

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 32 (NS) Winter 2008

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

Liberty and Occult Ambition in Coleridge's Early Poetry

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IN THIS PAPER, I examine the connexion between Coleridge's political commitment as a 'Friend of Liberty', his poetry and his pursuit of metaphysical knowledge, in the years 1794-1797.¹ My title uses the phrase 'occult ambition' in a dual sense with reference to Coleridge, to represent both an oblique personal aspiration, and a desire to possess 'occult' knowledge: a mode of apprehension that would comprise the 'unseen' but operative powers of reality. My contention is that Coleridge's passionate interest in these areas is an imaginative reflex of his political hopes, involving his revolutionary aspirations in a politicised esotericism that would shape his literary career. Coleridge's close engagement with the culture of dissent fostered a readiness to locate true 'Religion' outside established, institutionally sanctioned forms. However, this readiness also undermined Coleridge's attachment to the established forms of dissent itself, leading to warnings from Lamb and Barbauld, for example, that he was drifting into visionary or even 'pagan' territory. I therefore hope to complicate the received view of Coleridge's Unitarian radicalism between 1794 and 1797, with particular reference to some of his early poetry.

'The Times are trying', Coleridge told his lecture audience in 1795, 'and in order to be prepared against their difficulties, we should have acquired a prompt facility of adverting in all our doubts to some grand and comprehensive Truth' (LPR 5-6). The interfusion of politics, religion and science, and the heady metaphysical openness which animated Coleridge were clearly conditioned by his times. As Southey recalled of the early 1790s, 'few persons but those who have lived in it can conceive or comprehend what a visionary world seemed to open upon those who were just entering it. Old things seemed passing away, and nothing was dreamt of but the regeneration of the human race'.² Inseparable from the sense of promise, however, was a sense of threat; in John Beer's words, 'young men were torn between anxiety at the overturning of an established order, and attraction towards the new horizons of liberty'.³ Indeed, in 1801, Coleridge represented the post-revolutionary moral flux with an image of the crucifixion: 'when liberty was, as it were, fixed on the cross of shame and public abhorrence, amid the earthquake, that rent, and the darkness, that covered, the whole earth' (EOT I 284). Coleridge alludes to the tradition of a 'supernatural Darkness at Noon-day' (CN III 3891) upon the crucifixion of Christ,⁴ using the image to express an

¹ This article reproduces, in revised form, a paper delivered on 24 July 2008 at the Coleridge Summer Conference.

² *The Correspondence of Robert Southey with Caroline Bowles*, ed. Edward Dowden (London, 1881), 52.

³ John Beer, *Blake's Humanism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), 95.

⁴ Coburn at CN III 3891 n. observes that Coleridge had been reading Campbell's *An Universal History from the Earliest Account of Time to the Present* (1736-65), to which he refers in June 1810, where Campbell remarks upon 'this surprising phaenomenon, wherein midnight happened at noon day'. The fact that Coleridge had alluded to the tradition in his *Morning Post* article of 3 December 1801 (EOT I 284), however, shows that he was well aware of it, and its association with 'the Earthquake', of which 'such darkness of many hours' was a 'common precursor' (CN III 3891), at this earlier time.

epoch of religious moment that transgresses politically-established authority, and uniting the pursuit of political liberty with a spiritual imperative. This connexion gave Coleridge's desire for spiritual knowledge its public urgency.

Significantly, then, Coleridge's religious impulse existed self-consciously outside the sanction of institutional religion. Coleridge's dissenting politics naturally transmuted into a restless desire to articulate a revolutionised communion with the divine source—'Supreme Reality', the poet-philosopher's 'object of final pursuit', according to a note to 'Religious Musings' (PW I.1 180). In its essence, this desire resisted theological and intellectual closure, which was associated with a repressive regime of Church and state power. His early poem on the destruction of the Bastille celebrated this freedom:

No fetter vile the Mind shall know,
And Eloquence shall fearless glow.
Yes! Liberty the soul of Life, shall reign,
Shall throb in every pulse, shall flow thro' every vein! (PW I.1 21)

