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'Thickening, deepening, blackening': starlings and the object of poetry in Coleridge and Dante

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COLERIDGE'S STARLINGS are celebrated and are put to many uses.[1] This is as much as Coleridge or any of us can mean by them, I will be arguing, insofar as they permit meaning at all, or do so by refusing it, because it is the inscrutability of their design itself (or the absence or accident of design, the only-seeming-so) which excites Coleridge and us. They simultaneously allude and elude, disclose but never close, only thicken, deepen, blacken like aggregations of words on a page—except they are not a parliament of fowls, as I mean to show, but a poetry.

The equally celebrated collective noun handed down, putatively, by Juliana Berners in 1486 is 'a murmuration of stares', an image reaching towards metaphor in the way in which the flocking of starlings is wedded to language—or something before language. Auden found in the phrase, and its antecedent image, something of the immeasurable compact of thought and feeling in love, something 'Alive like patterns a murmuration of starlings / Rising in joy over wolds unwittingly weave'.[2] He points us directly to the conundrum of the unwitting pattern and that is where I want to go.

The starling flock in Coleridge's notes (where even his single observation of November 1797 is made to recur three times in the Notebooks CN I 581 and 582, 1589, 1779) lies some way beyond itself or Coleridge's own comprehension at any point, as it reforms itself in altered iterations, as an image and as an idea. This is the cleverness of the note—evolving like the flock through new and transient forms of significance. In this it is strictly *pointless*, not working towards any delimited destination in meaning, and refusing, even refuting, the stabilising pretensions of intellectual order embodied in theories—systems that seek to settle the matter. It is a mimetic irony that Coleridge's initial entry in the inside cover of N5 should run to the words 'a different Glory—Starlings—' and there culminate in its own interruption, as it were, and, literally dashing, vault over to N4 (which is to

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1 Thus Richard Holmes, as biographer: 'Clearly, this was some sort of self-image for Coleridge' (*Coleridge: Early Visions*, London: Penguin, 1990, 254), 'associated for him with his powers of imagination and creativity' (254n). Seamus Perry, writing on the uses of division, locates 'an apprehension at once of a discrete Many and of an encompassing One.' (*Coleridge and the Uses of Division*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1999, 30) Josie Dixon, hymning the notebooks, writes of these observations as if they were themselves correlative of the act of making notes, 'as if in the hope of imparting some fixity ... a distillation of fleeting natural phenomena into abstract, geometrical forms' (*The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn, Cambridge: CUP, 2002, 79). That these are all correct is the measure of the use and brilliance of the image, as Coleridge anticipated or apprehended it, for comprehending it is strictly what it refuses – both in the sense of comprehension as understanding, and in its sense of circumscription, encompassment. Lurking in, or passing through, or adumbrated by the susceptible shadow of the starlings, in other words, as I am suggesting here, is a criticism of mimesis, or at least a wary exploration of the finite destinations of mimetic correspondences, and hence a certain but pervasive understanding of art itself. The indeterminate menace of the starlings' 'will to form' is, as the associative proximity of sin to the starlings in this paper's reading hopes to imply, somehow to do with a critical, even moral fear of the proximity of mimesis to blasphemy, that ancient anxiety about the overreaching of art, and especially logocentric art, into the secret ministry.

2 W. H. Auden, 'O Love, the interest itself', *The English Auden* (ed. Edward Mendelson), London: Faber, 1986, 118.

move both forward and backward), to reform itself, renew and move on: 'Starlings in vast flights...' (CN I 581 and 582) It is the starlings, and the word 'Starlings', which relate the two books, 'thickening' the instance and the interstice, 'deepening' our wish of their significance, and literally 'blackening' the books with the murmurous agitations of ink signs flocking towards sense. In this the textual starlings share in the flock's character of happenstance ('without volition', as Coleridge imagines the birds) as also in its character of kinetic form, and its related (because fluid and integrating) suggestiveness. I would describe this susceptibility as a *deep practice of seeming* and I would argue that it is both an image and an instance of poetry. The interplay of the starlings and the signifier 'Starlings', between themselves and in the passage between the two notebooks, is a local mark of the interaction between words and the world, and one which is much about *seeming* in the project of poetry.

