

Dream Weaver: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the prefiguring of Jungian Dream Theory

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In his own words, Coleridge only ever ‘*seem’d*’ a poet (PW I 2 1145); what he *was* was a sort of Sandman, a weaver of elusive ‘Day-Dreams’, ‘Sorts of Dreams’, ‘Reveries’, ‘Visions in Dream’, and ‘Fragments from the life of Dreams’. What he *might* have been was one of the earliest dream analysts. This paper examines the relationship between Coleridge the poet and Coleridge the dreamer, and re-examines claims by Nicholas Halmi and David Miall that Coleridge ‘offers no alternative model’ to previous etiological explanations of dreams,¹ that he provides only ‘occasional remarks about dreams’ and no ‘single focus’ with which to satisfactorily account for dreams before the psychological advances of the next century.² Insisting on the absence of coherent dream theorizations in Coleridge’s notebooks and recorded dreams, critics repeatedly overlook the burden of proof lying in the poetry before them. The possibility of Coleridge as a dream weaver, or creator, composer, maker of dreams, and perhaps even a theorist on dreams, comes from his own association of poetry with dreams, of the poetic process with the dream process. Poetry, Coleridge tells us, is a ‘rationalized dream’ (CN II 2086) and, later, a ‘waking dream.’³ If poetry is effectively a *kind* of dream, it is perhaps suitable that we seek a coherent dream theory therein.

For Coleridge, poetry is a product of the imagination, and the imagination is a ‘Vision and Faculty Divine!’ (BL I 135). Creative in the highest degree, the imagination is able to transform whatever it touches. It is ‘a fusing power,’ writes Coleridge, ‘that fixing unfixes & while it melts & bedims the Image, still leaves in the Soul its living meaning—’ (CN III 4406). The poet is he who ‘diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, [and]... reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities’ (BL II 16). Notably, the modifying nature of Coleridge’s imagination and its power to blend and assimilate disparate elements into one glorious product is described in a curiously alchemical language. Alchemy, at its roots, is primarily an experimental scientific process devoted chiefly to discovering a substance (the philosopher’s stone) that transmutes common base metals (usually naturally opposing ones) into gold or silver.⁴ Opposites are chosen because of their natural attraction to each other and, after their conjunction, chemical combination and regeneration, a new substance emerges from them as pure. The one overlying dictum of alchemy is ‘SOLVE ET COAGULA’ (dissolve and coagulate) and it is in fact very similar to what Coleridge says takes place *psychologically* during the poetic process. In scattered comments throughout *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge notes that the Imagination

¹ Nicholas Halmi, ‘Why Coleridge Was Not A Freudian’, *Dreaming, Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams* 7(1997) 24.

² David Miall, ‘The Meaning of Dreams: Coleridge’s ambivalence’, *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (1982) 59.

³ Coleridge, *Lectures on Literature*, 2 vols., ed. R.A. Foakes (London: Routledge & Kegan aul ltd, 1987) 2 425.

⁴ Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy: the Mediaeval Alchemists and their Royal Art* (London: Diamond Books, 1976) 26.

‘fuses... the idea with the image’, it ‘is a synthetic and magical power’ (BL 2 16) which ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create’, and it is an organic power which ‘struggles to idealize and to unify’ (BL I 304). This power is the transforming power of the imagination.

The work of the imagination then, like the work of alchemy, is transformation—transformation which occurs through the union and fusion of opposites. It is well known that two of Coleridge’s favourite maxims are ‘Extremes meet’, or ‘all opposites tend to unity.’ In alchemy it is the Uroboros, the image of a single snake biting its tail or a pair of lizards biting each other’s tail, which is the symbol of this alchemical process of uniting and fusing opposites (*Alchemy* 152). Interestingly, Coleridge uses this precise alchemical image in his account of the poetic process. In a letter to Joseph Cottle in March 1815, a year before the publication of ‘Christabel’, Coleridge writes:

The common end of all *narrative*, nay, of *all* Poems is to convert a *series* into a *Whole*: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a *strait* Line, assume to our Understandings, a *circular* motion—the snake with its Tail in its Mouth (CL IV 545).