Thus far, Coleridge's ambitions were broadly in keeping with the hopes of contemporary Unitarianism. Richard Price had written in 1787 that the 'human mind must soon be emancipated from the chains of Church authority and Church establishments, for the liberality of the times has already loosened their foundations'.⁵ Coleridge too was quick to associate the established Anglican orthodoxy with intellectual suppression:

Wherever Men's temporal interests depend on the general belief of disputed tenets, we must expect to find hypocrisy and a persecuting Spirit, a jealousy of investigation, and an endeavor to hold the minds of the people in submissive Ignorance. That pattern of Christian meekness, Bishop Horsley, has declared it to be the vice of the age and government that it has suffered a free and general investigation of the most solemn Truths that regard Society—(LPR 67)

Coleridge enthusiastically took up the ideals of Unitarian dissent to break the limitations on human freedom implied in the anti-intellectual bigotry and 'mitred ATHEISM' (PW I.1 187) of the established Church.

The essence of his complaint against the Church is identical to that of his complaint against atheism: both 'Chain down the winged thought, scoffing ascent/ Proud in their meanness' (PW I.1 211).⁶ Coleridge however would

⁵ *Sermon on the Evidence of a Future Period of Improvement in the State of Mankind* (London, 1787), 27. On Price, a prominent member of the London Revolutionary Society, see Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 15-23 *et seq.*

⁶ Coleridge's quotation from 'Citoyenne' Roland, in a note added to 'The Eolian Harp' in the editions of 1796, 1797 and 1803, similarly expresses this position. As translated into English in Joseph Johnson's edition of Roland's *An Appeal to Impartial Posterity* (1795), the note reads: 'The Atheist is not, in my eyes, a man of ill faith: I can live with him as well, nay, better than with the devotee; for he reasons more; but he is deficient in a certain sense, and his soul does not keep pace with mine; he is unmoved at a spectacle the most ravishing, and he hunts for a syllogism, where I am impressed with awe and admiration' (PW I.1 234-35).

later use these lines to pillory his erstwhile hero, David Hartley, in the *Biographia Literaria* (BL I 122-23), and denounce Unitarian rationalism in similar terms. The esoteric course of Coleridge's research after 1795, and the development of his writing, suggest that he was already finding Unitarian discourse to have its own, more subtle limitations, equally vexatious to his compulsion, as he put it in 1797, 'to play off my intellect *ad libitum*' (CL I 366). Unitarianism valued reason and science in ways that Anglicanism did not, but failed in turn to satisfy more fugitive intuitions: in March 1805, he contrasts 'my *mist*, my delving & difficulty [...] feelings of dimness from *growth* [...] yearnings & strivings of obscurity from *growing*', with the 'Priestleyan, Paleyan, Barbouldian' 'parrot words, quite satisfied, clear as a pike-staff [...] acknowledging no sympathy with this delving, this feeling of a wonder' (CN II 2509).⁷ Here, his anti-metaphysical bogeymen comprise the leading contemporary apologists of both Unitarianism and Anglicanism, and his opposition to each variant of Christianity, at different periods of his life, was informed by his need for spiritual and epistemological freedom of inquiry. The politicised aspiration to achieve a higher, syncretic knowledge comprising the natural, psychological and spiritual order, provides the pattern underlying Coleridge's changing idiom.⁸

Coleridge's fondness for 'speculating on mystical schemes' (CL I 71), as he whimsically puts it in 1794, therefore exposes tensions in his religious allegiances, and his relationship to the Unitarian circle in which he moved in the mid-1790s. His Greek Ode on Astronomy, written for the Browne prize at Cambridge in 1793 and later translated by Southey, gives some clues as to the nature of this disjunction between his occult ambition and Christian piety, Unitarian or otherwise.⁹ For John Beer, the critic who has read most significance into this poem, Coleridge was never again 'to express his hopes and ideals with such openness'.¹⁰ Here Coleridge invokes Urania, the very archetype of a syncretic wisdom, manifest in poetry, that transcends the boundaries between pagan and Christian. In Abrams's words, she is 'the pagan muse whom Milton, following earlier Christian precedent, had baptized and equated with the "heav'nly Muse" who had inspired Moses and the Biblical prophets and had associated with the Holy Spirit who moved upon the face of the waters at the beginning of all created things'.¹¹ She emerges under

⁷ On the kind of personal antithesis Coleridge seems to have in mind, the anti-metaphysical 'Plain Speaker', see Seamus Perry, 'The talker', in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103-125, 112-13.

