Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Creative Fancy[1]

David Fairer

UNDERPINNING MANY DISCUSSIONS of 'Romantic creativity' (still a popular concept) is the Coleridgean distinction between Imagination and Fancy.[2] The terms are those famously set out in *Biographia Literaria* and elsewhere in Coleridge's later writings;[3] to the extent that the concept of Romanticism itself has come to be bound up with a series of related dualities which set active against passive, organic against mechanic, productive against reproductive, dynamic against static. This dualistic model has proved useful in survey courses on English Literature for conveying in a form that students can easily master the special creative 'power' of the Romantic Imagination as opposed to the less than powerful eighteenth-century empirical mind. A key text is of course the brief passage in Chapter 13 of *Biographia*, which in itself, concludes Richard Holmes, 'defined for the English-speaking world the Romantic concept of creativity':[4]

> [The secondary IMAGINATION] dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.
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> Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.[5]

Imagination's struggle to idealise and to unify (both admirable notions) is not my topic. Instead I want to take my cue from the character of the 'Fancy', in the hope that after dinner on this final evening of the conference it might be possible to be more indulgent to a faculty that often receives a bad press. After all, we need to recognise that as 'The Friends of Coleridge' we ourselves are a mode of Memory, an association, consisting of mixed individuals with divergent interests and varied concerns—not unified (heaven forbid!), but creatively juxtaposed and mingled, even occasionally modified, though not I suspect by much. In this associative way we piece together our experiences, and who knows what individual conjunctions and combinations form during the conference, many of them fleeting and amusive. Just occasionally there can be something which decisively alters our intellectual direction; but it is a

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[1] The concluding lecture (revised) of the 2010 Cannington conference, 27 July.

[2] Imagination, like Fancy, will be capitalised when it is conceptual. 'Coleridge's imagination' will therefore be distinguished from 'Coleridge's Imagination'.

[3] For the references, see M.H. Abrams, 'Coleridge's Mechanical Fancy and Organic Imagination', *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 167-77.

[4] Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 410.

[5] *Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), I, 304-5. Hereafter *BL*.

precarious, even accidental process: a diversion can become a discovery, or a revelation a delusion.

It is the creative potential of this more mixed empirical model of the imagination that I want to think about—whatever label we give it. What is going on *in a poem* when what we nowadays term 'the Fancy' is operating? Is it inevitably limited and mechanical? Coleridge's crucial Schlegelian distinction between mechanic and organic form, voiced in his eighth Shakespeare lecture of 1811[6] and in the *Biographia* and later texts, was extended so as to drive a wedge, which is still in place, between two different aspects of imaginative activity, with the result that they have in effect become (what they were not in the eighteenth century) two separate faculties. Coleridge of course made them part of a binary scheme, setting a mechanical 'Fancy' against an organic 'Imagination', and a dualistic 'Allegory' against a unifying 'Symbol'; and since then it has always been tempting to employ these oppositions in evaluating the poems of Coleridge and Wordsworth, judging more harshly those that seem in some way compromised or ambivalent, as being less unified and therefore less fully 'creative'. But I want to avoid such an over-schematic deployment of terms by returning to the eighteenth-century understanding, in which imaginative activity was not subject to internal regulation. My argument is grounded on the premise that eighteenth-century writers, like those of the Renaissance and seventeenth century, considered the imagination/fancy to be a single Protean faculty, potentially both visionary and delusory, divine and damned, the pure medium of the spirit or the slave of the body's passions, at times idealising, playful, grotesque, potentially transcendent, liberating, anarchic. When writers and thinkers spoke of these things they used the terms 'fancy' and 'imagination' promiscuously: their very point was that the same faculty (labelled from the Greek φαντασία or Latin *imaginatio*) contained vast possibilities: its character and value depended on how, and to what ends, it was used. In moving back to this paradoxical understanding of the imagination I take a different line from that of Jeffrey C. Robinson in his important study, *Unfettering Poetry: Fancy in British Romanticism* (2006), in which he discusses Fancy and Imagination as distinct faculties and evaluates the two separately.[7] In Robinson's dualistic reading the Fancy is viewed 'in opposition to the imagination' (p. 11), so that what he terms 'the poetry of the Fancy' is 'transgressive' and 'progressive', in contrast to 'a conservative poetics of Imagination' (p. 7). This brings valuable insights, but in developing my own

[6] *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T.M. Raysor, 2 vols (London: Constable and Co., 1930), I, 224. On Coleridge's indebtedness here to A.W. Schlegel, see G.N.G. Orsini, 'Coleridge and Schlegel Reconsidered', *Comparative Literature*, 16 (1964), 97-118.

[7] Jeffrey C. Robinson, *Unfettering Poetry: Fancy in British Romanticism* (New York and Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Robinson states that 'in common, as opposed to technical usage, "imagination" invariably signifies the locus in the mind for acts of creation, whereas the Fancy conveys the weak sense of whim and casual desire' (p. 4). His premise is that when eighteenth-century and earlier writers employ the terms they are either making a distinction between them, or in using them interchangeably they are being confused ('one word often taking on the qualities customarily associated with the other', p. 4). The consequence is that in eighteenth-century theorists 'there are curious slips in these discussions that suggest an instinct, usually checked, to find imagination and fancy aspects of the same thing' (p. 29).

readings I want to keep the two terms within the same faculty as always potentially in dialogue or at play together.

This is a vast and much discussed topic; but I'll work my way beyond what Coleridge and Wordsworth said about the imagination in 1815, and make their earlier poetry my focus. The aim is to look for the imaginative activity in some of this writing, and think about how it works. But rather than conduct a poetic defence of the Coleridgean Fancy, I want to use Wordsworth to make the boundaries between Fancy and Imagination more permeable and certainly less value-loaded, and consider how creatively both poets could exploit the imagination's capacity for challenging the binaries and working across different registers. The notion of conceptual boundaries will give way to distinctions of character. In this conversational scenario it is helpful to draw on the more ambiguous and paradoxical terms used by eighteenth-century aestheticians, who were working with an unsynthesised concept of the imagination, one whose sphere of activity was much wider and more varied than it later became. Their thoughts about 'creative genius' can help us view the early poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth in more flexible and nuanced ways.

