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Coleridge's Responses, Volume III: Coleridge on Nature and Vision

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edited by Samantha Harvey

THIS VOLUME is the third in a three-part series designed to offer both specialists and general readers a focused collection of Coleridge's thoughts on a particular area of interest. As John Beer, the series editor, asserts, nature and its relationship to the divine 'was always at the heart' of Coleridge's career, from his early minute observations of nature to his final meditations on God (xiii). Accordingly, volume editor Samantha Harvey has surveyed the whole range of Coleridge's writing, 'sifting the gems from the dross' with the unifying theme of vision as 'the sieve' (1). 'Vision' here encompasses both what can be perceived, and how it is perceived, dual aspects that are inseparable although, as the volume makes clear, their relationship changed as Coleridge's thought unfolded. The volume is organized to show an evolution from lower to higher—that is, from observed natural details, to lyric and artistic vision, to supernatural vision, to philosophical vision, culminating in Coleridge's vision of God. This ascending series follows a roughly chronological development, from youthful descriptive intuition to the mature elaboration of an aesthetic and philosophical framework to the religiosity of Coleridge's old age, although it's worth noting that each section includes material from across many years, showing that the developmental arc was hardly lockstep. Extracts are taken from Coleridge's miscellaneous notes, marginalia, lectures, notebooks, and letters as well as his published poetry and prose, so readers can follow ideas in various stages of incubation and polish.

This method of panning for gold in the mine of Coleridge's voluminous works and presenting the nuggets in such a systematized form—six hierarchically arranged chapters, each broken into subsections also arranged hierarchically from lower to higher—has both advantages and limitations. There is naturally a loss of context: these keynote passages come to the reader divorced from Coleridge's life experience and larger arguments, resulting in an impression of inclusiveness that nevertheless leaves out a great deal. On the other hand, the advantage of the editor's method lies in the creation of *new* contexts, which highlight connections otherwise very difficult to see. Perhaps the most striking of the connections made evident in this volume is the prevalence throughout Coleridge's most abstruse abstractions of the visual, even visceral, image. Coleridge may be thinking about Imagination and Spirit and Reason, but he is thinking *in terms of* waterbugs and crocuses, acorns and oaks, lakes, rivers, mountains and meadows. Thus, although this is a difficult book to read end-to-end, doing so is immensely rewarding if one builds on a first reading to generate a mental cross-index of Coleridge's thought. Starting with any one cluster, one can flip back and forth through the pages, comparing

and connecting, watching Coleridge's mind ramifying and deepening. Such active reading will soon send one back to Coleridge's collected volumes, to pursue new insights within the wider contexts that this collection necessarily leaves out. On balance, the loss in original context is well worth the gain in insight.

The editor's arrangement into a series of ascending categories, from earth to heaven, explores at each level Coleridge's three 'modes of vision': 'the outward and objective, the emotional and subjective, and the transcendental or spiritual,' corresponding to what Harvey calls 'the romantic triad, or the relationship between nature, humanity, and the divine' (9, 2). In this triad, nature becomes an active partner in the human mind's quest to know itself and the world, and, through learning how to read that world, to reunification with God the Creator. Active vision, which required 'cultivation and development,' becomes the engine that propels this spiritual ascent, making vision a mode of redemption and the poetic imagination not a passive receiver but an active 'mediator between nature, the human world, and the divine' (9). As Coleridge famously said, the poet 'brings the whole soul of man into activity,' fusing faculties together to reveal 'the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities' into 'one graceful and intelligent whole' (88-89).

Put like this, it sounds easy; for Coleridge it wasn't easy at all. That this aesthetic/metaphysical complex now sounds so straightforward is his legacy to us. Coleridge experienced the paradox of God's oneness against the manyness of his creation as 'the Riddle of the World' (4, 147, 180). In Malta, for instance, he struggled to express the sea, that 'Ocean of lovely forms!,' not just as a sentence but as 'the marvelous distinctness & unconfounded personality of each of the million millions of forms, and yet their undivided Unity in which they subsisted' (40-41). This poetic dilemma, the gulf between the play of words and the world's 'undivided Unity,' opened into the existential dilemma that runs like a fault line through the landscape of his thought: was the natural world self-existent, to be seen on its own terms, or was it a translucent manifestation of a higher power?

