

From

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# ‘Frost at Midnight’—Some Coleridgean Intertwinings

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LET ME BEGIN with a quotation from Hölderlin to honour Coleridge’s  
Love of things German:

...conversation  
Is good, and to say  
What the heart means...<sup>1</sup>

This fragment of Hölderlin comes from the poem ‘Andenken’ featured in an article resonantly called ‘On the Misery of Theory without Poetry’.<sup>2</sup> What drew me to this essay wasn’t the theme of conversation but the more unusual, though not unrelated, topic of greeting: how do we as readers greet a poem? Most conversations start with a greeting, so is there a literary equivalent? The essay argues that if we are astounded by the sheer beauty of a poem, we will have missed our encounter with it if we simply dissolve into awe.<sup>3</sup> Instead, we need to move on with the poem, so that rather than overwhelming it with our learning we allow the poem to induce in us an inward pause, which brings us to a threshold of expectancy or a ‘neighbourhood of the questionable’.<sup>4</sup> The poem gives in order to be able to ask, and its question is: Where are my friends? This, explains the article, is not a pleading for a short-cut to friendship but a poet’s petition, one which asks for ‘a kind of destinal granting’.<sup>5</sup> Ronell concludes that greeting must be a trope for the poetic word, a word which as such remains precarious and questioning.<sup>6</sup> And we might add, that, where a greeting leads to a conversation we readers don’t leave things where they were: we invite the poem to share its question with us, so that questioning is not so much the ultimate word but a shared word; as such the poem can move on with us.

Geoffrey Hartman once suggested that the only adequate response to a work of art is what he calls ‘a work of reading’: this is not to surround a poem with commentary so much as to offer the energy of the poem a collaborative future by inviting a whole cross-section of preoccupations to participate in our response.<sup>7</sup> The conversation broadens but remains within the original horizon of greeting. What I shall attempt in this essay is to greet the Coleridge of ‘Frost at Midnight’ by staying with the poem as it travels on to encounter a later, more philosophical Coleridge, and even further toward some modern

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin and Eduard Mörike: *Selected Poems*, trans. Christopher Middleton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 91.

<sup>2</sup> See Avital Ronell, ‘On the Misery of Theory without Poetry: Heidegger’s Reading of Holderlin’s “Andenken”’, *PMLA*, 120, 1 (2005), 16-32.

<sup>3</sup> Ronell, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ronell, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Ronell, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Ronell, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Unpublished comment at the conference *Culture and Critical Form: Reading after Geoffrey Hartman*, University of Warwick, May, 1993.

Coleridgean ‘second selves’ in the unlikely form of 20<sup>th</sup> century French phenomenologists. We all know what Coleridge felt about the French, wanting to stand four-square against ‘French philosophy and modern Materialism’ (CL V 8) but figures like Maurice Merleau-Ponty or Jean Louis Chretien are not chips off the same block as a Voltaire or Condillac. These more recent philosophical writers are as much soaked in the German transcendental tradition as Coleridge himself, and STC did say, wryly enough, in a notebook entry, that French is ‘the very own language of conversation’ (CN II 2431). So this essay will be offered in the spirit of the critical study by David Haney in which he undertakes a ‘meta-conversation’ between Coleridge and a number of contemporary thinkers. The aim, Haney says, is not to catalogue the weak or strong points on either side of the conversation, but ‘rather to *have* the conversation and reflect on it’.<sup>8</sup> Where Coleridge challenges us, in Haney’s view, is where he prompts us to attend to both his world and ours with care, so that his texts ‘speak’ to us in ways that can produce shared and living insights.<sup>9</sup> The theologian John Milbank has written of Coleridge that his significance is not that he anticipated many of our contemporary concerns, but rather that ‘he stands alongside us on the margins of still unresolved problems.’<sup>10</sup>

## II

The opening line of ‘Frost at Midnight’ is muted but not tentative: the frost ‘performs’, the word itself tempting us to imagine a rogue etymology whereby the ministry is carried out by working its way *through* the forms around it. There is also a sense that this windless night is somehow primordial, pre-reflective, or perhaps proto-spiritual. The owl’s cry indirectly introduces the speaker’s own waking solitude which rouses nobody else in the cottage; the cry helps pierce an internal solitude that seems already reaching out for a means of communicating with the surrounding silence. Perhaps the sharp cry is just how the frost itself would sound if its silence could be transposed. It arouses attention but is far from conversational. Are the poet’s musings the more abstruse because of the hour, or because they reach past themselves, ‘abstruser’ than any known object might require? ‘Abstruser’ might also figure a mind half-awake but there is real sleeping going on beside the poet, a child which mitigates the absolute solitude, an unconscious presence but one no less fully present for all that. The cradled figure seems to have found its place much as the frost also dwells obliquely and mysteriously, but the poet’s voice is neither wholly inside, sharing the family space, nor outside (the frost is in part secret because the poet is sheltered from it). The calm itself is provocative of that

<sup>8</sup> *The Challenge of Coleridge: Ethics and Interpretation in Romanticism and Modern Philosophy* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 416.