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When Coleridge pictures Fancy, in the words already quoted from Chapter 13 of the *Biographia*, the scene is reminiscent of a schoolroom (and the fanciful image is appropriate). In contrast with the 'vital' activity of Imagination, Coleridge's Fancy 'has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites' and 'must receive all its materials ready made'. Fancy is evidently *in statu pupillari*, and like any uncertain student prefers to work from prepared handouts, moving around its 'counters' as if making arithmetical calculations, or indeed playing draughts. It is dependent on memory and the association of ideas (a good way of remembering your lessons). Fancy's range of thought is confined to the materials of Lockean perception, brought into new patterns but essentially untransformed in the process. Coleridge's passage is clearly indebted to Kant's distinction in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1787) between his concepts of the *productive* and *reproductive* imaginations, with the merely reproductive being, Kant says, 'subject entirely to empirical laws, those of association'.[8] Not *un*-productive, we notice, but always in a strict sense 're-productive'. As Engell and Bate summarise it in their edition of the *Biographia*: 'Coleridge wanted to stress that fancy is tied to sensory experience. It can aggregate and combine only what it has received'.[9] The fundamental presumption here is that the empirical is always to some degree limited in range and activity.

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[8] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* ['B' Text, 1787]*: A revised and expanded translation based on Meiklejohn*, ed. Vasilis Politis (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), p. 110 [§24; B151]. See *BL*, I, ci-cii, where Engell and Bate are disconcerted to find Kant confusing his terms ('he mentions a creative imagination again . . . and then equates this, in at least one instance, with fancy!').

[9] *BL*, I, ciii-civ.

In the famous *Biographia* passage it's striking how well behaved Coleridge's Fancy is, satisfied with what is fixed and definite, playing by the rules, not raising awkward questions, in fact altogether lacking in *fantasy*—quite unlike the wild, unsettled creature celebrated and deplored in equal measure by writers of previous centuries. In the *Biographia* passage, the Lockean association of ideas—that most playful and unpredictable process and the inspiration for the delightful anarchy of *Tristram Shandy*—has been drained of its creative potential;[10] it is no longer paradoxically entwined with a tendency to be restless, unstable, and irresponsible. The eighteenth-century Fancy would simply refuse to behave itself in such a decorous way.[11]

But Coleridge's vital/mechanical binary remains extraordinarily influential, with the knock-on effect that the eighteenth-century imagination or fancy (the two terms almost always interchangeable)[12] has had a hard time from critics. Just one example chosen from many is Richard Kearney's book, *The Wake of Imagination: Ideas of Creativity in Western Culture*, which declares that German idealism 'released imagination from its long philosophical imprisonment', resulting in an 'affirmation of the creative power of man'.[13] Kearney's Creativity comes only with the 'modern' imagination; and he cites what he calls his 'canonical metaphor' in which 'the imagination ceases to function as a mirror reflecting some external reality and becomes a lamp which projects its own internally generated light onto things'. Kearney contrasts the '*mimetic* paradigm' with the '*productive* paradigm': 'the image', he says, 'was not a static "thing" (res) deposited in memory. . . but a dynamic creative act'. 'Meaning', he says, 'no longer required the orthodox mediations of reality to prove itself. It became its own guarantee—the immediate invention of imagination'.[14]

Nothing stands in the way of Kearney's Imagination. It offers instant access, and in his terms any mediation is obstruction. It is confident, assertive, in control. Of course this paradigmatic approach is as much an oversimplification of German idealist philosophy as it is of Coleridge, but it shows a dismissive contempt for the creative possibilities of the empirical. Must the 'creative' by definition be an *ex nihilo* impulse free of all experience and mental discourse, liberated from any cluttering perceptions and memories? To my mind it's the critic's terms that are limiting here, working as counters, black versus white, moving across white and black squares. However powerful

[10] The classic study of Sterne's engagement with Lockean association is John Traugott, *Tristram Shandy's World*: Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954).

[11] On the anarchic aspects of imaginative activity, see Michael V. DePorte, *Nightmares and Hobbyhorses: Swift, Sterne, and Augustan Ideas of Madness* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1974).

[12] For most writers of the eighteenth century the terms 'imagination' and 'fancy' are interchangeable (Hobbes, Pope, and Addison, for example, do not distinguish them). See also notes 21 and 26 below. In 1783 James Beattie noted that 'they are, indeed, names for the same faculty, but the former seems to be applied to the more solemn, and the latter to the more trivial, exertions of it', before concluding: 'However, as these words are often, and by the best writers, used indiscriminately, I shall not further distinguish them' (*Dissertations Moral and Critical* (London, 1783), p. 72). In quoting Beattie's words, Engell and Bate omit that final sentence (*BL*, I, xcviii), as does Engell in *The Creative Imagination* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 172. See note 7 above.

[13] Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Ideas of Creativity in Western Culture* (London etc.: Hutchinson, 1988), pp. 155-6.

[14] Kearney, pp. 155-6.

the binaries are, are they subtle enough for talking about poetry? Are they the sharpest critical tools we have for reading Wordsworth and Coleridge during the 1790s? Such a critical language is not open to being modified by an experience, not curious or responsive enough, not—dare I say—confused enough.

That's why I relish the joyous moment in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Kearney's canonical text) where M.H. Abrams catches Wordsworth muddling together those things that Coleridge needs to keep apart.[15] The passage from Wordsworth's *Preface of 1815* simply fails to grasp Coleridge's great idea: 'Wordsworth's vocabulary', Abrams notes, 'show[s] a regressive tendency to conflate the organic imagination with mechanical fancy, by describing it once again in terms of the subtraction, addition, and association of the elements of sensory images'. This threatens to undermine the very foundations on which *The Mirror and the Lamp* is built. Abrams is appalled:

> The imagination, Wordsworth says, is creative; yet, he asks, 'is it not the less true that Fancy, as she is an active, is also, under her own laws and in her own spirit, a creative faculty?' Worse still, Wordsworth indicates not only that fancy is creative, but that imagination is *associative*: both powers alike serve 'to modify, to create, and to associate'.[16]

Abrams is in despair with Wordsworth's confusion: you can almost hear him saying 'Read my book!' But Wordsworth's tentative question in the 1815 *Preface* is a pertinent one for his own earlier poetry. Creatively, what he likes working with are not contrasts in kind, but distinctions in character, between Imagination and Fancy—as he conceives them. By giving them the same activities (putting them in the same team as it were) Wordsworth can watch them more closely, see how they might interact. He is fascinated by the unifying and transcendent, but no less by elements of play and distraction, the more unpredictable aspects of personal association or sudden memory. He is clear that these two aspects of imaginative activity, Imagination and Fancy, share the same powers while representing different modes of behaviour and expectation. As the *Preface* says, 'To aggregate and to associate, to evoke and to combine, belong as well to the Imagination as to the Fancy'.[17] That little phrase, *as well*, with its Wordsworthian roominess, is decisive, and reveals his sense of the neighbourly, a creative capacity to let some things stand side by side. It is the key to one aspect of the creativity of the empirical imagination.

