11. THE CURSE OF THE ALBATROSS

There is no shortage of minute descriptions of nature in Coleridge's early journals and notebooks. He attempted, with a graphic precision similar to Hopkins', to record something of 'the marvellous distinctiveness & unconfounded personality of each of the million millions of forms, & yet the undivided Unity in which they subsisted' [*Notebooks* II 2344]. Yet, unlike Hopkins, he was rarely able to turn this abundant material ('the lovely shapes and sounds intelligible / Of that eternal language' ['Frost at Midnight'] to poetic account. The reasons for this failure are many and complex. One of the most overt, present from the beginning of his poetic career, is theological. In the early years he was happy to attach a high value to nature in aesthetic terms (the picturesque), and these terms shade off into the moral as he uses nature as a repository of symbols to help him organize and objectify his otherwise elusive and intangible thoughts. It was a world accessible to the mind, yielding patterns of order and unity, and therefore a source of stability and health on which he could depend at times of inner turmoil. Nature, he tried for a while to believe, was given by God for this very purpose. The personal God in whom he believed was a reasonable being who gave men god-like reason in order to apprehend Truth. This is not far removed from the teachings of Aquinas on which Hopkins based his evaluation of nature. But for Coleridge there was no Duns Scotus to mediate between the spiritual austerity of Aquinas and the sensuality of the nature-loving poet. Coleridge's Christianity was not a religion of blessings and creation and incarnation, but of sin, redemption and transcendence. He spoke of his 'natural inheritance of Sin and Condemnation' [*Notebooks* III 4005]. He was in constant fear that to attach any spiritual or theological value to the world of objects perceived by the senses would be to lay himself open to the heresy of pantheism. The attraction of a pantheistic vision is evident in Coleridge's work even before he met the persuasive expression of it in such early Wordsworth poems as 'Tintern Abbey'. In 1795 he wrote:

> And what if all of animated nature
> Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
> At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

But such thoughts are quickly dismissed as 'unhallow'd', 'shapings of the unregenerate mind' ['The Eolian Harp']. He agreed with Blake that 'whosoever believes in Nature disbelieves in God', and considered it a 'fearful error' even to regard the universe as an attribute of God's deity. He strove, therefore, to keep his God out of the world. It was the opposite tendency in Wordsworth which deeply worried him:

> This inferred dependency of the human soul on accident of birth-place and abode, together with the vague, misty, rather than mystic, confusion of God with the world, and the accompanying nature-worship, of which the asserted dependence forms a part, is the trait in Wordsworth's poetic works that I most dislike as unhealthful, and denounce as contagious. [*Collected Letters* V, 59]

Coleridge saw himself as obliged to make a choice between his attraction to nature and his determination 'to fight the bloodless fight / Of Science, Freedom, and the Truth in Christ'. There are other, perhaps deeper reasons for Coleridge's inability to become a worshipper of nature, to which we shall return later.

But for one year, the *annus mirabilis* of 1797-8, the combination of Coleridge's strong emotional response to nature and the irresistible influence of Wordsworth was able to overcome both his intellectual predilections and his theological convictions to the extent that he could describe himself as 'all adoration of the God in Nature'. There is a letter to Thelwall (16 October 1797) written partly in verse and partly in prose. The verse contains the lines:

> Struck with the deepest calm of joy, I stand
> Silent with swimming sense; and gazing round
> On the wide Landscape, gaze till all doth seem
> Less gross than bodily, a living Thing
> Which acts upon the mind and with such Hues
> As cloath th'Almighty Spirit when he makes
> Spirits perceive his presence!

This passage begins like Wordsworth, but in the last two lines drifts towards Coleridge's characteristically more spiritual vision. The prose part of the same letter makes Coleridge's position much clearer (and much further from Wordsworth's):

> Frequently all *things* appear *little*, all the knowledge that can be acquired child's play; the universe itself! what but an immense heap of *little* things? ... My mind feels as if it ached to behold and know something great, something *one* and *indivisible*. And it is only in the faith of that that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns, give me the sense of sublimity or majesty. But in this faith *all things* counterfeit infinity.

