AFTER ATTENDING THE NASSR CONFERENCE in Bologna several years ago, I took the opportunity of being in that part of Europe to follow, as best I could, Coleridge’s steps through mainland Italy in 1805-06. As Morton Paley has meticulously documented in his recent study, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts*, and as Eduardo Zuccato emphasizes in *Coleridge in Italy*, the Italian journey stands at the epicenter of Coleridge’s experience of visual art. Despite the loss, at sea, of the trunk that probably contained other records of aesthetic encounters than those in the notebooks and letters available to us today, Coleridge’s memories of this period form the axis or fulcrum upon which his subsequent thinking on matters of visual representation turns. In a related sense, as I will argue here, Coleridge’s reflections on the images he beheld in Italy are also crucial to his thinking on memory itself, and more generally to the philosophy of history he develops in later works. As he suggestively—but also, I think, characteristically—puts its while meditating on his Italian voyage in “The Garden of Boccaccio” some two decades later, what brings him out of his “dreary mood,” the “dull continuous ache” that has arisen from calling “on the Past for thought of glee or grief?” is none other than a piece of visual art, an “exquisite design” placed upon his desk by the “quiet hand” of Anne Gillman. What is remarkable about “The Garden of Boccaccio” is not just that Coleridge presents memory as failing to provide sources of relief—a role assigned in the *Biographia* when he describes Fancy as a form of memory operating through fixities and definites, and which he laments the loss of in “This Lime-tree Bower my Prison”—“Beauties and Feelings, such as would have been / Most sweet to my remembrance” (*PW* I.1: 3-4) —it is not just the failure to find such forms of consolation that distinguishes the “Garden,” but it is the role played by visual art in transporting him to an immanent present or Now through which all of the once-distant configurations of his life and career come into an ecstatic but reflective unison. As I will discuss today, such temporal concerns are central to Coleridge’s thinking on the fine arts: and visual representation is a central feature of his thinking on temporality. In both of these respects, the primary arena for Coleridge’s working-out of these ideas is his Mediterranean voyage of 1805-06, and the main stage in that arena is the cemetery at Pisa, the Campo Santo.

The Italian experience is a watershed moment in Coleridge’s thinking on matters of visual representation and aesthetics in general; he beheld such monuments as Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel frescoes and the adjoining galleries by Raphael, and he mingled with such diverse artists as the British painters Wallis and Russell; the Danish sculptor Thorwaldsen; the German

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painters Koch, Carstens and Schick; and not least, the American painter and soon-to-be lifelong friend, Washington Allston. Allston’s 1816 exhibition in Bristol is the ostensible occasion for Coleridge’s *Essays on the Principles of Genial Criticism*, but almost as soon as the two met ten years earlier, Coleridge was already working out his aesthetic principles while contemplating Allston’s paintings. Before he would explicitly define this as “Beauty” in the 1808 lectures, an early attempt to balance something like “multëity” with “unity” takes place in his ekphrastic description of Allston’s *Diana and her Nymphs in the Chase*, to which he referred as the “Swiss Scene,” and where he seeks to bring together, in an almost breathless stream of words, the image’s variety of local elements or details with its grander unities. He locates this mediation—quite shrewdly—in the way in which the foreground “seems to balance & hold even all the tints of the whole picture, the keystone of its colors—so aided by the bare earth breaking in & making an irregular road to the Lake on which that faery figure shoots along as one does in certain Dreams, only that it touches the earth which yet it seems to have no occasion to touch.”

This horizontal and then vertical movement through the painting finds a parallel in Coleridge’s perceptive scansion of surface rhythms that then drops, in another sort of verticalness, down into the deep images of dreams. Coleridge is more than aware that Lessing had designated the proper province of verbal language as temporal (opposing it to the spatiality of visual art), and what we see Coleridge trying to pull off here is a subversion of that sort of linear temporality through his appeal to the altogether less-regulated realm of dreams. It is no coincidence, I think, that the very next entry in Coleridge’s notebook is his description of the fountains at St. Peter’s: “The quiet circle in which Change and Permanence co-exist, not by combination or juxtaposition, but by an absolute annihilation of difference/column of smoke, the fountains before S’ Peters, waterfalls/God!—Change without loss” (CN II 2832). Change and Permanence, Change without loss—these are central facets of Coleridge’s spiritual thought, as well as the main features of what Coleridge in that marvelous section of *The Statesman’s Manual* means by “scriptural time,” in which prophecy and history dance and intermingle, and in which “both facts and persons must of necessity have a twofold significance, a past and a future, a temporary and a perpetual, a particular and a universal application. They must be at once portraits and ideals.”