Coleridge uses this serpent image again when describing the imaginative process in Shakespeare. He writes,

Shakespeare goes on creating and evolving, B out of A, and C out of B, and so on, just as a serpent moves, which makes a fulcrum out of its own body and seems forever twisting and untwisting in its own strength’.⁵

As for Coleridge’s actual familiarity with alchemy, we know that he said he ‘loved chemistry’ and he often attended public lectures on the subject, saying that he did so in order to ‘improve my stock of metaphors’ (CN I 1098). Yet what is even more interesting is that Coleridge actually appeared to have contact with a contemporary English alchemist. Coleridge was close friends with Charles Augustus Tulk, son of the very active English alchemist John Augustus Tulk who, in 1806, published *Flamel’s Testament*. Nicolas Flamel, was a French alchemist credited with actually having made and perfected the Philosopher’s Stone in the 1300s. So there is the possibility here of Coleridge’s familiarity with the subject of alchemy, and perhaps even the possible source of its influence upon him.

I am, of course, not alone in noticing an association of the poetic process with the alchemical process in Coleridge’s writing. Patricia Adair, for instance, in her book *The Waking Dream* characterizes Coleridge’s several sources as nothing but ‘base metal until touched to gold by the poetic alchemy’.⁶ Similarly, the editors of the Bollingen edition of the *Biographia* refer to the

⁵ Coleridge, *Table Talk*, 2 vols, ed. Carl Woodring (Princeton University Press, 1990) 1. 464.

⁶ Patricia Adair, *The Waking Dream* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd., 1967) 3.

complexity of Coleridge's work as a 'chemical compound' of texts (BL I cxx). Even John Livingston Lowes defines the process of Coleridge's imagination with, again, expressly alchemical vocabulary. He writes:

One after another vivid bits from what [Coleridge] read dropped into [a] deep well. And there, below the level of conscious mental processes, they set up their obscure and powerful *reaction*... Facts which sank at intervals and out of conscious recollection drew together beneath the surface through almost *chemical affinities of common elements*... and there in Coleridge's unconscious mind... the fragments which sank incessantly below the surface *fuse and assimilate and coalesce*.⁷

What Lowes is describing here is the alchemical process in poetry by which opposites come together and fuse and assimilate and coalesce—and the opposites he is talking about are actually the *psychological* opposites of conscious and unconscious elements in the poet's mind. What is significant is that this psychological rendering of the alchemical process in poetry, is precisely what Coleridge is also saying in his famous definition of poetry as 'a rationalized dream.' The definition in its entirety is as follows: 'Poetry is a rationalized dream, dealing out to our manifold forms our own Feelings—that never perhaps were attached by us consciously to our own Personal Selves' (CN II 2086). This definition of poetry as a rationalized dream is particularly important, not only because it draws the parallel between poetry and dream, but because its definition of poetry as the dealing out of what is unconscious to the conscious psyche of the poet looks forward to analytical psychology and its account of the same alchemical process as it takes place in the psyche of the *dreamer*.

Jumping forward about a hundred years after Coleridge is writing to the dream theory of Carl Gustav Jung, founder of analytical psychology, dreams are explained as just such a dealing out: 'What is repressed, ignored or neglected by the conscious is compensated by the unconscious... and the dream gives clues, if properly read, to those functions and archetypes of the psyche pressing, at the moment, for recognition'.⁸ This statement echoes Coleridge's definition of poetry as a sort of dream that deals out to us things that we have not yet attached to our conscious self. Also notable is that Jung describes this process of the union of conscious and unconscious elements that takes place in dreams in terms of the psychology of *alchemy*. For Jung, the dream is the gradual distillation of the contents of the soul. He writes,

The symbolic gold of great worth, or the transforming philosopher's stone 'lapis philosophorum' hunted for centuries by the alchemists—is to be found in man... It is the heart which is transmuted into the finest gold
(*Analytical Psychology* 119).

⁷ John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1927) 62 (italics mine).

⁸ Carl Gustav Jung, *Analytical Psychology: its Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 134.