⁸ For two influential interpretations of Coleridge's abandonment of Unitarianism, which, in accounting for his shift towards Anglican Trinitarianism, emphasise a reasoning more formally constrained by philosophical and theological terms, respectively, see Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 178-181 et seq. and J. Robert Barth, *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 3-13 et passim.

⁹ The original Greek of the poem is lost, but it survives in Southey's translation, first published in the *Morning Post* on 28 November 1801 (CL I 56 n), and, as John Beer says, 'there is no reason to doubt its faithfulness to the original': *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), 74.

¹⁰ Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, 75.

¹¹ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1971), 23.

‘immortal Night’, and ‘wisdom, the creatress’ unlocks ‘The depths of Nature to her piercing eye’ (PW II.1 85). The ode describes the poet’s self-election to this order of knowledge, where, in a kind of Dionysian apotheosis, ‘Inebriate in the holy ecstasy’, the poet knows himself ‘A star amid the starry throng,/ A GOD the Gods among!’ (PW II.1 87). The poem therefore draws on the tradition of the ‘Furor divinus’ by which the mind ‘is elevated above human nature and is transformed into God’ (CN II 3216 and n).¹²

This line of thinking and writing led inevitably to discomfort amongst even his most admiring and loyal Unitarian friends. Charles Lamb, for example, took the opportunity to chastise Coleridge in 1796 for ‘a certain freedom of expression, a certain air of mysticism, more consonant to the conceits of pagan philosophy, than consistent with the humility of genuine piety’.¹³ Lamb had been offended in particular by Coleridge’s comment that man might be ‘a partaker of the Divine nature’ (CL I 239), which, despite its scriptural origin, still left him uneasy; he was ‘apprehensive, lest we in these latter days, tinctured (some of us perhaps pretty deeply) with mystical notions and the pride of metaphysics, might be apt to affix to such phrases a meaning, which the primitive users of them, the simple fishermen of Galilee for instance, never intended to convey’.¹⁴ Far from accepting Lamb’s criticism, Coleridge would shortly repeat himself to Thelwall, in near-identical terms: ‘I need not tell you, that Godliness is *Godlike*-ness, and is paraphrased by Peter—“that ye may be partakers of the divine nature.”’ (CL I 284). Despite being careful on this occasion to provide the scriptural authority for his remark, Coleridge footnotes the word ‘Godliness’ with a quotation from Voss’s *Luise*, in which Peter, Moses, Homer, Zoroaster, Socrates and Confucius are said to share the same ‘Spirit of Animation’ (CL I 283-84). Coleridge has therefore expanded his notion of ‘partaking in the divine nature’ beyond Unitarian—and even Christian—boundaries, into a syncretic principle. From a Unitarian perspective with which Coleridge was nominally aligned in this period—he was now in ‘pagan’ territory. Ralph Cudworth, whose *True Intellectual System of the Universe* was the authority behind many of the ‘abstruser Reasonings’ (LPR 95) in the ‘Lectures on Revealed Religion’, provided Coleridge with some learned precedent for such syncretism. Cudworth’s *True Intellectual System* is itself a philosophically promiscuous text; in Douglas Hedley’s words,¹⁵ ‘a piece of speculative historiography trying to show that most of the more refined philosophers and sects of the ancient world accepted

¹² As Beer observes, Coleridge’s desire to socialise these possibilities, by extending them to others, distinguishes the aspirations contained in the poem from ‘megalomania’: *Coleridge the Visionary*, 75. Beer also notes the influence of Gray, Collins, Akenside and the Neoplatonist Synesius on the ideal of the poetic genius expressed in the ode: *ibid.*, 313-14.

¹³ *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marris, Jr., 3 vols (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975-78), I 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I 56.