In terms of character, Wordsworth's Fancy is, to put it bluntly, *a flirt*. She touches, rather than holds. Unlike Imagination,

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[15] For a more extended discussion of this see David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 15-32.

[16] Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p. 181.

[17] Wordsworth, 'Preface of 1815', *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, eds. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), III, 36. Hereafter *Preface*.

> Fancy does not require that the materials which she makes use of should be susceptible of change in their constitution, from her touch; and, where they admit of modification, it is enough for her purpose if it be slight, limited, and evanescent. (*Preface*, p. 36)

By comparison with Fancy's beguiling coyness, Wordsworth's Imagination offers a more demanding long-term relationship: 'Directly the reverse of these', he says, 'are the desires and demands of the Imagination. . . Fancy is given to quicken and to beguile the temporal part of our nature, Imagination to incite and to support the eternal' (*Preface*, pp. 36-7). In Wordsworth's terms, rather than offering a glance, Imagination has a more far-reaching *gaze* and her mind is on higher things. His Fancy is lively but elusive; it doesn't carry weight, but is capricious, *evanescent*, just touching gently, but requiring nothing—there is no permanent commitment.

There is an eighteenth-century character to this. How reminiscent it is of the sylphs in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, figures who express Belinda's youthful beguilement and mental play, with Wordsworth's Imagination in turn taking the role of Clarissa in the same poem. Set against the endlessly inventive playfulness of the sylphs, Clarissa is the serious friend who demands a permanent change in Belinda, turning her away from the coquettishness of the moment toward the eternal truths that she ought to face as a woman: 'painted, or not painted, all shall fade'.[18] The sylphs' modifications are slight, momentary, and forever shifting. Their varied creativity is always a *modal* effect, an endlessly resourceful skill at modulation:

> Loose to the wind their airy garments flew,
> Thin glitt'ring textures of the filmy dew;
> Dipt in the richest tincture of the skies,
> Where light disports in ever-mingling dies,
> While ev'ry beam new transient colours flings,
> Colours that change whene'er they wave their wings. (II, 63-8)

Pope's sylphs hover between sense and imagination, substance and colour.

It may seem fanciful to link Pope's lines to a passage from the early version of *Home at Grasmere*—but the Fancy is about surprising connections. I want to suggest that Wordsworth's exhilarating description of the birds circling over Grasmere Lake takes its dynamics from allowing the scene to be one of both Imagination and Fancy. This is where its poetic power lies. In contrast to Coleridge's docile figure in the *Biographia* passage, in the 1815 *Preface* Wordsworth talks of the 'rapidity and profusion' of the Fancy, whose effects are by turns 'surprising, playful, ludicrous, amusing, tender, or pathetic' (p. 36). The bird passage strikingly exemplifies these. But there is also present

[18] Pope, *The Rape of the Lock* (1717 text), V, 27.

something less transitory and casual. In the activity of Imagination, says Wordsworth, the image 'grows—and continues to grow—upon the mind': it has a quality of the 'inherent and internal' (p. 36). In the passage from *Home at Grasmere* Wordsworth feels commitment to the place he newly calls home, but also simultaneously a sense of potential transitoriness, his *adoption* of it and by it. We can catch the tension between his Fancy and Imagination in this passage—between a whirling sense of the scene's beguiling and ever-varying beauty, and a recognition of the new demands that settling in this place will make on him. The description has a paradoxical quality reminiscent of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where disconcerting dream and transforming vision belong in the same imaginative realm, as Hippolyta expresses it: 'all their minds transfigur'd so together, / More witnesseth than fancy's images, / And grows to something of great constancy'.[19] By not treating Fancy and Imagination as separate paradigms, but keeping them together as a potentially ambivalent and paradoxical discourse, Wordsworth conveys simultaneously the immediate instinctive joy and the underlying thought of a more sustained contentment. We can hear Fancy and Imagination combine, not to show the instant becoming eternal, but allowing the subtle temporal doubleness to register simultaneously. Here is the Wordsworth passage:

> They are jubilant
> This day, who drooped or seemed to droop so long;
> They show their pleasure, and shall I do less?
> Happier of happy though I be, like them
> I cannot take possession of the sky,
> Mount with a thoughtless impulse, and wheel there,
> One of a mighty multitude whose way
> And motion is a harmony and dance
> Magnificent. Behold them, how they shape,
> Orb after orb, their course, still round and round,
> Above the area of the Lake, their own
> Adopted region, girding it about
> In wanton repetition, yet therewith—
> With that large circle evermore renewed—
> Hundreds of curves and circlets, high and low,
> Backwards and forwards, progress intricate,
> As if one spirit was in all and swayed
> Their indefatigable flight. 'Tis done,
> Ten times, or more, I fancied it had ceased,
> And lo! the vanished company again
> Ascending—list again! I hear their wings:
> Faint, faint at first, and then an eager sound,
> Passed in a moment, and as faint again!
> They tempt the sun to sport among their plumes;
> They tempt the water and the gleaming ice

[19] Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.24-6.