These ideas come into even starker relief in Coleridge’s account of the Campo Santo in Pisa, arguably the centerpiece of his 1818 *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* and a favorite topic of conversation all the way through his later

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table-talk. Literally meaning “holy field,” the Campo Santo is Gothic-style cloister built around a rectangle of sacred soil shipped back from Golgotha during the Fourth Crusade. Construction was begun in 1278 and was eventually completed two centuries later. By the time Coleridge visited the cemetery in May 1806—at least twice, in fact, while waiting for his ship to sail from nearby Livorno—it was in a state of some disrepair, which was further compounded during World War II when an allied bombing raid set off a fire that consumed the then-wooden beams of the ceiling and melted the leaden roof, destroying much of what lay beneath. If there is a silver lining to this, it is that this prompted major repairs of the premises, including the frescoes that I will be discussing shortly, with modern advances in art restoration leaving the frescoes arguably in an even better state today than when Coleridge saw them.

As Elinor Shaffer has argued, the Campo Santo furnished Coleridge with “the precise location, recognition and realization in his own time of empirical examples of the art his aesthetics called for.” I agree, but her comments refer to Coleridge’s recollection of the Campo Santo in 1818, between which time and the date of his journey the vast bulk of his aesthetics come into being via lectures on Shakespeare and Milton, his Essays on Genial Criticism, and the Biographia, to name just a few repositories of this aspect of his thought. But what about the aesthetics Coleridge was formulating while he was in the Mediterranean? In a notebook entry of either May or June 1806, he remarks, “Of the hanging Tower, the Dome, the Cemetery, the Baptistery, I shall say nothing except that—being all together they form a grand & wild mass, especially by moonlight, when the hanging Tower has something of a supernatural Look” (CN II 2856). Standing under the tower by moonlight, it is not difficult to see and to feel what Coleridge meant. Coleridge’s connection of the moonlight with the “supernatural” (in its full, etymologically divine sense) is appropriate in another respect as well, for it hearkens back to a now-famous notebook entry recorded in Malta the year before: “Saturday Night, April 14, 1805—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 within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new” (2546). The linkage between these two entries alerts us not just to the deeply spiritual aspect of his experiences in Pisa, but also to his location of that spirituality in architecture and the fine arts.

To be sure, this is not an entirely new development, at least insofar as Coleridge had prioritized visuality in his spiritual and political work of 1795, and in particular through his concept of illumination as the a priori ground of productive political action and the immediate end to which political reformers should direct their energies. In A Moral and Political Lecture, he describes illumination along strikingly visual lines, returning it to its literal light-giving

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origins (but of course not dispensing with its theological dimensions either): the “soul-enobling views” propagated and facilitated by his exemplary band of patriots cultivate a sense of “moral taste” and thereby “bestow the virtues which they anticipate... Regarding every event even as he that ordains it, evil vanishes from before him, and he views with naked eye the eternal form of universal beauty.” Hence even though Hazlitt would declare that in the 1790s Coleridge “had no idea of pictures,” and even though Carl Woodring and Paley both agree that visual art “came into full existence for Coleridge” in 1803, when he met the painter and art collector, Sir George Beaumont, the 1795 lectures find Coleridge conceiving of visuality in a sense both political and strikingly aesthetic. In the “Allegorical Vision” that opens the Lectures on Revealed Religion, the “woman dressed in white” leads the narrator and his party away from the Temple of Religion to a spot of high land, where they are able to “observe the Relation of its different Parts, each one to the other” (Lects 1795 91). She then furnishes them with an “optic Glass which assisted without contradicting our natural vision and enabled us to see far beyond the Valley” (91). This device may well be a version of the “Claude Glass,” a tinted convex mirror then in vogue as a means of attaining a picturesque perspective of a landscape, similar to those painted by Claude.

I am tracing a lineage of thought backwards, here, in order to provide a fuller sense of just how much Coleridge’s aesthetics of visual representation had been percolating before his ostensibly official moment of initiation into visual art through Beaumont. Two more early moments are particularly crucial to fleshing out the long-developing parameters of his response to the Campo Santo. The first of these is 1791 poem, “To a Painter,” an imitation of Anachreon that instantiates a meditation on form and content that not only reappears in the “Allegorical Vision” via his description of the “Goddess Religion” as a giant, hollow statue, but that continually resurfaces in his aesthetic writings of the 1810s as into his theological work of the 1820s. To fully capture the radiant beauty that is before him, the painter’s art must “breathe along the canvass warm / An Angels Soul” (PW I.1: 25-6). In other words, following the related Pauline distinction of spirit from letter, Coleridge recognizes that the viability of the imagined painting depends on the infusion

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7 This might be the first inkling of Coleridge’s definition of beauty as “Multëity in Unity,” a major aesthetic criterion that, once he fully articulates it in the 1808 lectures, comes to bear on nearly all of his subsequent writing. See Lectures 1808-1819 on Literature, ed. R. A. Foakes, 1987, 2 vols, Vol. 5 of The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1 35 and n. Hereafter cited parenthetically as LL. In the version of the “Allegoric Vision” that appears in the second Lay Sermon, Coleridge accordingly appends the phrase “and of each to the whole, and of all to each” to this sentence (LS [1839] 322).

