

# The Mind's Eye: Vision and Experience in Coleridge's Notebooks<sup>1</sup>

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A STUDY WEEKEND for lovers of Coleridge devoted to the Notebooks would have been inconceivable little more than 5 years ago. The daunting weight and scholarly apparatus of Kathleen Coburn's monumental edition,<sup>2</sup> emerging volume by volume on a seemingly geological timescale, were testament to an extraordinary textual project, but not one calculated to broaden the Notebooks' readership outside the confines of university libraries. As a graduate student I had grown to love the Notebooks, and often found myself wishing I could take them out to read on a hillside like those here in the Quantocks, where Coleridge wrote many of the entries — a fantasy which at the time could only have taken the form of criminal subterfuge, in defiance of the stony-faced gatekeepers of the Bodleian, since Coburn's volumes were firmly anchored on the reference shelves of the Upper Reading Room (and would in any case have made for a rather heavy rucksack).

To that extent it was an act of faith which led me to insist on including a chapter on the Notebooks when, as a commissioning editor at Cambridge University Press in the late 1990s, I invited Lucy Newlyn to edit *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*. To my astonishment, Lucy drew a blank in her efforts to find a Coleridge scholar prepared to take on the pleasurable task of offering an interpretation of the Notebooks which would make them newly accessible to students of Coleridge, and she returned to put the ball back in my court: 'why don't you write it yourself?' As it happens I was by then on my way to take up a new position elsewhere, and in the hopes that this would absolve me from possible conflicts of interest at CUP, I rashly agreed. There must have been something in the air, since the fifth and final volume of the Coburn edition was at last nearing publication and Seamus Perry was in the process of compiling his selection from the Notebooks,<sup>3</sup> which also appeared in the same year as the *Companion*, giving students and enthusiasts the chance at last to read a generous sampling of entries (up to 1820), on the hillside of their choice.

At the time, without the benefit of Perry's volume to provide a text for the *Companion's* readers (and feeling some compulsion to represent at least briefly the idiosyncracies of the later, increasingly arcane Notebooks post-1820), I was back in the Bodleian with Coburn. As I re-read the Notebooks, some 15 years from my first encounter with them, the sheer brilliance of Coleridge's writing struck me with renewed force: above all his astonishing ability to relay the dazzling immediacy of fleeting natural phenomena — the momentary effects of light on water, shifting cloud formations by moonlight, or the fluid patterns of

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<sup>1</sup> Originally given as a lecture for Friends of Coleridge Study Weekend, at Kilve Court in September 2007, this essay developed out of an earlier piece on the Notebooks which appeared in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge 2002), pp. 75-88.

<sup>2</sup> *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn et al. (London and Princeton, 1957-2002).

<sup>3</sup> *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry (Oxford, 2002).

a migrating flock of birds wheeling about in the sky. For all the heterogeneous mix that characterises the entries' irresistible combination of profound imaginative insights cheek by jowl with the truly mundane (defeating any scholar's wilful attempts to impart coherence), I found myself increasingly conscious of a gradual but significant evolution at work in the pages of the Notebooks.

Two passages from the early 1800s shed some light on what was at stake for Coleridge in the experiential, philosophical and linguistic changes taking place. In an entry of March 1801 he describes an exchange with his four-year old son Hartley, who had been gazing out at a view of the mountains:

I shewed him the whole magnificent Prospect in a Looking Glass, and held it up, so that the whole was like a Canopy or Ceiling over his head, & he struggled to express himself concerning the Difference between the Thing and the Image almost with convulsive Effort.  
(CN I 923)

There is for Coleridge something profound at issue in that crucial distinction 'between the Thing and the Image', evidently felt with great clarity and yet eluding any ready formulation. Three years earlier he had written in 'Frost at Midnight' that the mind is 'every where / Echo or mirror seeking of itself',<sup>4</sup> and the mirror he holds for Hartley seems to stand in his Notebook reflections as a figure for the operations of the human mind. Hartley's struggle to articulate, and the accompanying sense that it is a troubling process, betray something of the anxiety which this phenomenon induces in Coleridge himself. The self-reflexive search for a symbolic level of meaning is at once deeply characteristic of the human imagination and yet has the potential to undermine the immediacy of its most vital relationship with the natural world, with the substitution of reflected images, ultimately circumscribed and two-dimensional.