> To show them a fair image. 'Tis themselves,
> Their own fair forms upon the glimmering plain,
> Painted more soft and fair as they descend,
> Almost to touch, then up again aloft,
> Up with a sally and a flash of speed,
> As if they scorned both resting-place and rest.[20]

The birds share the coyness of Pope's sylphs with their mirrored reflections, their beguiling intimacy—'almost to touch'—as they hover between sense and imagination. Both the immediate experience and the poet's awareness of his own perceptions are insisted upon; he is observing, listening, reflecting on, and seeing himself reflected in, their flight. We sense the power of that tension between ecstatically finding a space for yourself, flexing yourself within it, exploring it, and that bird-like scorn of the resting-place. Grasmere and the patch of sky above it become 'their own /Adopted region', a temporary home, and the poet's admission, 'I cannot take possession of the sky', goes along with his sense too of being adopted into his new landscape. There is an allegorical dimension to this, an awareness of his reading them as himself and himself as them—but importantly not reading simply *as* them. The birds are acrobatically elusive; they cannot be assimilated. The passage works between 'they' and 'I', and their evident *jouissance*, which he partly projects onto them, can cease at any moment—but only to allow a characteristic Wordsworthian pleasure in their return. What seems to have ceased has not. 'Tis done', he says. No it isn't, and the passage starts up again ('evermore renewed'). Is this Imagination at work here? Or Fancy? It seems pointless to ask, to require the distinction. The progressive, the circular, and the contrary are all in play. The flock of birds ascends to the level of spirit and all-embracing harmony, but then they descend as individual creatures of pleasurable sense (the 'painted. . . fair') admiring themselves in the icy mirror of the lake.

What comes powerfully across in the passage is an image of *inventiveness*, the crucial term in eighteenth-century discussions of imaginative creation. It is the resourceful ability endlessly to recombine ideas in varying forms, which eighteenth-century theorists of the imagination/fancy repeatedly celebrate. Here is Alexander Gerard in his *Essay on Genius* (1774) characterising the imagination's inventiveness as exemplified in the Shakespearean 'type' of Genius:

> Imagination is still more inventive in all its other operations. . . It can dart in an instant, from earth to heaven, and from heaven to earth; it can run with the greatest ease and celerity, through the whole compass of

[20] Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 54, 56 (MS B, lines 284-314). MS B is the earliest full text, with material dating from 1800. In the later MS D, revised after 1806, Wordsworth dignifies and orders the birds' motions, which 'might scarcely seem / Inferior to angelical'; in MS D they have now come to represent a 'perpetual' harmony, and their intricacies are 'unperplexed' (Darlington, pp. 55, 57).

> nature, and even beyond its utmost limits. It can transpose, vary, and compound our perceptions into an endless variety of forms, so as to produce numberless combinations that are wholly new.[21]

Read with this in mind, the bird passage from *Home at Grasmere* can be considered not just as a Wordsworthian celebration of Nature, but also, given Gerard's terms, as the poet's confident projection of his own genius, the joyful reach of his creative potential. It is rapid, swings between *heaven* and *earth*, and has an *ease and celerity* that are remarkable; it *transposes*, *varies*, and *compounds our perceptions*. Wordsworth's lines mingle hints of confidence, skill, energy, ecstasy, pride, grace, restlessness, a varied bundle of ideas. All this is not drawn into unity, but projected into variety. I don't think we need to evaluate this as a categorical distinction between Fancy and Imagination, but rather to recognise the passage as subsuming imaginative activities of differing character. It grows out of an eighteenth-century tradition inherited from the Renaissance in which the workings of the imaginative faculty are always potentially adaptive and paradoxical.[22]

Of course, behind our experience of the Wordsworth passage is also a keen empirical perception, which sees and hears, and helps us register the unexpected associations between, say, the circling planets and the sportive beauties. The glimpses of harmony and wantonness are drawn into the same dynamic vision. The writing has what Gerard refers to as 'a vigour of association'.[23] Another writer, William Duff, in his *Essay on Original Genius* (1767) says that Genius is confined to

> those few persons, whose minds are capacious enough to contain that prodigious croud of ideas, which an extensive observation and experience supply; whose understandings are penetrating enough to discover the most distant connections of those ideas, and whose imaginations are sufficiently quick, in combining them at pleasure.[24]

A well stored memory, lots of experience, and a vigorous associative power are the vital requirements. Here is Gerard again:

> [A]ssociation is often so strong, that it bestows a sort of cohesion on several separate ideas, and makes them start up in numberless combinations, many of them different from every form which the senses have perceived; and thus produces a new creation. In this operation of the imagination, its associating power, we shall, on a careful examination,

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[21] Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Genius* (London: W. Strahan, etc., 1774), p. 30. Gerard uses Fancy and Imagination synonymously.

[22] On Pope's indebtedness to Renaissance theories of the paradoxical imagination, see David Fairer, *Pope's Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 26-33.

[23] Gerard, p. 41.

[24] William Duff, *An Essay on Original Genius; and its Various Modes of Exertion* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1767), p. 128.

discover the origin of genius.[25]

And according to Dugald Stewart in 1792, 'it is the association of ideas that connects [the mind's] different parts together, and unites them into one whole'; 'a creative imagination', he says, 'implies a power of summoning up, at pleasure, a particular class of ideas; and of ideas related to each other'.[26] Again and again in these aesthetic texts the *creative imagination* and the *associating power* are in harness together. But Duff makes an explicit distinction between the many predictable minds that are limited to what he calls 'the most common laws of association' and 'receive their ideas by the same modes of conveyance' (the mental equivalent of regular public transport), and what he calls 'minds of a finer frame' who still work associatively, but with 'exquisitely nice relations of ideas'.[27] It is clear that the issue is not the empirical mind as such (with all its supposed limitations) but the individual qualities, the character, of a mind, the range of its materials, and the speed and sophistication of its workings. Focus shifts from the power of the Idea to the potential of the mind's activity, an awareness of mental process. Eighteenth-century theory does not hive off Imagination and Fancy into separate faculties as different in principle, but lets them associate, converse with, and potentially shade into, each other. Distinctions are preferred to binaries. In the process, the imagination becomes more spatial, conscious of position, movement, dialogue.[28]

It is this image of negotiating relationships within a shared space that I want to hold onto, as a key aspect of the intimate imaginative movements in Coleridge's Conversation Poems. I see them as texts which explore the overlay of the physical and mental space, and as they do so, to offer meaning as a form of intricate interconnection, of reading across and between. In these poems the empirical character of the imaginative activity creates spaces in which separate elements can become integrated and coherent, at some point working together as part of Locke's 'one common life'. To use his phrases, they exist not as 'mere particles anyhow united', but as a living continuity that 'partakes of the same life'.[29]