That ambiguous word 'counterfeit' is a long way from the neutral word 'cloath' in the verse passage. The first six of the nine meanings listed in the O.E.D. involve the intention to deceive. Is there already, in Coleridge's choice of this word (when functioning as thinker, not poet) a hint of his later rejection of pantheism as 'a handsome Mask that does not alter a single feature of the ugly Face it hides'. Nature is here equated with the devil, or rather with the serpentine Pagan goddess whom Coleridge's deepest imagination found so inescapable and so terrifying:

> Alas! Alas! that Nature is a wary wily long-breathed old witch, tough-lived as a turtle, & 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 & to take her revenge too ... [*Notebooks*]

She was also, unfortunately for him, his muse, and her revenge for his defection was to withdraw the gift and the consolations of creativity.

* * *

The main difference as poets between Wordsworth and Coleridge at this time was, it seems to me, that Wordsworth was disturbed by the unconscious and disliked as unhealthful Coleridge's dependence on it. Wordsworth valued nature partly because it gave him something solid and external to hold on to and to help him resist the pull of the unconscious. For the same reason, he wrote always in the past tense, long after the event, recollecting emotion in tranquillity. Coleridge plunged into the dark or lurid turbulence of his own emotions at that moment. Wordsworth worked largely in images, Coleridge in symbols. Wordsworth always knew, or thought he knew, exactly what he was doing. Coleridge liked his own poetry best when he didn't understand it. Of some lines in 'The Destiny of Nations' which

were later to provide him with much of the symbolic framework of 'The Ancient Mariner':

> ... When Love rose glittering, and his gorgeous wings
> Over the abyss fluttered with such glad noise,
> As what time after long and pestful calms,
> With slimy shapes and miscreated life
> Poisoning the vast Pacific, the fresh breeze
> Wakens the merchant-sail uprising.

he wrote:

> These are very fine Lines, tho' I say it that should not: but, hang me, if I know or ever did know the meaning of them, tho' my own composition. [*Poetical Works*, 140]

Wordsworth could never have said that. Wordsworth's conception of poetry was almost pedagogic, Coleridge's shamanic. Dorothy Wordsworth's first wondering response to him was that he had more of the 'poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling' than she had ever witnessed. Opium, though taken as a pain-killer, no doubt helped to propel Coleridge on his shamanic voyages on the sacred rivers and strange seas of his own unconscious.

Thus, fortunately for us, Coleridge's creative imagination habitually bypasses the censorship of his theology.

* * *

'Kubla Khan' dates from 1797 or 1798. Coleridge's famous account of it as an opium dream interrupted by a person from Porlock was not written until the occasion of its publication in 1816, and may have been invented to forestall accusations of incoherence. The poem would not otherwise seem incomplete. His dismissive description of it as no more than 'a psychological curiosity' would serve the same purpose. Six years earlier, in a notebook, he had described it simply as 'composed in a sort of reverie'. By this he meant a state of day-dreaming in which the intellect and ego are in abeyance, but the imagination is released, allowing symbols to well up from the depths of the unconscious and combine to form a pattern pregnant with deeper and more universal meanings than any the poet could arrive at in his normal state of consciousness. Whitman spoke of this reverie as 'a trance, yet with all the

senses alert - only a state of high, exalted musing - the tangible and material with all its shows, the objective world suspended or surmounted for a while, and the powers in exaltation, freedom, vision - yet the senses not lost or counteracted'; and Hughes speaks of 'the necessary trance'.

All great romantic poems are composed in some such state, though in 'Kubla Khan' Coleridge seems to have entered a particularly deep reverie, to have released particularly potent symbols, and to have had the courage to let them work without subsequent interference or interpretation. They are metaphors for his own nature conceived at such a depth that they are also metaphors for ours. The whole poem is to communicate its meanings entirely through such symbols. Coleridge himself has no definitive access to their meaning. We must make of them what we can, allowing them to play upon each other, upon whatever else we happen to know of Coleridge or of other literature, and upon our own imaginations.

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure-dome decree:
> Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea.
> So twice five miles of fertile ground
> With walls and towers were girdled round:
> And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
> Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
> And here were forests ancient as the hills,
> Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

Within these few lines Coleridge has established the basic polarities of the poem by juxtaposing the pleasure-dome and the sacred river, that which is designed and built by and for man, and that which is natural and 'measureless to man'. The polarities are sacred and profane, artificial and natural, human and non-human, fertile and sterile, life and death. Within the walls these polarities are to be reconciled. The odd word 'so' beginning the second sentence may simply mean that everything was built because Kubla Khan had decreed it, or that the walls were built to create a self-enclosed world where life could be dedicated to pleasure, a pagan paradise of atonement, where walls do not exclude mother earth but girdle her, and she responds to this nurture by blossoming and enfolding. The attempt is vast, not to reject life or any part of it, but to bring everything into accord with

man and his pleasure. The walls must therefore enclose the whole above-ground stretch of the river of life, from source to sink.