For both Coleridge and Jung then, the alchemical process in either poetry or in dreams is about the union of opposing conscious and unconscious elements *within the psyche of man*.

According to physical alchemy, the formula for the alchemical process can be encapsulated in the acronym: V.I.T.R.I.O.L. This stands for *Visita Interiorum Terrae Rectificando Invenies Operae Lapidem* and translates roughly as 'Go down into the bowels of the Earth, by Distillation you will find the Stone for the Work' (*Alchemy* 21). According to the first stage of the alchemical process, base metals are placed into a dark alchemical vessel (known as the VAS) where they undergo a chemical reaction and fusion. This is known as the NIGREDO or BLACKENING, whereby out of one element Primal and Shadow materials are distilled (or separated) for a later re-synthesis. Importantly, these two elements (the Primal and Shadow elements) are *complimentary* to each other, each having arisen out of the one same element, but the alchemical process demands that they be separated before they can be re-united. The process is of course reminiscent of Coleridge's definition of the secondary imagination that 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create' (BL I 304). Carl Jung extends this first stage of the alchemical process to dreams, suggesting that the dreamer descends into the dream and encounters there what he calls the 'Ego' and 'Shadow' elements in the mind; these, of course, are based on the Primal and Shadow materials of alchemy. The Ego, he writes, represents the conscious, waking element of the mind, which 'makes for itself its own segment of world and constructs its own private system, often with air-tight compartments' (*Analytical Psychology* 94). Out of the dreaming self also emerges the Shadow, which is the sum total of everything that has been shut out of, or denied by, the Ego in the waking world. In dreams, Jung explains, 'the Shadow appears antagonistic because it represents the despised, unacceptable, element of the mind' (*Analytical Psychology* 112). In fact, it can even initially appear as the 'ugliest' thing in the world. Yet importantly, says Jung, the Shadow is still somehow strangely appealing to the dreamer since it is *compensatory* (really just another side of the dreamer's identity that has been separated or extracted) and as such, as with the diffused base elements of alchemy, it too will later demand a reconciliation and synthesis (or an alchemical fusion so to speak) within the mind of the dreamer.

Before Jung, and in fact in words that closely anticipate Jung's, Coleridge speaks of a similar distillation of separate yet corresponding parts of the mind during the poetic process. While writing 'Christabel', for instance, Coleridge recounts how his mind is forced to come face to face with 'a *deep* unutterable Disgust' which makes him 'desist' from completing the poem with 'a deeper dejection than I am willing to remember' (CL I 643). This poetic confrontation with an internal, deep, dark, rejected, and repressed part of the mind is also extended by Coleridge into the specific creative realm of dreams. He explains, 'there is a self, or consciousness of the day, and an opposing self of the night...[there are] two consciences' and he calls these respectively the

ego 'diurnus' and the ego 'nocturnus' (CN III 4409). The 'ego diurnus', writes Coleridge, appears 'droll' and 'ridiculous' to the self of the night, while the 'ego nocturnus' counteracts by being tormenting and insidious to the ego of the day. Following Jung's account of the Shadow as an apparently 'autonomous life...but one that is in fact a psychic reality and unconscious component of the dreamer's personality',⁸ I wonder if we might not read the individual personages of Coleridge's dream poems as the interacting ego diurnus and ego nocturnus elements within the dreamer's psyche. In 'Christabel', for instance, the heroine (who, as Coleridge puts it, 'dreams with open eyes') lives enclosed in the masculine world of her 'noble father' and brothers where 'custom and law' are said to prevail. The description of course sounds very much like the realm of the Ego or ego diurnus. Moving away from the 'castle gate' however, Christabel descends towards a 'midnight wood' where she meets the dark figure of Geraldine. Geraldine, like Jung's Shadow figure, is sometimes beautiful and sometimes hideous but most importantly she is a compensating figure for Christabel who, having been separated from her dead mother, is represented variously in the poem as a child in relation to Geraldine. The idea is that like the alchemical Shadow element, or the Ego nocturnus as Coleridge calls it, Geraldine appears to be conjured up, or extracted from another realm (or perhaps we might say 'distilled' from the mind of the dreamer) in order to satisfy a neglected side of Christabel's psyche. Likewise in *Kubla Khan*, subtitled 'a Vision in a Dream', there is again an enclosed 'air-tight' Ego structure, namely, the stately pleasure dome, that is girdled 'within walls and towers.' In contrast to this, there is a compensating movement 'through caverns measureless to man' down to a 'sunless sea.' Here again, we might say that it is the ego nocturnus, or Shadow, that 'flings up' the sacred river in a kind of throbbing, erotic, and almost unseemly beckoning gesture from the unconscious. A similar alchemical movement takes place in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, another dream poem, in which the ship is 'merrily dropped' as Coleridge emphasises, 'Below the kirk, Below the hill, Below the lighthouse top.' Once again it is upon such a descent that the mariner (or the dreamer as the case may be) moves away from the established structures of the waking world to an extracted and separated state that exists below consciousness.