¹⁵ Douglas Hedley, ‘Cudworth, Coleridge and Schelling’, *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 16 (NS) (Winter, 2000), 64-70, 68. Hedley remarks that ‘Coleridge’s “Platonism” is derived from those seventeenth century thinkers who disliked both the Calvinism of the Puritans and the formalism of the Laudians, and who appealed to the indwelling Logos evoked by the Fourth Gospel and the tradition of Alexandria’: *ibid.*, 65.

some version of the Godhead as tri-une'. Given its reverence for ancient philosophers and speculative trinitarianism, therefore, and the fact that it was written within the Anglican tradition (liberally interpreted), Cudworth's authority held little sway in Unitarian discourse.¹⁶ Furthermore, a 'partaking of the divine nature', particularly in the humanist form of Coleridge's syncretic 'Spirit of Animation', risked displacing the Judaeo-Christian God's exclusive prerogative to redeem human failings: as Beer points out, from the perspective of 'traditional theology', 'communion with God' could only 'be restored by God's own act and God's own mercy'.¹⁷ For Lamb, indeed, Coleridge's desire to be 'Godlike' was blasphemous: 'high as the human intellect comparatively will soar, and wide as its influence, malign or salutary, can extend, is there not, Coleridge, a distance between the Divine Mind and it, which makes such language blasphemy?'.¹⁸

The occult ambition of Coleridge's spiritual imperative animated a love of the esoteric. 'I am *deep* in all out of the way books', Coleridge told Thelwall in November 1796, 'Metaphysics, & Poetry, & "Facts of mind"'— (i.e. Accounts of all the strange phantasms that ever possessed your philosophy-dreamers from Tauth, the Egyptian to Taylor, the English Pagan,) are my darling Studies' (CL I 260). Coleridge's evident delight in imaginative liberty encouraged his desire to discover truths for himself in sources that the dominant historiography, philosophy and religion of centuries had contrived to obscure. The connexion Coleridge makes between metaphysics, poetry, psychology, pagan philosophy and myth, reveals the course of his burgeoning spiritual and poetic demands.

From this early stage, Coleridge's esotericism involved a search, in John Beer's words, for 'a primeval recognition' of his own apprehensions.¹⁹ In his aspirational writing of this period, Coleridge sets himself at the leading edge of a tradition going back to a *prisca theologia*, a pre-Christian illumination of the divine intelligence that had ignited in human self-consciousness its inheritance

¹⁶ Coleridge borrowed Cudworth's magnum opus (first published in 1678, but read by Coleridge in the second edition of 1743, edited by Thomas Birch) from Bristol Library first on 15 May 1795, and again 9 Nov 1796: George Whalley, 'The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge, 1793-8', *Library*, 3rd series, 4 (1949), 114-31, 120, 124. The first time, Coleridge seems to have used Cudworth primarily to furnish himself with arguments against atheism (LPR 86 n; SWF I 28-32), while in 1796, he was presumably able to digest the work more thoroughly and at leisure. As well as drawing on the work in his poetry (see 'Religious Musings', at PW I.1 175-76, for example), Coleridge's notebook for 1796 and 1797 includes several entries using material found in Cudworth. See for example CN I 200 (on the pre-existence of the soul discussed in the *Phaedo*), CN I 201 (on the incorporeal nature of matter, from Plotinus), CN I 204 (on Cudworth's summary of part of Book VII of *The Republic*, where Glaucon and Socrates discuss the difficulty of distinguishing truth from illusion), CN I 208 (on the idea, derived from Anaxagoras, of 'God, as a machine in the Cosmopoeia'), and CN I 244, 246 and 247 (on the mythological and metaphysical significance of water). H.W. Piper suggests (apparently without detecting its irony) that Coleridge could first have been led to Cudworth by reading Priestley, who, despite his thoroughgoing antipathy to Platonism, had claimed that the concept of the world soul he found in Cudworth supported his own views: see *The Active Universe: Pantheism and the concept of Imagination in the English Romantic poets* (London: Athlone Press, 1962), 33, 46. Douglas Hedley has shown that Cudworth was also influential in Schelling's early development, lending Coleridge's later claim to have found a 'genial coincidence' (BL I 160) between Schelling's work and his own philosophising more authenticity than it is often credited with: see 'Cudworth, Coleridge and Schelling', 64-70.

¹⁷ Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, 57.

¹⁸ Marrs (*op. cit.*), I 53.

