

From

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# Springs, Fountains and Volcanoes— Coleridge’s Erotic Pulse

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‘I think it was Bishop Butler, who said, that he was all his life struggling against the devilish suggestions of his senses, which would have maddened him, if he had relaxed the stern wakefulness of his reason for a single moment.’

*Inquiring Spirit* 11; *Table Talk*—1 May 1830

**I**T STRUCK ME, that if I were in your position, sitting down to hear about erotic springs, fountains and volcanoes in Coleridge’s notebooks, I would rack my brains to remember anything relevant, and after a little pondering come up with *Kubla Khan*, not a notebook entry of course—though treated rather like one by Coleridge, having, prior to publication, a long history not quite public, not quite private. And because most of us naturally turn to *Kubla Khan* to find anything erotic in Coleridge, it is with *Kubla Khan* that I begin.<sup>1</sup>

After a calm, even stately, opening, the mood changes in line 12—‘But oh that deep romantic chasm...’ that ‘oh’ seemingly rather more a 20<sup>th</sup> century gasp than an 18<sup>th</sup> century exclamation.<sup>2</sup> And then all those phrases—‘A savage place!... holy and enchanted/... haunted/ By woman wailing for her demon lover!...And from this chasm.../ As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,/ A mighty fountain momentarily was forced...’ thus flinging up, momentarily again, the sacred river, which sinks, in dying tumult, to a lifeless ocean, into a kind of after-rest—all phrases speaking of some kind of unspeakable power, tantalizingly erotic, and yet quite unreadable as metaphor or allegory: thus tantalized, sure that we feel something, but uncertain what, there our thinking about Coleridge and the erotic more or less begins and ends; if determined to pursue the subject, we might turn to *Christabel*, and again we struggle to find why Hazlitt felt, ‘There is something disgusting at the bottom of this subject’—for in the end he was only able to substantiate this remark by suggesting that Geraldine was a man in disguise—an absurd suggestion in itself, but not without significance if you think, as I do, that the poem is some kind of prothalamion, a preparation for marriage. However, we conclude our reading of *Christabel* much as we did of *Kubla Khan*—hints, guesses, lines interestingly revised to remove early charges of obscenity, but nothing, finally, that you could put your finger on, so to speak, nothing that could finally damn the author in his own day, nothing that can redeem him in ours, by which I

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<sup>1</sup> This is only true for those who have not read Anya Taylor’s *The Erotic Coleridge*. That book traces Coleridge’s erotic thinking through many of his poems, particularly his early and under-read poems addressed to local belles, and deals comprehensively with *Christabel* and Coleridge’s relationship with Sara Hutchinson. Much of the material that Anya Taylor has integrated into her text was either new to me or originally presented, and the coherence of her argument gave me the confidence to believe that this was an area worth further research.

<sup>2</sup> This article has been edited by James Vigus, and the author is grateful for his help: here he comments, ‘...because sex began in 1963?! ‘Oh’ might be less usual than ‘ah’ in 1800, but not very much so... And what noise would characterise the 21<sup>st</sup> century?’

mean, that if to his generation he was being too frank, to our generation he is not being frank enough. And by digging around in the notebooks, my purpose is to show that this power does have distinct origins, is probably an energy vital to his creativity, and though frequently masked, frequently abjured by Coleridge himself, is always there in one form or another, from his earliest to his dying days.

To many of us, *Kubla Khan* is the archetypal romantic poem—rising up as if from the subconscious, unbidden, almost without benefit of the author, free of meditation or reflection, expressed in images not ideas, a thing quite itself, a model for what poetry ought to be. Not for Coleridge. Whatever was going on in the heart of the poem, it worried him. Although he wrote it somewhere between the autumns of 1797 and 1799, that is between the ages of 25 and 27, he didn't publish it until 1816, when he was 44 or 45. And he did so with a preface which is a series of elaborate disclaimers: it was published 'at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity'—Byron—and that 'as far as the Author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed *poetic* merits.' Never has so famous a poem been so denigrated by its author. The whole tenor of the preface is, 'This poem has nothing to do with me—don't judge me in respect of what you find there.' And Byron, the aristocrat unhampered by bourgeois morals, was very handy as an imprimatur, for Coleridge seems to have collected together in this 1816 volume all his dodgy poems—*Christabel*, *Kubla Khan* and *The Pains of Sleep*, which all have broadly similar structures: they open calmly, two in prayer, have a disturbed centre, and all were to be resolved by love. Jim Mays thinks that Coleridge feared 'a moral abyss', at the centre of *Kubla Khan*, and in the latest *Bulletin* hinted at the nature of this abyss—'Yeats could feel happy with his *Crazy Jane* poems but we avoid the issue of why Coleridge was forever dubious about *Kubla...*'.<sup>3</sup> That's a comparison I feel very much to the point: 'Love is all/ Unsatisfied/ That cannot take the whole/ Body and soul', said *Crazy Jane*,<sup>4</sup> and Coleridge struggled all his life with the competing energies of body and soul, a competition which, unresolved, disordered his love. And he was very conscious how deep this disorder went in him. In 1816, in the last words of his preface to *Kubla Khan*, he introduced *The Pains of Sleep* to the public: 'As a contrast to this vision, I have annexed a fragment of a very different character, describing with equal fidelity the dream of pain and disease.'

I have puzzled over the grammar of this; it might mean that though the character of *The Pains of Sleep* is quite different, as indeed it is, being an openly autobiographical, first person narrative, yet it describes, with equal fidelity, 'the dream of pain and disease'—i.e. that *Kubla Khan* is a dream of pain and disease; at the very least, we can say what Coleridge has told us, that *Kubla Khan* arose from a dream caused by his attempts to check the pain and

<sup>3</sup> CB 29 p.3

<sup>4</sup> *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, (Macmillan, 1973) p.291-2

disease of dysentery with two grains of opium, and at the time he wrote that preface such attempts were beset with moral anxieties.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps he is trying to build a bridge over the moral abyss of *Kubla Khan* by linking it to the involuntary moral frailties he confesses to in *The Pains of Sleep*. He is saying to his readers, 'If you find *Kubla Khan* morally questionable, remember it was only a dream, and in the *Pains of Sleep* I tell you what can happen in dreams.'