The last stage in physical alchemy is the reconciliation or fusion of the distilled base elements into an entirely new purified and transmuted substance. This stage is called the CONIUNCTIO or HIEROSGAMOS, literally the sacred marriage, and it takes place deep within the depths of the alchemical vessel or vas. Jung extends this alchemical principle of fusion and transformation to the union of Ego and Shadow in the psyche of the dreamer. This process he calls 'Individuation'; namely, 'an integration of the disparate elements of the personality by which the dreamer achieves identity and wholeness' (*Psychology* 222). Such wholeness can only be achieved, in alchemical terms, after the

⁸ Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, transl. R.F.C. Hull (New York: Princeton University Press, 1993), 301-2.

person integrates the previously distilled conscious and unconscious aspects of his psyche in the dream. ‘We recognize this wholeness,’ explains Jung, ‘when we say, ‘Everyone has in him something of the criminal, the genius, and the saint’’ (*Psychology*, 96). For Jung, this final stage of the dream process, the actual alchemical union itself, may be represented in various dream symbols such as the yin and yang, the hermaphrodite, and of course the uroboros. Notably, in chapter XVIII of *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge again uses the exact same term as Jung to pronounce *his* favourite dictum that in life we similarly strive for a wholeness and unity of opposing elements. He writes,

I define life as the principle of *individuation*, or the power which unites a given *all* into a *whole* that is presupposed by all its parts (BL II 62).

While Jung speaks of individuation as the goal of personality, Coleridge here deems it the impulse of life. The principle, however, spills through to his account of the poetic process where the whole is captured by the poet who ‘blends the nobler mind with the meaner object’ and ‘brings the whole soul of man into activity.’ Specifically, he continues, ‘whatever calls into consciousness the greatest number of [human faculties] in due proportion & perfect harmony with each other, is the noblest Poem —’ (CN III 3827). Like Jung then, for whom the fully ‘in-dividuated’ self is that in which all opposing and potentially *divided* elements of the dream are united and coordinated *within* the individual, so too for Coleridge the best poetry is that which unites the disparate, compensating elements of the human psyche. In his 1808 lecture on ‘The Principles of Poetry,’ Coleridge explains the imaginative genius of Shakespeare as the ability to ‘become...another Thing’—‘Proteus, who now flowed a river; now raged, a fire; now roared, a lion—he assumed all changes...& assumed the character.’ (LL I 225, 69). All of Shakespeare’s characters, Coleridge explains, are manifestations of elements deep within the writer. He elaborates, ‘What is the Lear, the Othello, but a divine Dream/ all Shakespere, & nothing Shakespere—O there are Truths below the Surface in the subject of Sympathy, & how we *become* that which we understandly behold and hear, having, how much God perhaps only knows, created part even of the Form.’ (CN II 2086). The entry echoes Coleridge’s account of his own dreams of Sara Hutchinson, where his visions are nowhere the precise manifestation of her form (‘no form, no place, no incident, any way connected with her!’), but she is everywhere part of the form: ‘the whole Dream seems to have been *Her-She*’ (CN II 2063). Once again then, it appears that the end purpose of Coleridge’s poetry is akin to the end purpose of Jung’s dream alchemy: namely, the union of dispersed psychological elements under one coherent in-dividuated whole. In the dream-lives of Coleridge’s poems, we might extend the possible applications of this poetic process to the psychological process that takes place deep in dreams. In ‘Christabel’, for instance, the main character falls to the ground and starts ‘hissing’ in what Coleridge calls, a ‘forced unconscious sympathy’ with her