Let us widen the context of those starlings. Coleridge embeds them in a lurid dawn, itself of one seam with the 'uneasy Doze-dream' (CN I 581) from which he awakes, and which he later calls 'painful' (CN I 1589). (The emendations of 1803, when Coleridge revisits these images, are a trove, since they triangulate the observation and allow us some sense of its significance through the lenses of difference: passing time, recollections in tranquillity. The changes, the differences, tell us more about the significance of the image to Coleridge than the image itself. The image itself tells us more about our own interest in Coleridge.) In that dawn, then, the sky is orange, its clouds brassy. In 1799 it seems the sun rose like a kite, casting its light upon the waters, and then seems to rise again over an intervening hill.[3] By 1803 the image had been differently recollected: now the rising sun has become itself 'a Hill of Fire', the waters reveal themselves as 'flooded', and the sun's reappearance is 'a compleat 2nd rising'. Are we to trust the immediacy of 1799, when the sun seemed frivolously like a kite, or the deliberation of 1803, when that kite had become a hill of fire over a flood? Clearly the latter version has been set in yet another context, something apocalyptic, scripturally infused with fire and flood, and second comings (the 1803 entry itself is a second coming). Actually, in part even in 1799, the context in which Coleridge embeds the image is his own poetry. In an image whose lexical field encompasses the words 'orb', 'glory', 'dim', and 'black', and the passage of starlings, the cousins of corvids, in a sky marked by mutable suns, a passage written up in the characteristic syntactical formula of repeated 'nows' ('now a circular area… now a globe… now from

[3] The re-rising of the sun becomes interesting in its reiteration in 1803 as a figure of resurrection or second coming, but it is more important here to note that the visual effect is a consequence as much of Coleridge's travelling, i.e. the observer's motion, as it is of the sun's passage. In other words this exciting effect is intensely one of accentuated relativity, and since this is produced as much of an alteration in the position of the observer as of the thing observed, bears directly upon the matter of subjective flux in poetry as upon the elusive object. The 'poetry' of the second sunrise is thus a consequence not only of the sun-object's alteration, movement, but also of the poet-subject's. This circumstance is one without a stable referent, exactly like the love between two people, or any communicated 'feeling', whose imprecisions and contingencies summon poetry, a genre which applies to sense and reason simultaneously in the 'attempt to transfigure some of the negative liabilities of speech' (Geoffrey Hill in John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden*, London: Faber, 1981, 86).

complete orb… now a balloon… now a concaved semicircle… ' CN I 582, 1589, composite), we are inevitably reminded of the last rook in the dusky air over the linden bower, whose

> black wing
> (Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
> Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory. (PW *156* 71–3)

The dissonant cry of that rook tells of life and the unity disclosed in nature, binding Coleridge and addressee (Lamb, us) together in a single outlook. But I have misquoted the poem significantly, sinning by omission to shift the cases of the verbs in the sentence, to imply that the passage of the rook across the sun is fact, when it is, of course, all part of a subjunctive arrangement of the poet's 'deeming' the several conjunctions by which the image comes to serve its purpose in a symbol for the conjunctions of friends, and of all parts in the one life. We will come back to that all-important verb; 'Deeming and Seeming' might be my title.

The way that Coleridge's starlings are deemed from without, by ourselves or by the agency that moves them without volition, and the way in which they propelled by that deeming to seem as they do to others without any will in their being, reaches back to an image at the heart of poetry, and, perhaps not obviously, about poetry, and poetry and love. This is the image that Dante attaches in the Comedy—also the flocking of starlings. It occurs in the fifth canto of the *Inferno*, the hell of the adulterers, incontinent lovers, and it describes the first, and most memorable, of his fitting torments. The lazy reader, besides, may well not read further than this scene, where Dante is kind and poetry cited in its own indictment, and where Dante swoons and Paolo and Francesca swoop into the hearts of so many. This is the image he supplies:

> E come li stornei ne portan l'ali
> nel freddo tempo a schiera larga e piena,
> così quel fiato li spiriti mali
> di qua, di là, di giù, di su lì mena
>
> [And as starlings are carried on their wings
> In the cold weather, in a vast wavering troop,
> So that breath carries the unfortunate spirits:
> It drives them here and there, now down, now up[4]]