Like *Kubla Khan*, *The Pains of Sleep* opens in calmness and with dignity:

Ere on my bed my limbs I lay,  
It hath not been my use to pray  
With moving lips or bended knees;  
But silently, by slow degrees,  
My spirit I to Love compose...

and in that line, learning that his prayers are addressed to Love, not to God or Christ, comes our first little surprise—but, God is Love, so we follow him on through a reverential resignation, a sense of supplication, all inward, all dignified, to his silent knowledge that 'round me, every where/ Eternal Strength and Wisdom are.' And then, rather like the sudden change of mood in *Kubla Khan*, the wild disorder bursts upon us—his inward quiet breaks into outward torment—

But yesternight I pray'd aloud  
In anguish and in agony,  
Up-starting from the fiendish crowd  
Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me:...  
Desire with loathing strangely mixed  
On wild or hateful objects fixed.  
Fantastic passion! mad'ning brawl!  
And shame and terror over all! (PW 335)

the wild torrent of words, the hellish fountain of phrases, eventually sinking down into a pitiable bathos, the final lines summing up all his agony, and its utterly simple, utterly impossible solution: 'To be beloved is all I need/ And whom I love, I love indeed.' His prayers indeed were addressed to Love. But even this confessional poem, in its published form, maintains a small but significant detachment from the author—he is not quite responsible for what happens to him—'Deeds to be hid which were not hid,/ Which all confused I could not know,/ Whether I suffered, or I did...' He sets his nocturnal terrors at one remove from himself. However, if we look at some of those lines excluded from publication, we begin to see what was troubling him: 'From low desires my Heart hath fled,/ On Beauty hath my Fancy fed.../ My waking

<sup>5</sup> The note Coleridge attached to the poem reads, 'This fragment... brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery...' (PW I ii 674) By the time he wrote the published preface, the dysentery has become 'a slight indisposition' and the opium 'an anodyne'. By then Coleridge felt that taking opium was a morally questionable act, perhaps inducing a morally questionable poem.

thoughts with scorn repell/ Loveless lust...’ His waking thoughts may repel loveless lust, but not his dreaming or subconscious self, and Coleridge was too conscious of that life in him during his tortured nights, to deny the reality of what he felt, though, quite reasonably, he chose to hide this knowledge from the reading public. This soul and body conflict, between the beauty his waking heart feeds on, and the low and loveless desires which animate his dreams and nightmares, pervades his notebooks, and as I hope we shall see, can help to clarify the significance of some of the images recurrent in his poems, that of the fountain being perhaps the most important, featuring in his writing from as early as 1792 to at least 1832, two years before he died.<sup>6</sup>

I have used the word ‘erotic’ to describe the energy at the heart of *Kubla Khan*, an energy which, in that poem alone, Coleridge permits us to see as fertile and creative, if also tumultuous in origin. However, what other civilizations have celebrated, recognizing its power as well as its danger, Coleridge almost always consciously calls lust or desire, and frequently characterizes as bestial, devilish, dehumanizing and, using his favourite pejorative term, French. But lest that seems to you any kind of final word on Coleridge’s attitude to erotic or sexual energy, I add one major caveat. Earlier this summer, Paul and I were both preparing for this weekend by reading through the notebooks, and knowing my subject he sent me relevant discoveries—we have collected a file, called 4108—why, you will discover if you read CN III 4108—and in numerous entries we find Coleridge asserting ‘the connection of Hope with Sexual impulse. For Lust will *hope* when *Reason* would despair.’ (CN 5504 f.6v) That was in 1827. (Of course, as I have been frequently reminded in discussing this paper, such a file may say just as much about us as it does about Coleridge—so, think of Paul and me as Bacchus and Silenius jogging along with their braying donkey, File 4108.) What I want you to keep in mind is that despite his conscious moral indignation in respect of lust or desire, nonetheless erotic energy might be a major element of his creativity, and his failure to incorporate it fully into his being, his consistent rejection of that power as of itself potentially benign, not only is a source of continual personal misery, but may also explain certain particular failures—most notably his failure to finish *Christabel*.

You are probably wondering by now where I am going to find the other springs, fountains and volcanoes that I have promised you—a promise imperfectly kept, for I have only a single volcano. In 1807, reflecting on his troubled, 8 year long and unconsummated relationship with Sara Hutchinson, he wrote:

Could I feel for a moment the supremacy of Love suspended in my nature, by the accidents of temporary Desire; were I conscious for a moment of an Interregnum in the Heart, were the Rebel to sit on the *Throne* of my Being, even tho’ it were only that the rightful Lord of

<sup>6</sup> PW 74—Lines to a Beautiful Spring... 1792

my Bosom were sleeping, soon to awake & expel the Usurper, I should feel myself as much fallen & as unworthy of her Love in any such tumult of Body indulged towards her, as if I had roamed like a Hog in the rankest ~~Stews~~ Lanes of a prostitute city, battenning on the loathsome offals of Harlotry/ yea, the guilt would seem greater to me/ but when Love, like a Volcano beneath a sea always burning, tho' in silence, flames up in his strength at some new accession, o how can the waters but heave & roll in billows!—driven by no wind on the mere Surface, save that which their own tumult creates, but the mass is agitated from the depths, & the waves tower up as if to make room for the stormy Swelling. (CN II 2984)

A fierce battle between love and desire burns through this passage; Coleridge is unwilling to be led by desire, to accept desire as a ground of motivation. His hope of seeing his love as spiritual, pure, means that he downgrades desire into a merely animal activity; and the force of his negative expressions—‘roamed like a Hog... the rankest stews of a prostitute city... the loathsome offals of harlotry’—is but an indication of the power of this potential usurper or rebel. But he protests too much: imagine all this in the context of marriage: he once complained that his wife was ‘uncommonly *cold* in her feelings of animal Love...’ (CN I 979); wouldn’t the ‘tumult of Body’ that he knows he can hardly avoid, wouldn’t such a tumult be the *warm* feelings of *human* love? Put the relationship in another context, and we need not fear the tumult, as in *Kubla Khan*, the sacred river sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean.

