and comprehended. Coleridge’s view of myth belongs fundamentally in the neoplatonic context… and myth arguably represents the a-historic idea of Plato made dynamic, as the form of what Brisman would call the ‘kenotic’.

It is illuminating to consider the spiritual implications of the temporal shift from chronos to kairos in Coleridgean ‘spots of time’ ahead of a close reading of the poem in its entirety. The mythic contexts identified by Reid must inform our reading of ‘To William Wordsworth’ as a further example of the Coleridgean Method at work. The religious background of Coleridge’s own extensive reading – particularly of Archbishop Leighton and Jeremy Taylor – is a complementary context for reading his early poetry that is beyond the scope of our inquiry.

While being mindful of mythic and theological considerations, we must proceed by focusing more closely, at this stage, on the quoted verse as belonging to a song match of lyric poets. It is poetic song hosted, in Coleridge’s case, by the Roman pastoral genre understood as a means of celebration of the ‘uses of adversity’, reminiscent of Shakespeare’s As You Like It. A brief comparison of the echoes in ‘To William

252 Nicholas Reid, Coleridge, Form and Symbol Or The Ascertaining Vision, 59.
Wordsworth’ when read alongside the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, to which it frequently alludes, justifies the foregrounding of the context of the pastoral genre. In Book I of *The Prelude*, the lyric speaker is not yet settled but treads lightly upon the earth as an Adam in a prelapsarian vision, desiring:

To drink wild water, and to pluck green herbs,
And gather fruits fresh from their native bough.\(^{253}\)  

(ll. 37-38)

Coleridge answers Wordsworth’s metaphor for poetic inspiration and the richness it yields by admonishing himself for his own darker poetry for ‘Plucking the poisons of self-harm!’ (l.80). Wordsworth continues to figure the ‘vernal promises’ of ‘A corresponding mild creative breeze’ (*The Prelude*, Book I, l. 43) continuing in lines 231-235 to satisfy Coleridge’s aspiration for his poet-friend:

I yearn towards some philosophic Song  
Of truth that cherishes our daily life,  
With meditations passionate from deep  
Recesses in man’s heart, immortal verse  
Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre;  

(ll. 231-235)

To which Coleridge responds, in the first verse paragraph of ‘To William Wordsworth’:

thou hast dared to tell  
What may be told, to the understanding mind  
Revealable; and what within the mind  
By vital breathings secret as the soul  
Of vernal growth, oft quickens in the heart  
Thoughts all too deep for words! –  

(ll. 6-11)

Through the organic imagery of ‘vital breathings’ and ‘vernal growth’, Coleridge reworks the convention of the *reverderie* to intersect with Wordsworth’s grand rhetorical question in *The Prelude*: ‘Was it for this?’ Before affirming that Wordsworth’s sustained effort is an ‘Orphic song indeed’ (l. 45), Coleridge echoes the impregnation metaphor while maintaining an emphasis on the ‘icy fang’ of Winter.

The poet invokes:

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with the verb emphasising the quickening of a child in the womb at the moment of its first major budding.

To characterise the figurative experience of being impregnated by listening to Wordsworth’s song, Coleridge imagines being

Where wisdom’s voice has found a listening heart
Amid the howl of more than wintry storms,
The halcyon hears the voice of vernal hours
Already on the wing.

The halcyon is a fabled bird that draws its name from a Greek root that joins hals (‘the sea’) with kyon (‘conceiving’). The halycon is a rich choice for Coleridge to employ as the listener to the voice made audible, like God’s voice in the garden in Genesis, particularly when one considers that, in mythology, Halcyone threw herself into the sea on becoming a widow and was transformed into a kingfisher. Like Philomel in ‘The Nightingale’, the mythic bird suggests a woman silenced by trauma. The movement of time into a pregnant season is heard by a bird associated with calmer, halcyon days, like the halcyon days in and of The Prelude for both Wordsworth and Coleridge. Wordsworth recalls a time when he stood ‘like a bee among the flowers’ in the famous ‘Fair seed-time had my soul’ passage in lines 605-608. In response, Coleridge conjures ‘Hyblean murmurs of poetic thought’ (l. 21). In Book XIII of The Prelude, Wordsworth’s concluding apostrophe to Coleridge in lines 246-9 highlights the role assigned to his admiring friend as a source of light through love: ‘thy presence shed the light of love’, says Wordsworth, as he labours to build up ‘a work that should endure’. Coleridge answers in his own snatch of song, celebrating the gift of poetic friendship that enabled Wordsworth’s ‘living soul in time’ to receive ‘The light reflected, as a light bestowed’ (l. 19). For each, poetry is a complicated exchange of philosophic song that,
when read together, in contexts that are crucial to Coleridge, exemplifies the method in
the fragments with which we are concerned.

For Coleridge, the pastoral genre acts as a necessary literary grounding for what
otherwise might appear as artlessly disconnected fragments. Evangelos Karakasis has
elucidated the pertinent complexity of the Roman pastoral, beginning with Virgil, in his
explanation of ‘how politics, panegyrics, elegy, heroic, and didactic poetry function as
guest genres within the pastoral host genre’\textsuperscript{254}. Bearing the ‘skirmish and capricious
passagings’ of the nightingales in mind as a means of understanding Coleridge’s
conception of an edgy exchange of snatches of song with Wordsworth, for example, the
notion of the pastoral as a host genre to Coleridge’s playful (and probably partly
parodic) wandering minstrelsy is a useful move away from the confines of more
earnestly figured Romantic authenticity. This move directs us towards a more complex
expression of natural piety, as Coleridge employs the rules of the guest genre of elegiac
poetry to play a delightful game of poetic artistry. Spontaneity is, in Coleridge’s early
poetry, artful indeed.

As early as 1796, in ‘Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement’,
Coleridge clarified his sense of a poem as part of an enduring chorus with Divine ends.
In ‘Reflections’, the lyric poet’s song is not likened to that of the nightingales but to the
songs of the mostly ‘viewless’ larks. The adjective inspired Keats in his ‘Ode to a
Nightingale’, but for Coleridge there are Hebraic connotations embedded in the
invisible, the ‘viewless’ – in the sense of \textit{enduring} (‘as seeing him who is invisible’) –
as discussed in relation to ‘Kubla Khan’. ‘Reflections on Having Left a Place of
Retirement’ emphasises the active listening required, first, of the poet, then of the
reader, in order to redirect apprehension towards intimations of unity with the Divine in
\textit{kairotic} moments, seemingly accidental opportunities for the reception of grace:

\textsuperscript{254} Evangelos Karakasis, \textit{Song Exchange in Roman Pastoral} (Berlin/NY: De Gruyter, 2011), 1.
Oft with patient ear
Long-listening to the viewless sky-lark’s note
(Viewless, or haply for a moment seen
Gleaming on sunny wings) in whisper’d tones
I’ve said to my Beloved, ‘Such, sweet Girl!
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!’

