

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 29 (NS) Summer 2007

© 2007 Contributor all rights reserved

<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

From Sight to Insight Coleridge's Quest for Symbol in Nature

Kazuko Oguro

ON THE 23RD OF JUNE, 1806, Coleridge set sail from Livorno, Italy, to come back to England after two years and two months of absence. His attempt to recover his health by a change of work and climate was not totally unfruitful during his stay in Malta and Italy, but the idea of going back to his former domestic surroundings made him feel almost desperate. In the stormy night before his departure he wrote in his notebook of his desire to be struck by lightning, making a characteristically Coleridgean observation that "Death by a Flash of Lightning" is the "concrete in nature nearest to the *abstract* of Death" (CN II 2866). The ship, however, carried him safely back to England after fifty-six days of voyage, and he landed on his home shores on the 17th of August, 1806.

In the first decade of the 1800's, including the time of his stay in Malta, we find Coleridge describing the objects of nature with unusual keenness. As he thought he could not write good poetry any more, he turned to his notebooks to jot down the fragments of his thought, as if to seek for the return of the former blissful moments of poetic vision. Thousands of lovely images pass before his eyes without arousing his emotion, and he cries out: "O let me rouse myself—If I even begin mechanically, & only by aid of memory look round and call each thing by a name—describe it, as a trial of skill in words—it may bring back fragments of former Feeling—For we can live only by feeding abroad" (CN III 3420).

Like a sheep that "feeds abroad," the poet tries to find in the outer world whatever might start the movement of his heart. We remember, on the other hand, his complaint in his "Dejection: an Ode" that he *sees* but not *feels* the beauty of nature, and the lines that follow: "I may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within." Coleridge the idealist was consistent in asserting that the life-giving power must come "from the soul itself." In 1801, in opposition to the empiricist philosophy of Locke and Newton, he wrote to Thomas Poole that the mind in the Newtonian system is always passive, "a lazy Looker-on on an external World" (CL II 709). Though he wrote a letter of recantation about Newton two years later (CL II 1014), his criticism of the philosophical system grounded only on sense perception, or what Coleridge called the "despotism of the eye," remained unchanged. Is he then contradicting himself by saying that he could live "only by feeding abroad"?

When we think about the poet's emphasis upon the outer world as well as upon his inner nature, we must take into consideration the two different modes of the act of "looking." In March 1801 he writes to Godwin from Greta Hall, Keswick: "I look at the Mountains only for the Curves of their outlines; the Stars, as I behold them, form themselves in Triangles [...]" The

poet is dead in me” (CL II 714). Several months before this note, however, the poet wrote from the same place to Josiah Wedgwood: “Often when in a deep Study I have walked to the window & remained there *looking without seeing*, all at once the Lake of Keswick & the fantastic Mountains of Borrodale at the head of it have entered into my mind with a suddenness” (CL I 644). And the familiar objects suddenly strike him with a sense of novelty.

The phrase “looking without seeing” is significant. He looks at the mountains but their images are not distinct—he does not see them for the “curves of their outlines.” He looks at them without the clear consciousness of seeing their shape, but the scenery as a whole strikes him and excites his inner feeling. The phrase reminds us of what Plotinus says in the fifth *Ennead*: “in not seeing [the eye] sees, and sees then most of all.”¹ It is also reminiscent of Coleridge’s short poem “Apologia pro vita sua” in which the poet sees a vision of sublimity in a piece of kindling coal and the smoke wreathing upward from it. In a creative moment, the poet

Gives to his eyes a magnifying power:
Or rather he emancipates his eyes
From the black shapeless accidents of size.

The same mode of looking at things is expressed in the following passage: “The eyes quietly & steadfastly dwelling on an object not as if looking at it or as seeing anything in it, or as in any way exerting an act of Sight upon it, but as if the whole attention were listening to what the heart was feeling or saying about it” (CN II 3025). Here the poet is not only looking at the outer world but is also “listening” to the sound of his inner voice: the act of sight is integrated in the whole body of his senses, and is directed both to the outer and to the inner world. As Coleridge looks, or gazes, upon the objects of nature, the objects seem to lose their distinctness and to undergo a kind of transformation into something more than mere visual images.