But as is perhaps proper in an unconsummated relationship, the ‘Volcano beneath a sea always burning’ doesn’t erupt into a fountain: it remains only a stormy swelling. And here we find what I think of as the rightly erotic, when he speaks of Love as flaming up at some new accession. We should note that it is love, not desire, that is compared to the volcano, though to us it sounds like desire, which is perhaps the point, for the two forces are momentarily combined, erotic energy empowers intellectual insight, and the two are not distinguishable in the product, ‘the new accession’. This is the mood of a poet writing a love-poem. He is apologizing to his muse for the troublesomeness of his new accessions, ‘o how can the waters but heave & roll in billows!’, conscious that Sara Hutchinson may find them much like ‘that complaining Scroll’ of the Verse Letter (115). The waves tower up, but are never broken open by ‘the stormy Swelling’ beneath them. And because there is no fountain, no bursting out, there is no sinking back into peace or harmony. But in the very act of denying its power, Coleridge has shown us how powerful in him the erotic really is.

In Malta, some two years earlier, and the fact that it was earlier is significant, because the longer his relationship with Sara Hutchinson continued unconsummated, the more he saw desire as distinct and destructive, he got out of bed at 2.30 in the morning and ‘as I past by the last window of the Room made *a vow* aloud/O me! that I ever should have had need to make such a

Vow!...’—or as he might have put it, ‘I pray’d aloud/ In anguish and in agony’—and then follows a truly Coleridgean digression explaining how dividing the concupiscent in our nature from ‘benevolent *Reason*’ furnishes ‘excuses for Despair and spiritual Sloth’; which comment is an entry in File 4108—for where there is no desire, there is no hope, not even spiritual hope. We never do find out what the vow was, but he does offer up a prayer:

‘Merciful God! grant that this Rising out of my Bed may be a Resurrection to my better Spirit!—I rose for this cause/I felt myself in pleasurable bodily feeling half-asleep... I felt strongly how apart from all impurity if I were sleeping with the Beloved, these kind and pleasurable feelings would become associated with a Being *out of me*, and thereby... increase my active benevolence = virtuous Volificence = benevolence = *goodwilldoingness*.’

(CN II 2495)

He got out of bed because he was too much enjoying his semi-dreams of sleeping with Sara Hutchinson; but in effect he goes on to say that the resurrection of his better spirit would have been realized had he been able to sleep ‘cum amata’. He believes in the essential goodness or rightness of those dreams:

O yes, Sara! I did feel how being with you I should be so very much a better man/...so that finally whatever is really & truly a part of our existing Nature... may become an object of our love... yea, that the Pressure of the Husband’s Hand or swelling chest on the bosom of the beloved Wife shall appear as strictly and truly virtuous, as *Actively* virtuous, as the turning away in the heat of passion from the Daughter of Lust or Harlotry. O best reward of Virtue! to feel pleasure made more pleasurable, in legs, knees, chests, arms, cheek—all in deep quiet, a fountain with unwrinkled surface yet still the living motion at the bottom, that “with soft and even pulse” keeps it full— & yet to know that this pleasure so impleasured is making us more *good*, is preparing virtue and pleasure for many known and many unknown to us.

That’s quite an extraordinary thought—happy in bed, we are making everyone else happy. But Coleridge insists on it. He thinks of another famous man who had a miserable marriage:

‘O had Milton been thus happy!...’ might not ‘more than 20 million of Souls, & perhaps hereafter 20 times 20 million of human Souls have received new impulses to virtuous Love, till Vice was stared at as Voluntary Torment, slow gratuitous Self mangle-murder!—O and the thousand thoughts arising from this state, only connected with it, inasmuch as Happiness is a Fountain of intellectual activity, and

connects the connected a b with c, d—till Z.’<sup>7</sup>

Happiness is a fountain of intellectual activity, and happiness is imagined as an erotic pleasure, impleasured, as Coleridge so sweetly puts it, in the legs, knees, arms, chests, cheeks of lover and beloved, united in a deep quiet, an unwrinkled surface, softly pulsing, a living motion at the bottom—profoundly erotic really, though I confess my ancient schoolboy mind always giggles at the thought of unwrinkled bottoms softly pulsing. And yet it is a curious and interesting fact that the phrase “with soft and even pulse”—almost the erotic centre of this note—is Coleridge quoting himself, from a poem which seemingly has no erotic overtones at all. We will come back to that in a moment. But the simple point I have to make is that Coleridge has discovered, or disclosed to himself, that the fountain of intellectual activity, the source of his power, of his ability to connect and reduce multieity to unity, is an erotic happiness, a happiness which he imagines might not only empower his mind, but those of other great poets too.