What had no doubt impressed itself deeply on Coleridge in the passage from Purchas which had inspired 'Kubla Khan' was the inclusiveness of Kubla's enclosure, and his determination to ensure the benison of nature by pouring forth, 'with his own hands', the milk of thousands of white mares 'in the aire, and on the earth, to give drink to the spirits and Idols which they worship, that they may preserve the men, women, beasts, birds, corne, and other things growing on the earth'. If nature accepts the sacrifice, she responds with milk and honey-dew of her own, and man and nature are at one.

In the second stanza the female suggestions become more intense and finally explicitly sexual. The opening phrase 'But oh!' indicates that something dreadful is about to be described. That 'deep romantic chasm which slanted / Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!' is no less than the groin of Mother Earth, a place simultaneously savage, holy, enchanted and demonic, the fount and origin of all life. The earth, like a woman in labour, breathes in 'fast thick pants', then suddenly gives birth to a mighty fountain tossing huge dancing fragments of rock (of which, perhaps, the palace is built). And this giving birth, this eruption of creative energy, is perpetual, a 'ceaseless turmoil'. Then the river settles down to meander gently for five miles, watering the woods and gardens, until it reaches the caverns through which it sinks into 'a lifeless ocean'. The sacred river is a symbol of life itself, that undifferentiated life which the Greeks called *zoë*, nature's fertilizing energy available for a time to man to channel into his creative purposes; energies born in the turmoil of sex and blood, and doomed, after a term, to be dissipated in the destructive tumult of death.

Midway between the fountain and the caverns, between birth and death, Kubla Khan builds his pleasure-dome, from which can be heard both the turmoil of the rising waters and the tumult of the falling waters in a 'mingled measure' which is the music and the dance of a life in harmony with both. Whereas a spire or Gothic arch is a symbol of the aspiration to detach the spirit from the earth, the dome-shape, like Lawrence's rainbow (and, behind him, the rainbow of Genesis) is a symbol of the reconciliation of heaven and earth, body and spirit. It is a symbol of fulfilment, rounded and complete, like a breast. Its wholeness constitutes its holiness. It is thus the opposite of Shelley's 'dome of many-coloured glass', which is life staining 'the white radiance of Eternity' ['Adonais'], of Tennyson's Palace of Art, a 'lordly pleasure-house' specifically designed to exclude the world and

its cycles and tumult, and of Yeats' Byzantium, which also repudiates nature in favour of art, and neglects 'sensual music' in favour of 'monuments of unageing intellect'. Moreover, this 'miracle of rare device' (art) seems to have been constructed to be as sunny as possible, reaching upwards, but also to extend down into the earth where there are caves of ice. Kubla's domain reaches horizontally through time from long before birth ('ancestral voices') to the distant future (prophesies of its own inevitable destruction), and also vertically through space from the sun to the under-earth, from the highest to the lowest, the hottest to the coldest extremes available to man's senses. Had it sought pleasure by attempting to exclude the ancestral voices and the tumult it would have been merely escapist and self-indulgent. Had it allowed them to prevail, dejection would have supervened and condemned the whole enterprise to remain unfinished.

Kubla Khan might more easily have enclosed only that section of the river which meandered gently for five miles, and all within his walls would have been gardens and pleasure-dome. The palace of art was often thought of as dedicated to beauty, shutting out the world where ignorant armies clash by night. That, for Coleridge, would have been mere fancy, not imagination which must pay all its debts to reality. T.H. Huxley was to speak of the highest human activity as building, in opposition to the state of nature, the state of art. What Kubla builds in his palace and Coleridge in his poem is in defiance of that opposition. Here art admits its total dependence on nature. All fertility and creativity ultimately depend on the sacred river. 'Great creating Nature' creates the gardener and the artist too. The 'miracle of rare device' may be the product of a human brain, but that in turn is a product of nature and subservient to its laws. Coleridge regarded the ability to achieve such reconciliation of opposites as the highest power of the poet:

> The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity. ... He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power ... reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities. [*Biographia Literaria*, ch.XIV]

In the closing section the poet claims that in order to create the poetic equivalent of 'that dome in air' he would have to recapture a 'deep delight' he had once experienced in a vision of a 'damsel with a dulcimer'. The fount of inspiration is associated, again, with woman, or female muse, who acts as

intermediary between poet and nature. Her song is always a symphony because she sings, spontaneously, in harmony with nature (which men, for reasons which will emerge in 'Dejection', are no longer capable of). Coleridge always associated his loss of inspiration with his failure to establish a satisfactory relationship with a woman. Given that inspiration, from woman or any other source, the poet is transformed into the prophet or shaman, who makes the dangerous journey, on behalf of us all, into the depths of the psyche, the spirit world, to return half-crazed, but with healing truths. This truth-teller is always feared by rationalists, materialists, and by those who simply want to be left alone to go to the wedding feast, to make money, to read the newspaper, or to write yet another book of post-modern critical theory. As Ted Hughes says:

> How can a poet become a medicine man and fly to the source and come back and heal or pronounce oracles? Everything among us is against it. [Faas, 206]

He has also been feared and persecuted by the devotees of revealed religion, and was therefore feared, and ultimately proscribed by Coleridge's Christian self. The struggle between Coleridge's Unleavened self and his Christian self is brilliantly described in Hughes' essay 'The Snake in the Oak' (*Winter Pollen*, 1994).

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Wordsworth's ponderous and patronizing list of the 'great defects' of 'The Ancient Mariner' which he included in his preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* reveals that he was unable to read the poem Coleridge had actually written, unable to recognize the symbolic meaning of the plot, the characters or the imagery:

> First that the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the control of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural: secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon: thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated.

It is significant that Coleridge was an outstanding interpreter of Shakespeare. Coleridge too, whether he knew it or not, was perpetually generating metaphors for his own nature. He described himself as 'seeking, as it were *asking* for, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists'. He is searching, in other words, for archetypes. Speaking of 'The Ancient Mariner' he claimed that what gives these 'shadows of imagination' their credibility is the 'semblance of truth' they receive from his 'inward nature'.

There is every bit as much of Coleridge's 'inward nature' in 'The Ancient Mariner' as in 'Dejection', but translated into some of the most striking, memorable and universal objective correlatives in literature. The strongest, most deeply felt stanza in the poem is not one of the macabre highlights, but the painful reiteration of

> Alone, alone, all, all alone,
> Alone on a wide wide sea!
> And never a saint took pity on
> My soul in agony.

The strongest element throughout the poem is this agony compounded of loneliness, desolation and remorse. In the notebooks we can see this agony searching for its symbols:

> in that eternal and delerious misery -
> wrathfires -
> inward desolations -
> an horror of great darkness
> great things that on the ocean
> counterfeit infinity -

The theme is exactly the same as that of the abortive long poem 'The Wanderings of Cain' which Coleridge abandoned in order to write 'The Ancient Mariner'. It was to be about 'guilt, suffering, expiation and wandering ... The scene was desolate; as far as the eye could reach it was desolate'. And Cain was to be punished by God not only for a senseless killing, but 'because he neglected to make a proper use of his senses'.

If Coleridge is himself the mariner, what had he killed to give him such remorse? Clearly it was no bird or external creature, but a part of himself. In 1808 he was to write: 'O had I health and youth, and were what I

once was - but I played the fool, and cut the throat of my Happiness, of my genius, of my utility'. Self-murder is not too strong an image for several ways in which Coleridge already felt that he had senselessly killed the best part of himself, his capacity for loving.

At the time of writing 'The Ancient Mariner' Coleridge had never been to sea. Some years later he was at sea and saw men shooting at a hawk from the ship, and wrote - 'Poor Hawk! O Strange Lust of Murder in Man! - It is not cruelty. It is mere non-feeling from non-thinking'. The shooting of the albatross is motiveless because in the unawakened consciousness of the mariner it is too trivial an act to need a motive; it is no different from shooting at a bottle. A mariner is one who cuts himself off from the living body of mankind and sails to silent seas where 'no living thing was to be seen'. In this he is a perfect symbol of the reclusive thinker whose abstruse researches take him further and further from nature and common human experience. The imagination cannot deal in abstract things. To reject nature and the life of the senses is necessarily to exile the Muse and starve imagination. The poet's tongue 'through utter drought' is 'withered at the root'. But the poet who is honest and humble and courageous enough (as Coleridge, for one glorious year was) to admit that this has happened, to accept responsibility for it, to allow the suffering imagination to exact its terrible revenges, opens the way through ego-death to a rebirth of imagination and glorious reconciliation with the transfigured Muse.