A further entry touching this theme another three years on (after Coleridge's *annus horribilis* of 1802), makes clearer the nature of that anxiety and the imaginative crisis at stake:

Hard to express that sense of the analogy or likeness of a Thing which enables a Symbol to represent it, so that we think of the Thing itself—& yet knowing that the Thing is not present to us . . . that Proteus Essence that could assume the very form, but yet known & felt not to be the Thing by that difference of the Substance which made every atom of the Form another thing /—that likeness not identity—an exact web, every line of direction miraculously the same, but the one worsted, the other silk  
(CN II 2274)

The sense of disillusionment here in the notion that the coinage of the symbolic imagination is in some sense counterfeit begins to crystallise the

<sup>4</sup> ll. 21-2, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton 1969-) XVI (I.1), 454.

problem for Coleridge: the reflexive mirror of the mind engages in an imperfect doubling, a substitution of secondary likenesses, which may be ultimately a betrayal of first-hand experience — even a kind of duplicity.

The idealist philosophy which so fascinated Coleridge and De Quincey, aided and abetted by the hallucinations induced by laudanum, lent a peculiar twist to the problem, with the threat of solipsism casting doubt on the existence of the objects of perception outside the operations of the mind. When the world becomes only a systematic extension of self-consciousness, the mind's duplicitous reflections become more psychologically disorientating. De Quincey's opium-fuelled visions took this anxiety to its nightmarish conclusion. In *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* he quotes (with a clear sense of affinity) an account by Coleridge of a series of engravings by Piranesi, which he refers to as '*Dreams*' and 'which record the scenery of his own visions during the delirium of a fever'. Coleridge described to De Quincey how, in a series of vertiginous optical illusions, impossible staircases like something out of Escher's drawings lead into one another, and the artist represents himself appearing repeatedly. Their significance for Coleridge can be guessed at from De Quincey's ready identification of 'the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction' that haunted his dreams 'so much that I feared... some... tendency of the brain might be making itself (to use a metaphysical word) *objective*; and the sentient organ *project* itself as its own object'.<sup>5</sup> De Quincey's figure for this imaginative doubling returns later in 'Suspiria de Profundis' with the Apparition of the Brocken and the Dark Interpreter ('originally a mere reflex of my inner nature')<sup>6</sup> and reaches its nightmarish extreme in the uncontrolled and treacherous alter egos encountered by the dreamer in 'The English Mail Coach': 'What if it were his own nature repeated, — still, if the duality were distinctly perceptible, even *that* — even this mere numerical double of his own consciousness — might be a curse too mighty to be sustained.'<sup>7</sup> Similarly Gothic dimensions to the disorienting doublings of the mind had by then entered the psychological fiction of the period in James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), taking the problematic distinction of likeness and identity (and the disjunction of the imagination and its moral referent) to their most disturbing extreme.

While this may take us a little way from Coleridge's own experience (and in the later Notebooks, by 1827 he explicitly rejects the notion of solipsism), it might help to clarify the anxiety which he increasingly brings to bear on the acts of symbolic intuition and perception, vision and experience. That self-consciousness appears at many points in Coleridge's writing to be associated with a fall from unconscious unity with the perceived world, into an awareness of the division between inner and outer worlds. The redemptive longings of the imagination are thus orientated towards a recovery of something

<sup>5</sup> De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, gen.ed. Grevel Lindop (London 2000-3) II, 68-9.

<sup>6</sup> 'Suspiria de Profundis' in *Works* XV, 184.