Does this mean that the kind of happiness Coleridge describes here, erotic in origin, is only knowable in conjunction with desire? He thinks not. He is determined to believe that ‘by rigorous unremitting Purity of ~~my~~ our Thought, when awake, joined with the unremitting feeling of intense *Love*, the imagination in Sleep may become almost incapable of combining base or low Feelings with the Object of that *Love*.’ (CN II 2600) Clearly it is in sleep that the dangers lie. He has just had ‘a long Dream, of my Return, Welcome, &c. full of *Joy & Love*, wholly without *desire*, or bodily Inquietude, tho’ with a most curious detail of images, and imagined actions, that might be supposed absolutely to *imply* awakened Appetite.’ The wakening of appetite *per se* is Coleridge’s great fear—it is the animal rising up against the human. Whether this purification of motive is really practicable is to us a question, though Coleridge is determined to make it so. But the imagined outcome is always a realized physical union, in which the desire is not felt as desire: thus the final words of this dream were a benediction:

“With all the merely bodily Feelings subservient to our Reason, coming not only at its call, and obeying its Behests with a gladness not without awe, like servants who work under the Eye of their Lord, we have solemnized the long marriage of our Souls by its outward Sign & natural Symbol. It is now registered in both worlds, the world of Spirit and the world of the Senses. We therefore record our deep Thankfulness to Him, from whose absolute Unity all Union derives its possibility, existence, and meaning, subscribing our names with the blended Blood of this great Sacrament.” (CN II 2600)

<sup>7</sup> For Coleridge’s idealization of and identification with Milton, as a philosopher and poet, see James Vigus’ article “With his garland and his singing robes about him”, in *Coleridge’s Assertion of Religion*, ed. Jeffrey Barbeau (Peeters 2006, pp. 97 – 119), especially pp.106 -115.



If the appetite was awakened, then it was under the control of Reason or Love, and the very delightful image of the servants working gladly under the eye of their lord, redolent it seems of the joy of welcome expressed in one of the best known glosses of the Ancient Mariner—lords expected, ‘and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival’—is a vision of a perfectly ordered, perfectly functioning world.

And by disciplining his desire, a servant in the household of love, Coleridge is able to experience an almost mystical union in Sara’s presence, without any kind of physical contact. In the last year of their relationship, when much of the time it seems that the stormy waters were heaving so high as to make Sara often sea-sick, Coleridge records a remarkable moment of peace, of blissful harmony. They are sitting in silence together, ‘in the calm Even of confident Love’ and such is the quality of the silence, that

“I fear to speak, I fear to hear you speak”—So deeply do I now enjoy your presence, so totally possess you in myself, myself in you—The very sound would break the union, and separate *you-me* into you and me. We both, and this sweet Room, its books, its pictures & the Shadows on the Wall Slumbering with the low quiet Fire are all *our* Thought, a harmonious Imagery of Forms distinct on the still substance of one deep Feeling, Love & Joy—A Lake—or if a stream, yet flowing so softly, so unwrinkled, that its flow is *Life* not Change...’  
(CN III 3705)

The erotic without desire? Or something completely different — a personalized form of Frost at Midnight, communing with the beloved rather than with the ‘dim sympathies’ of the fire?<sup>8</sup> Although their physical presences are almost dissolved in the silence, yet Sara has to be there to enable Coleridge’s experience. And of course what I want you to see is that this union is expressed in terms that he has formerly used of the erotic—‘one deep Feeling, Love & Joy... a stream... flowing so softly, so unwrinkled, that its flow is *Life* not Change’—and in this tiny, invisible flow, Coleridge incorporates the idea of Life, not as something wild, tumultuous, for and of itself, but a version of the still small voice issuing after all thunderous desires have been quieted. The experience is deeper than sense, and when Coleridge claims that Love is not Desire, and can be known in distinction from it, such beautiful moments as these should embarrass our scepticism. But physically separated from Sara Hutchinson, the comfort of such unbodied experiences is impossible: in Malta he jotted down for one of his planned Soother of Absence poems, ‘— but oh Sara! I am never happy, never deeply gladdened—I know not, I have forgotten what the *Joy* is of which the Heart is full as of a deep & quiet fountain overflowing insensibly, or the gladness of Joy, when the fountain overflows ebullient.’  
(CN II 2279)

<sup>8</sup> This is James Vigus’ interesting suggestion.

But Coleridge never finally resolved the essential conflict between love and desire, at least in his relationship with Sara Hutchinson. It always troubled him, and I give you a few instances. In November 1806, he declares ‘I know, you love me... the fuller my inner Being is of the sense, the more my outward organs yearn & crave for it/ O bring my whole nature into balance and harmony.’ (CN II 2938) In 1809—‘Asra! I am a man & not only feel as a man, but with an intensity I had never before no conception of...’ (CN III 3520)—his intensity getting the better of his grammar; and soon afterwards,

O so very deep & strong & vehement is my love that it requires all the accompaniments of love in its utmost—all but its utmost—blessedness, all its smiles, its embraces, its most genial pledges of unalterable reciprocity to make it compatible with the full possession & exercise of reason—then indeed it is life to life, power & radiance/therefore o pardon the anguish of reason darkened in the eclipse of love. (CN III 3552)

Love accompanied by its genial pledges is, in his remarkable phrase, ‘life to life’; a man so pledged is imbued with power and radiance, for, we may say, ‘he on honeydew hath fed’. But if not irradiated by its ‘accompaniments’, then there is nothing but ‘the anguish of reason darkened in the eclipse of love’—a striking phrase, in which Coleridge admits that love illuminates reason, and not, vice-versa as you might expect of him.<sup>9</sup>

I would like to conclude this discussion of fountains, by reading most of a very beautiful sonnet Coleridge wrote for Sara Hutchinson, the only known manuscript being in his own hand, and pasted at some unknown time into a copy of *Christabel*, also written out by him. It has all the appearance of a very special and very personal gift. I start at line 4:

Dear Asra, Woman beyond utterance dear!  
 This Love, which ever welling at my heart  
 Now in it's living fount doth heave and fall,  
 Now overflowing pours thro' every part  
 Of all my Frame, and fills and changes all,  
 Like vernal waters springing up thro' Snow—  
 This Love, that seeming great beyond the power  
 Of Growth, yet seemeth evermore to grow—  
 Could I transmute the whole to the rich dower  
 Of Happy Life, and give it all to Thee,  
 Thy Lot, methinks, were Heaven, thy Age Eternity!