<sup>9</sup> Haney, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Divine Logos and Human Communication: a Recuperation of Coleridge’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 29 (1987), 73.

uneasiness (and as such pro-vokes the owl's cry), being the product of an 'extreme silentness', so monolithic as to verge on separating the poet from any sense of relation or stable object of meditation. Is it the silentness of very little or of a whole world? It seems a silence wrapping in itself a multifarious landscape whose complexity is uneasily reduced to this minimalism in which its life has become 'inaudible as dreams'. What should be there no longer behaves as if it were there; which is disturbing because in the poem this exactly rendered world seems to be actively mimicking its own intangibility, realising an unreality paradoxically one step ahead of those abstruser schematicisms of a poet who might be tempted to reduce it to an unreality of his *own* devising. As the phrase 'sea, hill and wood' repeats itself like the owl-cry it is as though a silent village is peopled only by these non-human features, and the daytime distinction between human and non-human is both intensified and reduced in such a marginal scene. Wordsworth, in his notebook, could liken the ripples and murmurs of landscape to a 'peopled solitude' (WP V 341), but here the frost has translated a populous scene to another medium which the poet can't bring to focus, despite the implied precision of the frostiness. Kelvin Everest compares this to the effect of a 'silent film',<sup>11</sup> but it is one almost immediately modified by a fluttering film in the grate which returns the poet to an audible space. While the frost is both present and secret, the sooty film is distractingly visible but not entirely real, an unquiet thing less than a meaningful object, but for that reason a 'companionable thing', a perception offering itself to phantasy rather than observation, to a weird internal topology rather than the topographic layers of cottage, village and hill. An insufficiently centred self converses with a derived or partial object. In a future Notebook entry, Coleridge will remark on how a coal-fire induces in him the conscious fantasy of shrinking to a Lilliputian so that the embers become like mountains in contrast (CN II 2402). In 'Frost at Midnight' the speaker is already substantially diminished by the inaudibility of the outer world, not to speak of his abstruser musings equally inaudible to his own inner self, but at the same time his thoughts are diverted by a riddlingly active 'companionable form' which is not a spectre nor a self-conscious illusion.

The middle section of the poem, which pursues the image of the 'stranger', contrasts loneliness amid a crowd of school-fellows with a solitude from within a family circle. The word 'stranger' itself could denote an expected child in seventeenth century English and we know that Coleridge was expecting his second child in a matter of weeks.<sup>12</sup> The 'gentle breathings' of the babe recall the poet to his present situation, a calm which is able to hear and inhabit 'the interspersed vacancies/ And momentary pauses of the thought'; the extreme outer silentness has been mediated by the freaks of a film of soot which, though uneasily marginal in itself, is effective at distracting

<sup>11</sup> *Coleridge's Secret Ministry: the Conversation Poems, 1795-98* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1979), 260.

<sup>12</sup> See Matthew Vanwinkle, 'Fluttering on the Grate: Revision in "Frost at Midnight"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 43 (2004), 588.

the mind from a quasi-paralysis. Coleridge writes himself into greeting the scene around him, which enables him, in turn, to greet the babe as a true object of attention:

My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart  
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee. (ll. 48-9)

Although the speaker recurs to musing on the comparative deprivation of schooldays where memories of ‘cloisters dim’ do not figure among dim underlying sympathies, the imagery of ‘sky and stars’ removes us to a larger, shared world. The ‘sky and stars’ is exactly where the ‘Great Universal Teacher’ can be presumed to be most at home, together with that spirit-life moulding the mind of the child amid scenes of nature by stimulating it to ask for the being it already has. The deprivation of such scenery shows up in the father’s uneasy habits of musing and questioning, though he is less concerned to subvert or de-create than to track a way back *to* asking (while you might question from where you are *not*, you ask from where you *are*). To ask is to sue for relation with what has already been given. The gift remains a silent one, perhaps so secret the poet doubts whether he has received it at all: by acknowledging such a starting-point, however, Coleridge implicates a desire to bring it more fully into figurative life and relationship.

The concluding, superbly pared-down verse paragraph completes the ‘rondo’ which for Coleridge enacted best the conversational pattern which had not quite been caught, to his mind, in earlier, longer versions of the text. Some critics take the repeated use of ‘Whether’ (in ‘Whether the summer... whether the eve-drops... (ll. 66-70)) as an index of uncertainty. I read the word as hinging on a more confident celebration of the cycle of season giving way to season, a set of open possibilities held in a stable equilibrium. We are given a marvellous set of correspondences which reinforce the interlinking of the seasons in very compressed form: summer green is rhymed in winter (despite bare branches) by a *mossy* apple-tree; the singing redbreast suggests springtime while his hue transfers by implication to the apples on the tree to figure the ripeness of autumn. The smoke of a winter fire turns out to be the gentle steam of a thaw, and the droplets under the eaves, now arrested by frost, call up the globe of the moon in an embracing rather than alien silence. It is only in the ‘trances of the blast’ we actually hear the droplets fall, a telling phrase which seems to hark back to the witching time of ‘extreme silentness’. ‘Pauses’ of the blast might have allowed the sun-thaw droplets to be gentle audible, but the stronger figure of ‘trance’ directly summons the sense of a ‘secret ministry of frost’ which, by solidifying the droplets in what John Beer calls ‘a principle of concretion’,<sup>13</sup> conjoins the quietly shining icicles to the ‘quiet Moon’.