This account by no means exhausts the significance of the killing of the albatross. There are also more deeply personal and more universal dimensions. Several critics have noted the heavily sexual imagery of the poem. The poem includes its own representative auditor in the form of the wedding-guest, disgusted by and afraid of the mariner yet held by his glittering eye. He is equally pulled by the merry din of the wedding, the feast, the rose-red bride, and the dreadful tale of the withered mariner, whose cross-bow is later to suggest (like the dead albatross hanging from his neck) both an inverted crucifix and a perverse alternative (like Adonis' spear) for normal, generative, perhaps even sacramental, phallic activity. The mariner later projects onto the surface of the Sargasso Sea the obscene contents of his own disordered psyche. As Wilson Knight describes it:

> It is a lurid, colourful, yet ghastly death-impregnated scene, drawn to express aversion from physical life in dissolution or any reptilian manifestation; and, by suggestion, the sexual as seen from the mentalized consciousness as an alien, salty, reptilian force. It is a

> deathly paralysis corresponding, it may be, to a sense of sexually starved existence in the modern world; certainly 'water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink' fits such a reading.
>
> [*The Starlit Dome*, 85-6]

That the water-snakes symbolize the passions, especially sexual passions, cannot be doubted. In 'Pantisocracy' Coleridge had written:

> And dancing to the moonlight roundelay,
> The wizard Passions weave an holy spell.

The curse is merely the extension to the external world of what has already happened inside the mariner. Wind symbolizes both inspiration and creative energy. It was the albatross (love) that had 'made the breeze to blow'. Now the sea itself, source of all life, is stagnant. Rain cannot fall, for the mariner has dammed up the spring of love in his own heart. Hughes writes:

> Considering the situation as a game, one could say the Christian Crossbow Self has won the first round, and in winning has forced onto the bird and the sea of the Female ... a state like death, and onto itself a life of horror, dumbly staring at the world of its own death-dealing rejection, a world that seems to putrefy. [*Winter Pollen*, 455]

Lawrence's 'Snake' is a poem clearly inspired, in part, by 'The Ancient Mariner'. Here the phallic snake excites horror by entering a symbolically female 'fissure', miming the sex act. The narrator, in his attempt to kill the snake (come to drink from a common source of water), combines in one act the mariner's killing of the albatross and his horror at the writhing of the water-snakes. Immediately, the narrator regrets it:

> I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.
> And I thought of the albatross,
> And I wished he would come back, my snake.
>
> For he seemed to me again like a king,
> Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
> Now due to be crowned again.
>
> And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords

> Of life.
> And I have something to expiate:
> A pettiness.

The mariner, too, comes to see 'God's creatures of the calm' as lordly, having their appointed place in the scheme of things. Coleridge's gloss compares them with the stars:

> The blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is silent joy at their arrival.

Lawrence's earlier explication of serpent symbolism applies equally to his own later poem and to 'The Ancient Mariner':

> If there is a serpent of secret and shameful desire in my soul, let me not beat it out of my consciousness with sticks. It will lie beyond, in the march of the so-called subconsciousness, where I cannot follow it with my sticks. Let me bring it to the fire to see what it is. For a serpent is a thing created. It has its own *raison d'être.* In its own being it has beauty and reality. ... For the Lord is the lord of all things, not of some only. And everything shall in its proportion drink its own draught of life. [*Phoenix*, 677-9]

[It is interesting to note that the spirit of Sicily during Coleridge's visit in 1804 released him from the voice of his education and his deep-seated horror of the reptilian: 'O this savage and unforgettable scene! Huge Stones and huge Trees, & small & large Trees and stones ... & the savage women in the Torrent, hairy menlike legs - Oleander! Ivy! Myrtle / and all the pot herbs - lovely Lizards The Paradise.]