Note that both types of fountain are present—the pulse of Love ever welling at his heart, at times the ‘living fount’ which ‘doth heave and fall’, at others

<sup>9</sup> James Vigus comments: ‘You might, but perhaps it is there even in his Platonic conception of that supreme exercise of Reason, philosophy: ‘Truth + Good = Wisdom. Love of Truth + Love of the Good = Philosophy. Philosophy is the Wisdom of Love, as well as the Love of Wisdom.’ MM ? ??? (Petvin)

‘vernal waters springing up thro’ Snow’—a fountain of intellectual activity, a creative warmth melting the winter snow and invigorating the landscape of their relationship. It is a wonderful and generous blessing, in which he imagines that the energy she might derive from his love will transcend time and place, and make her home with eternity, or infinity, that home of homes. This is comparable to the ending of the Verse Letter, although that same energy is there not derived from him, but from Sara’s nesting ‘with the Darlings of [her] Love’—the Wordsworth family—a kind of marriage that in Coleridge’s description takes us back to that blissful dream of sleeping with the beloved:

Thou being innocent & full of love,  
 And nested with the Darlings of thy Love,  
 And feeling in thy Soul, Heart, Lips and Arms  
 Even what the conjugal & mother Dove  
 That borrows genial Warmth from those, she warms...  
 To thee would all Things live from Pole to Pole,  
 Their Life the Eddying of thy living Soul. (PW 289)

I’m not sure whether ‘Eddying’ is a variant of the soft and even pulse. But the declaration of Sara’s innocence is important; it is Coleridge’s *sine qua non* of benign erotic experience. And if you doubt that there is something gently erotic here, I point you to such a line as ‘And feeling in thy Soul, Heart, Lips, & Arms’—note the beautiful and I think intended gradation from spirit to body—reminding us of ‘O best reward of Virtue! to feel pleasure made more pleasurable, in legs, knees, chests, arms, cheek...’. And don’t you feel a profound physicality in ‘the conjugal and mother dove/ That borrows genial Warmth from those she warms?’ And behind the image of ‘her thrill’d wings, blessedly outspread...’ is an excited, unreserved welcoming which is almost that of the lover to her beloved. As often in Coleridge, what is just below the surface is more powerful than we expect—a welling spring on the point of breaking out.

I said a while ago that when he compared ‘this pleasure, so impleasured’ to a fountain that “‘with soft and even pulse” keeps it full’, he was consciously quoting himself from a poem with no erotic overtones. That poem is ‘Inscription for a Fountain on a Heath’, probably written about 1801, so quite close to the Verse Letter of 1802. It is 19 lines long, and here is most of it:

Long may the Spring,  
 Quietly as a sleeping Infant’s breath,  
 Send up cold waters to the Traveller  
 With soft and even Pulse! Nor ever cease  
 Yon tiny Cone of Sand its soundless Dance,  
 Which at the Bottom... dances still,  
 Nor wrinkles the smooth Surface of the Fount.  
 Here Twilight is and Coolness: here is Moss,  
 A soft Seat, and a deep and ample Shade...

Drink, Pilgrim, here! Here rest! and if thy Heart  
 Be innocent, here too shalt thou refresh  
 Thy Spirit, list'ning to some gentle Sound,  
 Or passing Gale or Hum of murmuring Bees! (PW 277)

There is apparently little here to tie the poem into the thesis that I have been pursuing; but Sara Hutchinson may be lightly alluded to in the 'soft Seat', otherwise known to Coleridge and the Wordsworths as 'Sara's Seat' (CM III 837); there is, after the refreshment of body, and curious in the context of what seems primarily a topographical poem, a refreshment of spirit offered on the condition of innocence, that innocence the pre-condition of erotic experience. And there is just the hint of all this having conjugal overtones in, 'Quietly as a sleeping Infant's breath'—though the warmth of such a breath sits a little oddly beside the 'cold Waters' to which it is compared. But, again, what has got into the poem is something less than was in Coleridge's mind. Close to the time he is likely to have written this poem, he jotted down in a notebook, 'The spring with the little tiny cone of loose sand ever rising and sinking at the bottom, but its surface without a wrinkle.—W.W. M.H. D.W. S.H.' (CN I 980) Note that it is unwrinkled, again: perhaps that very lack of wrinkling is an expression of innocence.<sup>10</sup> How odd, really, to associate a modest little spring with the great loves of one's life. This indicates the centrality of the image in Coleridge's consciousness. Kathleen Coburn points out that his initials are not among them. He was not part of the harmonious Wordsworthian household, but a much more disturbed and disturbing one. And the note following is clearly associated with Sara Hutchinson, and indicates his separation or alienation: 'Item—Murmur of a stream—Item—*well with* Shadows. Item—Why aren't you here?' (CN I 981) In Malta that final cry, 'Why an't you here?' will rise again from the depths of his despair, so powerful is his feeling that she ought to be where he is.<sup>11</sup>

And why '*well with* Shadows'? All his wells and fountains have shadows or shade around them, thus imbued with privacy: 'the beautiful Fountain or natural Well at Upper Stowey'—upon which all his images of fountains may be based—was surrounded by weeds hanging down its sides, and the reflection of those weeds in the water as if plants growing straight up was to Coleridge an image of the ideal relationship between '*Thoughts and Things*' in the happy man, in the man whose erotic happiness was realized, we might say. (CN II 2557) Note also his excitement about the 'dark green file of long lank weeds' beside the waterfall in 'the roaring dell' as described in *This Lime-Tree Bower*, which

<sup>10</sup> James Vigus pointed out the lack of wrinkle, mine the suggestion of innocence.