The imagery of ‘Frost at Midnight’—its catalogue of smoke, cloud, droplets, moon, sooty film, icicle—are all intermediate appearances arising from

<sup>13</sup> *Coleridge’s Poetic Intelligence* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 139.

some more primitive state which suggests both insufficiency and inter-relation. They possess, if you will, an intermediate way of being: all immensely particular objects of perception but all transitional states of or moments in their world. They are secondary entities: the moon reflects the sun, smoke derives from fire and icicle from water and so on. They enter the poem from within a sense of marginality but are woven together by its dialogical process to invoke a continuous community of *active* relations, as the cycle of transformation and season that moves through them has no single point of privilege. Such intermediate forms of themselves 'quieten' the stark difference between subject and object which was to haunt Coleridge throughout his life. They speak quietly of difference from within an im-mediacy already in relation to what withdraws as they approach. Or their own presence is a sort of withdrawal, a secret ministry of its own. The icicles 'quietly shining to the quiet Moon' provoke us to imagine this quietness as something secondary and local, less than elemental. The icicles are quiet because their frozen state removes from them the restlessness of living water; Lou Thompson has suggested that 'quiet' often bears a connotation of stillness;<sup>14</sup> the lack of noise may figure other sorts of *positive* lack. The moon is a larger droplet englobed in the heavens and not the origin of its own light but casting a light mild enough to be in relation to what shines toward it. The icicle's shining is even more derivative than the moonlight but the 'shining to' is a moment of freedom and space. The quietness still belongs to the prevailing silence but is able to modify it by suggesting something more palpable, still dedicated to silence perhaps but no longer as figuring isolation. On the contrary, the whole scene bespeaks participation. A primordial sun might dazzle any such relation out of existence and remains at a distance, though always implied as the opposite pole of midnight. The ontological conversation between all these images appears provisional. To what extent are these entities intended to be exemplary, or is their own mode of relations itself open to other horizons than the prevailing ethos of the immanent and the supplementary?

### III

One horizon with which 'Frost at Midnight' is much involved is that of its own philosophical preoccupations, much evident in a poem which one critic has labelled 'a sort of philosophical lullaby'.<sup>15</sup> Earlier versions of the text were even more explicit about what might flow from a 'self-watching subtilizing mind'. The fact that by 1817 and after Coleridge had simplified these lines to refer more succinctly to 'a toy of Thought' indicates not just his concern to produce a smoother aesthetic effect, but that he was still trying to realise more of the suspensive or 'hanging' quality of the poem's internal conversation with

<sup>14</sup> 'What is the Sound of One Icicle Shining? Silence and the Koan of "Frost at Midnight"', unpublished paper given at the *Coleridge Summer Conference*, Cannington, July 2004.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert Crawford, "'My Babe So Beautiful!'", *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 November, 2004.

itself. The conversation is now overheard by a philosopher, a philosopher who interrupts at times, but as the poem goes on rewriting itself he is also someone who gradually learns to substitute a phenomenological patience in the face of experience, rather than agonize over epistemological quandaries.

I have introduced the term ‘phenomenological’ which I want to draw into the very conversation ‘Frost at Midnight’ draws us readers into. What I hope this will illustrate is less Coleridge’s own intellectual background as he wrote the poem while mulling over themes in Hartley and Berkeley,<sup>16</sup> than how the poem establishes a more intimate tension between the imaginative and the schematic, anticipating resources not yet available to its author, and also raising questions of aesthetic experience as wholly internal to thought. Part of the conversational idiom of the poem lies not just in how imagination reconciles discordant elements, but in how that very conversational texture exposes itself to an imagination which can be burdened, hindered and interrupted. Imagination presents itself here as an emergent power called on to fill a breach: Hume’s dismantling of knowledge had led to a ‘withering of the philosophical appetite’ in England, so that it fell more to poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge to struggle with a more self-consciously philosophical poetry as a matter not just of experimental form but also of content.<sup>17</sup> In 1796 Coleridge had remarked to Southey how he ‘cannot write without a *body* of *thought*—hence my *Poetry* is crowded and sweats beneath a heavy burthen of Ideas and Imagery (CL 1 74). In ‘Frost at Midnight’ these sweats of ideas and imagery are held at bay by the icicles, as suspended but concrete particles of the world; when they revert to droplets in the thaw a living situation has mingled itself with the burden of thought. In the famous letter to Thelwall of 1796 (where Coleridge highlighted what he called the ‘divine Chit-chat of Cowper’) he also claimed that his ‘philosophical opinions are blended with, or deduced from, my feelings: & this, I think, peculiarizes my style of writing’ (CL 1 279). One critic has gone further and insisted that for this poet it is the feeling which *sets* intellect in motion.<sup>18</sup> For David Miall, this intimacy of style as thought and thought as style has an *anticipatory* quality, which for me implies a prescience for ideas yet to articulate themselves on the one hand, and a patience with experience too complex for summary analysis on the other.<sup>19</sup> Coleridge was always delighted by instances of anticipation and noted with relish how the Italian Giordano Bruno somehow ‘knew’ about the circulation of the blood thirty years before Harvey (CN 1 928). This was just how he liked to think of himself in relation to Kant and much of contemporary German *Naturphilosophie*. By feeling Coleridge included a ‘feeling for’, an intuitive sense concrete and intimate enough to be equally overflowing with speculative