The albatross is the opposite of the mariner. Despite its prodigious wings, it chooses to descend to share the lot of men, in sheer fellowship. When its body is later hung about the neck of the mariner instead of the cross, the parallel with Christ is made specific. It represents also the last tenuous link between the mariners and the rest of life. The mariner's act is therefore an unconscious claim to be able to do without this link with man, nature and God-in-nature. It is an act of pure hubris.

But the powers symbolized by the albatross cannot really be killed. They can be repudiated and violated. This treatment only serves the drive the energies underground ('nine fathom deep') where they work destructively, and are inaccessible to human understanding or control, glimpsed only in dreams and nightmares. Everything is reversed. Instead of the glorious sun of dawn we have 'the bloody sun at noon' (a god of wrath). Instead of the moon as protective virgin ('Mary Queen') we have the White Goddess in her other aspect as witch and whore:

> Her skin was as white as leprosy,
> Her lips were red, her looks were free,
> Her locks were yellow as gold:
> The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
> Who thicks man's blood with cold.

The triple goddess can save and inspire, but she can, provoked, turn men mad. The mariner's glittering eye signifies that he is moonstruck, lunatic.

Coleridge's Nature here manifests itself as Christian and Pagan powers simultaneously. While the Polar spirit works from below, concerned, like the Eumenides, only to avenge the sacrilege of the spilt blood of the guest, the Angels working above are concerned to transform the curse into redemptive suffering leading to at least partial expiation and redemption. The outcome is something of a compromise.

The Hermit makes godly hymns in the wood, celebrating both Nature and God. His altar is a moss-covered oak-stump. He does not cut himself off from other men but 'loves to talk with mariners'. The Nature he knows and worships, however, is far from Wordsworth's 'vernal wood'. It contains Love and processes of redemption and rebirth, but also, indivisibly, decay, fear, pain and death:

> Brown skeletons of leaves that lag
> My forest-brook along;
> When ivy-tod is heavy with snow,
> And the owlet whoops to the wolf below,
> That eats the she-wolf's young.

The mariner/shaman/poet has made his psychic journey into the spirit world and returned to the human world, come full circle to his point of

departure, but transformed by his experiences, half-crazed, but bearing healing truths for mankind. R.D. Laing describes the voyage in these terms:

> This journey is experienced as going further 'in', as going back through one's personal life, in and back and through and beyond into the experience of all mankind, of the primal man, of Adam and perhaps even further into the being of animals, vegetables and minerals. In this journey there are many occasions to lose one's way, for confusion, partial failure, even final shipwreck: many terrors, spirits, demons to be encountered, that may or may not be overcome. ... We are so out of touch with this realm that many people can now argue seriously that it does not exist. It is very small wonder that it is perilous indeed to explore such a lost realm. [*The Politics of Experience*, 104-5]

The imaginative, prophetic, healing power is as much a curse as a blessing. The gift of prophecy was from the first often accompanied by the curse of never being believed. Few wish to listen to such truths, or can accept them having listened. The mariner's impact is disastrous - the Pilot falls into a fit; the Pilot's boy goes permanently insane; the Hermit can scarcely stand and cannot shrieve him; the wedding guest turns away from the wedding 'like one that hath been stunned / And is of sense forlorn'.

It is as though Coleridge had had the experience, but his Christian self refused to allow him to hold on to its meaning. As Hughes puts it:

> Coleridge experiences his Pagan 'regression' as a breakthrough to a vision of greater spiritual meaning: his vision of the beauty of the sea-snakes, which renews his (the Mariner's) spiritual being, and redeems all the horrors of his Christian adventure. Nevertheless, when Coleridge's habitually dominant Christian attitude reasserts itself, after this brief, mystical reversal, the returned Mariner's experience is recounted, and heard, not as a vision of greater spiritual meaning, a revelation of the divine glory of the total creation, but as something unspeakably dreadful, incomprehensibly ominous and disheartening, a tale too terrible to be told or heard, like a curse. [W*inter Pollen,* 451]

* * *

Wordsworth did all he could to discourage Coleridge from going on writing in the manner of the great poems, where Coleridge had sought

symbols for inner realities, even when those realities were disturbing or disgusting. But even without Wordsworth's influence, he would probably have sought increasingly symbols only for the pure and perfect, and these he found in other people rather than in the natural world or in himself. His use of symbols becomes increasingly self-conscious; they degenerate from being the forgotten or hidden truths of his own nature to being fully conscious emblems and analogues for intellectual ideas and ideals. His refusal of unconscious symbols bars him from the sources of his finest poetry. By 1802 the only remaining subject for distinguished poetry is his lament for what is lost. In March of that year Coleridge wrote 'the Poet is dead in me'.