serpent-like companion Geraldine. Similarly, in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the mariner ‘blesses unawares’, Coleridge emphasizes, those creatures of the slimy deep which initially appeared disgusting to him but for whom he now feels a sudden unconscious affinity. Also in *Kubla Khan* by means of a ‘miracle of rare device’, as Coleridge puts it, a reconciliation is effected between the sunny pleasure dome (the possible realm of the Ego as we have seen) with its opposite icy caves of darkness (the Shadow). Once more, the end result of this fusion of conscious and unconscious elements is, quite fittingly, the perfect alchemical product: as Coleridge describes it, a ‘mingled measure.’

Coleridge’s poetic theory then (that of poetry as a ‘rationalized dream’ in which unconscious compensating elements of the psyche are brought forward to join with consciousness) is not simply a theory of poetry, but by extension it might reveal something of the nature of the dream-lives of the characters of his poems and perhaps even, with the help of analytical psychology, be read as a kind of prefiguring of an alchemical dream theory that had yet to be fully elaborated by Jung in the next century. A small, rather easily overlooked, passage from Coleridge’s notebooks reads:

Of a great metaphysician/ he looked at (into?) his own Soul with a
Telescope/ what seemed all irregular, he saw & shewed to be
beautiful Constellations & he added to the Consciousness hidden
worlds within worlds (CN I 1798)

In a notable twist of coincidence, this passage was chosen by Jung’s collaborator Aniela Jaffé as a fitting tribute to the Swiss psychologist and today prefaces the introduction to Jung’s autobiography ‘Memories, Dreams, Reflections.’⁹ While this tidy anecdote offers at least a cursory connection between Coleridge and Jung, it should by no means be the final word on the subject. It is my contention that Coleridge’s theory of the poetic imagination, with its precise alchemical terminology, looks forward to Jung’s use of the symbolism of alchemy in the interpretation of dreams. Coleridge, in his own words, elucidates upon the affiliation of alchemy, language, and psychology as follows:

I am persuaded that the chymical technology, as far as it was borrowed from Life & Intelligence, half-metaphorically, half mystically, may be brought back again... to the use of psychology in many instances—& above all, in the philosophy of Language—which ought to be experimentative & analytic of the elements of meaning, their ~~single~~, double, triple & quadruple combinations,—of simple aggregation, or of composition by balance of opposition.

Thus innocence is distinguished from Virtue & vice versa—In both there is a positive, but in each opposite. A Decomposition must take

⁹ Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé (London: Reader’s Union, 1964) 9.

place in the first instance, & then a new Composition, in order for Innocence to become Virtue. It loses a positive—& then the base attracts another different positive, by the higher affinity of the <same> Base under a different Temperature for the Latter (CN III 3312)

Like Jung after him, Coleridge recognizes the potential of the alchemical ‘technology’ in literature and psychology. Specifically, he suggests its role in the process of the transmutation of meanings in language and, by extension, Coleridge implies that a similar transmutation may take place within the psyche of an individual by the ‘decomposition’ of innocence and its recomposition at a higher level as virtue. This alchemical exchange is precisely that which we see in the dream lives of Coleridge’s poems, where the individual psyche is ‘dissolved, diffused, and dissipated’ into its separate, component, yet compensatory parts, before it can undergo an alchemical reconciliation ‘in order to re-create’ itself. Alchemical language then, belongs to both Jung and Coleridge. Where Jung finds in it a language to describe the function of dreams, Coleridge uses it to explain the nature of poetry and, through it, to arrive at an understanding of the complex interactions within the human psyche—an understanding that is remarkably similar to that developed by Jung nearly a hundred years later.

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