<sup>11</sup> CN II 2000. Thinking of CN I 986, Paul Cheshire writes on p. 23 of this Bulletin, 'Such invocation experiments suggest that when he addresses Sara Hutchinson in his notebooks asking "Why aren't you here?" (CN I 981) he's not just a lover missing his absent beloved. It's the complaint of an idealist metaphysician who says, if you are present as a living being in my heart, then on the deepest plane of reality you *are* here! It's the world outside that's wrong. It's also the cry of an unsuccessful magus. He has cast the spells, made the invocations: why, then, has the summoned spirit not appeared?'

seems to have similar, though inexpressible undertones; the well on the heath was surrounded by a sycamore bower, the mighty fountain of Kubla Khan is in a chasm 'athwart a cedarn cover'. I'm afraid it flitted across my mind that perhaps there was some Jungian archetype at work in Coleridge, and Clough's poem, originally *The Bothie of Toper na Fnosich* and naughtily associated by an early reviewer with an ancient Highland toast to *Tobair na Feosag*, or 'the bearded well', reminded me that wells have that kind of association in popular culture, the source of both refreshment and fertility. Was there anything of this in Coleridge's mind? It is hard to say, but we have seen that his use of the image is compatible with such traditional toasts, and it seems unlikely that such a man could miss such associations. However, we must content ourselves with the fact that he himself never overtly mentions springs, fountains or volcanoes in this respect.

The 'Inscription for a Fountain on a Heath' was first associated with Sara Hutchinson, but in later life, in a different domestic and conjugal situation, it perfectly expressed for him his idea of Anne Gillman. In a marginal note on this poem, dated 1832, just two years before his death, Coleridge wrote:

This Fountain is an exact Emblem of what M<sup>rs</sup> Gillman was by Nature, and would still be, if the exhaustion by casualities and anxious duties & hope-surviving hopes, had not been too, too disproportionate to the "tiny", tho' never-failing, Spring of reproductive life at the bottom of the pure Basin. No Drouth! No impurity from without, no alien ingredient in it's own composition, it was indeed a crystal Fount of Water undefiled—But the Demand has been beyond the Supply! the Exhaustion in merciless disproportion to the reproduction! But God be praised!—it is *immortal*, & will shoot up it's bright column of living Waters, where it's God will be the Sun, whose light it reflects! and it's place in Christ the containing and protecting Basin.

It is perhaps no accident that Coleridge twice stresses the reproductive powers of this spring, but this note in praise of Mrs Gillman was for family perusal, and so appears detached from any personal involvement. The private truth was very different. He saw himself as Jacob to her Rachel, described her in his notebooks as 'The Alone Most Dear', and when he wrote that he saw in her, or *fancied* that he saw in her 'Symptoms of Alienation', she wrote in the margin, 'It was fancy', thus accepting her role as Rachel. We know very little about Mrs Gillman—even Coleridge found her a very reserved woman, unwilling to talk about her feelings or beliefs, but she does seem to have needed some kind of comfort and consolation not provided by her very busy, hard-pressed husband: 'All women dote upon an idle man', wrote Yeats, ('Vacillation') and though I would be the last person to accuse Coleridge of idleness, he was what idle men often are, about the house, and he could be turned to and talked to. There is little doubt that Mrs Gillman and Coleridge enjoyed their time together, often

taking the family on holiday, but leaving Mr Gillman back in Highgate. And we know that on these holidays, they enjoyed fireside evenings by themselves, after the children were in bed, reminiscent perhaps of Coleridge's fireside evenings with Sara Hutchinson at Allan Bank. And during their Ramsgate interludes, Coleridge seems to have willingly taken on the role of surrogate husband, talking, in his letters home, of such small domestic matters as the difficulty of getting the younger James into bed. Improving his health and that of Mrs Gillman was the hope of all these holidays, and in 1823 he records a

‘delightful three Dip & a Swimlet Bath, the Sea just stirring enough to be lively. M<sup>rs</sup> Gillman too evidently better, God continue it! But still her Flow of Strength, the tiny Spring at the bottom of the natural Fountain, requires careful *husbanding*—too much... must not be drawn at once from the Basin. Wait for its own gentle overflowing.—  
(CN IV 5025)

I don't know what a 'three Dip & a Swimlet Bath' is—perhaps three dips under the waves, and a little swim—may be the distinction between 'bath/bathing' and 'bathe/batheing' hadn't yet arrived in the language, but clearly Coleridge had been enjoying a tumble in the waves—he always delighted in the liveliness of the sea. This is a kindly note, more or less free of the turbulent feelings associated with Sara Hutchinson, but he underlined 'husbanding', and Kathleen Coburn is sure that it is a self-conscious pun. If there is no risk of powerful feelings overflowing, there is still the careful and tender attentions of a husband for his wife, as we might expect of a Jacob in service to his Rachel, leaving the domestic surface of their lives unwrinkled.

However, beneath the surface there were minor troubles, often Coleridge questioning his place in Mrs Gillman's affections. Some six months later, in April 1824, he jotted down a few lines which he said were 'composed extempore, without taking my pen off the paper...'

Idly, we supplicate the Powers above!  
There is no Resurrection for a Love  
That unperturb'd, unshadowed, wanes away  
In the chill'd heart by inward self-decay.  
Poor Mimic of the Past! the Love is o'er,  
That must *resolve* to do what did itself of yore.