¹⁹ John Beer, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (London: Macmillan, 1977), x.

of that divinity. As Ian Wylie has shown, the idea of this ‘ancient tradition of knowledge’ finds an outlet in ‘Religious Musings’.²⁰ Wylie interprets its importance to Coleridge there as an affirmation of ‘the Unitarian knowledge of the one supreme God’ held by an ‘elect band’, which included not only the *prisci theologi* but also natural philosophers such as Priestley, Franklin and Newton, as their modern heirs.²¹ While a monotheist sensibility was central to the tradition, however, the criticisms that Coleridge would receive for his indulgence in ‘pagan philosophy’ at the expense of ‘genuine piety’ (as Lamb put it) make it unlikely that Coleridge pursued his interest in the *prisca theologia* on the basis of its *Unitarian* credentials.²² Rather, it reveals an ambitious, independent and even furtive search for an imaginatively liberating gnostic philosophy (or ‘metaphysics’).²³

When revising ‘Religious Musings’ for the 1797 edition of his *Poems*, Coleridge added, and then withdrew, a line which conceives of Christ not in Christian terms, but as a *priscus theologus*, the ‘Renewer of the ancient Truth!’ (PW II.1 233: BL MS Ashley 408 fol. 7). By presenting Christ in this way, Coleridge decentres the authority of Christianity, rendering it one historical form among many which aspire to a greater, more ancient spiritual truth. This, as Ian Wylie has noticed, is precisely the priority advocated by Giordano Bruno:²⁴

[Bruno] subordinated Christianity, the younger faith, to the ancient tradition, representing Christ as a member of the preaching band of theologians who originated with Zoroaster and Hermes and stretched down the ages. Hence Bruno inverted the *prisca theologia*, making it the authentic tradition of which Christianity was not the summation, but

²⁰ Ian Wylie, *Young Coleridge and the Philosophers of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 12-26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23-4.

²² Prior to Wylie, and influentially, Piper also argued that Coleridge’s reading and writing between 1794 and 1796 should be seen as a fabric of thoroughgoing ‘Unitarian’ commitment: see *The Active Universe*, 29-59. This delimitation results from his methodology, however: Piper’s tendency to present his important subject – the connexion between Romantic ideas of the imagination and ‘the concept of an active and living universe’ – through a conflated variety of preconceived categories, such as ‘Unitarian’, ‘pantheist’ and ‘quasi-pantheist’ (see, e.g. *Active Universe*, 44). If such categorical affiliations are not taken for granted, the evidence demonstrates that whatever labels Coleridge operated under, his *writing* is less doctrinaire, and more imaginatively open-ended than Piper’s argument would suggest.

²³ I use the word ‘gnostic’ here in its broadest sense, as relating to ‘esoteric spiritual knowledge’ (OED), and not the various heretical early Christian sects grouped under the term ‘Gnostic’ (and distinguished as such by the use of the capital). In the ‘Lectures on Revealed Religion’, Coleridge echoes the Priestleian orthodoxy in his attack on the Gnostic ‘corruptions’ of Christianity, such as Christ’s status as a God-man, which are blamed for the religion’s ‘Mysteries’ (LPR 199). Coleridge would very shortly be attracted to these dimensions within the Christian tradition, however, and even to the notion that ‘Intelligence and Truth’ were the offspring of ‘Abyss and Silence’, a ‘Gnostic’ idea that he had attacked (LPR 199; see John Beer at AR 564).

²⁴ Wylie, *Young Coleridge*, 17. As Frances Yates puts it: the ‘whole platform’ of Bruno’s work was ‘a return to a better “Egyptian” pre-Judaic and pre-Christian philosophy and magical religion’: *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 398. Despite the Brunian appearance of Coleridge’s handling of Christ and the *prisca theologia*, there is no certain evidence that Coleridge read Bruno before 1801, making it most likely that Coleridge had arrived at his speculative position by other means, possibly as a result of his reading in myth and syncretic mythology, which included Cudworth, Dupuis’s *Origine des tout les cultes, ou religion universelle*, Berkeley’s *Siris* and Andrew Ramsay’s *The Philosophical Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion*. Priestley quotes Bruno as an authority when arguing that the universe is constituted by divine energy: see Piper, *The Active Universe*, 36.

merely another manifestation.