It is an image at once chastening the sinners it describes with the hapless behaviour of mere birds, whose actions are basely natural and without the

[4] Sisson's translation rather than Cary's. The last line, with its translated form 'now down, now up' inevitably reverberates in the syntax of 'This Lime-tree Bower' and the notebook entry, as discussed above. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C.H. Sisson, London: Pan, 1981, 66, 40–3.

selfhood of intellectual will, and conversely and simultaneously celebrating the force that animates them, the intelligence that is outside the birds, organising them. The birds are subordinated to the pattern of the flock, as wayward selves congregated in forms of a higher, more harmonious order. At a local level the torment and the sin are united in that single intelligence, for what propels the souls is the proximity of their loves, as subjects of the sin committed they are forever enslaved to the futile hope of the object of their love. For Dante this is both mercy and torment, the mildest of hells therefore, since the sin is committed in the occasion of love, albeit incontinent love, and the want of a proper object of love results in this windy and pointless, inwardly obsessed progress.

This is what Coleridge saw from the coach to London on the 27th of November 1799:

> Starlings in vast flights drove along like smoke, mist, or any thing misty without volition - now a circular area inclined in an Arc—now a Globe—now from complete Orb into an Elipse & Oblong—now a balloon with the car suspended, now a concaved Semicircle—& still it expands & condenses, some moments glimmering & shivering, dim & shadowy, now thickening, deepening, blackening! (CN I 582, Coburn's emendations applied)

The image of course is coincident with Coleridge's (implicitly adulterous) love for Sara Hutchinson. It is noted on the coach journey away from Coleridge's first encountering her, and years later he made a retrospective entry for the 24th of November, just days before his departure, in which he recalled that Sunday as being 'Conundrums & Puns & Stories & Laughter… Stood up round the Fire, et Sarae manum a tergo longum in tempus prensabam, and tunc temporis, tunc primum, amor me levi spiculo, venenato, eheu!, & insanabili, &c' ('and I held Sara's hand for a long time behind my back, and then for the first time, love pierced me with its dart, envenomed, and alas! incurable, &c.') (CN I 1575) Stories, conundrums, laughter and wandering hands are all too redolent of Paolo and Francesca. The Bristol Library records show that Coleridge borrowed a translation of the *Comedy* in the summer of 1796.[5] He knew the poem before he caught the coach to London or slipped his hand into that of Sara Hutchinson. Are the starlings of 27 November then a half-conscious evocation of the torment into which Coleridge was slipping? They have the force of presentiment, as if the shadow of Dante passes over Coleridge's emotional landscape. Certainly, as Anya Taylor has shown, the fifth canto of the *Comedy* looms directly over the poem 'Love' which Coleridge began at Sockburn and hurried into print on his return (by coach though the lurid dawn) to London at the end of November.[6] At the very least it is darkly propitious that Coleridge, in the midst of composing a poem so informed by

[5] Anya Taylor, *Erotic Coleridge*, New York: Palgrave, 2005, 82
[6] Taylor, *Erotic Coleridge*, 82ff

Dante's lovers' circumstance should have looked out on the flights of starlings in whose wavering troop Dante placed those two whose sin was to love wrongly, or too much, and whose temptation lay in poetry. And certainly by 1803, as the grievous implications of his love for Asra were making themselves evident, Coleridge was, as we have seen, at pains to resituate the starlings in an infernal landscape, or at least an apocalyptic one, reconfiguring (starling-like) the kite of playful heavenly aspiration as instead 'a Hill of Fire', which phrase is only one vowel's substitution away from a hell of fire.