<sup>7</sup> 'The English Mail Coach' in *Works* XVI, 422-3.

approximating the childlike radiant unconsciousness he observed in his son Hartley in a letter of 1803:

An utter Visionary! like the Moon among thin Clouds, he moves in a circle of Light of his own making—he alone, in a Light of his own. Of all human Beings I never yet saw one so naked of *Self*<sup>8</sup>

The imaginative recuperation of unconscious communion with natural phenomena (a pivotal transition for example in ‘The Ancient Mariner’, from nightmarish alienation into the moonlit incandescence in which, his sensibility renewed, he blesses the water snakes ‘unaware’) is a myth central to Coleridge’s poetry, yet one which becomes increasingly difficult to realise in the pages of his later Notebooks. In its place, we see the gradual encroachment of what he called in the first published version of ‘Frost at Midnight’ ‘the self-watching subtilizing mind’,<sup>9</sup> overseeing the perceptual process and threatening to impair the spontaneity of his creative powers.

Coleridge’s theory, expounded in *Biographia Literaria*, that poetry requires ‘an interpenetration of passion and will, of *spontaneous* impulse and of *voluntary* purpose’<sup>10</sup> is complicated by the principle observed by Hazlitt whereby ‘purpose... takes away that tremulous sensibility to every slight and wandering impression which is necessary to complete the fine balance of the mind’.<sup>11</sup> It was an anxiety which rang all too true for the Victorian inheritors of Coleridge’s legacy. Matthew Arnold’s observation on the ‘perception of poetic truth’ seems grounded in such experience: ‘[it] is of all things the most volatile, elusive, and evanescent; by even pressing too impetuously after it, one runs the risk of losing it’.<sup>12</sup> John Stuart Mill recorded his strong identification with Coleridge, ‘in whom alone of all writers I have found a true description of what I felt’ when his own intellectual crisis led him to a conviction of the necessity of unself-consciousness to enable the individual to ‘inhale happiness with the air you breathe, without... either forestalling it in imagination or putting it to flight by fatal questioning’.<sup>13</sup>

Over the course of his Notebook reflections, Coleridge’s increasing self-consciousness in the act of perception develops particularly in relation to the ways in which it was becoming subject to a larger philosophical freight. By 1805 he was reflecting directly on the encroachment of the symbolic imagination on the act of perception:

In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro’ the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something

<sup>8</sup> *Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford, 1956-71), II, 1014.

<sup>9</sup> Variorum Text line 19.1.8 in *Collected Works* 16 (II.1), 571.

<sup>10</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Engell and W. J. Bate (1983) in *Collected Works* VII, II, 65.

<sup>11</sup> Hazlitt, *Works*, ed. P. P. Howe (London, 1930-4) II, 261.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold, *Complete Prose Works*, ed. R. H. Super (Michigan, 1960-77), I, 174.

<sup>13</sup> J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. J. Stillinger (Oxford, 1971) pp. 84, 86.

within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phaenomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner Nature (CN II 2546)

He identifies it as a kind of epistemological habit, the 'seeking' and 'asking' related to other forms of transcendental yearning, but here explicitly seen as jeopardising the acuteness of his powers of sensory perception and the capacity for 'observing anything new'.

By 1808 he was analysing the role of the Notebooks themselves in the symbol-making process and the imaginative, even spiritual, need at its root. He begins one entry with an apostrophe to his Notebook: 'Ah! dear Book! Sole Confidant of a breaking Heart' and after a long elaboration and digression continues:

every generous mind... feels its *Halfness*—it cannot *think* without a symbol—neither can it *live* without something that is to be at once its Symbol, & its *Other half*... Hence I deduce the habit, I have most unconsciously formed, of *writing* my inmost thoughts—I have not a soul on earth to whom I can reveal them... and therefore to you, my passive, yet sole, true and kind, friends I reveal them. (CN III 3325)

Here the Notebooks themselves become a stand-in for that 'Other half' — at once a surrogate for the lifetime partner and companion he never truly had, and also a Platonic counterpart and supplement to the 'halfness' of the mind, which delivers the sense of wholeness, oneness and unity he always craved. He identifies that counterpart, for which the Notebooks are made a substitute, as the Symbol, a concept so essential for Coleridge that without it, the mind 'cannot *think*' and ultimately cannot '*live*'.