We can see this happening, I think, in 'Frost at Midnight', a poem in which two individual human lives are being lived side by side within the cottage—the poet's and the baby's.[30] They are intimately connected, but separate (as they have to be, to be truly intimate), and at this moment one has consciousness, the other not. Within reach of them both is a living fire burnt low in the grate; and a few yards away, shut out from the warm space of human intimacy, is a

[25] Gerard, p. 41.
[26] Dugald Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (London: A. Strahan, etc., 1792), p. 283. Stewart notes that 'the greater part of English writers . . . use the words Imagination and Fancy as synonymous'.
[27] Duff, p. 127.
[28] Gerard (p. 27) speaks of invention 'assembling ideas in various positions and arrangements, that we may obtain uncommon views of them'.
[29] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (2nd edn, 1694), II.xxvii.4.
[30] My discussion of 'Frost at Midnight' here draws on the extended analysis of the poem in *Organising Poetry*, pp. 310-14.

different 'life', that of the active frost; and well beyond is the distant moon, soon to be replaced by the morning sun. The poem is alert to relative location and potential dialogue, so that the spaces and intervals between things come alive. The father's attention moves between the fire and his child, and outside, the icicle holds its quiet communion with the moon. Within these carefully plotted co-ordinates the poet's mind and the reader's are invited to work (this is the 1798 text):

> The thin blue flame
> Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not:
> Only that film, which flutter'd on the grate,
> Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing,
> Methinks, it's motion in this hush of nature
> Gives it dim sympathies with me, who live,
> Making it a companionable form,
> With which I can hold commune. Idle thought!
> But still the living spirit in our frame,
> That loves not to behold a lifeless thing,
> Transfuses into all it's own delights[,]
> It's own volition, sometimes with deep faith,
> And sometimes with fantastic playfulness. (13-25)

In those last six lines (missing from the more familiar 1829 text) Coleridge acknowledges the ambivalence of the eighteenth-century imagination, as subsuming both 'deep faith' and 'fantastic playfulness' (there are links here, I think, to how Wordsworth writes about the imagination in 1815). There is fidelity and inventiveness: the firm conviction of the one does not close off the freedom of the other. There is the possibility at this moment, within this space (the cottage and the text), of both a rapt spiritual contemplation and a toying with thought. Our 'living spirit' may be a pledge of 'faith' but also fanciful and restless. The poem makes room for both. In this mixed scenario the human imagination does not exist on its own self-validating visionary plane, but finds its identity in the life around: it is responsive, alert, aware, with a human capacity to be surprised and delighted, and to feed these back into the scene. The film hovering on the fire brings its own associations through the memory of his birthplace, the church tower, and his schooldays, and the poem indulges this sequential train of associative thoughts before turning back to the cradle:

> Dear babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
> Whose gentle breathings, heard in this dead calm,
> Fill up the interspersed vacancies
> And momentary pauses of the thought!
> My babe so beautiful! it fills my heart
> With tender gladness, thus to look at thee… (49-54)

There is simultaneously emptiness and fullness. The stress is on the space between things, the gaps across which thought moves, and how they can be filled. 'Interspersed vacancies' could be a chilling idea, but here the mind supplies the reassurance of the repeated human breathing. The unquiet film fluttering on the grate overlays the still scene with a living unsteadiness, which will be picked up in the ending of this early version with the infant's burst into consciousness, when it will reach out for the icicles, and 'shout, / And stretch and flutter' from its mother's arms (83-4). The imaginative 'reach' of the poem is of this kind, in which a flickering fire, a curious infant, and the imagination that links them are all invested with the same sportive quality. Somehow in this text we feel that the 'life' is not in the individual thing, but in the *play* between, in the connections. 'Things' in the poem remain in this way distinct but imaginatively within intimate reach.

My sense of how imaginative activity might be prompted by the spatial deployments of the conversation poem is intriguingly echoed in a notebook fragment dating from about 1808, where Coleridge sketches an outline that is crying out to be developed. The four lines simply read:

> The singing Kettle & the purring Cat,
> The gentle Breathing of the cradled Babe,
> The silence of the Mother's love-bright Eye,
> And tender Smile answ'ring it's smile of Sleep.[31]

It is as if Coleridge were mapping out the co-ordinates for another conversation poem. Everything is in place for the promptings and responses to begin, the potential muted dialogues to be explored—though I'm not sure about the kettle and the cat (Cowper would have enjoyed tackling this). Perhaps something magical might be made of the whistling and purring: both are, after all, breaths of contentment.

I want to turn finally to three poems (two by Coleridge and one by Wordsworth) which can be said to have briefly shared the same space—you might say as neighbours and associates—and between which I think we can discern a kind of conversation taking place about the imagination and its ambiguous character. In the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth's 'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree'[32] were immediately followed by Coleridge's 'Lewti; or, The Circassian Love-Chant',[33] only for the latter to be cancelled and replaced by 'The Nightingale; A Conversational Poem',[34] which describes how the birds

[31] Mays, I, 846 ('On a Happy Household'). The lines in Notebook 17 are conjecturally dated c. 6 Jan. 1808 by Coburn.

[32] Composed at Racedown early in 1797. All quotations are of the 1798 first edition text in *'Lyrical Ballads', and Other Poems, 1797-1800 by William Wordsworth*, eds. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 47-50.

[33] 'Lewti' is Coleridge's re-working (probably in Feb-Mar 1798) of a schoolboy poem by Wordsworth. See Mays, I, 457-8; II, 574. It had been published in *The Morning Post*, 13 April 1798. Quotations are of the cancelled *Lyrical Ballads* text in *Lyrical Ballads*, eds. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), pp. 311-13.

[34] Coleridge posted the completed poem to Wordsworth, 10 May 1798, with the famous accompanying lines: 'like an honest bard, dear Wordsworth, / You'll tell me what you think, my Bird's worth' (Griggs, I, 406). All quotations of 'The Nightingale' are from the 1798 text in Brett and Jones, pp. 40-4.

'answer and provoke each other's songs'. There are potential exchanges of that kind between these three texts, which in the complex publishing history of the first edition have an unsettled relationship.[35] Most surviving copies carry 'The Nightingale', but several have 'Lewti' and two copies contain both poems.[36] There may have been a practical reason for the substitution,[37] but when they are read together another plausible explanation emerges for why Coleridge in particular might have been anxious to make the change. Which poem ought to follow the 'Yew-tree' lines?