<sup>16</sup> See James D. Boulger, ‘Imagination and Speculation in Coleridge’s Conversation Poems’, *Journal of English and German Philology*, 65 (1965), 702.

<sup>17</sup> See Tim Milnes, ‘Through the Looking-Glass: Coleridge and Post-Kantian Philosophy’, *Comparative Literature*, 51, 4 (1999), 310.

<sup>18</sup> See Richard H. Fogle, *The Idea of Coleridge’s Criticism* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1962), 28.

<sup>19</sup> ‘The Displacement of Emotions: the Case of “Frost at Midnight”’ (*The Wordsworth Circle*, 20, 2 (1989), 99.

energy. As the theologian Donald MacKinnon acknowledged, it was as a poet that Coleridge came to Kant, with problems and queries first raised by his own poetic practice.<sup>20</sup>

The matters which the Conversation Poems touch on are not limited to drawing-room exchange, however nuanced this might be in Cowper. It has been pointed out how these poems give us instances of the imaginative process unifying experience, but they also open us to the unbridled power of speculative reason which as often serves as an obstruction to the tentative intertwinings of imaginative threads. This can be traced to the persistent contradictions in Coleridge's life and world.<sup>21</sup> The conversational style was equally capable of steering Coleridge into tight corners but with this style he wasn't simply courting danger but also eliciting new resources. Above all, the Conversation Poems were readable. When he introduces the occasional quotation from them in his later writings, they remain close to Coleridge's vital intellectual concerns which they had gone on underlying and fleshing out. Similarly, these poems draw us readers on with our own thoughts and associations, many of which Coleridge could not have foreseen; for us too the poetry makes itself felt in new contexts, summoning off fresh fields resonances we had not realised we were going to find already embedded there.

Let me attempt to illustrate this by looking at some themes in 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology in the company of Coleridge, until we are drawn back to 'Frost at Midnight' itself. Phenomenology would have been known to Coleridge as a German term in his lifetime. The word first appears in the writings of J H Lambert in his *Neues Organon* of 1764, where it is used to indicate a study of the forms both appearances and illusions take. The idea itself probably goes right back to Aristotle who famously sought to 'save the appearances', by which he meant any good explanation should start from how we experience things and how they naturally appear to us: he put us on our guard against the counter-intuitive. Kant took over the word phenomenology from Lambert, using it to show how the principles of sensibility and understanding only apply to a world of appearances and not to things as they might be in themselves. We know Coleridge felt ambivalent about this, yearning for a form of perception that was vital and truly ontological, but at the same time respecting Kant's insistence that being always holds back something in reserve as unknowable, which Coleridge welcomed as a buttress against pantheism. But Coleridge was disappointed Kant didn't believe it was possible to demonstrate the nature of ultimate reality, though Kant held that everything implied the existence of an absolute reason; Coleridge consoled himself, however, with the thought that such an affirmation was already implicit nearer to home in the writings of Bacon, Baxter and Leighton.<sup>22</sup>

It is Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) whom we acknowledge as the founder

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<sup>20</sup> 'Coleridge and Kant' in *Coleridge's Variety: Bicentenary Studies*, ed. John Beer (London: Macmillan, 1974), 192-3.

<sup>21</sup> Boulger, *op. cit.*, 692.

<sup>22</sup> See John Beer, 'Editor's Introduction', *AR*, cxix.

of phenomenology as a modern movement, and who, like Coleridge, spent time at the University of Göttingen. He defined phenomenology as an attempt to uncover the nature of meaning through examining human consciousness, a mind which always acts to place its meaning *in* a world.<sup>23</sup> Husserl wanted to account for how the miracle of objectivity within subjectivity is brought about. As one commentator puts it: ‘we live naively in this world, swimming with the flow of its givens’ and Husserl becomes aware of the phenomena of the connectedness of all experience, or what we recognise as ‘a world’.<sup>24</sup> Swimming with the flow of givens is certainly one obvious starting-point for a Coleridge Conversation Poem.

One can argue for a temperamental affinity between Coleridge’s thought and modern phenomenology, despite differences of language and emphasis. There is a resemblance in the style of thinking: for Coleridgeans this dictum by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a disciple of Husserl, has a familiar ring: ‘the unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoate atmosphere which has surrounded it are not to be taken as a sign of failure—they were inevitable because phenomenology’s task was to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason.’<sup>25</sup> Husserl, like Coleridge, left unpublished work and masses of notebooks at his death, and Merleau-Ponty himself never finished his most significant later work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. The text as we have it tails off into working notes after its last completed chapter called ‘The Intertwining’. Coleridge might well have wryly felt at home with these people, one feels.