Since the 1790s Coleridge had been prone to the temptations of neo-Platonic philosophy, which reduced the natural world to a series of reflective signs or likenesses of their true spiritual or essential prototypes, while 'we in this low world / [are] Placed with our backs to bright Reality'. The imagery of Plato's cave in this passage from his poem 'The Destiny of Nations' renders 'all that meets the bodily sense... Symbolical' and human cognition a process of making out 'the substance from the shadow'.<sup>14</sup> However, returning to his Notebook reflections of 1808, we see another, more empirical tradition complicating his philosophical allegiances. Here the reality in which his beloved Symbols are felt to be ultimately deficient is an external, earthly one, rather than that of Platonic essential Ideas:

All minds must think by some *symbols*—the strongest minds possess the most vivid Symbols in the Imagination—yet this ingenerates a *want*... for vividness...: which something that is *without*, that has the

<sup>14</sup> ll.18-21, in *Collected Works* XVI (I.1), 282.

property of *Outness* (a word which Berkeley preferred to 'Externality')  
can alone fully gratify. (CN III 3325)

Here in a nutshell is the dichotomy on which so many of the Notebook entries turn — for Coleridge, on the one hand the mind yearns for, and needs for its very existence, the unifying force of the Symbol, which has the power to deliver a higher order of meaning. On the other hand, that meaning is ultimately an inward, self-reflexive attribute, and the more he pursues its transcendental prospects, the more it threatens to shade off into the problematic self-doubling, even duplicity, of a world of imaginative substitution, 'that likeness not identity' which had troubled him in the earlier note of 1804. As Coleridge acknowledges in this passage, for all its imaginative and spiritual promise, the symbol-making faculty is prone to take him away from the outside world, leaving him sensing a 'want' of 'vividness', a need for the outwardness or 'externality' of the living world experienced not in the imagination, but through the senses. For Coleridge more than anyone, the risk that the symbolic imagination might deprive his apprehension of the natural world of its sensory immediacy was acutely felt; to us too it seems especially poignant, since he had such an extraordinarily fine eye for its beauties, and a naturalist's gift of detailed observation in the empirical tradition of Gilbert White.

In this context, the drive of many of his Notebook entries seems to be to find some compromise between the vulnerable transience of natural phenomena and the inviolacy of abstractions, which had led him to exclaim in an entry in 1799, 'how perishable Things, how imperishable Ideas' (CN I 576). Thus, three years later he seizes on 'The stedfast rainbow in the fast-moving, hurrying, hail-mist' as an image 'of fantastic Permanence amidst the rapid Change of Tempest' (CN I 1246), even in the knowledge that rainbows are the most evanescent of phenomena, their proverbial promise of incorruptible gold inevitably delusive. The search for what he called in *Biographia*, 'a substratum of permanence, of identity, and therefore of reality, to the shadowy flux of Time'<sup>15</sup> takes us back to the Platonic model, but with a strong counter-tendency to value things in themselves for mortal, sensory beauties of a more earthly kind.

That tension between symbolic apprehension and empirical experience is one which Coleridge felt to be especially characteristic of the Notebooks' medium. In the Prospectus to *The Friend*, in one of his few public references to the Notebooks, he writes of 'daily noting down, in my Memorandum or Common-place Books... whatever had occurred to me from without, and all the Flux and Reflux of my Mind within itself'.<sup>16</sup> At times it appears that Coleridge can pull off a delicate balancing act between the two, as in his finest poetry; at others, the effect is more destabilising, and progressively one senses

<sup>15</sup> *Biographia*, II, 234.

<sup>16</sup> *Collected Works* IV. II, 17.

the encroachment of Symbols and images — ‘that likeness not identity’— at the expense of his earlier intimate, unconscious identification with the natural world.

Passages from the earlier Notebooks help to clarify just how much was at stake. Here is Coleridge in the lakes in 1799, showing his extraordinary passion for observing the changing effects of light on landscape, and an eager instinct to put those evanescent phenomena into words that might last, extemporising freely with language in the hopes of catching a momentary effect:

