Coleridge's Only Tree: Picturing the Birch

Fiona Stafford

COLERIDGE'S PRESENCE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE is widely felt: references to an 'albatross' or 'Xanadu', phrases such as 'a sadder and a wiser man', or the 'willing suspension of disbelief' are everywhere—like 'water, water'. For a writer sometimes given to extraordinarily intricate sentences, he also had a rare capacity for proverbial phrases and for transforming obscure sources into standard English. The figurative meaning of the noun 'albatross', 'A source of frustration, obstruction, or guilt, from which it is difficult to rid oneself; a burden, an encumbrance; a hindrance' is attributed in the *OED* to 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere'. 'Xanadu', though appearing in *Purchas's Pilgrimage*, is defined as 'A place suggestive of the Xanadu portrayed in Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*, with its dream-like magnificence and luxury'. 'Kubla Khan' popularised the 'milk of paradise', too, though the term goes back to the Minoan culture of 2500BC, where it referred to the latex from the seedpod of an opium poppy.[1] Less widely known is Coleridge's contribution to popular botany: the now common flower, *myosotis palustris* owes its familiar name, 'forget-me-not' to Coleridge. Before the nineteenth century 'forget-me-not' used to refer to various flowers, including bird's eye or germander speedwell (*veronica chamaedrys*) and ground pine or yellow bugle (*ajuga chamaepitys*).[2] After the publication in the *Morning Post,* and then *Sibylline Leaves*, of 'The Keepsake', featuring 'That blue and bright-eyed flowret of the brook, / Hope's gentle gem, the sweet FORGET-ME-NOT!', the name became firmly attached to *mysotis palustris* (PW 1, 2, 709-10). The association was strengthened by Coleridge's note:

> one of the names (and meriting to be the only one) of the *Myosotis Scorpiodes Palustris*; a flower from six to twelve inches high, with blue blossom and bright yellow eye. It has the same name over the whole empire of Germany (*Vergissmein nicht*) and, we believe, in Denmark and Sweden.

Coleridge's lifelong passion for plants is obvious throughout his work, but it was intensified by his love for Sara Hutchinson. Their shared enthusiasm inspired Sara to copy into his notebook a long list of flowers from William Withering's *An Arrangement of British Plants*, and Coleridge to weave flowers into poems for and about Sara (CN I 863). Despite the flower's private meaning, Coleridge's note on the forget-me-not is a public display of botanical and cultural authority. As Geoffrey Grigson and Richard Mabey have explained, 'the plant was a symbol of love' in both Old French and German folk tradition, where forget-me-nots recalled the story of a knight and his lady, whose sprig of blue flowers fell into the Danube. The knight dived in to rescue the posy, only to be swept away, crying '*vergiss mich nicht*' (Forget me not!)' as he threw the

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[1] Lucy Inglis, *Milk of Paradise* (London: Macmillan, 2018)

[2] Geoffrey Grigson, *The Englishman's Flora*, rev. edn (Oxford: Helicon, 1996), 283-4.

dripping blue flowers ashore.[3] Whether or not Coleridge had come across the story in his German researches, he succeeded in fixing the romantic flower name for English speakers in a love poem poised between separation and hope.

Coleridge's legacy to popular botanical language includes trees as well. In that compact twentieth-century guide, *The Observer Book of Trees*, the entry on 'The Birch' begins ' "The Lady of the Woods", as Coleridge christened the Birch, is at once the most graceful, the hardiest, and the most ubiquitous of our forest trees.'[4] In *British Trees*, Charles Hall took a similar line on the silver birch, approving its popular name of 'The Lady of the woods' on the grounds of its evident 'grace and elegance', but omitting any specific reference to Coleridge.[5] Both books may have been indebted to *The Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles*, a three-volume compendium in which William Bean waxed lyrical over the silver birch: "Most people will agree with the oft-quoted words of Coleridge, that it is "most beautiful / Of forest trees, the Lady of the Woods."'[6] More recently, Frances Carey quoted Coleridge in her chapter on 'Birch', suggesting a parallel response to the tree's natural beauty in the 'poetry' of Constable's 1820 drawing of a Birch.[7] In his regular 'Take on Nature' in *The Irish News*, for 18 November, 2017, Stephen Colton's thoughts on the 'elegant' silver birch in his back garden ran under the headline 'Silver Birch deserves Coleridge's description, "Lady of the Woods".' Although Coleridge's phrase is well known in arboreal circles, he is not always credited as the author, because those using it are generally more interested in the tree than the poet. The ubiquity of the pretty name nevertheless demonstrates Coleridge's contribution to an aesthetic, rather than purely practical or scientific, approach to trees. It also suggests that Coleridge's choice captures something essential about the species, which tree-lovers recognise and wish to perpetuate.