Given the continuing Unitarian context of his activities in 1797, it is unsurprising that after considering the idea, Coleridge withheld the Bruno-like description of Christ from the published versions of 'Religious Musings'. Nevertheless, the idea of the *prisca theologia* informs the poem in other ways. Coleridge's imagining of the 'elect of Heaven' who's 'eye' sees 'Him, Nature's Essence, Mind, and Energy!' (PW I.1 177) owes much to the idea of the esoteric tradition. The eye of the elect is that of Urania, penetrating the secrets of existence. Without distinction between pagan and Christian, the elect include the 'mighty Dead', '*who'er* from earliest time/ With conscious zeal had urg'd Love's wondrous plan,/ Coadjutors of God' (PW I.1 188; my emphasis).²⁵ In the closing sequence the poet makes no secret of his desire to join their 'mystic choir', 'Ebullient with creative Deity!' (PW I.1 190), rapturously initiating himself into their number as a source of spiritual authority. In the tentative continuity between pagan and Christian found in 'Religious Musings', Coleridge is straining towards a more inclusive spiritual language, but one which risked transgressing the boundaries of Unitarianism and the Christian religion.

The best of Coleridge's early poems, 'The Eolian Harp', revolves upon this transgression.²⁶ Harold Bloom speaks for much scholarship when he describes the poem as 'a dialectic between two Coleridges, the imaginative and intellectually daring poet, and the timidly orthodox young husband'.²⁷ In a similar vein but with a distinct approach, Seamus Perry has argued that 'it should be read as a delicate example of Coleridgean mixed feelings', capturing an oscillation between the heterodox theology of the 'One Life' and the 'transcendent deity' of orthodoxy.²⁸ More rarely discussed is the poem's eroticization of the transgressive pursuit of occult knowledge. It is possible to read the erotic charge that Coleridge imparts to his imagery as a kind of amplification of his theological deviance, an oblique exultation in his undomestic, and possibly un-Christian, impulses. The 'simplest Lute, / Plac'd length-ways in the clasping casement' (ll. 12-13) is already a body in eroticized confinement, when

²⁵ In Coleridge's 'Lectures on Revealed Religion', it was '*almost* all mankind' that had 'worshipped blind and senseless Deities' in the ancient world (LPR 200; my emphasis), which leaves room for the enlightened paganism Coleridge might have had in mind. In a note on the Millennium appended to the 1797 text, Coleridge presented an inclusive vision, recalling the passage from Voss's *Luise* that he quoted to Thelwall, of '*all* who in past ages have endeavoured to ameliorate that state of man will rise and enjoy the fruits and flowers, the imperceptible seeds of which they had sown in their former Life' (PW I.1 188; my emphasis).

²⁶ The text used for the following discussion is that of 'Effusion XXXV, Composed August 20th, 1795, at Clevedon, Somersetshire', used in *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796). The Bollingen *Poetical Works* uses the 1828 version as its reading text; all other variants are recorded concurrently in the variorum text of volume II. For a text that enables the reader to compare several versions of the poem as they appeared 'on the page', see Paul Cheshire, 'The Eolian Harp', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 17 (NS) (Summer, 2001), 1-22 and pull-out section.

²⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 200.

²⁸ Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 69, 68.

by the desultory breeze caress'd,
Like some coy Maid half-yielding to her Lover,
It pours such sweet upbraidings, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong! (ll. 14-17) ²⁹

The interplay of activity and passivity in the drama of seduction heightens desire, just as the questionable propriety of spiritual speculation intensifies the poet's pleasure. The breeze/lover/narrator presses on, and now, the harp's 'strings/ Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes/ Over delicious surges sink and rise', unlocking a 'soft floating witchery of sound' (ll. 17-20). The seducer is seduced by the voluptuous music that he and the breeze have released, and this flings open the wonder of speculation:

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversly fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (ll. 36-40)

The 'intellectual Breeze' of the divine corresponds to the 'desultory breeze' of the seducer's hand, educing 'thought' as well as a 'witchery of sound' from the eroticized body of nature. The breeze/seducer/poet has *become* the animating 'Soul' and 'God of all'.³⁰

This moment marks the irruption of Coleridge's occult ambition, and draws the well-known response:

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
Darts, O beloved Woman! nor such thoughts
Dim and unhallow'd dost thou not reject,
And biddest me walk humbly with my God (ll. 41-44)