The date Coleridge gave his 'Dejection' ode (4 April 1802), though we know the ode was not composed on any single day, is significant. Early April is a time when one might hope for a resumption of creativity. At the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer takes for granted that as the sweet showers of April engender the flowers, and the sunshine and gentle breezes prick the hearts of birds into song, so these same impulses will stimulate the hearts of men into both physical and spiritual activity. When the natural world ceases to give a man's soul this 'wonted impulse', or his soul ceases to be able to receive it, he experiences a particularly acute and modern form of dejection we call alienation - a sense of being cut off from the sources of life and from its potential fruitfulness:

> Sometimes when I earnestly look at a beautiful Object or Landscape, it seems as if I were on the <u>brink</u> of a Fruition still denied.
>
> [*Notebooks* III 3767]

When T.S. Eliot wanted to create a sense of the loss of harmony between human feelings and the seasonal rhythms of the natural world, he began *The Waste Land* with an inversion of the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*:

> April is the cruellest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain.

Wordsworth's creativity was similarly cruel to Coleridge - 'Life's joy rekindling roused a throng of pains' ['To William Wordsworth']. The flowers

of spring are welcomed, though Coleridge could now find no other use for them than to strew them upon his own grave.

The word 'dull' is prominent also at the beginning of Coleridge's ode. His inspiration now is not worth calling a wind, merely a 'dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes / Upon the strings of this Aeolian lute, / Which better far were mute'. The first stanza is a prayer for wind and rain, not the gentle breezes and showers of Chaucer, but a 'squally blast' with slant driving rain. So dull are his feelings that he cannot imagine that anything less than a full-blown storm 'might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!' He is not praying for the pain to go away, but for it to blossom into expression, which would itself be some relief. As it is, his depression is locked within him:

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

It is a self-absorbed stifling grief which prevents him responding or relating to anything outside himself. Yet a poet is, by his own definition, one who can send his soul, his imagination, abroad to commune with the other, the not-self.

The danger is that this poem too will turn in upon itself, licking its own sores, like a Hamlet soliloquy. His only hope is an external beacon or guiding star. He addresses the poem to his beloved Sara, his muse, and an embodiment of that Joy which is the mortal enemy of Dejection.

It had been a balmy and serene evening, full of birdsong, lovely cloud formations, followed by sparkling stars and a crescent moon - a scene which at one time would have filled Coleridge with joyful emotions. Now, though his eyes register the beauty, he feels nothing, as if the connection between his outward senses and his inner feelings had been severed. From this he concludes:

> I may not hope from outward forms to win
> The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

The image of the fountain, together with the description of his dejection as a 'smothering weight' on his breast, reminds us of 'The Ancient Mariner', whose lack of feeling had caused him to shoot the albatross, whose heavy

body was then hung about his neck. This weight fell from him and the natural intercourse of nature - wind and rain - resumed only when his spontaneous feelings were released like a fountain. But if Coleridge himself understood 'The Ancient Mariner' he was unable to act on or live by what it said to him. By repudiating nature and 'the natural man', the life of the body, he severed himself from the tree of life: he shot the albatross. And the spring of love which gushed from his heart, for Sara Hutchinson, was no blessing, but itself a curse.

Intercourse, either with outward forms through the senses or with the archetypes of his own unconscious, always stimulated Coleridge to desire sexual intercourse with women. Not only was such intercourse banned by religious law as adulterous, but any overt sexuality, even with his wife, had come to seem to Coleridge to be a capitulation to the lowest in himself. His ultimate requirement from Sara was that she should be a living embodiment of absolute purity and a symbol of perfection. He must therefore protect her from his own degrading sexual desires, and from any touch of nature. He thus violated both Sara herself , and the 'natural man' in his own nature. His determination that his sexual drives should be repressed drove him to reject the whole natural world, which became a source of temptation rather than strength.