#### IV

How do some of Coleridge’s philosophical dilemmas intertwine with Merleau-Ponty’s own attempts to hold together inner and outer worlds in the mid-twentieth century intellectual landscape, many of whose distinctive features were being laid down in the period Coleridge lived through? Coleridge might well have warmed to a man who could write: ‘Every incarnate subject is like an open notebook in which we do not yet know what will be written’.<sup>26</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, the act of perception itself seemed the key to overcoming subject-object dualism and to being drawn into the world. As Merleau-Ponty wrote: ‘I grasp myself, not as a constituting subject which is transparent to itself... but as a particular thought, as a thought engaged with certain objects as a thought in act; and it is in this sense that I am certain of myself’.<sup>27</sup> Coleridge

<sup>23</sup> See Jeff Malpas, ‘From the Transcendental to the “Topological”’: Heidegger on Ground, Unity and Limit’, in *From Kant to Davidson: Philosophy and the Idea of the Transcendental*, ed. Jeff Malpas (London: Routledge, 2003), 87.

<sup>24</sup> See Dermot Moran, ‘Making Sense: Husserl’s Phenomenology as Transcendental Idealism’, in *From Kant to Davidson: Philosophy and the Idea of the Transcendental*, ed. Jeff Malpas (London: Routledge, 2003), 63.

<sup>25</sup> See James B. Steeves, ‘The Virtual Body: Merleau-Ponty’s Early Philosophy of Imagination’, *Philosophy Today*, 45, 4 (2001), 373.

<sup>26</sup> *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004), 37. Cited hereafter as *Basic Writings*.

<sup>27</sup> *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 22.

possessed a strong sense of 'outness' (Berkeley), a sense of something uniquely given to common sense or 'simple realism' (Reid) which refuses to derive knowledge from a calculus of our representations. As John Milbank observes, the human mind doesn't copy from nature, its apprehension is 'inscrutable and direct'.<sup>28</sup> Merleau would have agreed with Coleridge that a poet's heart and intellect should be 'intimately combined and unified, with the great appearances in Nature' (CL II 864) and we know that Coleridge's later theosophy was concerned above all with the nature of action: that any possible synthesis not a mere static formula but must be the fruit of a progressive act. Where Coleridge describes how by deep feeling we make our ideas dim in what is a deep and steady feeling which identifies the 'Perceiving & the Perceived', he is already doing a species of phenomenology (CN I 921). It is true later Coleridge generally sees objects in need of being redeemed from their chaos by consciousness while Merleau-Ponty stakes his thought on a principle of inherent organisation essentially shared between mind and world. Coleridge seems to concede this when he refers to 'actual impressions' possessing a 'uniform significancy' or 'that apparent contingency and promiscuous position of Objects by which Nature or the World of the bodily sense is discriminated' (CN III 3474). As a poet Coleridge is always sensitive to the complex self-organising life of things in the world. He was to come to understand that where the Primary Imagination does its work, it essentially reaches outwards in sympathy with the plastic powers in nature.<sup>29</sup> And we should remember that in his famous definition of the Secondary Imagination as 'essentially vital even as all objects... are essentially fixed and dead (BL I 304), he was careful to qualify the term 'objects' within the parenthesis 'as objects'; in other words, objects are fixed and dead when they are less than living phenomena, a failure not present in his poetry unless afflicted by dejection. For Merleau-Ponty, the body itself is ontological because it actively places itself in the world, it is not the inert platform for a living spirit. The same must be true of any Coleridgean body which imagines. Early Coleridge stressed the corporeality of thought (CL I 137) and his increasing interest in a power he had yet to name as imagination was a path from the concrete mechanisms of a Hartley towards a spiritual horizon not reducible to the dogmatic idealism of a Berkeley. Coleridge's own sense of self was challengingly pieced by an actual world, and he knew well that his own 'slender Thread' of Fancy always fastened itself to 'something below' (CN II 2166). The phenomenological body is not in space like things, Merleau-Ponty would want to say, 'it inhabits or haunts space' which is what Coleridge's secondary imagination also does, and we have only to bring to mind the *Ancient Mariner* or *Christabel* to think of haunting and haunted bodies.<sup>30</sup>

In his later and unfinished work, Merleau-Ponty moves from emphasis on

<sup>28</sup> Milbank, op.cit.,63.

<sup>29</sup> Milbank, op. cit.,64-5.