(ll. 18-26)

Coleridge’s complex understanding of an *enduring* song illuminates an approach to the poem, ‘To William Wordsworth’. Engaging with that understanding is a means of recovering Coleridge’s enduring contribution to a method of poetic practice that suggests a permanent place for the philosopher-poet ‘Among the archives of mankind’ (l. 57). As in the vignette of the child Hartley with his ear cupped that closes ‘The Nightingale’, Coleridge here bids ‘us listen!’ with patient ear.

An imagination in dialogue with the complex pastoral tradition known to Coleridge through active engagement with poetry from Virgil to Shakespeare is apparent. In this final conversation poem, Coleridge addresses the Wordsworth who had addressed him in *The Prelude* by positioning his partner in song alongside Shakespeare:

O great Bard!
Ere yet that last strain dying awed the air,
With stedfast eye I viewed thee in the choir
Of ever-enduring men. The truly great
Have all one age, and from one visible space
Shed influence! They, both in power and act,
Are permanent, and Time is not with them,
Save as it worketh for them, they in it.
Nor less a sacred roll, than those of old,
And to be placed, as they, with gradual fame
Among the archives of mankind, thy work
Makes audible a linked lay of Truth,
Of Truth profound a sweet continuous lay,
Not learnt, but native, her own natural notes!

(ll. 47-60)

An enduring voice is a ‘permanent’ contribution to a choir of bardic songs that belong, not to the realm of chronological time, but to an eternal *kairotic* moment that elevates each individual to ‘a living soul in time’. Hence, ‘Time is not with them, / Save as it
worketh for them’ (ll. 54-55), in the language of the sermon sonorously audible in these lines.

In the face of such solemnity, though, the quotation from Gilbert and Sullivan that heads this discussion of Coleridge’s ‘To William Wordsworth’ is intended to swerve from a modern conception of Romantic authenticity to grasp Coleridge’s strategic, even parodic, tuning of his song to meet the active listener. He is both supple and sincere, although the ‘linked lays’ that form the conversation poems under discussion here are more methodical than ‘viewless’, bearing, as they do, the stamp of conscious forethought. Spontaneity is artfully contrived, as a closer examination of Coleridge’s snatches of song fragments – shot through with his own distinctive method – reveals. These fragments of conversation endure as part of the still crucial inquiry into human understanding of the sublunary world and its heavenly counterpart. Coleridge characterises Wordsworth’s reading of The Prelude as an experience that ‘Makes audible a linkèd lay of Truth’ (l. 58), a song about the musical unity of both worlds available to the heart that listens.

Delight in the game ought not detract from the profundity of thought and feeling involved, as it would from a reading that was too taken up with Wordsworth’s ‘high argument’. Such is the emphasis in Lucy Newlyn’s thoughtful examination of allusiveness in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge.255 In her focus on ‘Coleridge’s presence in The Prelude’,256 Newlyn argues that the two versions of Coleridge one reads there – one ‘mythologized beyond recognition’ and ‘the other more flawed and human’ serving as a prop and foil to Wordsworth – indicate that the poem is actually ‘a solitary

255 Lucy Newlyn, Coleridge, Wordsworth and the Language of Allusion.
quest, to which friendship itself is finally irrelevant’. For Newlyn, Wordsworth’s *modus operandi* takes precedence over Coleridge’s *Method* as she discusses their collaborative private language of poetry. I would reverse that emphasis in a reading of ‘To William Wordsworth’ that is continuous with the more sophisticated dialogic context that any reading of Coleridge requires.

It is the friendship of the reader that Coleridge courts, ultimately. Wordsworth may be the friend at hand at the moment of composition of ‘To William Wordsworth’ but the friendship that extends beyond this one and endures is Coleridge’s imagined friendship with the literate reader of futurity. To this future reader, Coleridge converses in the role of soulful teacher and mindful friend with more consistency than he managed with any of the close and crucial friendships of his actual life including – in addition to Wordsworth – John Thelwall, Robert Southey, Charles Lloyd and even Lamb, the ‘gentle-hearted Charles’ with whom Coleridge did not converse for two years.

The friendly, future reader will respect the terms of inquiry set by Coleridge in *The Friend*. In a refreshing treatment of Coleridge’s early poetry that is itself respectful of Coleridge’s metaphor of organicism, Ewan James Jones queries Frank Lentricchia’s uncritical acceptance of Frank Kermode’s positioning of the ‘New Criticism’ in *Romantic Image*: ‘But what if Coleridge’s verse writing never did only imply “the autonomous and autotelic nature of the single lonely poem?”’. Jones’ conclusion is heartening for this inquiry, especially for our kindred spirit of keeping critical faith with Coleridge:

> This work has argued precisely that it never did. Insofar as its argument has involved a defence of certain concepts fallen into theoretical disrepute – ‘organic’ form, the symbol – that defence has been unremitting. But so has it entailed the further, inextricable claim that such concepts bear within them a

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258 Ewan James Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form*, 199 and 228.
critical dimension that customary accounts (many of which Coleridge himself provided) have not always allowed to emerge.259

Just so. There is more in the structural mechanisms of Coleridge’s method, which I have conceived here as a ‘grammar of the imagination’, than one might envisage from the usual ways of reading Coleridge’s prose pronouncements.

Given the title of this chapter (drawn from ‘To William Wordsworth’), ‘Hyblean murmurs of poetic thought’, Evangelos Karakasis’ comments on Callimachus’ poetry are pertinent to my reading of Coleridge in relation to the sacred, particularly with regard to the natural world being infused with divinity:

This type of inclusion of one story into another, similar in context, is a further neoteric marker… the neoteric poetical program [alludes to]… Hyblean honey… Callimachus’ poetry is like a clean unblemished water that the bees bring to Demeter from a sacred spring, as is evident from the coda of the Hymn to Apollo.260

It would be a fair claim, then, that the ‘father’s tale’ coda in ‘The Nightingale’ – with which the first section of this chapter closed – is drawing on this tradition, given Coleridge’s deeper engagement with Classical pastoral and poetics. In Essay IV of The Friend, the educative experience of enduring Coleridge by reading his poetry through his own principles of aesthetic practice and philosophical thought emphasises the activity required of an understanding far removed from Locke’s tabula rasa and more knowing and strategic in its supreme moments of receptivity than the ‘wise passivity’ of a reader of Wordsworth.