And yet the excitement of what Holmes calls the 'protean form' does seem to outdistance the menace of the cloud, or at least stay with it.[7] In this conflation of thrill and menace, and the apprehension, both anxiety and grasp, of that compound, the image seems to me more and more to suggest and participate in the condition of poetry itself—or, particularly a condition of what we now recognise as the Romantic sublime in poetry. In 1807 Coleridge noted of a Dante canzone that it was 'a poem of wild & interesting Images, intended as an Enigma, and to me an Enigma it remains, spite of all my efforts. Yet it deserves transcription, and translation.' (CN II 3014) In this way poetry and starlings are alike, and Coleridge treats them so, as occasions of transcribing and translating to no fixed end.[8]

Dante's son Pietro Alighieri advanced seven types of meaning in the *Comedy*, ranging from the 'historical' (which would treat, here, of the strict interest in a natural history of flocking starlings) to the culminatory mode of the 'anagogical', some way beyond the finite destinations of the allegorical, and implying, instead, a high order of spiritual reading, abutting on contemplation.[9] Our age, secular and out of the habit of such attitudes of mind, would baulk at such a mode, but insofar as it leans towards a kind of reading that might be thought of as contemplative, or intuitive, or infinite and un-closed, it would share in the faculty of apprehension that I want to argue proceeds from poetry and is its cause. 'The word comes from *ana* which means above and *goge* which means to lead', Pietro tells us, which suggests exactly what the starlings do. We, ourselves and Coleridge, and even at the extreme of his poetry, Dante, apprehend the starlings—interrupt them to our purpose, as Dante and Virgil do—but we do not comprehend them, though we try to in harnessing them to our ends. In all these occasions the starlings lead thought above the finite order of comprehension, into the realm of apprehension.

As poetry does. Poetry organises language to lead thought above its grounded limits. In this it is a flocking, 'a murmuration' and a part-witting 'pattern' of words, and of the sounds before words and the images after them. The common apprehension of a poetry that lies outside the poem in the world

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7 Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, 254.

8 Indeed, a little effort in transcribing and translating the words 'Image' and 'Enigma' (and 'Imagine') might serve very well to embody the kind of ana-grammatical resolutions that the starlings, the notes, poetry, the 'anagogical', as well as the correspondence between Coleridge's image and Dante's. These reformulations, like the starling flock, are ceaseless anagrams of one another, and intrinsically potential.

9 Michael Caesar (ed.), *Dante: The Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge, 1989, 133–7.

and before it is really only an apprehension, quite correct, of the way in which the mechanics of language, in larynx or in ink, move from accidental form to the same form now deliberated as word, as suggestible shape or susceptible shape, in the process of signification.

In his biography, treating of this image of starlings, Holmes makes what seems to me a vital marginal observation. He recollects a description of Coleridge in an essay of Virginia Woolf that has an uncanny likeness to Coleridge's own description of the starlings: 'he seems not a man, but a swarm, a cloud, a buzz of words, darting this way and that, clustering, quivering, and hanging suspended.'[10] Might this not serve as well to describe simultaneously the state of the condemned soul in the second circle and the state of the poet in thrall to the world and to words? There is an answer of sorts to that question, in Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, and inevitably it concerns both Dante and starlings. Dante, says Shelley, stands alone with Homer as epic poet, for 'Lucretius had limed the wings of his swift spirit in the dregs of the sensible world; and Virgil… had affected the fame of an imitator', as first among 'the flock of mock-birds' (and I'm not here going into the flock's embodiment of materialist particularity, after Lucretius,[11] nor into the matter of the starling's own fame as a mimic, a mock-bird, trained to shout 'Mortimer!', though all these thicken my instance. Indeed, in the matter of mock-birds and mimicry, it would be well to recall also the 'imitative lisp' of the toddler Hartley, which imperfect language, aggregatively come by, fancifully learnt, 'mars all things' in 'The Nightingale' (PW *180* 93)). It is sufficient to put it this way here, that this passage from the 'Defence of Poetry' is a passage written in the starling tongue (not least recalling as it does the 'one star amid the starry throng' of Southey's translation of Coleridge's Greek Ode[12] (PW *55 X1* 111), or of Shelley's own 'Ode to the West Wind'):

> Dante was the first awakener of entranced Europe; he created a language, in itself music and persuasion, out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarisms. He was the congregator of those great spirits who presided over the resurrection of learning; the Lucifer of that starry flock which in the thirteenth century shone forth from republican Italy, as from a heaven, into the darkness of the benighted world. [13]

How many English-speakers, when they see or say the word 'starling', have in their mind's eye the starry spots of the starling's plumage? It could—though it doesn't—mean 'little star'. For the birds are flocked with stars just as the

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10 Virginia Woolf, 'The Man at the Gate' (1940), *Collected Essays 3*, London: Hogarth, 1967. Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, 254.