(CN IV 5146; PW 597)

We may wonder what he means by 'the Powers above', and why he uses such loaded terms as Resurrection;<sup>12</sup> but I think the meat of the meaning is in the middle two lines—and particularly in the two words 'unperturb'd, unshadowed'; is there just a hint here of the well dried up, unshadowed by desire, the little spring *not* dancing at the bottom, *not* welling up? Remember

<sup>12</sup> Seamus Perry advised me to look at John Beer's *Providence and Love*, which I have yet to do.

that a ‘*well with Shadows*’ he had associated with Sara Hutchinson. The ‘inward self-decay’ is perhaps a lack of the spontaneous desire, and what makes Coleridge uncomfortable is that any such welling up or dancing now requires an act of will, when in the past it came unbidden. Is this the cold friction of expiring sense, or a consciousness that the impotence associated with long term use of opium is beginning to take its effect?<sup>13</sup>

What we don’t know is whether Coleridge was applying this to himself or to one of his beloveds. Interestingly, it does seem that Mrs Gillman might have taken these lines personally. Just as she had said ‘It was a fancy’, when Coleridge feared that her Rachel was alienated from his Jacob, so here, squeezed into the margin vertically beside this passage, she has written, ‘Mistaken’. On the other hand, attached to these lines, but separated from them by the word ‘Item’, Coleridge has again tried, as he often does, to establish the right relationship between desire and love:

Desire, of pure Love born, itself’s the same:  
A Pulse, that animates the outer frame,  
It but repeats the life-throb of the Heart—  
And takes the impress of the nobler part.

Here, at the very least, the ‘life-throb of the Heart’ is symbolized and expressed by desire, the soft and even pulse, animating the outer frame. Desire is the natural and proper medium for the expression of ‘the nobler part’. But what if desire is of itself inappropriate, as in his love of Anne Gillman? What prevents the inward self-decay, how is the inward life-throb of the nobler part to find expression? Coleridge, as you might imagine, wrestled with this problem, as he had unsuccessfully with Sara Hutchinson, and in his later years seemed to have decided that spirit must speak for spirit, unaided by desire. In 1830 he noted that ‘the distempers and decays of the Body will as despondency’ counteract our aspirations to the Good, to Duty and to the Word of God. He goes on

‘Life can only be compensated by *Life*. It is the deep expression of this that renders the complaining Psalms so affecting to me. If there is a spiritual Life, there must be a spiritual *Analogon* of feeling, a *Sensation of Being*. “Restore unto me the *Joy* of the Salvations and uphold me a free Spirit.” (CN V 6454)

In 1830 then, he was glad if he could find a ‘spiritual *Analogon* of feeling’,

<sup>13</sup> Impotence is James Vigus’ suggestion, but it fits the context. The short term effects of opium may be different: I found this on a website: “Rosenthal (Wiener Medical Press, published 1886) states that injections of morphine of medium strength (0.03 - 0.06 per day) produce unusual hilarity and affability, heightened sexual excitability, increased refinement of the sense of touch, etc., - all symptoms little known and appreciated.” The increased sensitivity of touch is interesting in the light of Coleridge’s discussion of touch, double touch, and fruition, by which he sometimes seems to mean orgasm.

(<http://www.erecile-dysfunction-facts-you-need-to-know.com/index.html> - see ‘ED and opium and cannabis’)

separate from the decays of the body. And in the mid 1820s he seems to have tried to spiritualise his love, as he had tried to do for Sara Hutchinson. In May 1826, a year or so after his fear of Mrs Gillman's alienation, he jotted down four lines of verse in a notebook:

Was ne'er on earth Seen beauty like to this,  
The concentrated satisfying Sight  
In its deep quiet ask no further bliss,  
At once the form and substance of Delight!

There is just the faintest echo of his fountain imagery in the 'deep quiet' that this contemplated beauty inspires in him. But, he reminds himself, 'ask no further bliss'. Do not associate beauty with desire, and thus with possession. Originally these lines were headed 'A. G.', and therefore any question of possession, implicit or explicit, ought to have been ruled out, though as we have seen, it was at the least implicit in their viewing of each other as Jacob and Rachel.<sup>14</sup> But just as in his relationship with Sara Hutchinson, he attempted to feed on or contemplate Anne Gillman's beauty independently of any kind of claim upon her. Thus in a note which chronologically Kathleen Coburn places immediately after the lines on beauty, he records what is essentially a debate between the intuition of beauty and the causes of desire:

Is there a man who has truly and intensely loved a lovely and beautiful Woman, a Woman capable of gazing, in that *inward* communion of Silence, on Vale, Lake, and Mountain Forest, in the richness of a rising or setting Sun, she, as she stands by his side, smitten by the radiance & "herself a Glory to behold, the Angel of the Vision!"... but must have felt, that it is the disquieting sense of Change, the thought-flash, "I shall lose her, perhaps", that awakes DESIRE! The hollow Bodement of Inconstancy, the remembrance of the transitory... in all sublunary Loveliness... disturbs the deep fruition of the simple uncompar'd Present, and that Fear the doubting infidel, untrusting of the Future, & yet dissatisfied with the Present prompts him to press the Beloved Object closer to himself, as if to inclose it in his own Life, and to confound it with his Being, thus sacrificing in order to secure it!—But with this excitement of the Selfish Greed comes grasping with restlessness & turbid feelings/Lake, Vale, & Forest, Mountain & the Glory of the Light are eclipsed... But happiest he, for whom the Shadow passes soonest off... who... awakes as from a brief Sleep/and forgets the Dream in the reality!

(CN IV 5370)

Blake said the same thing, a little more concisely:

<sup>14</sup> Those initials were later crossed out, rather randomly, in light blue ink, by whom and when, we don't know, but not either by Anne Gillman or Coleridge it appears, and the lines were incorporated into a poem for another noted beauty of Coleridge's acquaintance, Elizabeth Aders.



He who binds to himself a joy  
 Does the winged life destroy;  
 But he who kisses the joy as it flies  
 Lives in eternity's sunrise.

'Eternity', *Complete Poems*, ed Erdman, p.162

and it would be nice to record that this is the way the story ends, a serene sunset on Highgate, Coleridge standing untroubled beside his last "Angel of the Vision", the bliss of her beauty leading him towards eternity's sunrise. But I'm afraid it didn't happen quite like that, though I haven't managed to untangle the clues as to what did happen. To conclude, therefore, I will simply set down some of those clues. On the one hand, Coleridge seems to have been tempted to give up on what we might commonly call life, on what belongs to the senses, on social pleasures, on poetry, and concentrate purely on what belongs to the mind and spirit, to philosophy. And this tendency is well portrayed in the final version of what was to have been the third stanza of Youth and Age—happily for that poem, never attached to it.