Given our extensive treatment of the Lucretian context for Coleridge’s reconceptualised lene clinamen, Anthony Kenny’s observation on the twin objectives of Lucretius appears just as applicable to Coleridge’s tactical approach to a poetics sweetened and made light to make a strong philosophical medicine appealing to the patient reader: ‘Lucretius himself described his poetic skill as honey to disguise the

259 Ewan James Jones, Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form, 199.
260 Evangelos Karakasis, Song Exchange in Roman Pastoral, 199.
wormwood of Philosophy’. Coleridge’s highest compliment to Wordsworth’s poetic skill invokes the mythological associations of the ancient Sicilian town of Mount Hybla, renowned for its wildflower honey (a sweet nectar of the Gods).

**Coleridge’s song contest with Wordsworth**

The beautiful line ‘Hyblean murmurs of poetic thought’ (l. 21) exemplifies the kindling of Coleridge’s poetic power following the emotionally complex experience of listening to the sustained recital of ‘The Prelude’ in its early, very personal incarnation. Coleridge blends with the poet-friend of his nostalgic imagination as he re-imagines Wordsworth in quietly glorious solitude and effortless relation, communing with a natural world alive to the dynamism of a principle of unity grounded in the divine will:

When power streamed from thee, and thy soul received  
The light reflected, as a light bestowed—  
Of fancies fair, and milder hours of youth,  
Hyblean murmurs of poetic thought  
Industrious in its joy, in vales and glens  
Native or outland, lakes and famous hills!  
Or on the lonely high-road, when the stars  
Were rising; or by secret mountain-streams,  
The guides and the companions of thy way!

(ll. 18-26)

Coleridge depicts the memory of an idealised poet as a powerful conduit for ‘a living soul in time’. It is a memorable moment charged with *kairotic* opportunity. Thomas McFarland notes the use of ‘almost perfect’ Wordsworthian ‘cadences and drawn-out rhythms’ in Coleridge’s tribute to Wordsworth. Life at its most vital is emphasised by the image of streaming power enabled by open receptivity to the gift of the light of a ‘POET’s eye’ that illuminates the beauty of the natural world. Stephen Prickett goes further than M.H. Abram’s lamp metaphor to claim: ‘What is reflected is also subtly transmuted’. The swelling chorus of joy at this stage of ‘To William Wordsworth’

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recalls such transformative moments in the milder hours represented in ‘The Eolian Harp’.

In Chapter One, we discussed the principle of ‘progressive transition’ in relation to the triggering sensual experience of snatches of scent that enable seizing a moment of *kairos*:

> How exquisite the scents
> Snatched from yon bean-field! And the world so hushed!
> The stilly murmur of the distant sea
> Tells us of silence.

(ll. 9-12)

Mindful of Steiner’s warning about the decadence of language grown opaque to its originary roots, we need to restore to Coleridge’s original conception of ‘spots of time’ the full weight of its mythic as well as theological significance at this stage of our argument. That *kairos* is linked to education is more fully explicated by James L. Kinneavy in his study of its ‘rhetorical dimensions’:

> kairos was closely aligned with education… Since the Greeks deified many of their ideals it is not surprising that *Kairos* was also a God. The usual representation of *Kairos* was as an ephebe… at the end of which rite of passage he came into manhood.264

It is in the sensation of the distant ‘stilly murmur’ that Coleridge’s lyric speaker is alerted to the coming of *Kairos*. In such moments of supreme opportunity, the poet is able to produce the honey of spectacular sweetness that is the Hyblean ideal. In ‘To William Wordsworth’, Wordsworth is imagined as a version of an ‘ephebe’ undergoing the rites of passage charted in *The Prelude*, to bring forth the ‘Hyblean murmurs of poetic thought’ (l. 21) celebrated by Coleridge. A murmur is an intimate sound, not fully realised as speech, indeed much closer in spirit to a snatch of song. Neither a murmur nor a snatch is more than a fragment until the unity of the whole can be apprehended.

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Coleridge finds himself through recalling his poetic self blended with a young Wordsworth as *kairotic* poet, powerfully streaming the energy of imaginative thought and situated forevermore in a position of dynamic reciprocity with a living spiritual world. That Coleridge’s response is to enter unawares into a state of prayer at once dramatises a Wordsworthian ‘wise passivity’ and enacts a surrender, a *kenotic* sacrifice to the greater poet of Coleridge’s imagination. Coleridge’s logic is associative, here, as elsewhere, hence the guided reader of *The Friend* must apply a kindred poetic logic to espouse Coleridge’s more than syllogistic – yet distinctively methodical – progression towards unity. Coleridge describes the organic vitality of his distinctive method in these memorable terms: “Though verses were “not logic”, they should be “the envoys and representatives of that vital passion which is the practical cement of logic; and without which logic must remain inert”.” Coleridge’s notion of a concrete binding agent that joins distinct propositions, a ‘cement’, may be applied to the friendly intercourse represented by the verse exchange of *The Prelude* and ‘To William Wordsworth’. There is a vital joining of the passions through poetic recitation, active listening and kindred response in these fragments of the larger conversation between William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The thought that is not yet a thought – more a resolve or aspiration – is a figuration of the logical relations by which each stands to the other, a complex relational unity beyond first order predicate logic. It is closer to the realm of prayer, as love passes into eternity:

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

(ll. 108-112)

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If Wordsworth becomes greater when thus cemented to Coleridge then the prostrate younger poet need not have become the lesser of the two, particularly when his metaphysics is not seen as a substitute for the fine poetry of the conversation poems. Rather, Coleridge’s philosophical prose encodes a set of driving principles that affirms his notebook observation that ‘All metaphysic… is in its origin… Poesy, that highest in which Phil. & Poetry interpenetrate.’ Essay IV on ‘method in the fragments’ directs us to a reading of ‘To William Wordsworth’ as a fragile rendering of a momentarily unified Coleridge conversing in the role of soulful teacher and mindful friend, indeed singing like a ministering minstrel.

Wordsworth can show himself to be more solid than Coleridge with respect to Providence, as exemplified in *The Excursion*, first published in 1814. While Wordsworth affirms the teleological, benign influence of contingency in the lives of hapless mortals, Coleridge can only aspire to such certainty. Wordsworth observes that,

> One adequate support  
> For the calamities of mortal life  
> Exists – one only; an assured belief  
> That the procession of our fate, howe’er  
> Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being  
> Of infinite benevolence and power;  
> Whose everlasting purposes embrace  
> All accidents converting them to good.