But 'Sara's' response, and its pious implications, are passively confined within the operation of poem, in the same way that the Eolian harp is placed in the 'clasping' casement and worked upon by the breeze/seducer/poet/God. Her resistance serves as a boundary to be crossed with relish, and corresponds to

²⁹ Camille Paglia has also remarked upon the poem's 'sexual turbulence', observing that it is 'a far stranger poem than scholars admit'; she interprets it in accordance with her overall thesis that 'for Coleridge, spiritual exaltation means sexual self-immolation', and sees the 'coy Maid' and the passive harp as feminised self-projections expressing Coleridge's 'longing for erotic and creative passivity': *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 318-19. Rather than ritualised self-abasement, however, my reading finds a productive, eroticized interplay of activity and passivity, as anticipated in Coleridge's early sonnet, 'As late I journey'd o'er th' extensive plain', where 'all—at once—my ravish'd eye did sweep' (PW I.1 15), the eye both ravishing in its 'sweep' (a word reproduced in 'The Eolian Harp') and ravished by what it sees, an activity and passivity that educe each other.

³⁰ The reading offered here therefore finds grounds to oppose the assumption behind Kelvin Everest's comment that 'it is very hard to believe that Coleridge would have identified his sexual advances with the "Plastic and vast" influence of God on creation', a statement which tends to contradict his earlier acknowledgement of the connexion between 'the object of the wind's, and the lover's, caresses': *Coleridge's Secret Ministry* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1979), 209, 202.

the eroticized transgression figured earlier in the poem as part of the poem's double-tongued apparatus.³¹ The narrative self-representation as 'A sinful and most miserable man,/ Wilder'd and dark' (ll. 54-5) is inextricable from the self-representation as a metaphysical adventurer.³² The 'shapings of the unregenerate mind' (l. 47), which, syntactically speaking, refer as much to the poem as a whole as to its specific speculation on nature and the divine, are built in to the narrative self as a defining quality. In revelling in 'temptation', intensifying it by eroticizing its transgressiveness, the poem subverts Christian piety, in ways of which Coleridge seems to have been aware at the time: 'Does not that man *mock* God', he wrote, 'who daily prays against temptations, yet daily places himself in the midst of the most formidable?' (CL I 255-56). 'The Eolian Harp' draws much of its energy from the figuring of just such behaviour.³³

Coleridge's occult ambition, then, and the need to find a language adequate to that imperative, was a reflex of his commitment to a shared political and spiritual liberty. But it was also problematic, in religious, social and even moral terms. Hazlitt once suggestively observed that 'Coleridge somehow always contrived to prefer the *unknown* to the *known*',³⁴ and this metaphysical restlessness, even in the mid-1790s, sat uneasily not just with the political, intellectual and religious hegemony, but with the assumptions of Unitarian dissent. These pressures would inform the fusion of stealth and imaginative freedom that characterises Coleridge's most achieved poetic utterance—in 'The Eolian Harp' and later—and help to explain why he could 'accept no place in State, Church, or Dissenting Meeting' (CL I 274).

³¹ Everest observes the apparent rejection of 'the speculations of the poem' in its closing sequence to derive from 'obviously fabricated grounds of Christian piety that are foreign to the whole cast of his mind', and explains its 'limited, myopic piety' as an appeal to 'the solemn approval of the Christian public': *Coleridge's Secret Ministry*, 221.

³² My argument therefore opposes the approach taken by Ronald C. Wendling, who, drawing on several other like-minded critics, interprets the poem as a genuine celebration of his honeymoon with Sara, involving a deeply-felt rejection of speculative presumptuousness in favour of Christian piety and domesticity: 'Coleridge and the Consistency of "The Eolian Harp"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 8 (Autumn, 1968), 26-42.

³³ On the interpretation offered here, the well-known lines beginning 'O! the one Life within us and abroad...', added in 1817, rather than throwing the poem completely out of balance and making 'nonsense of the unaltered ending', as Humphry House maintained (*Coleridge* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), 76), sustain and intensify the attractiveness of what is *opposed* to the Christian domesticity of the ending.

³⁴ 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' (1823), as reprinted in Duncan Wu (ed), *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 600-10, 604.