<sup>30</sup> *Basic Writings*, 36.

bodily perception to a more mysteriously speculative element which he simply names 'flesh'. By this he doesn't intend a materialist triumph because it is precisely flesh which reveals the invisible within the visible aspect of things; it is not just the human body which partakes of 'flesh'—rather it is a property common to all the vital layers of the world which see and touch one another. For the Coleridge of *The Friend*, religion defines itself as 'the act and habit of reverencing THE INVISIBLE, as the highest both in ourselves and in nature' (F I 440). Merleau-Ponty connects visible and invisible things to the idea of an 'intertwining', by which he means we only really see our world because we are ourselves visible objects within it—we touch it because we are touched by it. These are ontological rather than contingent properties, all based on interaction, key elements in a world of participation. This avoids being another supreme synthesis which would risk falling back onto the sort of formulaic absolute Coleridge so much dreaded. Rather, it offers a world of exchange and reversibility which represents for Merleau-Ponty something more truth-like than any supreme synthesizing of these inter-relations. To express this, Merleau-Ponty borrowed the figure of chiasmus, symbolized by the Greek *chi* which looks like an X and which stands for a general exchange of qualities; the process is never completed, however, but folds and turns within itself, a process the French philosopher compares to the flesh possessing a flap or leaf, different moments of which are in play without rigidifying into subject or object. Coleridge, in a Keswick letter, could liken his own spirit to a leaf eddying in autumn and relate that to the intense feeling for the universal spirit arising within himself (CL II 916). The figure of chiasmus in itself can denote divine harmony for Coleridge, as one critic, writing about 'Frost at Midnight' has suggested.<sup>31</sup> Coleridge's underlying sense of form demands that if plurality always presupposes unity, that many must be one, the reverse is also equally true, that the one must be many.<sup>32</sup> For both philosophers this is more than a dialectic because chiasmus symbolises a primordial current of sharing out and actualisation. For Merleau-Ponty philosophy discovers itself to be already placed in an ongoing world, a world which elicits this insight but beyond that requires no formal or narrowly intellectual solution; such an act of perception, however, draws upon a mysterious reservoir of primordial faith.<sup>33</sup> Coleridge's own 'primal act of faith' is enunciated in the word God, a 'faith not derived from experience but its ground and source' (LS 18). Merleau-Ponty equally goes beyond external experience but he believes the ground for doing so is given by the world itself. Transcendence, for Merleau-Ponty, is this very world which eludes our grasp, so much so that any absolute self would be so closed in on itself it would be unable (ironically enough) to turn toward a *divine*

<sup>31</sup> See Jan Plug, 'The Rhetoric of Secrecy: Figures of the Self in "Frost at Midnight,"' in *Coleridge's Visionary Languages: Essays in Honour of J.B. Beer*, ed. Tim Fulford and Morton D. Paley (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1993), 36.

<sup>32</sup> See Nick Reid, 'Coleridge and Schelling: the Missing Transcendental Reduction,' *Studies in Romanticism*, 33,3 (1994), 469.

<sup>33</sup> See Steeves, *op. cit.*, 374.

absolute.<sup>34</sup> Such was Coleridge's fear also, faced with the high dialectical ambitions of post-Kantian philosophy. Though he craved for method and synthesis, he also insisted on a living Other which the human will desires to relate to personally and progressively. Will is central too for Merleau-Ponty, as experiences like love or hate can't be proved philosophically but are only made actual by an existential decision to love or to hate. When I will to love I already find myself loving, and this is related to a primordial faith in perception, so that where I enter into relation with the outside world I already begin to understand it.

## V

So with heads swimmingly conversant with possible points of contact between Merleau-Ponty and Coleridge, let us retrieve 'Frost at Midnight'. The key image near the poem's opening is the sooty film on the grate, that unquiet presence which evokes in the poem a fear of the 'phantasmal chaos of association' or the 'fleeting chaos of facts' as Coleridge was later to classify similar experiences (BL I 116; LS 18). The 'idling Spirit' which toys with thought, seeking 'a mirror of itself' seems to mock that transcendental spirit which endeavours 'to unite the insulated fragments of truth and frame a perfect mirror' as Coleridge eventually declared in his *Table Talk*. (IT I 248). But perhaps the fragments of perception in the poem are not quite so 'insulated' as the poet imagines he fears. Rather than oscillating insecurely between subject and object, a dead nature and a living vision, the film of soot might itself be something like the flap or sheet which Merleau-Ponty sees as a reversible leaf of inter-relation, a fold in the flesh of body and world which promotes their intertwining. For Coleridge, the chaos of association needs to be modified by the will, and by the will we can understand something nearer to an active participatory consciousness which intends a living world for its object (one hinted at in the idea of Primary Imagination) Coleridge's own secondary imagination with its stress on dissolving, diffusing and dissipating in order to recreate might in practice take its origin from such an idling spirit, which as we see in 'Frost at Midnight' can also be a way of letting be, of waiting on silence and solitude, essentially modest but not meaningless ways of being in the world. To dissipate can allow a letting-go which accompanies a coming-into-place, being somewhere by interpenetrating its nondescript moments and moods. Such flecks and marks, Merleau-Ponty would have us believe, are parts of a particular world of playing and praying more primordial than any purely conceptual space.<sup>35</sup> A conflicting but cohering locus emerges from this concrete entwining of oneself and the world, which is to say: a conversation about being is joined. Coleridge's telling phrase 'a companionable form'

<sup>34</sup> *Basic Writings*, 172.