(Book Fourth, ll. 10-17)

For both Coleridge and Wordsworth, it is a crucial poetic objective to render sweet ‘the uses of adversity’, although Coleridge’s Shakespearean lens is more darkly tinged, as we have seen. We may take profound pleasure, nonetheless, in the sweetness of Hyblean poetry at its most spectacular for both the poet of the early version of *The Prelude* as the poem ‘to Coleridge’ and his rapt listening friend responding with ‘To William Wordsworth’ as of old during a period of strained relationship. The two poets engage, with discrete philosophical priorities, in an exchange of song that continues to

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reward the listening reader attuned to the significance of the pastoral conventions explored in this chapter as fragments of a complex minstrelsy. In the next and final chapter, Coleridge’s emphasis on edification twinned with poetic pleasure will be extended to enhance the notion developed here that the habits that become the character of the educated provide the surest ground for living, as well as for reading, methodically.
The notion of ‘the friend’ as a means of *educing* a response in the reader that is proportionate to the effort of the writer requires further discussion in the context of Coleridge’s ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’. As noted at the outset of the inquiry, Coleridge cites Plato to assert the claim that ‘it is but just that you should honour me too in the same proportion’. Contrary to the strategies of rhetoric developed by Hugh Blair in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* and based on ease of reading, Coleridge deliberately constructs each essay as an attempt to figure a mode of apprehension that
requires the reader to expend considerable effort. Coleridge’s objectives align with Blair’s, nonetheless: ‘Moral and religious instruction derive its efficacy not so much from what men are taught to know, as from what they are brought to feel’. Coleridge’s feeling prose is predicated on a theory of knowledge as process, rather than product, an educational premise that underpins advances in a constructivist model of education that still retains the sense of ‘leading out’ embedded etymologically in the Latin root, educare. In Platonic terms, to educate is to light a fire rather than to fill a bucket (along the lines of an Enlightenment model of transmission of a complete body of knowledge). Tim Fulford makes this point in connection with the politics of education, particularly the utilitarianism that had been parodied by Henry Fielding in Tom Jones in the figure of Square, then later by Charles Dickens in the character of Gradgrind in Hard Times:

Coleridge’s views on education put into practice his insistence on the importance of language to a true understanding of humanity. He returned the word to the Latin educare, to draw out, and emphasized that it meant ‘eliciting the faculties of the human mind’ (Friend, I, 540). In fact, creative and idiosyncratic etymologizing was a cultural weapon in his hands. An example of the creative language that he was advocating, it also attacked the ideological capture of words by the establishment. His definition of education, for example, can be seen as an attack on the utilitarian principles and disingenuous motives behind the practice of teaching the poor through religious tracts and moral tales which told them to be content with their lot.  

Fulford’s remarks may surprise critics intent on keeping Coleridge in a conservative box. The image of the writer with his ‘cultural weapon’ aloft is closer to the essayist of The Friend (as we have seen reading the rhetorical strategies and textual dynamism of the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’).

While the constructivist model has gained ascendancy in recent years, there remains a danger in uncritically accepting radical anti-realism. Coleridge’s assimilation

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of Idealist strains of metaphysics into his complex synthesis of contrary approaches to ‘what there is’ ought not to be mistaken for an unqualified acceptance of sceptical anti-realism of the kind that infiltrated both analytic philosophy and the strains of literary criticism that have fed into education theory in the twentieth century. As Wordsworth and Coleridge recognised in 1797, Nature has a life of her own and is a mystery resistant to human explication because it hovers at the limits of our human cognition. If you consider Coleridge’s faith, it is hardly possible to align his thoughts with the atheistic solipsism that radical scepticism necessarily tends towards. We, alone – even as solitary percipients of the natural world – are not responsible for the mystery of nature as creation-in-progress nor is that wonder simply set up for human convenience, delight, or dread. As we move into the twenty first century, a humility is re-entering discourse on the nature of ‘life, the universe and everything’ that augurs well for a less human-centred view of the world we inhabit, including both its potential and fragility.

If religious consensus gave way in Victorian England to evolutionary theory then we have not reached the point of anything like universal, open acceptance of an atheist, radically sceptical position that rejects the independent existence of the material world familiar to our common sense. Even if we are immersed in a hologram projected from the event horizon of a black hole – a physics hypothesis briefly entertained this century by Brian Greene in *The Fabric of The Cosmos* – then the construction of the reality we inhabit is still beyond our authority.\(^{269}\) There remains more in Heaven and on Earth than you and I have dreamed of and in such a place of ignorance and possible cosmic irrelevance then friendship is as crucial now as it was to Coleridge. We still need friends like Horatio to sing us to our rest and Coleridge, beside and astride

Shakespeare, remains at the forefront of modern inquiry into how we know and in what manner we should teach those in a position to effect change and responsible custodianship of a world we are yet to apprehend comprehensively.

**Meditation on educative friendship**

We have not yet mapped our neural processes sufficiently to describe the rich experience of educative friendship, so we return to the lyrical to describe the state of becoming enkindled through an enriching relationship. An educative friend lifts us into the roomy architecture of a remarkable mind and we enter its capacious rooms and dark passages, delighting at what the friendly teacher has to show us. Indeed we bask in that person’s generous hospitality. We leave transformed by that wondrous moment of intimate connection. Once a learner is enkindled, latent potential comes into existence in fledgling form in attentiveness to the new friend. The friendly voice conjures our ‘living soul in time’ and when we hear and return the challenge of friendship’s expectations we are as full of wonder as that wonderful friend who never loses the gloss of our first rapt attentions. Upon the death of such a friend – despite the disappointments and moments of disconnection that inevitably follow the course of companionship – we can say, in all sincerity, as Wordsworth did of Coleridge: ‘He was the most wonderful man’ I have ever known.\(^{270}\)

As noted in the Preface to this inquiry, for Coleridge friendship was sacred: ‘I would not, I could not dare, address my countrymen as a Friend, if I might not justify the assumption of that sacred title by more than mere veracity, by open-heartedness’\(^{271}\). Coleridge’s sense of sacred friendship invokes both Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 116’ and the well-known Biblical passage on *caritas*, Corinthians XIII. Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 116’ is at once an intellectual argument and a model for poetic friendship. If we are to come

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to grips with Coleridge’s notion of ‘sacred’ friendship and its significance for educing the latent potential of the reader of both *The Friend* and his early ‘Friendly poems’, then it provides a sure starting point that is at once historically credible and ahistorically transcendent. Coleridge’s antagonistic response to Godwin, as cited by Adam Sisman, reinforces the links he makes between friendship, love, the soul and striving for ideal realisation of potential: ‘The ardour of private Attachments makes Philanthropy a necessary habit of the soul. I love my Friend – such as he is, all mankind are or might be!’

The challenge and strife of friendship is evoked before the preciousness of genuine communion in Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 116’. The quality that emerges as the defining characteristic of such love is its enduring nature before the vicissitudes of life that require the Biblical virtues of patience, forbearance, perseverance, hope and faith:

> Let me not to the marriage of true minds
> Admit impediments, love is not love
> Which alters when it alteration finds,
> Or bends with the remover to remove.
> O no, it is an ever-fixéd mark,
> That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
> It is the star to every wand’ring bark,
> Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.
> Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
> Within his bending sickle’s compass come,
> Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
> But bears it out even to the edge of doom:
> If this be error and upon me proved,
> I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Schooled by Shakespeare to guard the dearest friendships from the perils of personal shipwreck, Coleridge learnt to look steadfastly (if briefly) at the Wordsworth of *The Prelude*, as we saw in the last chapter. As Wordsworth momentarily held nature with a steadfast eye, Coleridge re-creates that gaze for a poignantly expansive yet doomed friendship that briefly represents the glorious achievement of a ‘marriage of true minds’.