This transformation of visual images, however, does not occur under the “despotism of the eye.” This expression is applied in the *Biographia* to a system of philosophy grounded on the belief that truth can be, and must be, proved with our sense perception, especially of the eyes (BL I 107). The “Slavery of the Mind to the Eye” is another expression for it, as we see in his marginalia on Erigena’s *De divisione naturae* (CM III 138). As long as an object remains a mere material image reflected on the passive eye, it remains alien to his mind and frustrates his desire to attain the sense of unity between himself and the outer world. At some happy moments, however, the poet’s soul is liberated from the material world and the object he beholds becomes a kind of medium through which the poet attains a deeper sense of existence. The object comes to be seen as a different manifestation of the same principle on which his own existence is grounded. In such moments, the act of “seeing” implies not

¹ Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.5.7; tr. by A. H. Armstrong; *Plotinus* V (Loeb Classical Library, 444) 179.

merely the power of cognition but also the power to realize the life and unity of being. It is closely related to his feeling of “I am,” the sense of his own existence as an integral part of the organic whole of the world. This experience, however, is only a rare visitation, as he says in the *Biographia* quoting Plotinus again: “it either appears to us or it does not appear. So that we ought [...] to watch in quiet till it suddenly shines upon us.”²

A fragment of 1809 (CN III 3649) reads as follows:

One lifts up one’s eyes to Heaven as if to seek there what one had
lost on Earth / Eyes –
Whose Half-beholdings thro’ unsteady tears
Gave shape, hue, distance to the inward Dream /

The “unsteady tears,” like streaming waters, bedim or blur the outline of the object seen through it. The eyes through the tears only “half-behold” the object; and the “half-beholding” eyes give his “inward dream” not only shape and color but also “distance.” This shape, color and distance, given to his inner nature, are what Coleridge calls “the property of *Outness*,” borrowing the word from George Berkeley’s “Essay towards a New Theory of Vision.”³

The following is a well known passage written on 14 April 1805, which Nicholas Reid calls a “seminal entry” in Coleridge’s notebook:⁴

In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro’ the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language within me that already and forever exists, than observing any thing new. Even when the latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phaenomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner Nature / It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! It is *Λογος*, the Creator! <and the Evolver!> (CN II 2546)

Here we have a blurred image of the moon again, and the thing he observes comes to be seen as a word, or a symbol. The object of nature, which has been transformed through the union with his soul, is no more a simple thing or an image but a language for what has been within himself for a long time, and which now speaks for him and to which he listens. The capitalized “Word” is equated with Logos or the Creator, evidently in reference to the first verse of the Gospel of St. John.

The object of nature thus transformed “awakens” the poet’s thought and feeling that remains in its potentiality, and at the same time it makes intelligible “that eternal language, which thy God / Utters.”⁵ Trevor Levere points out in

² BL I 241; cf. Plotinus, op. cit., 179.

³ By the word “outness” Berkeley means the distance between the eye and the object. The Works of George Berkeley ed. Alexander Campbell Frazer (Thoemmes Press 1944) I 101.

⁴ Nicholas Reid, *Coleridge, Form and Symbol* (Ashgate 2006) 1.

⁵ “Frost at Midnight” ll 60-61.

his *Poetry Realized in Nature* that in a copy of *Aids to Reflection* presented to John Hookham Frere, there is a manuscript note of Coleridge distinguishing the two kinds of relation between thing and thought: to contemplate thoughts in relation to things, and to contemplate things in relation to thoughts. “In the former class, the Thoughts gradually sensualize: in the latter Things light up into Symbols and become more and more intellectual. The sensual Veil of the *phaenomenon* loses its opacity, and the *Substance*, the Numen... shines through.”⁶ The former is to express an abstract idea by translating it to a concrete image, while the latter is an insight into something beyond the sensual phenomenon, though it can be made possible only through the phenomenon itself.

The words “shines through” are equivalent to “translucence,”⁷ the word Coleridge uses in his famous definition of symbol in *The Statesman’s Manual*. When one feels the transcendental light shining through a material object, the opaque object of daily perception is turned into a semi-transparent mediator of light. He explains the idea of symbol in comparison with that of allegory: while an allegory is merely a “translation of abstract notions into a picture language,” a symbol is characterized by a “translucence of the Special in the Individual, or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible” (LS 30).