8 See also Aids to Reflection, ed. John Beer, 1993, Vol. 9 of The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: “Life is the one universal soul, which, by virtue of the enlivening BREATH, and the informing WORD, all organized bodies have in common, each after its kind. This, therefore, all animals possess, and man as an animal. But, in addition to this, God transfused into man a higher gift, and specially imbathed:—even a living (that is, self-subsisting) soul, a soul having its life in itself. ‘And man became a living soul’” (15).
of a living spirit into the otherwise static outlines of its subject matter. The other early development that I want to point out here is Coleridge’s recognition of the historical value of art, which came into vivid relief during his tour of the churches of Lübeck in 1799: “Every picture, every legend cut out in gilded wood-work, was a history of the manners & feelings of the ages, in which such works were admired & executed.”

Both of these strands—the vital struggle between form and content and the historicity of that struggle—come together for Coleridge in the Campo Santo, and particularly in the fresco *The Triumph of Death*, today attributed to either Buonamico Buffalmacco or Francesco Traini.

The image above, and that below, from the far left-hand side of *The Triumph of Death*, help us picture what Coleridge had in mind when he declares, quite boldly, in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that

> The impression was greater, I may say, than that which any poem had ever made upon me. There, from all the laws of drawing, all the absence of colour (for you saw no colour, if there were any you could not see it, it was gone), it was one mighty idea that spoke to you, everywhere the same. In the other pictures the presence of an idea acting, of that which

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was not formed, was evident, because the forms there outraged all notions of that which was to be impressed had there not been something more; but it was the adoption of a symbol, which, though not in as polished a language as could be wished for, which though in a hoarser voice and less tempered modulation uttered the same words to that mind which is the source of all that we really enjoy or that is worth enjoying.¹⁰

The “one mighty idea” indeed suffuses this work to the extent that even the pilgrims’ horses are transfixed by it. Death pervades the painting in both an allegorical sense—as personified in the central figure of the terrible angel with white hair and scythe—and as a physical fact, everywhere palpable but most especially in the dead and dying bodies, of all social ranks, that accumulate in the foreground. The souls of the deceased echo this sense of doubleness or between-ness in that they are depicted as infant bodies pulled out through the corpse’s mouth by angels and demons, who then vie for their eternal fate in a frenetic mid-air battle that anticipates the left-hand panel of Hieronymus Bosch’s *Temptation of St. Anthony* triptych (on the next page).

Coleridge regards this strikingly corporeal depiction of the soul as emblematic of the philosophical materialism of the middle ages, and yet he also sees in the structural logic of the fresco as a whole and in the passions or “human interest” emerging out of its bodily outlines a new dawn of Platonic idealism:

... during the prevalence of the corrupt Aristotelian philosophy—which had passed into endless distinctions and classifications the fine arts partook of the same influence wry outlines surfaces imprisoned in the outlines without depth—without force it was in painting what mere verbiage would be in literature and that with the dawning of the true genius of Giotto and the six other Masters whose works are preserved at the Cemetery of Pisa where... with philosophy there the outward form was more than indifferent it seemed like the Platonic matter to be untractable and yet there was the power felt and with the power the grace and the life and the influence of Platonic Philosophy.  

(PL II 711-12)

When delivering this lecture in 1818, Coleridge might have chosen Michelangelo and Raphael, whose productions he considered “mightier” than Giotto’s (LL II 59), as its centerpieces, and yet what captivates him is the frescoes’ palpable sense of process, of materials translating into “idea” in a way that had not yet been attempted in the medium. It is this very sense of between-ness, of process both painterly and philosophical, that attracts Coleridge
to the *Triumph of Death* and that distinguishes his comments not as rote or clichéd, but as almost unmistakably modern.