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As Heidi Thomson observes of Coleridge’s coupling of ‘Friend’ and ‘reader’: ‘It is the kind of recognition which he both craved and found wanting in Wordsworth.’

The beauty of the glossarist’s description of the Mariner’s yearning that accompanies lines 264-270 of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ approaches Shakespeare’s model of true communion through figuring the steadfast friendship as love’s brightest star, quantifiably distant yet qualitatively measureless and beyond the inexorability of chronological time. It is not the cold eye of the uncanny, lidlessly staring polar star that Keats later gives us but a lyrical description that emphasises the sense of appointedness, entitlement and of being calmly welcomed home that encapsulates the steadfast gaze of a loving friend in a *kairotic* moment. Friendship is the healing balm that brings into focus the ‘great calm’ of a world beyond flux where everything is in its appointed place according to the unity of design one would expect of a benign, Divine creation. That is how friendship feels in its moment of actualisation. Yet the poem proper expresses more fear in the dreadful description of that same wonderful glimpse of the world’s calmness as ‘A still and awful red’. In the stillness there is awe and in the redness the shadow of the ship transmogrifies the reflected moonlight into the colour of blood, sacrifice and suffering. Coleridge is preoccupied with the question of whether love can be found without self-obliterating *kenosis* at ‘the edge of doom’:

In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and everywhere the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected, and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.

The moving Moon went up the sky,
And nowhere did abide;
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside—
Her beams bemock’d the sultry main,
Like April hoar-frost spread;
But where the ship’s huge shadow lay,
The charm’d water burnt always
A still and awful red.

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Friendship for a man of Coleridge’s religiosity is infused with the Biblical virtues listed above as ideals to strive towards in our fallen and fallible state. That striving is valiant in the teeth of the terrifying loss of personity that joining with another might entail. Dread of the selflessness of selfless love works woe against the leavening influence of full and frank friendship for Coleridge in both poetry and in life.

Even in a secular age, when a dear friend dies we turn to Corinthians XIII to celebrate a life and love that is the embodiment of a Christian caritas, a Latin concept that loses its full force in the modern translations of the King James Bible that render this complex love as ‘charity’, a term quite reduced in its contemporary sense. Charitable love ‘suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up’. Coleridge’s ideal of friendship, of love and of communion, is informed by both what caritas is and what it is not, it:

5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;
6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;
7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

‘Enduring Coleridge’ means to bring the holistic love that is caritas to bear on the study of his works, the love a student bears for an inspiring teacher, along with the patience and the faith that allows us to unravel from tightly contained, limited selves to rediscover selfhood anew in relationship. By traversing the difficult ‘passagings’ of poetry’s labyrinthine method of transit, we can refurbish our own architectural neural space to enable optimum functioning of that most valorised of Romantic ideals, and still cherished educational objective: an imaginative mind.

Acquiescence to the transformative power of an imaginative mind is required to read Coleridge’s series of essays (‘with literary amusements interspersed’), The Friend. Such a reading encourages the wilful anachronism of reading the early poetry back
through a hard won and thoroughly embodied grasp of method, in readiness to give due honour to a still ‘living soul’ whose distinctive voice reverberates through and beyond an historical materialist conception of time. These are the relations in which we stand to Coleridge, the ‘Friend’, as we endure his exacting educative processes to think and to ‘theorise’ with the poet on his own terms:

THE FRIEND, however, acts and will continue to act under the belief, that the whole truth is the best antidote to falsehoods which are dangerous chiefly because they are half-truths: and that an erroneous system is best confuted, not by an abuse of Theory in general, nor by an absurd opposition of Theory to Practice, but by a detection of the errors in the particular Theory. For the meanest of men has his Theory: and to think at all is to theorize.  

‘Literary Amusements Interspersed’

The first issue of the first edition of *The Friend* begins with an apologetic tone to situate the weekly essay in the tradition of *The Spectator* and then to distinguish its aims, most ambitiously in the ‘prospectus’. One such aim includes ‘education in the widest possible sense’. The metaphor of the ‘prospect’ is part of the architectural figure that underlies the work and brings the method to order, despite the appearance of miscellany. Between the introductory remarks and the prospectus, Coleridge inserts his own poem with a promise not to inflict his poetical works on the reader, as a habit, in the new publication. When the work is revised some literary amusement remains interspersed along with the remarkable ‘landing place’ essays that allow the reader to pause, reflect and take stock before moving onwards and upwards with ‘the Friend’. That such interruptions are part of the revision of the work’s order signals their significance to the writer and merits closer critical attention.

Critical opinion over the ‘landing places’, the ‘literary amusements’ and the miscellany of *The Friend* has been almost as divided as the body of critical commentary on the *Biographia Literaria*, although that body of commentary is much larger than that

on the neglected prose of *The Friend*. In 1938, Earl Leslie Griggs commented on the ‘impertinent interludes’ in the work, in an era before the critical understanding of the *Biographia* developed to the point of recognising the power of purposeful miscellany. As postmodernism exerted cultural influence in the 1990s, the notions of ‘play’ and ‘pastiche’ supplanted censorious critical reception of Coleridge’s prose in his more famous works. The pertinence of Coleridge’s digressive style emerges in tandem with the development of this critical lens through a recovery of the value of the self-reflexive text. William Christie’s literary biography of Coleridge is exemplary in this regard.\(^{277}\)

While a transmissive model of systematic Enlightenment has been rightly displaced as an educative mode, it is only to be hoped that drawing on a flexible and open-ended method, such as Coleridge’s, might restore coherence to the contemporary study of literature, supposedly freed from the frame of Humanism. Freedom, progress and shared values as ideals of a literature with an educative function remain crucial in the twenty first century. ‘Amusement’, in Coleridge’s sense of ‘literary amusement’, appears promising, too, with its latent reminder of both the muse of inspiration and the amazement of learning with wonder. Amusement, in a non-trivial sense, entails a diversion of attention as part of a process of attending to a way of thinking that elongates our imaginative prospect. Coleridge uses the verb ‘eloign’ as a descriptor for the process of suspending belief and enriching our prospect of the scene before us. Educating hearts and minds to endure sustained attention to a continuous process of learning that involves how to think critically, creatively and imaginatively might yet usher in an ‘education worth the name’ identified by Coleridge in Essay IX on ‘the


\(^{277}\) William Christie, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Literary Life*. 

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science of education. That must entail a return to reading as the primary act that precedes ‘readings’.