<sup>35</sup> See Glenn A. Mazis, 'Merleau-Ponty, Inhabitation, and the Emotions' in *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Essays*, ed. Henry Pieterma (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 264.

suggests an entity which promotes this intertwining process, an image which sparks off a series of memories and anticipations, fears, hopes and implicit promises between himself and the breathing presence of Hartley. The babe's potential one day to 'wonder like a breeze' itself derives from the more immediate 'gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm' (l.45). As Jan Plug notes, 'As "companionable form" the film has already begun to be personified; but as "stranger" the prosopopeia [*ie* personification] is continued as is the reversal of inside and outside, as the way is opened up for the subsequent identifications to be made through the film'.<sup>36</sup> The reversibility of seeing and being seen, or being touched by what one touches, is Merleau-Ponty's idea of what constitutes intertwining, and, in a marvellous image Coleridge would have loved, he explains how 'reflection doesn't withdraw from the world towards a unity of consciousness...it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire'.<sup>37</sup> In 'Frost at Midnight' those sparks are diminished to a fluttering unease or filmy loneliness but they do still illuminate a flickering capacity for world relation.

The explorations of worlds of thing, place, weather and person in 'Frost at Midnight' emerge amid a literally provocative silence, one which 'vexes meditation with its strange / And extreme silentness, (9-11) but which calls beyond 'abstruser musings' to participate in a play of tentative presences or echoing absences which feels very like the resonance of the invisible amid the visible. Merleau-Ponty speaks of feeling and emotion as the gift of the 'indirect voices of silence', voices and presences encountered in an intertwining of identities rather than any hierarchical, constituting process.<sup>38</sup> The muteness of perception (by which the film speaks from within the silence, saying what we can't quite hear but convoking other, more companionable silences) intertwines itself with those invisible ideas, which weave an immediacy of 'spirit'. Here is a concreteness of remarkable delicacy which Coleridge creates for us. 'The quietness is not simply a function of tone, Jan Plug insists, '...but also of...suspension'.<sup>39</sup> It is the suspension of the icicles within the secret ministry of frost (secret because invisible as a process but solidly creating new objects) which leads to acute visibility. These are closely inter-volved distances which don't settle into a lifeless unity but move across one another in a shared world innocent at this juncture of any final synthesis. They are suspended in what draws them to and through each other, as sunlight becomes a milder form of light in the moon, and water crystallizes in an effect of companionable stasis, but which, as seasonal manifestation, is not static at all. Likewise, with Merleau-Ponty, invisible ideas can't be detached from sensible appearance; we wouldn't see the invisible any better if we lacked bodies which stay up late at night immersed in silence; rather, the very 'secrecy wherein [invisible things] lie'

<sup>36</sup> Plug, *op. cit.*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Basic Writings, 70.

<sup>38</sup> See Mazis, *op. cit.*, 262.

<sup>39</sup> Plug, *op. cit.*, 38.

allows them 'their proper mode of existence'.<sup>40</sup> Or as the John Milbank remarks, commenting on Merleau-Ponty: 'Imagination is the medium in which the judgement of the higher soul swims. "The soul never thinks without a mental image" and the film of images is to the mind as the air is to the eye, in affecting it.'<sup>41</sup> The book which swims here is not involved in the mock study of a transcendental idealism; rather, as in 'This Lime-Tree Bower' the poet stands 'Silent with swimming sense', conscious of the iridescent surfaces of an entire moral and spiritual world which flow and reticulate together. 'The moon's pale disk', Merleau-Ponty will say, is not a general quality corresponding to a notion of the mind, 'but what is discovered by our gaze or our movement, a question to which these things provide a fully appropriate reply'.<sup>42</sup> Our senses question the things around us and the objects reply to them, and such is the living world Coleridge hopes for his son, a world of 'lovely shapes and sounds intelligible'(l.59), which through such giving makes the spirit ask.<sup>43</sup> These secrets, Merleau-Ponty urges us to see, are 'divined at the junctions of the visible world, they are our ideality, surpassing our places of existence but not leaving them'.<sup>44</sup> Jan Plug finds the interchange between icicles and moon in 'Frost at Midnight' only a partial realisation of chiasmus (the figure of intertwining) because of the repetition or redundance by which the icicles are seen as 'Quietly shining' to a 'quiet Moon'.<sup>45</sup> The critic sees this as subverting reciprocity, but if we follow Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility it can be as though we are seeing two sides, two 'leaves' to the apparently single reality of quietness. Because Coleridge senses the quiet, precise shining of the icicles is icicle-like and so not quite identical to the softer, broader shining of the moon to which it is in no sense opposed, he dramatises relationship which is not identity by rhetorically repeating the word, with only a slight grammatical modulation, so that difference is a difference *within* relation. This is how the flesh of the world folds, exchanging passive and active moods, in a reciprocity which hangs back (another meaning of the 'suspensive') from absorbing in a prior synthesis the givenness of space and time. Such is the 'intensity of the feeling of life' which Coleridge so names in 1803: 'Life seems to me...a universal spirit, that neither has, nor can have, an opposite'(CL II 916).