What more quintessential Coleridgean image than this? The very dynamics of flesh and spirit, form and content, rind and substance that for Coleridge constitute the vital electricity of visual art (and of poetry, for that matter) here find a “meet emblem” in the soul tugged in opposite directions by a demon (badly faded, at his feet) and a resplendent seraph, as if partaking in both in a struggle that will never be definitively resolved.\(^\text{11}\) This very sense of division, of being in what Seamus Perry calls a “muddle” between two poles that each demand systematic assimilation, if not negation, of the other (a “sacrifice” that Coleridge characteristically resists, as Thomas McFarland has also pointed out) is at the heart of Coleridge’s views on visual representation.\(^\text{12}\)

As he puts it in the lecture “On Poesy or Art,” art is “of a middle nature between a Thought and a Thing” (*L.L. II* 218). Keeping in mind Coleridge’s idea of the “LUST OF THE EYE”\(^\text{13}\)—indeed his continual awareness of the adverse

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\(^{11}\) Such *between-ness* applies to the circumstances of the painting as well—it is not all fleshy neo-classicism like Michelangelo, and in fact it’s quite clear that this artist had traveled north, certainly to northern Italy but perhaps further as well, and thereby absorbed a strikingly northern or Germanic visual paradigm as well.


effects of sensual overreliance—we find him also maintaining that art, or at least good art, counteracts the tyranny of the eye by bringing it into conjunction with the higher faculties of the mind. As he translates from Goethe, “the best work of art speaks to our feeling too, but speaks a nobler language, and one which has to be learnt; it engages the feelings and the power of imagination, it destroys all arbitrariness and caprice, we cannot do as we like with what is perfect; we are obliged to give ourselves up to it, in order that we may receive ourselves back from it, exalted and improved” (CN II 3221).

If The Triumph of Death is paradigmatic of the struggle between “FREE LIFE” and “confining FORM” that characterizes the best specimens of visual art, then Coleridge also found works in the Campo Santo that exhibited no such dynamism. Among these were the sculptures at “Algarotti’s Tomb,” which as Coleridge recalls featured “inveterate likenesses of periwigs in marble.”


When in the fifth of the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Coleridge charts the decline of philosophy from Platonism down to the “merely mechanical” or Atomistic School, he points to these “great marble wigs” as an artistic example of the last, in which “the effect of outward form or symbol was more noble than the cause which produced it” (*PL* I 239). As I discovered at the Campo Santo, however, Algarotti’s tomb features no periwigs whatsoever.

Paley has noted this in his study as well, but considers it merely a misremembrance. There is, however, good reason for this mix-up, particularly when we consult Algarotti’s 1762 *Essay on Painting*, which Coleridge had almost certainly consulted prior to 1818. Algarotti’s essay reads as an antitype of Coleridgean aesthetics, and very much like the negative but crucial role played by Richard Payne Knight’s *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* in Coleridge’s 1808 lectures, the *Essay* becomes a springboard for a number of Coleridge’s main aesthetic ideas.

First of all, Algarotti advocates the sort of aesthetic *delusion* that Coleridge wants to distance as much as possible from art proper:

> Painting: that art, in which the hand is freely to express the boldest and most beautiful conceptions of the fancy: that art, whose business it is to give relief to plain surfaces, light to dark ones, and distance to things under the very hand: to bestow, in a word, life and soul upon a piece of
canvas, so as to impose upon our senses, and make us cry out with the poet, in a fit of wonder and amazement,

Non vide me’ di me chi vide il vero
He sees not better, nature’s self who sees.\(^{16}\)

Such *imposition* on the sense is precisely what Coleridge finds repugnant in extravagant stage production and in sensationalistic artworks such as Henry Fuseli’s, whom he considered a painter of “vigorous impotence.” In his defense of delusion-inducing artistic exactitude, Algarotti ventures even further than the common trope of Zeuxis’ grapes, describing his pleasure at being “told, that a dog was deceived to such a degree, by certain steps in a perspective of Dento’s, that, expecting to find a free passage, he made up to them in full speed, and dashed out his brains; thus immortalsing by his death the pencil of the artist, which been the occasion of it” (28-9). Algarotti especially admires the idea expressed by la Casa, to borrow as many ideal parts from multiple bodies as possible, thus “rightly imagining, that from such an union, and of such beauties, must result the beauty of an Helen” (39-40).