Application of Bakhtin’s notion of ‘heteroglossia’ to Coleridge’s polyphonic productions brings into play voices of doubt, uncertainty and despair even in the midst of triumphal declarations or tableaux. With the ear of a dramatist, Coleridge disrupts the genres of ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’ within particular non-conforming poems, as we have seen. My consideration of Coleridge’s writing, as a whole, has answered the charge of ‘literary absolutism’ levelled by Paul Hamilton by bringing the dialogic quality of Coleridge’s ‘Friendly’ poems and the prose of The Friend to the fore. Coriolanus is hardly riven by doubt, yet it is a comparison to Shakespeare’s conception of the Roman general that Hamilton draws, in his critique of the privileged status of Romantic discourse. In his extension of McGann’s ideological critique of Romantic preconceptions and assumptions, Hamilton considers the difficult question of ‘poetic autonomy’ in these terms:

If we are to believe its own publicity, it [= Romantic poetry] oversteps its boundaries, and, in its pretensions to a defamiliarized apprehension of everything prior to conceptualization, it appears foundational, promising a new heaven and a new earth. Equally, though, this power is premised on a literary absolutism that can just as easily appear constitutionally reactionary. A Coriolanus among discourses, poetry, for Hazlitt, must always prove ‘right-royal’, sympathizing with power rather than with the victims power oppresses, scornful of pleas for answerability or for it to show a consideration for the claims of other disciplines. Coleridge’s notional philosophical poem, as he commends it to Wordsworth, initially appears to be a socializing project, created out of its dialogue with different disciplines; but, in its formulation, it wavers between this intellectual cosmopolitanism and the belief that it alone, on its uniquely ideal plane, can solve the problems or reconcile the oppositions fissuring those other discourses.

By claiming a Bakhtinian dialogism for Coleridge’s poetry, I have argued for a position from which such charges of absolutism begin to show their own insufficiency in comparison with the broad prospect of our present ‘landing place’. The reader of The

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Friend, reading backwards to the early poetry examined here, has ascended with an ear more charitably attuned to the many voices and complex tonal paradoxes embodied in Coleridge’s early poems.

Alert to the dialogic dynamism of Romantic verse, William Christie argues for a reading of Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ along these lines, concluding that ‘in spite of the poet’s eloquent advocacy of ‘something more deeply interfused’, the poem’s complex tone ‘betrays a tentativeness, a self-distrust, even while signaling desire and optimism; to repeat that there exists an undercurrent of doubt, even of desperation’. Alert to the dialogic dynamism of Romantic verse, William Christie argues for a reading of Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ along these lines, concluding that ‘in spite of the poet’s eloquent advocacy of ‘something more deeply interfused’, the poem’s complex tone ‘betrays a tentativeness, a self-distrust, even while signaling desire and optimism; to repeat that there exists an undercurrent of doubt, even of desperation’. 280

For a perceptive critic like Hamilton, a surprising under-estimation of the drama of different voices in Romantic poetry is implicit in the act of invoking the Coriolanus comparison. Hamilton’s charge can be answered by the fact that it is patently reductive to figure particular incarnations of a Romantic voice as instances of monologic (and monolithic) discourse with absolutist pretentions. Eloquent, yes, but far from certain of the convictions so eloquently conveyed. Readers are taught to question with the poets in the distinctly educative experience that is the reading and re-reading of both Coleridge and Wordsworth in an inquiring spirit.

The laudable aim of unmasking Romantic ideology begins to appear more like a limited recasting of poetic voices that, by virtue of the complex drama of their dialogues, cannot be contained in so tight a critical space. The particular voices of Romantic poetry were never as singularly certain, nor as universally authoritative as critiques coming from this narrower view suggest. The Coleridge who concludes ‘To William Wordsworth’ arises from the ashes to speak (as Morton D. Paley recognises) not ‘in the vatic mode that distinguished Coleridge’s greatest earlier poems’ but ‘as a

poet of personal sentiment, intimate friendship, and meditative reflection’. 281 Thus, too, the friend of The Friend emerges from this ‘mountain-birth’. Listening to that complex voice is not to ignore the politics of the text, thoughtfully researched by Deirdre Coleman, for example, in the pioneering full-length study of the first edition of the work, Coleridge and “The Friend” 282. It is more akin to the aware but determined focus distinguished by Susan Wolfson in her nuanced claim and its now critically necessary qualification that,

the power of Romanticism is its empowering of readers to construct their own, sometimes different, Romanticisms. But to say this is to say something quite different from the monolithic critique that finds all poetic self-contestation displaced from the contradictions of socio-historical reality into an aesthetics of reconciliation and spiritual transformation. 283

After pausing, then, to survey the critical landscape from the view we have now developed over several chapters, it is time to return to the discussion of Coleridge’s use of the reflective pause of a ‘landing place’ as part of the rhetorical strategy of The Friend. That discussion must take due account of the view critical readers have attended to and remarked upon in the existing commentary on Coleridge’s use of the ‘landing place’. In a considered response to critiques of Romantic ways of thinking, Nicola Trott explains: ‘We, in our discipline, have our frames, too, and “Romanticism” is perhaps the most successful, anyway the most enduring, of those we have devised for looking at the literature and culture of the early nineteenth century.’ 284 Trott’s claim is most apt to close my discussion of Romanticism, here, with an eye on its value to both education and literary criticism.

282 Deirdre Coleman, Coleridge and “The Friend”.
After the first ‘Landing-Place’ Coleridge offers essays on political knowledge and government, returning to his prized goal of creating a transhistorical network of thinkers in Essay IV, with the inclusive admission of guilt that ‘we have, most of us, at some point or other of our lives, been amused with dialogues of the dead’.\textsuperscript{285}

Considering Coleridge’s obsession with etymology, the process of being amused may be conceived as being not only entertained but in contact with the muses of the past, experiencing amazement in conversation with writers no longer living and feeling wonder as we wander through a maze of thought. Coleridge wakes the dead in order to have a conversation that invites the yet unborn to join, as his complex educative network is built from his literary experience and imagined philosophical alliances and theological skirmishes.

The abiding concern with chance as a governing force in a universe beyond our control crops up soon after in Essay XVI on ‘Principles and Actions’, as Coleridge considers the process of deductive logic in opposition to drawing a valid conclusion as though it were ‘a lucky prize drawn among a thousand blanks out of the lottery wheel of conjecture’.\textsuperscript{286} Such vivid metaphor enlivens the prose of \textit{The Friend}, that continues from a consideration of good government to pure reason with a rhapsodic flourish that re-iterates the central concerns of the author in relation to chance, volition and merited accolades or shame in the apostrophe to the ‘Thrice blessed faculty of Reason!’\textsuperscript{287} Coleridge concludes that it is this ‘celestial organ’, alone, that is not doled out according to a random system, so that this gift alone does not ‘seem dispensed by chance or sullen caprice’. I imagine that the baleful figure of ‘sullen caprice’ is the flipside of the luckier coinage \textit{lene clinamen}. Following on from this ‘miscellany’, Coleridge proceeds to

\textsuperscript{286} Samuel Taylor Coleridge, \textit{The Friend}, 1:123.
\textsuperscript{287} Samuel Taylor Coleridge, \textit{The Friend}, 1:191.
inquire into the broader yet related philosophical issues raised in his ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’.