One feels this pull most strongly in the volume's opening pages, which include descriptive passages of uncanny brilliance:

Lizard green with bright gold spots all over—firmness of its *stand-like* feet, where the *Life* of the *threddy* Toes makes them both seem & be so firm, so solid—yet so very, very supple/ one pretty fellow, whom I had fascinated by stopping & gazing at him as he lay in a <thick> network of Sun & Shade... turned his Head to me, depressed it, & looked up half-watching; half-imploring, at length taking advantage of a brisk breeze that made all the Network dance & Toss, & darted off as if an Angel of Nature had spoken in the Breeze—Off! I'll take care, he shall not hurt you/... (34)

This green gold-spotted lizard, ‘half watching; half imploring,’ is as endearingly self-existent as any being in Coleridge, except perhaps for his spooky watchful nightingales, with ‘Their bright, bright eyes, their eyes both bright and full,/ Glistening’ (62). Ten years later, though, Coleridge questions whether birds have any interior existence at all: ‘has the Bird Hope? Or does it abandon itself to the Joy of its Frame—a living Harp of Eolus?’ (35). By the time he wrote *Biographia Literaria*, the question seems to have been resolved in favor of the organizing power of the ‘Imagination,’ which is ‘essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead’ (96). What animates this passive or even ‘dead’ material nature is the ‘antecedent unity’ of all creation that Coleridge calls, in line with ‘Bacon and Kepler... a law’ (80). All nature is analogous to the crocus, whose various parts—‘root, stem, leaves, petals, &c. cohere to one plant... owing to an antecedent power or principle in the seed,’ which existed before a single particle of matter ‘had been attracted from the surrounding soil, air, and moisture’ (80-81). In the *Lay Sermons*, this antecedent power is explicitly ‘the transmitted power, love and wisdom of God’ that ‘shines through’ a translucent nature. The human task is to become, consciously, what nature is without consciousness: ‘what the plant *is* by an act not its own and unconsciously—*that* must *thou* make thyself to *become*’ by prayer and grace (194). The book’s closing pages complete the trajectory: ‘Life begins in detachment from Nature, and ends in union with God’ (215).

If, with Bruno Latour, one sees this split of object from subject, nature from human, as the generative act of modernism, one will have to acknowledge that Coleridge was so endlessly fertile and formative precisely because he was modernism’s leading architect. That he ends in locating transcendence not in physical nature but in the law of nature, a law which he identifies with the law of ‘Bacon and Kepler’ and with God’s germinal Idea, completes the modern trajectory. The romantic triad of nature, man, and God has been rearranged into the romantic ascension from earth to heaven by emptying nature of all self-organization, so it might serve as a vehicle for divine spirit. Insight culminates when nature disappears altogether, kicked away like scaffolding.

What this volume makes available is the emergence of modernism as a process that did a kind of necessary cultural work for Coleridge, who was self-aware enough to record its losses and costs as well as its gains. His need to solve the ‘Riddle of the World,’ how to resolve the many into the one, gained urgency from the horror of the French Revolution, which figured the many as a political threat to social coherence. Coleridge brought this threat under control in *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, but the manyness of nature proved still more treacherous: as he wrote in an 1825 letter to James Gillman, ‘But alas! alas! that Nature is a wary wily long-breathed old witch, tough-lived as a turtle and divisible as the polyp, repullulative in a thousand snips and cuttings, *integra et in toto!* She is sure to get the better of Lady *Mind* in the long

run and to take her revenge too' (109). Disciplining that wily old witch into 'subordination,' 'submission,' or 'subjection' (172, 170, 177) required an aesthetic intervention that converted Nature from a balanced and opposed power to a 'symbol... characterized by a translucence of the... eternal through and in the temporal,' which, 'while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative' (77). Thus Nature as the symbolic art of God became the model for the art of the poet, that secondary creator whose Imagination works like God's not by pushing around pretty shapes and colors, those 'coloured shadows,' but by seizing their generative Law. But remarkably, this also became Coleridge's model for the scientist: 'The human mind is the compass, in which the laws and actuations of all outward essences are revealed as the dips and declinations... True natural philosophy is comprised in the study of the science and language of *symbols*.... The genuine naturalist is a dramatic poet in his own line' (196).