I have come suddenly upon Ulswater, running straight on the opposite Bank, till the Placefell, that noble Promontory runs into it, & gives it the winding of a majestic River, a little below Placefell a large Slice of calm silver—above this a bright ruffledness, or atomic sportiveness—motes in the sun?—Vortices of flies?—how shall I express the Banks waters all fused Silver, that House too its slates rainwet silver in the sun, & its shadows running down in the water like a column—the Woods on the right shadowy with Sunshine, and in front of me the sloping hollow of sunpatched Fields, sloping up into Hills so playful, the playful Hills so going away in snow-streaked savage black mountain—But I have omitted the two island Rocks in the Lake (& the colors of the Lake all changed!) The one scarce visible in the shadow-coloured Slip now bordered by the melted Silver—the other nearer to me, likewise in the glossy shadow, but far removed from the Dazzle & quite conspicuous—The Sun, it being just past noon, hangs over the Lake—clouded so that any but a weak eye might gaze on it—the clouds being in part bright white, part dusky Rain-clouds, with islets of blue Sky (CN I 549)

The endless improvisation of these passages and their sense of real-time description of meteorological phenomena is reminiscent of Constable's equally obsessive cloud studies, dashed off at speed to catch a passing light effect, with notes on the back recording date, time and place. Like Constable, Coleridge took an interest that was not just artistic but passionately empirical, observing and recording time and again, in an effort to understand something of the force behind the changing patterns of light and weather.

That interest extended for Coleridge beyond the phenomena perceived to the act of perception, not only in epistemological terms as part of his philosophy, but also in terms of physiology. A number of Notebook entries bear witness to his fascination with the optical process. Interestingly, the mechanics of vision seem most to excite his interest where they provide a literal instance of the doubling of likenesses; early in 1804 he writes, ‘last night each time I started from Sleep the one candle by my bedside were seen as two distinct candles, for the first moment/. The least variation of the organ, from its ordinary state destroys single Vision’ (CN II 1863). Paradoxically, in the cases where he records ‘a pretty optical fact’ (in the passage which follows,

from 1803) or 'a fact of Vision' (in 1808), the 'fact' is the visual process or phenomenon, and its object actually an illusion or *trompe d'oeuil*.

As I was returning from Fletcher's, up the back lane, & just in sight of the River, I saw floating high in the air, somewhere over the Banks's, a noble *Kite*—I continued gazing at [it] for some time; when turning suddenly round I saw at an equidistance on my right, i.e. over the middle of our field, a pair of Kites—floating about—I looked at them for some seconds when it occurred to me that I had never before seen two Kites together—instantly the vision disappeared—it was neither more nor less than two pairs of Leaves, each pair on a separate Stalk, on a young Fruit tree that grew on the other side of the wall, not two yards from my eye. The leaves being alternate did, when I looked at them as leaves, strikingly resemble wings—& they were the only leaves on the Tree.—The magnitude was given by the imagined Distance; that Distance by the former Adjustment of the Eye, which *remained* in consequence of the deep impression, length of time, I had been looking at the Kite... (CN I 1668)

Five years later, in a passage where he records 'on Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> March 1808, I had a fact of Vision', there is a more forced attempt to reproduce the optical illusion, and to analyse the phenomenon, with Coleridge now fully conscious of the duplicity of the visual reproduction:

I again voluntarily threw myself into introversive Reflections, & again produced the same Enlargement of Shapes & Distances and the same increase of vividness—but all seemed to be seen thro' a very thin, glaceous mist—thro' an interposed Mass of Jelly of the most exquisite subtlety & transparency. But my reason for noting this is—the fact, in my second & voluntary production of this Vision I retained it as long as I like... without destroying the Delusion/—then started my eyes & something... of the Brain behind the eyes started or jirked them forward, and all was again as in common. / The power of acting on a *delusion*, according to the Delusion, without dissolving it/ (CN III 3280)

There is something of the deliberateness of a scientific experiment about this passage, and less of the unconscious magic which had earlier held him spellbound watching the imaginary kites: philosophy unweaving the rainbow, perhaps, and leaving him more prosaically aware of his delusion. The resulting sense that 'all was again as in common' suggests that he had emerged into something like Wordsworth's light of common day, bereft of the qualities which had illuminated his earlier vision. He is aware too that the illusion was above all based on an intermediate substance, the 'very thin, glaceous mist' or 'interposed Mass of Jelly' — a physiological token for the way in which the act of perception seems increasingly for Coleridge to be consciously mediated

indeed mediated by consciousness — no longer the *immediate* participation in the scene which had characterised the earlier Notebook entries. By 1827, a note on the 'Difference between mental & corporeal optics' (CN V 5514) is directed towards moralising conclusions on the nature of religious delusion.