11 See Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*, 107ff.

12 Gregory Leadbetter drew my attention to this with his paper at the Coleridge Summer Conference in 2008: 'Making Space for the Unseen: Liberty and Occult Ambition in Coleridge's Early Poetry'.

13 Shelley, 'Defence of Poetry', *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts*, *Criticism* (eds Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers) New York: Norton, 1977, 499–500.

flocks are starred with birds. The 'starry flock' among which Dante is Shelley's (cunningly cast) Lucifer, are more than angels or apotheosised heroes. They are constellations of starlings also. Here we have the (neoplatonically inclined) scientific error in which phylogeny is anticipated in ontogeny (and humanity anticipated in the individual). In this the book of nature is deeply integrated, written with markers of corresponding form, leaning towards a semantic that is a doctrine of signatures. However spurious the science, it remains true that poetry, and especially a mimetic understanding of poetry, is nothing if not, complexly, a doctrine of signatures. In such a view, the starred plumage and the flock of stars are related, and, more importantly, so thicken and deepen and blacken an instance in which sinner and angels are of one antiphonal emanation. This is nature as Coleridge later and jocularly recognized it 'divisible as the polyp', a case of 'Kaleidoscopic freaks and symmetries', and of 'chasing dodging stars in a sky hunt' (CL V 496–7). Both attributive elements—angelic choreography and sinner's maelstrom—are in the cloud of starlings and in poetry, and their reconciliation, though apprehended cannot be comprehended. It is, as Herbert had it, no more or less than 'something understood'.[14]

That famous list sonnet of Herbert's—'Prayer'—is a sentence without a verb. That is its point: to leave the reader obliged to participate in the creative project of the logos by supplying not just a word, but a word and agency, simultaneously and inextricably—a word *as* agency. It is the reader who must 'know' in the community of language that the elided verb is 'is'—a case of 'to be', an act and occasion of being—and who, knowing this, must enact the appointment of *things-being* in the instance and instant of apprehending the verb. Coleridge's starlings are kin in this 'something understood' also, in their essential condition of seeming, their summoning our deeming. Coleridge has a liking of this intransitivity and the way it yearns for a more transitive condition, a passage out of valent seeming into an attached and fitting judgement, or deeming—such a transit, or conditions akin to it, is that in which he recognizes poetry. Recall how it is not hope, but hope without an object, which is the subject of a poem, a work without hope. ('Hope' and 'love' are verbs which, at the very least, of the nature of their action, crave their object, indirect or direct).[15] Let us end by saying that the starlings form. We can say that, but not what. For the starlings, like poetry, are uncertain of their object. The uncertainty of the object is their susceptibility, and it summons a determining

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[14] George Herbert, "Prayer I", *English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 176–181. This superb edition supplies a bibliographical sketch of essential criticism alongside the poem, including several analyses pertinent to my concern with the poem's lack of a verb.

[15] It will be seen from these occasions that the sense in which I am applying 'transitivity' (and 'intransitivity') is not altogether strictly the grammatical one, though it arises there. My point is excited by the root in 'transit' and the relationality, somewhat transferential, somewhat a site of prerogative and power in the 'taking of an object', of this transit between subject and object, in fixing the sense of what only seems, in the judgement (applied and recognised) that is the act of deeming. Coleridge, deeming the significance of Hartley's night terrors noted how, or that, 'the Candle cures the SEEMS' (CN I 1253). We, deeming the significance of that note, might deem Enlightenment in the candle, and Romanticism in the seems, and poetry in the relation of both (after all, does the candle cure the seems themselves, or us of the seems?).

subjectivity, an act of deeming the seeming object. That determination is ambiguously creative, present in both author and reader, and God and man. It drags from us our participation in language's project, that of disclosing data as information, an act of meaningful witness. And we find that where we are summoned as subjects to deem the significance of things, to appoint their object in the world, we are bereft of what we hope for as the *inevitable* destinations of language, and there have recourse to another language, which we call poetry.