Some natural objects respond very well to this aesthetic imperative. Interestingly, lizards and nightingales do not. Their glittering eyes and uncanny movements make them altogether too adult, too 'witchy.' The chrysalis, however, does: it figures repeatedly in these pages as a symbol for the potential in the actual. As Coleridge writes, those only can understand the self-intuitive symbol 'who feel in their own spirit the same instinct, which impels the chrysalis of the horned fly to leave room in its *involutrum* for *antennæ* yet to come' (81, 154; 198). Just so does the unborn human have eyes, ears, and lungs, furnishing proof of 'a transuterine, visible, audible atmospheric world,' and just so do we have 'spiritual senses, and sense-organs—ideas I mean'—referring to a corresponding world that transcends this one (158). As Ralph Waldo Emerson asked, in a typical rewording of Coleridge, 'Does not the eye of the human embryo predict the light?' (21). The chrysalis is prophetic because it so neatly telescopes ascending stages in development, as does the seed, Coleridge's primary symbolic natural object, which contains and unfolds into the entire range of developmental stages all organized by that germinal and antecedent idea: plant, tree, meadow, world. Coleridge thus develops a host of metaphors from plants and insects, which he finds 'at once an instance & an illustration of the poetic process' (91). In *Lay Sermons*, he offers perhaps the most intriguing of his readings of 'the great book of [God's] servant Nature' in 'the flowery meadow,' which stretches before his eye like 'a beautiful infant that has fed itself asleep at its mother's bosom.' In the long passage that follows Coleridge evokes not just a single plant's life-cycle but a whole divine ecology. The 'each' of single plants coexists 'in the unity of a higher form, the crown and completion of the earthly, and the mediator of a new and heavenly series.' The 'vegetable creation' in *internal* structure symbolizes 'the unity of nature,' while the meadow 'in its *external* variety and manifoldness' represents 'the omniformity of her delegated functions' in *textual* form: it 'becomes the record and chronicle' that 'enchases that vast unfolded volume of the earth

with the hieroglyphics of her history' (193-95). In *The Friend*, Coleridge explains how this analogy with reading works: the illiterate Indian perusing the Bible can only sort the black stokes into 'ciphers, letters, marks, and points,' until the 'friendly missionary' arrives and translates marks into thoughts, the book into a 'living oracle': 'The words become transparent, and he sees them as though he saw them not' (176). Nature vanishes before the Invisible (67).

Yet of course it does not vanish at all. Coleridge's Godscapes are readings of very material and particular landscapes, from the neighborhood invoked in 'This Lime-tree Bower My Prison' (47-49), to the Ancient Mariner's weird Gothic seascapes (136-40), to the Alps as a figure for transcendence (153), or Lake Geneva for the ascension to the fountainhead of meaning (162). One thus sees in this volume an extraordinary compaction of potentials, which in successive writers both cis- and transatlantic diversify into an array of possibilities. Speaking for the Transatlantic side, Emerson virtually channels Coleridge, rejuvenating his line of transcendental idealism, including the impulse to make nature disappear into the Invisible, from his early sermons through his last essays and lectures. But curiously, the harder Coleridge combated French materialism, the more he provoked those who took up and developed materialism into alternative versions of modernisms, most notably the German Alexander von Humboldt, and Henry David Thoreau. And finally, those Gothic innerscapes, in which nature is wholly subjected to a mind that is variously passive, perverted, or corrupted, were a primer for Edgar Allan Poe's triumphs of horror, particularly the voyage of his own Ancient Mariner, Arthur Gordon Pym. Are these three impulses, then, joined at the root? In 'History,' Emerson deftly reworks the Coleridgean oracle right to the end, when suddenly he tells us to 'hear the rats in the wall, see the lizard on the fence... . What do I know sympathetically, morally, of either of these worlds of life?... What does Rome know of rat and lizard?'¹. Talk of the return of the repressed! Rats and lizards, nightingales and albatrosses, nibble at the foundations of History, Church, and State. One might be forgiven for wondering whether, without this Gothic fear of their imploring, alien, and glittering eyes, would Coleridge—would we—have ever arrived at Modernism at all?

¹ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 'History.' *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979: 2:222.