The question is pertinent for Coleridge, given that Wordsworth's poem carries a direct warning to any young man who might consider himself a 'genius'. The 'lonely' yew-tree seat, where the message is left to be read by its next occupant, is emblematic of an inability to connect fruitfully with the world. It has a 'desolate' location in a no-man's-land between humanity and nature: it is 'far from all human dwelling' and yet is shunned by nature's embrace ('what if here / No sparkling rivulet spread the verdant herb; / What if these barren boughs the bee not loves', 2-4). This is no bower for friendship or conversation but instead a place of solitary contemplation for a looker-on; it offers a vantage-point whose chief virtue is its removedness, a distance 'commanding a beautiful prospect', as the extended title says. No toying with fanciful possibilities here. The 'circling shade' of the seat also has a suitably memorial quality recalling the sad fate of its maker:

> He was one who own'd
> No common soul. In youth, by genius nurs'd,
> And big with lofty views, he to the world
> Went forth, pure in his heart, against the taint
> Of dissolute tongues, 'gainst jealousy, and hate,
> And scorn, against all enemies prepared… (12-17)

The repeated 'against' signals a selfhood constructed by opposition. Instead of finding a growing identity through experience, his youthful purity had defined itself against the world. This lack of a Lockean 'common life' suggests this is genius without the sustaining geniality, the living intercourse that helps form one's character. Caught in the binary of purity and 'taint', as soon as he met rebuff the youth turned away in scorn: 'At once, with rash disdain he turned away, / And with the food of pride sustained his soul / In solitude' (19-21). The price for this idealised purity was high, and he became a self-

[35] See D.F. Foxon, 'The Printing of *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798', *The Library*, 9 (1954), 221-41; Mark L. Reed, 'Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the "Plan" of the *Lyrical Ballads*', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 34 (1965), 238-53; and Mark L. Reed, 'The First Title Page of *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798', *Studies in Bibliography*, 51 (1998), 230-40.

[36] Mays records five copies of the 1798 edition with the uncancelled leaves containing 'Lewti' (II, 575). Two of these (Southey's copy, British Library C. 58. c 12 (1); and Yale In W890 798c) contain both 'Lewti' and 'The Nightingale' (Reed, 'The First Title Page', p. 233).

[37] 'Apparently just as printing concluded, however, someone – most likely Coleridge – recognized that the true authorship of 'Lewti' was public knowledge and that the anonymity of the book was compromised; so 'Lewti' was cancelled and replaced by another poem of Coleridge's' (Reed, 'The First Title Page', p. 231). Mays suggests that 'there may be other, literary reasons for the decision' (I, 457).

contemplating emblem himself: 'Fixing his downward eye, he many an hour / A morbid pleasure nourished, tracing here / An emblem of his own unfruitful life' (27-9).

In this scenario reminiscent of Jaques's melancholy self-allegorising, Nature, instead of offering living sustenance, became a refuge. His imagination was unable to make associations and he could only 'gaze / On the more distant scene' (30-1), registering intensely its beauty, but unable to infuse it into himself: 'his heart could not sustain / The beauty still more beauteous' (33-4). The Idea was just too big for his humanity to absorb. Others might feel a 'kindred loveliness', but not he:

> he would sigh
> With mournful joy, to think that others felt
> What he must never feel: and so, lost man!
> On visionary views would fancy feed,
> Till his eye streamed with tears. (38-42)

The lines convey the dangers of 'visionary views' that cannot engage with experience but feed the fancy and become focused on the self. To make the point even more directly the speaker finally turns to admonish the reader who is now occupying that contemplative seat, possibly a man of 'young imagination' (45), and warns him against allowing its cherished purity to become merely pride in disguise:

> If thou be one whose heart the holy forms
> Of young imagination have kept pure,
> Stranger! henceforth be warned; and know, that pride,
> Howe'er disguised in its own majesty,
> Is littleness…. The man, whose eye
> Is ever on himself, doth look on one,
> The least of nature's works… (44-53)

Imagination, even of the most visionary kind, can easily be turned inward, failing to make connections beyond itself. Without any kind of empirical engagement it has a tendency to be abstracted, self-absorbed. By the final lines of the poem it becomes clear that it is through knowledge, wisdom, love, and the connections made between them, that a fully rewarding life is composed, and of which imagination is an integral part. The emphasis on experiential connections and associations suggests that in this poem Wordsworth is aware of the imagination as not merely a visionary mode, but a field of choice and negotiation. A self-absorbed 'feeding' of the fancy turns the ideal into indulgence.

Given that Wordsworth's poem has finally become a direct admonition ('O, be wiser thou!'), a reader at this point encountering 'Lewti; or, the Circassian Love-Chant' would have a distinctly uneasy experience, given that it reveals a

youthful imagination of the most fervid, self-absorbed and neurotic kind, displayed to the reader with shameless exuberance. The 'Love-Chant' takes as its refrain, 'Image of LEWTI! from my mind / Depart; for LEWTI is not kind', and variants of this cry echo through the poem as an *idée fixe*. The image of the Circassian maid haunts him implacably, and as he roves through the romantic landscape (with the intention 'to forget the form I lov'd') every detail of it brings her to mind:

> The rock half-sheltered from my view,
> By pendent boughs of tressy yew.—
> So shines my LEWTI's forehead fair,
> Gleaming thro' her sable hair.
> Image of LEWTI! from my mind
> Depart; for LEWTI is not kind. (9-14)

The note appended to the *Morning Post* text suggests that the poem's imaginative world offers a respite from daily life: 'amidst scenes of carnage and horror, of devastation and dismay, it may afford the mind a temporary relief to wander to the magic haunts of the Muses; to bowers and fountains which the despoiling power of war has never visited'.[38] But this is wide of the mark. The poem is about having no relief: the imagination forever returns obsessively to the same image, always desired but never possessed. The world of nature, instead of offering an enriching field for the imagination to wander in, becomes a mirror of the self, reflecting back its own fixation. Every time the poet comes close to making the image real, it betrays him and frustrates his desires:

> with such joy I find my LEWTI;
> And even so my pale wan cheek
> Drinks in as deep a flush of beauty!
> Nay, treach'rous image! leave my mind,
> If LEWTI never will be kind. (23-7)

Not unlike the unfortunate Strephon in Swift's poem 'The Lady's Dressing Room', who becomes the victim of the Lockean mental associations that feed his desire ('his foul imagination links / Each dame he sees with all her stinks'), Coleridge's lovesick speaker is not only haunted by the tantalising female, but turns himself into a sexual predator who draws on everything he sees to feed his fancy. The disturbing climax comes when he finally promises to track her down:

> I know the place where LEWTI lies,
> When silent night has clos'd her eyes—
> It is a breezy jasmin bow'r,

[38] Mays, I, 574.