The spontaneous energy which had driven so many passages in the early Notebooks gradually gives way over the early 1800s to the self-consciousness about the process of observation with which I began. That sense of process, now bringing with it a consciousness of change and finally loss, is all too evident in a poignant entry where one of his minutely recorded descriptions of nocturnal light and sound shades off into something symbolic of the notion that an element of his imaginative life had deserted him:

Wednesday Morning, 20 minutes past 2<sup>o</sup>clock. November 2<sup>nd</sup>. 1803. The Voice of the Greta, and the Cock-crowing: the Voice seems to grow, like a Flower on or about the water beyond the Bridge, while the Cock crowing is nowhere particular, it is at any place I imagine & do not distinctly see. A most remarkable Sky! The Moon, now waned to a perfect Ostrich's Egg, hangs over our House almost—only so much beyond it, garden-ward, that I can see it, holding my Head out of the smaller Study window. The Sky is covered with whitish, & with dingy *Cloudage*, thin dingiest Scud close under the moon & one side of it moving, all else moveless: but there are two great Breaks of Blue Sky—the one stretching over our House, & away toward Castlerigg, & this is speckled & blotched with white Cloud... Now while I have been writing this & gazing between whiles (it is 40 M. past Two) the Break over the road is swallowed up, & the Stars gone, the Break over the House is narrowed into a rude Circle, & on the edge of its circumference one very bright Star—see!... it has bedimmed it—& now it is gone—& the Moon is gone. The Cock-crowing too has ceased. The Greta sounds on, for ever. But I hear only the Ticking of my Watch, in the Pen-place of my writing Desk, & the far lower note of the noise of the Fire—perpetual, yet seeming uncertain/it is the low voice of quiet change, of Destruction doing its work by little & little. (CN I 1635)

Significantly, the sense of deprivation — 'it is gone' — is associated with a movement away from what he elsewhere referred to as 'outness' or externality in the point of connection with the natural world; with his head literally out of the study window, he is alive to every momentary, magical change in the moonlight; as he descends into the indoor firelight, something profound is felt to have been lost. The movement from moonlight into darkness, and the subsidence of his heightened perception into the awareness only of a mechanical ticking, enact a sense of irreversible change in his relationship with the world, wrought by the passage of time, treacherously recorded on the face of his watch. The movement of the second hand seems to hold a double meaning — the passage of direct experience in the immediate moment (and a

vividness of perception that is literally unmediated) into the recorded, constructed image, mediated by language into something which renders it, finally, second hand. That ticking away of his powers is located very precisely 'in the Pen-place of my writing desk', literally at the seat of his activity as a writer.

Two years later in 1805, he returns to this preoccupation with timepieces, showing himself acutely aware of their more figurative significance:

The more I reflect, the more exact & close appears to me the Similie of a Watch and Watches: the Sun & motion of the heavenly Bodies in general, to the conscience and consciences : : to the reason & goodness of the Supreme./Never goes quite right, any one; no two go exactly the same, they derive their dignity and use as being Substitutes and Exponents of heavenly motions/but still in a thousand instances they are & must be our instructors, by which we must act...

(CN II 2661)

Where earlier the watch had been a reminder of time, change and loss, here Coleridge reflects on the status of watches as an imperfect likeness of the real heavenly timepiece, the Sun, providing everyday 'Substitutes... by which we must act'. We are back to the substitution of likeness for identity, the world of the second-hand surrogate, a consciousness which seems to mark a kind of disillusionment.

Linguistically he explicitly identifies the image which stands in or doubles for something else, as a simile — the rhetorical figure most clearly suited to a world that has become characterised by 'that likeness not identity'. A few years earlier, in a letter to William Sotheby of September 1802, Coleridge had written witheringly of the use of simile in Bowles's poetry:

never to see or describe any interesting appearance in nature, without connecting it by dim analogies with the moral world, proves faintness of Impression... A Poet's *Heart & Intellect* should be *combined, intimately combined & unified*, with the great appearances in Nature— & not merely held in solution & loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal Similes.