Here we see a typically Coleridgean idea of the gradation of being: the individual, the species, the genus, and the universal. The higher level includes the lower as in concentric circles, which represent the ontological system elaborated in his *Theory of Life*. The higher mode of existence is rendered “intelligible” only through the correspondent form of a lower mode of existence, which, partaking of the same principle of being, functions as a symbol of the higher. The translucence of the eternal in the temporal, which Coleridge emphasizes here, seems to be grounded upon the basically Christian dialectic of eternity and time in the divine act of creation, but this problem is not within the scope of this essay.⁸

In looking at the things of nature Coleridge is perpetually seeking for something that gives a form to his inner nature, “something in and by which the forma informans reveals itself” (SWF I 377), and he calls this form a symbol. The symbol is something outside of himself, having the “property of Outness.” He is strongly aware that his soul is imperfect in itself, and he uses the word “halfness” to express this sense of imperfection. In 1808 he writes that his mind “cannot think without a symbol—neither can it live without something that is to be at once its Symbol, & its *Other Half*” (CN III 3325). His yearning for a symbol is almost like a physical desire. A similar confession is seen in his notebook of 1803: “My nature requires another Nature for its

⁶ Trevor H. Lever, *Poetry Realized in Nature* (Cambridge University Press 1981) 97.

⁷ There is an illuminating chapter on this word in James S. Cutsinger, *The Form of Transformed Vision* (Mercer University Press 1987) 73-87.

⁸ Claude Tresmontant, *Essai sur la pensée hébraïque* (Les Éditions du Cerf 1956), though not a Coleridgean study, gives a valuable hint for considering this problem.

support, & reposes only in another from the necessary Indigence of its Being” (CN I 1679). This “another nature” is very similar to his nature but is not the same. He explains this idea using a simile of different wind instruments with the same breath sent into them, echoing the image of the Eolian harp. The same breath—or the same universal Soul—is “diversely incarnate” through different instruments. This is the implication of the word “tautegorical” which Coleridge coined from Greek roots and employs in his definition of symbol (LS 30): it signifies that the same universal idea is manifested in different forms, or different gradations, of existence.

In Plato’s *Symposium* we find the original sense of the word “symbol” (συμβολον) which is the half of a broken talisman and which seeks for the other half to recover its wholeness.⁹ Plato talks about it in connection to the human eros, and Coleridge refers to it in a later note in relation to G. F. Creuzer’s *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* (CN IV 4831). This old meaning of the word “symbol” is suitable to convey Coleridge’s sense of “halfness” and his longing for the “other half.” In Coleridge, however, we have to remember that one fundamental idea should be applied to different levels or gradations of thought. The word “symbol” in Coleridge, which may simply signify a broken half of a talisman, is a primary element of poetic imagination, and, on a still higher plane, it bears a religious implication.

The deep blue sky of Malta was always a source of inspiration for him. In an 1804 note, he describes the sky as a “soft blue mighty Arch.” To his eye it seems like “an inverted goblet, the inside of a sapphire Bason,” as if the infinite space of air had assumed the form of a dome in a cathedral (CN II 2346). The impression revives in his memory even three years after he came back:

The Sky, o rather say, the Aether, at Malta, with the Sun apparently suspended in it, The Eye seeming to pierce beyond, & as it were, behind it—and below the aethereal Sea, so blue, so <a> zerflossenes Eins, the substantial Image, and fixed real Reflection of the Sky—O I could annihilate in a deep moment all possibility of the needlepoint pinshead System of the *Atomists* by one submissive Gaze! *Λογος* ab *Ente*—At once the ~~essential~~ existent Reflection, and the Reflex Act—at once actual and real & therefore, filiation not creation (CN II 3159).