> The Nightingale sings o'er her head;
> Had I the enviable pow'r
> To creep unseen with noiseless tread,
> Then should I view her bosom white,
> Heaving lovely to my sight… (65-72)

In the later *Sybilline Leaves* version the nightingale even becomes his *alter ego*, a voyeuristic intruder able to thread its way into her secret retreat.

If 'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree' issues a warning against the self-indulgent imagination of '[t]he man, whose eye / Is ever on himself', then the speaker of 'Lewti' seems to exemplify it. Admittedly there's a note of self-mockery in the poem's projection of this hypersensitive man of feeling; but placed immediately after the 'Yew-tree' lines it can't avoid filling the role of case-study. After Wordsworth's poem of wise advice, the adolescent voice is just too loud, insistent, and naïve. The young man clearly needs help.

Whether the substitution of 'The Nightingale' recognised this potentially embarrassing juxtaposition it's impossible to say. But with that poem, deliberately subtitled 'A Conversational Poem', Coleridge enters into thoughtful and mature dialogue with Wordsworth's text. It is now a relationship of equals, indeed of friends. 'The Nightingale' is about the 'converse' of friendship, nature, and imagination, and seems to take its cue from the very issues that 'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree' raises, particularly its suspicions about an imagination that claims transcendent vision only to shun human experience. Like that poem, 'The Nightingale' also has a sentimental location, but this one draws friends together ('Come, we will rest on this old mossy Bridge!'); and whereas around the lonely seat '[n]o sparkling rivulet spread the verdant herb', the connecting bridge has a stream that 'flows silently / O'er its soft bed of verdure'. In this more intimate setting the poet's convergence with Wordsworth and Dorothy ('My Friend, and my Friend's Sister') is conducive to memory and association. The poem's many conjunctions are all the more vital for being temporary, held by the moment. The friends come together briefly then part, but only to anticipate their next meeting (the final echoing 'farewell' is of course *hasta la vista*). In 'The Nightingale' the poet's imagination articulates these happy encounters, and in doing so avoids the temptation to unify and idealise, to claim one soul-sustaining vision. The poem hints at the visionary privileges usually accorded to nocturnal contemplation, only to resist them and deploy its mixture of imaginative elements more playfully.

The result is a lively and varied poem, which although it celebrates the nightingales' music is calculatedly lacking in tonal harmony, in the poetic equivalent of 'keeping' in a picture.[39] The birds contribute to this diversity with their 'skirmish and capricious passagings, / And murmurs musical and swift

[39] 'The proper subserviency of tone and colour, in every part of a picture, so that the general effect is harmonious to the eye' (OED, 'keeping', 9a).

jug jug'. The poem has several 'capricious passagings' of its own, not least its satiric notes placed alongside echoes of romance.[40] The tonal range is remarkable and helps convey a sense that we are in the presence of a lively Fancy as much as a shaping Imagination. Delight and teasing mockery occur at moments of intense insight, and potential transcendence is touched by a lyric inventiveness. At the heart of this commitment to mixed rather than pure form is the poem's projection of the imagination. Rather than aspiring to a harmonised vision, its fluidity of association is part of its character. Elements of Wordsworth's later characterisations of Fancy and Imagination both have place.

At first the scene appears set for a traditional nocturnal contemplation. We are about to enter the sphere of Milton's 'Il Penseroso', the *urtext* of eighteenth-century poetic melancholy, where '*Philomel* will daign a Song, / In her sweetest, saddest plight, /. . . Sweet Bird that shunn'st the noise of folly, / Most musicall, most melancholy!'.[41] In 'Il Penseroso' the human mind rises above the things of this world, and the imagination promises to liberate the soul from bodily senses ('looks commercing with the skies, / Thy rapt soul sitting in thine eyes', 39-40).[42] But in Coleridge's poem no sooner has this contemplative expectation been set than he springs his trap. The tone shifts in an instant, and an ironic note is struck:

> And hark! the Nightingale begins its song,
> "Most musical, most melancholy" Bird!
> A melancholy Bird? O idle thought!
> In nature there is nothing melancholy.
> —But some night-wandering Man, whose heart was pierc'd
> With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
> Or slow distemper of neglected love,
> (And so, poor Wretch! fill'd all things with himself
> And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
> Of his own sorrows) he and such as he
> First nam'd these notes a melancholy strain;
> And many a poet echoes the conceit. . . (12-23)

'Fill'd all things with himself'. We hear Coleridge explicitly repudiating the egotism that the 'Yew-tree' lines had criticised ('The man, whose eye / Is ever on himself'). He is well aware of the compulsive way in which the projections of a self-absorbed mind always 'tell back the tale', a circular idea alien to true conversation.

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[40] Lucy Newlyn convincingly suggests that the 'city bard' is an amused recollection of his own earlier self as author of 'To the Nightingale' (1796 *Poems*, pp. 71-2). See *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 45.

[41] 'Il Penseroso', 56-62. The texts of Milton's poems are quoted from *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).

[42] Anne Finch's popular 'Nocturnal Reverie' (1713) also introduces the nightingale of poetic tradition where 'lonely Philomel, still waking, sings' (4), and the poem ends with 'the free Soul to a compos'dness charm'd' (43).