(CL II 864)

In particular he associates this denigrating view of similes with 'a perpetual trick of *moralizing* every thing' and consigns them to the pulpit, '*Proper for a Sermon*'. Yet within a couple of years, Coleridge, in his own Notebooks, was revealing himself alive to just such possibilities for simile:

The little *point*, or... *Globe* of Flame, on the lighted Taper remaining unaltered 3 minutes or more—given over then at once the flame darts or plunges down into the wick, up again—& all is bright—a fair cone of Flame with its black column in it, & minor cone shadow-colored—resting upon the blue flame... A pretty [,] detailed Simile in the

manner of J. Taylor might be made of this (CN II 2129)

Ascribing the unspecified analogy to the mode of a noted sermon writer such as the seventeenth-century theologian Jeremy Taylor allows Coleridge a little distance from the rhetorical figure he had recently described in such pejorative terms. Reflecting on why the simile's referent is left unarticulated, suspended in a rather uncharacteristic silence, I am reminded of how this imagery of the guttering flame had been strikingly anticipated in a letter to Godwin he had written in 1801, describing the process by which his tendency for 'chasing down metaphysical Game' had led to a process of 'intellectual *exsiccation*':

The Poet is dead in me—my imagination (or rather the Somewhat that had been imaginative) lies, like a Cold Snuff on the circular Rim of a Brass Candle-stick, without even a stink of Tallow to remind you that it was once cloathed & mitred with Flame. (CL II 713-4)

The analogy hovering unspoken over his Notebook entry may well in this context refer to his declining imaginative powers, suggesting that in both form and unarticulated content, the simile — a figure he had so disparaged in the year of his 'Dejection' crisis for its imaginative deficiencies — was becoming his native mode.

Progressively in the later Notebooks we find Coleridge himself using similes for just such a moralising purpose as he that for which he had so castigated Bowles. A finely descriptive passage of lightning flashes illuminating a ruined castle in 1809 ends abruptly with the need to draw an allegorical likeness: 'how hieroglyphic of human Life—of a man cast on shore, and raising himself up by both arms from his *prostration*' (CN III 3258). The choice of a storm scene for his analogy seems particularly ironic in the light of a passage from *The Friend* where he later chose a tempest to illustrate the phenomenon of sublimity 'absolutely suspending the power of comparison, and... utterly absorbing the mind's self-consciousness'.<sup>17</sup> The later Notebooks suggest rather that self-consciousness was not so easily absorbed and the faculty of comparison, drawing likenesses for want of such sublime moments of unity, was *faute de mieux* an imaginative resource to be exploited. The same simile of the lightning flash returns in a note of 1827 which suggests an anxiety about somehow missing his own chances for epiphany or revelation:

As unsatisfying as Flashes of horizon Lightning, when one says—well! I'll leave off looking at the next flash, which is sure to come either too soon or with too long an interval, for one to keep the resolve—even tho' one's eyes are aching with looking at the twilight horizon! (CN V 5579)

Increasingly simile becomes a characteristic rhetorical figure, as the immediacy

<sup>17</sup> *The Friend*, I, 367-9.

and live descriptive extemporisation of the earlier entries is overtaken by the deliberateness of philosophically-driven analogy. Yet it is characteristic of Coleridge that he should be able to describe and deploy this process himself to great imaginative effect. An entry dated 1820 or '21 (the final extract in Perry's selection), gives a wonderful description and example of the ways in which similes play an increasing role in the later Notebooks: 'Amid the profoundest and most condensed constructions of hardest Thinking, the playfulness of the Boy starts up, like a wild Fig-tree from monumental Marble' (CN IV 4777). Coleridge has moved into a more mediated, self-conscious mode of philosophical writing, yet many of his similes still share in miniature the magical qualities of his earlier notebook descriptions — drawing on the experiences of his youth ('the playfulness of the Boy'), but with a consciousness that they now belong to a world of analogy, rather than lived experience in the here and now.