## V1

I hope there has been at least *some* fruitful intertwining of the voices of Coleridge and Merleau-Ponty with a minimum of arbitrary yoking. One

<sup>40</sup> *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 148-50. Cited hereafter as *TVTI*.

<sup>41</sup> 'The Soul of Reciprocity Part Two: Reciprocity Granted,' *Modern Theology* 17, 4 (2001), 497.

<sup>42</sup> *Basic Writings*, 136.

<sup>43</sup> Merleau-Ponty insists that reflection must seek in the world itself the secret of our perceptual bond with it, as part of 'our mute contact with the things, when they are not yet things said.' When we question the world, we 'make it say, finally, what in its silence it *means to say*...' *TVTI*, 38-9.

<sup>44</sup> *TVTI*, 153.

<sup>45</sup> Plug, *op. cit.*, 74.

Coleridgean exclamation might well be: what difference does a belief in God make in this? Does phenomenology for all its subtle description only give us a purely immanent space, a world primordially self-sufficient? Where Merleau-Ponty suggests that any philosophy is already part of the world it attempts to understand, a world without the need for any formal solution, Coleridge would not have been satisfied, though he would have acknowledged Merleau-Ponty's attempt at a genuine openness of reflection: he too is in the business of offering 'aids to reflection'. In his earlier work, transcendence indicated for the French thinker how we encounter a world beyond any calculus of representation, but his later work approaches what are at least quasi-theological perspectives. He will come to acknowledge that our experiences are not narrowly based on what comes to hand: not only does the visible imply the invisible but even something irredeemably *absent* might be among the number of our most original *experiences*. We might discover within ourselves a movement towards something which never actually presents itself.<sup>46</sup> He also remarks that transcendence no longer hangs over us, for humans have become its privileged bearer.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Merleau emphasises that humans have 'strangely become' transcendence's privileged bearer, which for Coleridgeans echoes the role of the 'stranger' in 'Frost at Midnight', at once conjured up by an idling spirit but able to sustain a deeper mysteriousness as it draws the imagination around itself.

Merleau-Ponty reminds us that, like the unity of the world, that of the I is invoked rather than experienced each time we perform an act of perception.<sup>48</sup> An invocation is literally a prayer, and for Jean-Louis Chretien, a contemporary French philosopher, "To pray is in religion what to think is in philosophy" (Nervalis).<sup>49</sup> For Merleau, our bodies experience the world by responding to the call of things,<sup>50</sup> and for Chretien the idea of call and response is a key theme in his phenomenology. He describes how we can only beckon towards what has already manifested itself in us, calling us to call. If our answer to things fully sufficed them there would be no basis for dialogue. The call comes from beyond our being but never corresponds to it. The creation is a silent cry which resounds within us,<sup>51</sup> and the voice of the other breaks its silence if we offer it our attentive silence, so that there is a chiasmic filigree of silences which cross one another. Once again we seem on the verge of the secret ministry of 'Frost at Midnight'. Another reason why Coleridge chooses to echo 'quietly' with 'quiet' in the closing line of the poem may be that he is trying to conjure up a speaking or dialogic silence, no longer something strangely or dreamily inaudible but an encounter mysteriously audible to those

<sup>46</sup> See Remy C. Kwant, *From Phenomenology to Metaphysics: an Inquiry into the Last Period of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophical Life* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1966), 243.

<sup>47</sup> See Jerry H. Gill, *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1991), 148.

<sup>48</sup> *Basic Writings*, 206.

<sup>49</sup> 'The Wounded Word: Phenomenology of Prayer' in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": the French Debate*, by Dominique Janicaud *et al.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 148.

<sup>50</sup> *Basic Writings*, 123.

<sup>51</sup> *The Call and the Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 18.

who watch from the night of their spirit and listen to the world. Participating in the world of icicle and moon is not to glimpse transcendence absorbed into the immanent intertwinings of the universe so much as to be brought to an horizon of prayer, or hold ontological converse at the world's margin or lip. For call and response also intertwine, belonging so much to the world they are no longer conventionally contained or placed within it.

Part of the lyric drama of the poem is the extent to which Coleridge still feels threatened by a reductive world of analytic description, in which the stranger is only an idle freak to be returned to the void by a suspicious, detached understanding. Coleridge still has a long way to go before he can work out a more adequate participatory insight, but in making the conversational mode the primary means of encountering and addressing the world in which he discovers himself, he has already found a way of inviting experience to exercise an initiative from within the process of reflection. What he sees can also be heard out of the silence and that which he thinks he calls out to; what he experiences whether idly or profoundly he *invokes*. Conversation is the path of invocation. That conversation is of course interminable, a dialogue in danger of collapsing back into isolated soliloquy, but also capable of glimpsing a more sustaining sense of dedication before others and before the ground of those others. Coleridge is no longer here, but in inviting more recent thinkers to participate in, supplement, or simply to listen, as it were, to Coleridge's own speculative experiences, I hope we have been reminded of how this is a conversation frequently to be overheard in out-of-the-way places and at odd times; even in our own familiarly unpropitious time, it is one which offers itself to be joined in yet again.

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