It is also clear that Coleridge's poem is not going to be unified in tone or style. As the poem develops, snatches of lyric ode alternate with descriptive narrative, and the conversational ease of a verse epistle modulates into satiric ridicule, mocking those 'youths and maidens most poetical / Who lose the deep'ning twilights of the spring / In ball-rooms and hot theatres' only to 'heave their sighs / O'er Philomela's pity-pleading strains' (35-9). After this hint of suffocating artifice there is an exhilarating sense of release as we turn to 'Nature's sweet voices always full of love / And joyance' (42-3). The poem insists throughout on that plurality of 'voices'—no one voice or vision will claim priority—and it is with a hint of amused surprise that we are now introduced to 'the merry Nightingale', a disconcerting phenomenon that refuses to be a spiritual symbol. Instead its notes have the 'rapidity' and 'profusion' of the Fancy. The bird

> crowds, and hurries, and precipitates
> With fast thick warble his delicious notes,
> As he were fearful, that an April night
> Would be too short for him to utter forth
> His *love-chant*, and disburthen his full soul
> Of all its music. (44-9; my italics)

It is tempting to hear this as Coleridge's light-hearted echo of his Circassian *love-chant* now subsumed into the sounds of nature. What is striking about the passage is the way the bird's 'soul' spans Idea and sense, hinting at spiritual transcendence while offering a vivid experience of fullness, rapidity, variety, and play. The poem orchestrates these elements skilfully, creating a scene in which the imagination locates a world beyond sense, while allowing vivid sensory details to impress themselves.

The bold dynamics of the piece reach their climax in a choral passage that proclaims a universal harmonious melody. But such a summary sounds bland alongside what Coleridge gives us. Momentarily the imagination has struck a chord beyond individual identity, a unifying 'one sensation'. But no sooner do we respond to this bold proclamation than another of the poem's 'capricious passagings' draws us back to the minutest observation of nature. The transcendent experience becomes even more intense for the element of beguiling playfulness that suddenly emerges. The heavenly chord and the dizzying visual detail reverberate together for a moment to stunning effect, as if the bird is itself reeling from the spiritual implications of the vision:

> the Moon
> Emerging, hath awaken'd earth and sky
> With one sensation, and those wakeful Birds
> Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy,
> As if one quick and sudden Gale had swept
> An hundred airy harps! And she hath watch'd

> Many a Nightingale perch giddily
> On blosmy twig still swinging from the breeze,
> And to that motion tune his wanton song,
> Like tipsy Joy that reels with tossing head. (77-86)

Without the playful effect of the Fancy this passage would lose its special power. At one moment the nightingales unite to form a heavenly chorus, and the next our eyes strain to focus the picture of a single acrobatic bird balanced at the end of a swaying branch, catching an instant of heady intoxication, the 'tipsy Joy' of life. The phrase directly recalls the 'Tipsie dance, and Jollity' of Milton's Comus,[43] confirming that we are no longer in the visionary world of 'Il Penseroso' but have been re-tuned to the livelier notes of 'L'Allegro', Milton's celebration of mirth and Fancy, 'with many a winding bout / Of lincked sweetnes long drawn out, / With wanton heed, and giddy cunning, / The melting voice through mazes running' (139-42). In Coleridge's poem the elements of melancholy and mirth are interwoven. Milton's youthful poems, in the fashion of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, offer contrasting pictures of the paradoxical Renaissance imagination, and the presence of this poetic diptych behind 'The Nightingale' brings in the divine Imagination of the one ('looks commercing with the skies') and the pleasing Fancy of the other ('sights as youthfull Poets dream', 129). Coleridge's conversational poem introduces them to each other, and they work together to delightful effect. The two imaginative landscapes combine, and elements of contemplative melancholy and genial mirth are conjoined. The 'glimmering Bowres, and glades' (27) of 'Il Penseroso' meet the 'frolick wind' (18) of 'L'Allegro'.

And Coleridge's poem ends not with any kind of prayer or self-dedication such as concludes Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', but with a hopeful fancy. The emphasis of the final lines is on personal memory and association. The poet is now the fond father cradling the true visionary, whose infant consciousness, entranced by the moon, recalls the bright, glistening eyes of the nightingales in the bushes, but transposes them to something beyond nature. Suddenly that which is 'slight, limited, and evanescent' is in touch with an element of the 'inherent and internal', something that 'grows—and continues to grow—upon the mind':

> he beholds the moon, and hush'd at once
> Suspends his sobs, and laughs most silently,
> While his fair eyes that swam with undropt tears
> Did glitter in the yellow moon-beam! Well—
> It is a father's tale. (102-6)

In those throw-away words the poet acknowledges it as a fancy, a passing

[43] *A Mask presented at Ludlow-Castle*, 104.

effect of light, an emotive association, the stuff of romantic fiction. But the possibility that it is so much more has been registered. When the wish comes, it's a simple one: that Hartley 'shall grow up / Familiar with these songs, that with the night / He may associate Joy!' (107-9).

We realise that the poem has been associative in all kinds of fruitful ways. Placed immediately after 'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree', it is in dialogue with that text. It avoids projecting pure 'visionary views', but instead conveys a more mixed imaginative experience in which the natural and transcendent never become divorced from each other. Like the *ebullition* (the bubbling up) of the nightingales' songs in his conversational poem, Coleridge's genius had an endlessly creative resourcefulness. Writing to the Beaumonts in 1803, he characterised himself as possessing

> an ebullient Fancy, a flowing Utterance, a light & dancing Heart, & a disposition to catch fire by the very rapidity of my own motion, & to speak vehemently from mere verbal associations.[44]

It is this kinetic imaginative faculty that is fundamental to the empirical aspects of Coleridge's 'genius'. His mind is filled to capacity, you feel, with experience, with reading, and inner conversations, that feed his rapid train of thought. Coleridge understands his own capacity to flow and bubble, and to pursue associations in possibly wayward directions. It is perhaps a good thing to be reminded of Coleridge's poetic imagination in practice, and how much it draws from the empirical, associative elements of the eighteenth-century imagination. When Wordsworth in his 1815 *Preface* dared to treat Imagination and Fancy as operating within the same sphere of activity he was not wrongheadedly misunderstanding Coleridge's genius, but offering an insight into the imaginative worlds of some of his and his friend's best earlier work. A genius like Coleridge's that can 'transpose, vary, and compound our perceptions into an endless variety of forms' is one that will never cease to absorb us. This is perhaps one reason why we all feel the need to come into conversation with him, and with ourselves, every two years.

[44] Griggs, II, 1000-1.