Dew-drops are the Gems of Morning,  
 But the Tears of mournful Eve:  
 Where no Hope is, Life's a Warning  
 That only serves to make us Grieve  
     In our Old Age!

(Whose bruised wings quarrel with the bars of the still narrowing cage)  
 That only serves to make us grieve  
 With oft and tedious *taking-leave*—  
 Like a poor related Guest,  
 Who may not rudely be dismiss'd;  
 Yet hath outstay'd his welcome while,  
 And tells the jest without the smile!  
 O! might Life *cease*, and selfless *Mind*,  
 Whose Being is *Act*, alone remain behind!<sup>15</sup>

Without Hope, (dewdrops and desire are connected in File 4108) Life is nothing but an unwelcome relative who can't easily be shown the door; and only Mind, or spirit, is worthy of house-room. However, the whole tone of this poem is one of regret—one does not feel that Coleridge has found his 'spiritual *analagon* of feeling' in which the truths of Mind can rest. And curiously, very soon after he wrote this, he parodied himself in a poem, 'The Irish Orator's Booze: A Sonnet'. The central section of the poem finds grounds for hope in drink:

Where good Drink is, Life is cheering

<sup>15</sup> PW 597, with the line in parenthesis added from the variorum version.

That only serves to make us brave  
 In our old age,  
 Whose glad voice chanteth with delight full many a glorious stave—  
 That only serves to make us gay  
 With oft and pleasant tol-lol-lay

in which you can see drink, life, joy and poetry all coming together in a Bacchic celebration. True, as Jim Mays points out, the poem then moves on in ways that make the argument inconsistent, but it ends in a mock-curse invoking blindness on folk ‘Whose total *Tipple* is *Tea...*’ (PW 677).

The two poems set side by side indicate that life is fighting life in Coleridge, the life of the spirit warring with the life of the senses. As he got older, and more decrepit—he spent most of his last three or four years in bed—we might expect Mind to gain the upper hand, and there is plenty of evidence that that is what Coleridge wished for himself. If that was enough for him, it wasn’t in itself an adequate vision of human life. In a note written within eight months of his death, commenting on an early work of Henry More, he writes of

Aphrodite, Venus Anadyomene... the Beauty of Life, or rather Life as Beauty, Life as the Mother of Love—for Man Sea-born. Sea = the appetential Life, the *Concupiscible Nature* in Man... (CN V 6850)

and in the next note, ‘The concupiscible Nature, and the Concupiscence of the Inferior Life must exist even in the regenerated Humanity, and as in the first Eden, so in Paradise Regained.’<sup>16</sup> (CN V 6851)

Is Aphrodite Andayomene, rising from the sea of desire, thus becoming an angel of the vision? I’m not sure, but there is here, as throughout Coleridge’s thinking, a complex relationship between beauty, hope and desire; certainly his Angel never could have been that ‘tall old Hag,’ of whom he enquired his way in 1796 between Mearsbrook and Sheffield, ‘whose soul-gelding Ugliness would chill to eternal chastity a cantharidized Satyr’,<sup>17</sup> (cantharides are a powerful aphrodisiac, allegedly) even though, he added, ‘an Angel of Light could not have been more civil.’ (CL I 182) But that relationship between beauty and desire, so comically inverted here, and all the life that Coleridge found and celebrated in the energies of nature stayed with him to the end of his days. Like other powers rooted in our humanity, the erotic may fail to find its appropriate form—be suppressed, distorted,

<sup>16</sup> CN V 6851; James Vigus comments: ‘Milton again – and perhaps Milton’s Eden (Paradise Lost Bk 5) stirs behind the earlier quotation about the man and woman gazing together at the landscape – Milton must have been cheering for Coleridge, a poet of ‘Ideality’ taking the sensuous world to task, but at the same time celebrating sex among angelic beings and unfallen man.’

<sup>17</sup> He it put more bluntly in a note: ‘an horrible phiz that would castrate a cantharadized Satyr’ (CN I 138) He was clearly rather pleased with ‘cantharadized’, however he chose to spell it. ‘Cantharides’ (pl., OED) are dried Spanish flies, which act as an aphrodisiac, reputedly.

denied—and like other powers, it may need to be rescued.<sup>18</sup> Coleridge, his own life profoundly unbalanced, struggled to establish a just place for the senses: in 1830, he noted with approval Bishop Butler’s admission that ‘he was all his life struggling against the devilish suggestions of his senses, which would have maddened him, if he had relaxed the stern wakefulness of his reason for a single moment.’ (IT 1 May 1830) And yet Coleridge’s delight in the free life of nature can be seen throughout his notebooks—one brief final example: he loved dancing, saying of it—‘Dancing, when poor human Nature lets itself loose from bondage & circumstance of anxious selfish care/it is Madness.’ (CN II 2238) Yes, if it is seen only as a rebellion against reason, it is madness: but as Coleridge also knew, the dancing tumult of the senses, bacchanalian, erotic, is a fountain of life.

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<sup>18</sup> This I have always taken as the idea of *Alceſtis*, especially as translated by Ted Hughes; and Herakles descent into the underworld has something of the same purpose. Interestingly, Coleridge copied out such a passage from J Hookham Frere’s translation of *The Frogs*—see CN III 4331 f.111—in which Herakles is telling Bacchus what he will find as he descends into the underworld to rescue Euripides: after ‘the perjurers and assassins.../ your sense will be saluted/ With a gentle breathing sound of Flutes and Voices/ And a beautiful spreading Light like ours on earth/ And myrtle glades and happy Quires among,/ Of women and men with rapid applause and mirth.’ These, Herakles tells Bacchus, are the initiated.