**Analogous architecture**

Coleridge imagines the structure of *The Friend* as though it were an architectural space for a reader to enter, move through and pause to take in its various but ultimately unified prospect. The view from the ‘landing space’ might, by turns, direct attention to the particular magnificence of a natural feature or the colour that imagination gives to objects of contemplation in its specific hue or an extensive outlook that takes all this in at once. Coleridge explains the analogy in Platonic terms of beauty as ordered symmetry (proportion):

> Among my earliest impressions I still distinctly remember that of my first entrance into the mansion of a neighboring Baronet . . . Beyond all other objects, I was most struck with the magnificent stair-case, relieved at well proportioned intervals by spacious landing-places, this adorned with grand or shewy plants, the next looking out on an extensive prospect through the stately window with its side panes of rich blues and saturated amber or orange tints: while from the last and highest the eye commanded the whole spiral ascent with the marbled pavement of the great hall from which it seemed to spring up as if it merely used the ground on which it rested. My readers will find no difficulty in translating these forms of the outward senses into their intellectual analogies, so as to understand the purport of the Friend’s LANDING-PLACES, and the objects, he proposed to himself, in the small groups of Essays interposed under this title between the main divisions of the work.\(^{288}\)

Mastery of this structure for the reader, then, requires command of the ascent as a coherent path, figured as a spiral. It is not until very recent times that Coleridge’s claim to methodical coherence has been given due critical attention. In 2013, Samantha Harvey devoted a chapter to the ‘landing place’ as part of an inquiry into the legacy of Coleridge’s method in the work of Emerson in the movement that became (in her title) *Transatlantic Transcendentalism*. Harvey recognises the significance of the spiral as an intellectual analogy by ‘indicating a complex and dynamic mode of thinking that

engaged multiple perspectives at once’. It is heartening that the horizons of a revitalised field of research and inquiry into Coleridge’s method in *The Friend* is beginning to receive interest beyond the narrow scope of the politics of the work in its historic moment.

In 2012, Murray Evans was right to connect Coleridge’s architectural analogy in *The Friend* to rhetorical strategies that continued to inform transitions in the *Opus Maximum*. Evans formulates ‘the virtuosic, the multifaceted prospect, and the uncanny overview as three rhetorical modes of transition’. Emphasis on complex transition as a key feature of Coleridge’s method accords with the approach taken in this thesis. Julie Ellison’s stress on the ‘prospect’ in an earlier work on Romanticism, gender and logic led to a productive distinction that does not divide, situating Coleridge’s ‘principles of a mode between fiction and nonfiction’. This earlier critical comment is astute in terms of the genre-defying complexity of voice we have identified in Coleridge’s prose. In the context of a discussion of literary biography after the ‘death of the author’, on Coleridge’s revision of *The Friend*, Rawes and Bradley note that

Coleridge added little new to his revised version of *The Friend*, giving the existing materials of the periodical numbers a different, more orderly and progressive structure. This repeats on a large scale the momentary pauses which Coleridge regarded as essential to real thinking, the pauses being three ‘Landing Paces’.

Here, the educative function of the ‘literary amusements interspersed’ and the ‘landing places’ in the 1818 edition is given due emphasis.

Molly Lefebure identifies the significance of Blumenbach’s legacy to Coleridge as a thinker habitually prone to assimilating diverse modes of cognition:

Like Cuvier and the naturalist and transcendental anatomist Lorenz Oken (1779-1851), Blumenbach rejected the image of a single linear chain of

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progression for the developing life forms, but postulated a species of ascending spiral staircase, with series of landings (what Oken would describe as a series of levels of differentiation). On each level of this staircase nature paused to regain breath, as it were, and impetus for the next step. STC, when he came to write his Theory of Life some twenty years later at Highgate, produced from his mind’s capacious store cupboard Blumenbach’s image of an ascending and expanding spiral.\textsuperscript{293}

It may be concluded, charitably, that Coleridge’s extension of Blumenbach’s figure of the spiral as a mode of thought in his poetry and in the structure of The Friend is an example of an act of communion with a coterie of scholars that places readers in dialogue with the collective intellectual treasures of the ages. Samuel Daniel’s 1599 poem Musophilus, the subtitle of which resonates with Coleridge’s objectives in the essays concerned with education, is a work ‘Containing a general Defence of All Learning’. Like Coleridge, Daniel imagines a transhistorical community of scholars with the past shaping the present in unanticipated ways:

\begin{quote}
And who in time knows whither we may vent  
The treasure of our tongue, to what strange shores  
This gain of our best glory shall be sent  
T' enrich unknowing nations with our stores?  
What worlds in th’ yet unfixed occident  
May come refin’d with th’ accents that are ours?  
Or who can tell for what great work in hand 
The greatness of our style is now ordain’d?  
What powers it shall bring in, what spirits command,  
What thoughts let out, what humours keep restrain’d,  
What mischief it may powerfully withstand,  
And what fair ends may thereby be attain’d?\textsuperscript{294}
\end{quote}

Daniel’s didactic dialogue between the ‘lover of Muses’, Musophilus, and the ‘lover of the world’, Philocosmus, offers a model for educating individual virtue through exposure to the collective wisdom of the great souls of the Humanist past, whose literary and philosophical speculation can inform action in the world in Coleridge’s time as well as our own.

\textsuperscript{293} Molly Lefebure, Private Lives of the Ancient Mariner: Coleridge and his Children (Lutterworth Press, 2013), 164.  
Indeed, in the final in a series of introductory essays just prior to the first ‘landing place’ in the 1818 edition of The Friend, Coleridge begins with an epitaph from Daniel’s *Musophilus*, that adapts the earlier poet’s lines to foreground the specific Lucretian context for Coleridge’s battle for an education more illuminating than atomistic materialism.295 In this context, I examined Coleridge’s use of the *lene clinamen*, the ‘gentle bias’ or *tiny swerve* in the early poetry in Chapters One and Two. Using the principles of method elucidated in The Friend, we have given due significance to the ‘self-unravelling clue’ of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, ‘Frost at Midnight’ and ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. In Essay XVI (on ‘Self-Knowledge’) in the introductory section of The Friend, the opening ‘clue’ is a quotation from Daniel’s *Musophilus* lines 910-15, but the first line of poetry has been changed significantly from the original. In the first footnote, the line: ‘Who will not grant, and therefore this observe’ becomes ‘Blind is that soul which from this truth can swerve’. In light of Coleridge’s concern with the ‘insensible’ *clinamen* noted in our Preface, this substitution in the context of a discussion of self-knowledge from one so blinded at times to his own inner workings is revealing. It reinforces the importance of the *clinamen* of antiquity as the crux of many of Coleridge’s dialogues with the dead and the catalyst for a haunted obsessive treatment of volition in our waking lives.