The metaphors such as “mighty Arch,” “inverted Goblet,” “the inside of a sapphire Bason,” “with the Sun apparently suspended in it,” all suggest the old Hebrew idea of heaven—the firmament as a solid dome dividing the water above it and below it, as we see in Genesis 1: 6-7. To the poet’s eye the aethereal water above the firmament and the material water on the earth are reflections of each other, suggesting the perfect correspondence between them. By “one submissive gaze” the poet can refute the system of the atomists, and

⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 191 D; *Plato* III (Loeb Classical Library 166) 141.

affirm instead the oneness of the principle that sustains and comprehends both the material and the immaterial worlds. To borrow the expression of Robert Barth, the sensual metaphor “grows in intensity to the point of symbolic vision.”¹⁰ The “submissive gaze,” by which the poet proceeds from the phenomenal to the noumenal, is in clear contrast to the “despotic eye” which binds the mind only to the surface of things. To describe the relation of heaven and earth he introduces the word “filiation” implying the relation of Father and Son, avoiding the more familiar word “creation.” It is significant that his first confession of his turn to Trinitarianism is seen in a series of notes in February 1805, the date not many years apart from those of the passages referred to above.

In *Aids to Reflection* and elsewhere Coleridge defines “reason” as distinguished from “understanding.” While understanding is a discursive faculty which depends on some other ground for the proof of its truth, reason is “intuitive” and has no other ground but itself. Reason is the faculty of contemplation, and it is “much nearer to SENCE than to Understanding” (AR 223). “Reason” and “sense,” which in ordinary language imply two very different faculties, are here connected as being analogous to each other. The word “contemplation” is close to what Plotinus means by *theoria*, signifying a “deep gaze” directed both inward and outward. The mode of its operation is closer to sense or sight than to discursive thinking, because it is a direct intuition of truth—“intuition” as derived from its original Latin *intueor*, meaning an act of looking closely at an object.¹¹

Coleridge also refers to Richard Hooker, a 16th century theologian, and quotes from his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* with some variation: “Reason is a direct Aspect of Truth, an inward Beholding, having a similar relation to the Intelligible or Spiritual, as SENSE has to the Material or Phenomenal.”¹² A similar idea is seen in the Cambridge Platonist John Smith’s *Select Discourses*: “When *Reason* once is raised by the mighty force of the Divine Spirit into a converse with God, it is turn’d into *Sense*: That which before was only *Faith* well built upon sure Principles (for such our *science* may be) now becomes *Vision*.”¹³ For Smith, says Basil Willey, this “Sense” is a very different thing from the ordinary perception; it is attained by “restoring upon a higher plane that ‘sense’ which could only delude upon the lower.”¹⁴

For Coleridge, however, the transformation of the sense perception into a transcendental vision was not a simple straightforward process. He had to go up the steps as on a ladder, in order to attain what he thought should be the final realization of truth. He writes in the *Biographia* that “sensation itself is but vision nascent, not the cause of intelligence, but intelligence itself revealed as

¹⁰ Robert Barth, S.J., *The Symbolic Imagination* (Princeton University Press 1977) 86.

¹¹ Cf. *Logic* 151.

¹² AR 223-4. A corresponding passage is found in Richard Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* (The Scolar Press 1969) 117.

¹³ John Smith, *Select Discourses* (Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints 1979) 16.

¹⁴ Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* (Chatto and Windus 1957) 141, 144.

an earlier power in the process of self construction” (BL I 286). Sense perception is not immediately the “cause” of symbolic vision just as a mere aggregation of sensuous images does not create a work of art. “Sensation” for Coleridge should be a “vision nascent,” a vision going to be born, or a visionary power in its yet dormant state. In our daily experience it manifests itself as a mere act of sense perception, but it has the potentiality of metamorphosis into its full development. The rebirth of a caterpillar into a butterfly is Coleridge’s favorite symbol of transformation, as it corresponds to his idea of the dynamic evolving process of the act of creation. As Coleridge himself suggests in his short poem “Psyche or Butterfly,” written in reference to the Greek myth, the difficulty of the transformation also seems to correspond to the severity of the tasks given to a mortal woman, Psyche, before she could attain the angelic love of Cupid.

Coleridge started with a simple act of looking, and sought for a symbol that would help him ascend a step higher than the mere visual world. But the “Language of Nature is a *subordinate Logos*” (LL I 429, my italics), the logos that belongs to a lower order than what he reads in the Gospel of St. John. The “modifying power” of poetic imagination helped him to ascend a step upward, but it was only a “dim Analogue” of the divine creation (CL II 1034), or only an approximation to the final participation in the oneness of being that he perpetually longed for.