Even if by virtue of negative contrast, the conjunctions between the *Essay* and Coleridge’s own aesthetics run even deeper than in the above examples, as in Algarotti’s comments on drapery:

Albert Durer is another great master in this branch, insomuch that Guido himself was not ashamed to study him. There are still extant several drawings made with the pen by this great man, in which he has copied whole figures from Albert, and scrupulously retained the flow of his drapery as far as his own peculiar stile, less harsh and sharp, but more easy and graceful, would allow. It may be said, that he made the same use of Albert, that our modern writers ought to make of the best Authors of the thirteenth century. (70)

Compare this with the following notebook entry composed, as Coburn accurately conjectures, around 1818:

Not only historical Dates, but even relative Chronology, must be put out of the Question in every attempt to extract the radical sense of a Symbolic Mythus—they and the names that are supposed to determine them, must be contemplated as the Costume and Drapery in Albert Durer’s grand Scripture-history Pictures.” (CN IV 4839)

Beyond the superficial similarities between the final sentence in the Algarotti passage and Coleridge’s observation in Chapter XVI of the *Biographia* that the poets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, coeval with the painters,

combined “exquisite polish” with “perfect simplicity.” Coleridge’s note on Dürer effectively inverts Algarotti’s argument by regarding Dürer’s drapery not as an end in itself, the focus of the image, but rather as an outer shell for the sense of scriptural time that suffuses the work. In The Statesman’s Manual, Coleridge calls this the “hidden mystery in every the minutest form of existence, which… freed from the phaenomena of time and space, reveals itself to the pure reason as the actual immanence or in-being of all in each” (LS [1839] 251-2). Dürer’s drapery, like the gilded wood-work at Lübeck, elucidates the particular historical moment of the art-work, but it also illuminates the philosophy of history put forth by the painting as one in which time and space are a mere fabric covering—and indeed woven out of—a far grander, in fact uncircumscribable immanence.

We are back now to the idea of history with which I began, and I want to conclude with an example from Coleridge’s “Historie and Gests of Maxilian,” his partial rendering of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Der Goldne Topf that he prefaces with an uproarious epistle to one “Dick Proof, Editor.” Where Algarotti insists, like Dick Proof, that an artist “ought carefully to avoid mixing the antique with the modern; the domestic with the foreign; things, in short, repugnant to each other, and therefore incapable of gaining credit” (79), then Coleridge counters with the exclamation:

"Lay the time farther off? But why, Richard? I pray thee tell me, why?? [...] Will [the reader] accept as fossiles, what he would reject as specimens fresh caught...? Thou mayst think this, Richard, but I will neither affront the reader by attributing to him a faith so dependant on dates, nor myself, whose history is a concave mirror, not a glass case of mummies, stuffed skins of defunct monsters, and the anomalous accidents of nature."

(SWF II 968)

It is no coincidence, I think, that Coleridge first mentions the concave mirror in his definition of organic form in 1812, and that it reappears here in an inseparably aesthetic, spiritual and historical sense. As he states in the 1812-13 Lectures on Belles Lettres, “Nature the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms: each exterior is the physiognomy of the being within, its true image reflected and thrown out from the concave mirror” (LL I 494). While it appears paradoxical that a metaphor with such overt mechanical associations would be aligned with the organic, such is in fact its purpose—the concave mirror becomes the trope by which Coleridge is able to reconcile (or at least balance) the inherent artifice of form with the ever-evolving spirit or content that both nature and the artist seek to express. Hence his championing of Michelangelo and Raphael in the Lectures

18 In his Letters on Natural Magic, Addressed to Sir Walter Scott, Sir David Brewster documents the numerous ways in which such mirrors could be utilized, under certain lighting and spatial configurations, to project spectral bodies, which in turn (via the introduction of a properly-placed prism) could even be decapitated or otherwise manipulated.
on the History of Philosophy as having “succeeded in taming the untractable matter and in reducing external form to a symbol of the inward and imaginable beauty” (PL II 712). In light of Coleridge’s earlier definition of organic form, artistic representation in this sense is none other than a concave mirror; while itself artificial, material, and bound by laws of space and time, it projects that which is immaterial, non-spatial, and non-temporal. Because our own perception is crucial to this process, what is at work here is not delusion, but rather illusion—we feel the beauty in the works of Michelangelo and Raphael even to this day “for this reason because we look at the forms after we have long satisfied all curiosity concerning mere outlines… why having determined what they appeared to the eye do we still continue to muse on them but that there is a divine something corresponding to within which no image can exhaust” (712). What Coleridge reaches in “Maxilian,” then, is an affirmation that history itself functions much in the same way as art. As he tells Dick Proof several pages later, “No! with confidence and secular pride I affirm, there is no age you could suggest, the characteristic of which is not to be found in the present—that we are the quintessence of all past ages, rather than an age of our own” (970). History is that which the discerning mind, like the discerning eye before the work of art, will acknowledge as an artifice or construct that points the way towards something non-artificial—namely, eternity or “quintessence.” Art, then, is both a measure of history, and at the same time an exemplar of the immeasurability of spiritual time that lies at the center of Coleridge’s thought and work.