The vividness of his earlier sensitivity to evanescent effects in the natural world is still present in a kind of rhetorical echo, even as it becomes subordinated to his figurative purpose, in the service of those 'profoundest and most condensed constructions of hardest Thinking'. Thus in an entry of the same period, it is not the living scene, but an abstract philosophical proposition which has him exclaiming, '*How luminous! As plain to be seen, as an Eel in an old Fish-pond, from which the water has been just let off, or the Sun glittering on the mud and sparkling on the Duck-weed!*' (CN IV 4521) For Coleridge's modern readers, the brilliance of the natural observation distilled in his simile is infinitely more lucid than the philosophical point at issue, and it gives us a tantalising and ultimately nostalgic flash of the 'old' Coleridge.

The changes I have been tracing through Coleridge's Notebook reflections suggest that there is broadly a progression (in some senses perhaps more a decline) over the course of Coleridge's imaginative career, in the movement out of one mode of experience, vision and language, into another. It is the accompanying senses of elegy or irony in the knowledge of what has been lost which gives many of the later entries their emotional charge. However, it is worth counterpointing that linear version of his career with a more complex sense that many of the same ironies — problematic and finally poignant in their capacity to defeat his transcendental longings — are present in his poetry from an early stage. Susan Wolfson has shown brilliantly how the simile's operation as a troubling figure for the visionary shortfall of a world characterised by 'that likeness not identity' is also characteristic of much of his finest poetry.<sup>18</sup> In Wolfson's readings, some of the most highly-charged epiphanic moments are qualified and attenuated by the dilution of Coleridge's climactic affirmations of identity or union with the object of his vision, into the more provisional mode of similitudes. The rhetoric of likeness is based ultimately on an

<sup>18</sup> Susan Wolfson, 'Comparing Power: Coleridge and Simile' in Christine Gallant (ed.), *Coleridge's Theory of Imagination Today* (New York, 1989), reworked as chapter 3, 'The Framings of Simile: Coleridge's "Comparing Power"' in *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, 1997).

acknowledgement of difference, and even disjunction — a sense which is clearly present in a note of 1827 where he refers to ‘the efforts of Nature to reconcile chasm with continuity—to vault and nevertheless to glide’ (CN V 5494). While it is tempting for us to anatomise these ironies in Coleridge as though from a more knowing vantage-point than his own, he seems to be always there before us, anticipating the sense of his own deficiency. It is perhaps worth reflecting, too, that the self-consciousness that destroyed the immediacy of his early passionate identification with the natural world was in the end a humanising influence in relation to the formidable ambitions — transcendental or rhetorical — invested in his later philosophical abstractions.

The increase in self-consciousness, and with it the progressively more formal and rhetorically literary quality of Coleridge's notebook entries, is no doubt related to his changing intentions concerning possible publication. While the earliest notebooks are clearly impromptu, private jottings — informal in tone, improvisatory in their expression and punctuation — and lack any formal structure, there are increasing hints in the later notebooks (particularly in the most recently published fifth volume of the Coburn edition) that he was in fact beginning to envisage some sort of afterlife for the Notebooks in the hands of those to whom he left them. He writes in a note of September 1830:

If any Stranger should light on this... let him read them not as asserted truths, but as processes of a mind working toward truth—& construe the occasional *positiveness* of the language as expressing only the conviction of the moment, which however lively is yet quite compatible with an unfeigned, yea, at the very moment co-present, sense of the probability of my being in error, or at least of half-truth.

(CN V 6450)

There is a sense here of apology and defensiveness against future misreadings: to articulate the provisional nature of the entries seems to acknowledge the encroachment of a perspective where something more doctrinaire than ‘the conviction of the moment’ may be required. Yet there is something quintessentially Coleridgean about that rueful sense that he dwells in a world of contingent half-truths rather than certainties — it is his own kind of negative capability, which at best the Notebooks seem ideally designed to foster. With the spectre of the reading public intermittently hovering over the later entries, the Notebooks' glorious freedom from the portentousness of Coleridge's public utterances begins to be lost, and with it something of their improvisatory energy and charm. For me their greatest achievement and capacity to move lies in the very instability of perception and insight that is figured in the shimmering, dazzling, evanescent play of light he so often evokes — the precarious oscillation in the mind's eye between those changing modes of vision and experience.