Coleridge has by now committed himself to the belief that man's intellectual and spiritual faculties are higher than nature, and that the forms of nature must be subjugated to the intellect. Like Blake he believed that without man nature would be barren, or, in his own words, 'an inanimate cold world'. Yet no sooner has he claimed that 'in our life alone does Nature live: Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud', than he is driven to define the Joy which issues from the soul as 'Life, and Life's effuence, cloud at once and shower':

> Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
> Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower.

What we give to Nature, it seems, we have received from her.

The claim that the loss of his 'shaping spirit of Imagination' can be laid at the door of too much 'abstruse research' seems but a rationalization or evasion of the real 'viper thoughts' which are not allowed into this poem, but emerge under cover of nightmares in 'The Pains of Sleep' ('desire with loathing strangely mixed', 'life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame'), and more explicitly, despite the use of ciphers, in the notebooks.

As the poem begins once more to coil around itself, Coleridge seeks to project his soul outwards again by paying attention to the wind which has now got up. He first interprets the sound of it as a 'scream of agony' or the groans of a routed army. But suddenly the noise ceases, and in the profound silence which follows, he imagines a less frightening tale:

> 'Tis of a little child
> Upon a lonesome wild,
> Not far from home, but she hath lost her way:
> And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,
> And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear.

This tale is 'tempered with delight' because of its implication that there are such things as home and mother waiting to be found. The child seeks its home. The mother seeks her child. They are not far apart. The child has lost her way only for a while. Coleridge is obviously that lost child. Home is where he belongs. The mother is the loving female, whether an actual loving woman, or Nature, or his own anima. In the final stanza the storm becomes a 'mountain-birth' which can only mean that Sara, with the stars hanging bright over her dwelling, is to be the virgin mother out of whom the whole of creation is to be reborn, purified and unified in her:

> To her may all things live, from pole to pole,
> Their life the eddying of her living soul!

The prayer is desperate, and could not be answered. Neither Sara nor anyone else could redeem Coleridge from the damage he continued to inflict upon himself.

Not least in the causes of his dejection was the knowledge that he had so desperately mismanaged his own sensibilities, that there had been

> a long and blessed interval, during which my natural faculties were allowed to expand, and my original tendencies to develop themselves: my fancy, and the love of nature, and the sense of beauty in forms and sounds. [*Biographia* I, 10]

That he had once 'traced the fount whence streams of nectar flow', had fed on honey-dew, and drunk the milk of Paradise.

Coleridge was never able to recover Joy from without or within:

In vain we supplicate the Powers above;
There is no resurrection for the Love
That, nursed in tenderest care, yet fades away
In the chilled heart by gradual self-decay.
['Love's Apparition and Evanishment']

What remained was work without hope:

Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve,
And Hope without an object cannot live. ['Work without Hope']

Nor can poetry live without access to nature, either in its outward forms or its inward symbols.

Norman Fruman sums up Coleridge's later life:

> The later Coleridge presents a poignant image of severely diminished emotional range and response. Suppressing the 'natural man' in himself, he willingly embraced the role of sedentary semi-invalid over the last eighteen years of his life. He left his wife when he was just thirty-four years old - never having been an ardent husband - and for the next twenty-eight years he was celibate, and struggled mightily to banish sexual images from his mind. He spent the long Highgate years more or less in the garb and stance of a priest, clad from head to toe in black, and declaiming against the evils of the age and the animal in us all. He was still a young man when he ceased to be a husband, father, brother, or lover to anyone. [Gravil, 75]

His alienation was complete, most notably, perhaps, in his alienation from the life of the body. In the *Biographia* Coleridge speaks of

> the seeming identity of body and mind in infants, and thence the loveliness of the former; the commencing separation in boyhood, and the struggle of equilibrium in youth: thence inward the body is first simply indifferent; then demanding the translucency of the mind not to be worse than indifferent; and finally all that presents the body as body becoming almost of an excremental nature. [II 263]

(Here is Blake's 'Vile Body'.) But the buried life of the body is still, as late as 1825, capable of crying out its distress in the poetry:

> All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair -
> The bees are stirring - birds are on the wing -
> And Winter slumbering in the open air,
> Wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!
> And I the while, the sole unbusy thing,
> Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing. ['Work without Hope']

Like Hopkins he felt himself to be 'time's eunuch' (a word which occurs, encoded, in the *Notebooks*). And the result, as always, was not the hoped for soaring of the life of the spirit, but spiritual paralysis. In his own epitaph he described himself as 'he who many a year with toil of breath / Found death in life'.