**Romantic poetry and the legacy of Lucretius**

Kantian idealism may have ‘seized’ Coleridge in the late 1790s, but thinking in German, as it were, along these lines did not diminish his faculty for poetically rendering the concrete particular. It seems appropriate, then, to conclude our discussion of a just claim to systematic investigation of Coleridge’s thinking with a kind of Realism that has flourished in Australia, forged by philosophers distrustful of misty

European worldviews. I have argued for the recovery of Romantic epistemology as a systematic investigation of consciousness, reality and language. After the ‘linguistic turn’ in Philosophy, it is crucial to return to Coleridge’s method for formulating and teaching a science of knowledge.

Research and inquiry into the generative power of methodical principles pertaining to a science of knowledge need be predicated neither on British empiricism nor on the idealist extremities of Continental philosophy in its historic and latter day incarnations. Coleridge’s philosophical work, particularly the ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ published in the 1818 edition of *The Friend*, remains potentially foundational for a twenty-first century philosophy predicated on Coleridge’s principles for a complex method of thinking about poetry and about humanity in the scheme of actual things. Coleridge speaks to a lingering critical anxiety about the existential status of the world (singular) we acknowledge on a common-sense view. His early poetry is concerned with refining the faculty of understanding, particularly as it is applied to our place in that familiar world. It simultaneously renders the horror that attends on being out of place in the world for a hapless individual whose understanding is darkened by doubt. I will conclude by affirming that we have a just claim to the philosophy of Coleridge in the twenty first century. Regardless of ideology, we have a right to recover Romantic ways of thinking as a productive mode of critical inquiry.

**Summary of conclusions on Coleridge’s Method**

I have investigated Coleridge’s concept of harmonious friendship as a unified ‘muleity’ with an emphasis on reconciling philosophical voices. This investigation began in the first chapter with a distinctive reading of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ and ‘Frost at Midnight’. The principles of these poems were then shown to be continuous with ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. I have kept faith with Coleridge’s own Method,
drawing on the 1818 edition of *The Friend*. My sustained focus has been on Coleridge’s ‘methodical cultivation of the mental powers, by methodical exercise of their own forces’, as a way of reading the early poetry through ‘the functions of comparison, judgement, and interpretation’. In the first six chapters of my thesis, I have established a methodology of Romantic poetics predicated on Coleridge’s ‘Essays on the Principles of Method’ in *The Friend*. I have established that the notion of friendship must be integral to a faithful reading of Coleridge’s poetry and educative legacy.

I began with a treatment of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ that made explicit the operation of Coleridge’s theorised methodological principles at the level of structure and poetic form. I elucidated the principle of ‘continuous transition’, which I interpreted as the relations of ‘progressive singularity’ for ‘the living soul in time’. I have identified a distinctively Coleridgean transition marked by an inconspicuous turn, or *swerve*, which allows for such harmonious progression. My structural focus widened from an initial musical metaphor to include the sense of ‘Transition’ as a noun of action indicating an initial crossing over, and discovered that a close reading of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, focusing on the principle of ‘progressive transition’, is best situated in the philosophic context of the ‘One-Over-Many’ problem. I argued that, in that context, Coleridge establishes a sense of volition in a designed but not over-determined universe.

I have identified a stronger sense of a productive and *progressive* being in ‘The Eolian Harp’, a conversation poem that dramatically enacts the principle of ‘progressive transition’. Recall of the gentle swerve to humility and self-surrender prompts abashed self-flagellation in ‘The Eolian Harp’, as we have seen. I have argued for the significance of method as ‘progressive transition’ in relation to ‘Dejection: An Ode’ and ‘The Nightingale’. In these poems, Coleridge confronts the debilitating melancholy of

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spiritual uncertainty that pervades ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ to affirm that the spontaneous presence of gratuitous reversals may indicate the presence of a gentle bias in an uncertain world. I have read the moon’s delightfully, but poignantly imagined speech in ‘[A Soliloquy of the Full Moon, She Being in a Mad Passion]’ as a simple, beautiful rendering of the reassuring realisation that echoes a nursery lullaby to ward off harm: ‘I see the moon/And the moon sees me.’ The playfulness of this poem’s serious joke alleviates the dispiriting burden of metaphysics, despite the horror of an arbitrary universe in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. I have interpreted this reassurance as an illustration of the gracious spontaneity that is ‘analogous to the causality of the human will’. Coleridge gently renders the process by which an inspired imagination achieves communion with Nature suffused with divinity.

I have contended that enduring Coleridge at the juncture of theological emotional urgency and imaginative philosophical speculation requires suspension of disbelief in a Divine analogue such as the one of Coleridge’s powerful imagination. In Essay VII of *The Friend*, ‘inward combination’ is given as the energetic source of guiding principles and the basis for a literary theory of imaginative poetry, as we have seen in contemplation of ‘Dejection: An Ode’, where Coleridge emphasises the crucial role vital joy plays in experiencing life with the full force of a ‘living soul in time’. I have concluded that Coleridge’s imagination shapes his meditations on the art of poetics even as he laments the loss of the imaginative power deriving from the inner experience of feeling proportionally combined with thought. The contrapuntal unity of Coleridge’s method survives the poet’s spiritual crisis in the despairing poetry of ‘The Pains of Sleep’ and ‘Limbo’.

I have argued that Coleridge’s methodical purpose may be inferred from his claim for Plato ‘that the EDUCATION of the intellect, by awakening the principle and
method of self-development, was his proposed object. By exploring how Coleridge’s
dynamic principles generate the figure of the ‘Romantic invalid’, I have identified the
significance of embodied revelation for Coleridge. I have connected the significance of
bodily organisation and disorganisation to the crucial motif of self-composition as a
means of both self-exculpation and self-development in Coleridge’s literary miscellany.
I have concluded that we must, as active readers, submit to the Baconian model of
education outlined in the preface to Essay V. Our keeping faith with Coleridge’s
principles allows us to experience the agon and agony dramatised in these poetic
shapings of lived experience along the lines suggested by Bacon and quoted by
consistently figure enduring principles as a way that a reader must discover.
Imaginatively engaging with such figuration is the role assigned to the reader as friend
to the writer, as I have demonstrated. Coleridge educates our hearts and minds to endure
sustained attention to reading Romantic poetry as I have done in this thesis, guided by
the friendly Coleridge.

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