The 'Lady of the Woods' appears in 'The Picture, or the Lover's Resolution', published in the *Morning Post* on 6 September 1802, within a fortnight of 'The Keepsake'. It is now more often remembered by students of literature for the few lines extracted in the preface to 'Kubla Khan' than as a poem in its own right. The account of the interrupted dream and the Man from Porlock is itself broken—but also magnified—by the passage from 'The Picture', where a beautiful reflection in a woodland pool is destroyed by flowers dropped by the woman mirrored in the water,

> Then all the charm
> Is broken—all that phantom world so fair
> Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,
> And each mis-shape the other. Stay awhile,
> Poor youth, who scarcely darest lift up thine eyes!

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[3] ibid; Richard Mabey, *Flora Britannica* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996), 310-11.
[4] W.J. Stokoe, *The Observer's Book of Trees* rev. edn, (London and New York: Frederick Warne, 1968), 120.
[5] Charles Hall, *British Trees*, (London: A. & C. Black, 1930), 36.
[6] W. J. Bean, *The Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles* (1914) 3 vols, 6th edn. (London: John Murray, 1936), I, 254.
[7] Frances Carey, *The Tree: Myth and Meaning* (London: British Museum Press, 2012), 68-9.

> The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon
> The visions will return! (PW I, 2, 714-15)

If the preface to 'Kubla Khan' laments the disappearance of a wonderful dream, the lover in 'The Picture' is even more distraught by the disappearance of his vision. Coleridge referred to 'The Picture' as 'A Poem on the endeavor to emancipate the soul from day-dreams & note the different attempts & the vain ones' (CN I, 1153), but his emphasis on 'endeavor' demonstrates the power of the daydream and the forlorn efforts to secure any lasting inoculation against love. In 1819, Coleridge criticised its lack of 'some *one Spirit*, a Unity beside and beyond mere connection' (PW, I, 2, 711), but prior to this, he included a revised version along with other 'Love-Poems' in *Sibylline Leaves*. Two hundred years later, 'the Lady of the woods' has escaped her original setting to take on an independent life of her own. There is much to be gained, however, by revisiting the poem in which she first appeared and considering Coleridge's special interest in birch trees.

The passage in question is rather less exotic than the incense-bearing trees and sinuous rills of 'Kubla Khan'. Although the 'crescent hills' that 'fold in behind each other' may be a domestic equivalent of the 'Hills /Enfolding sunny spots of greenery' and the 'furious waterfall', a version of the Khan's 'mighty fountain', the landscape of 'The Picture' is immediately accessible to English readers:

> Such the hour
> Of deep enjoyment, following love's brief feuds;
> And hark, the noise of a near waterfall!
> I pass forth into light—I find myself
> Beneath a weeping birch (most beautiful
> Of forest trees, the Lady of the woods),
> Hard by the brink of a tall weedy rock
> That overbrows the cataract. How burst
> The landscape on my sight! Two crescent hills
> Fold in behind each other, and so make
> A circular vale, and land-locked, as might seem,
> With brook and bridge, and grey stone cottages,
> Half hid by rocks and fruit-trees. At my feet,
> The whortle-berries are bedewed with spray,
> Dashed upwards by the furious waterfall. (PW I, 2, 715-16)

Whortleberries are common British plants, known in the North of England as bilberries or blaeberries, and in Wales and the Marches as wimberries. Coleridge uses their West country name, which probably came most easily, and grounds the scene in countryside recognisably British. Although he declared that his 'passion' for plants was 'always deadened by their learned names' (CN I 1610 f72), the whortleberry's Latin name (*vaccinium myrtillus*), included in his footnote to this poem, introduces a subtle joke on the lover's belief that he has now escaped into the consolations of nature, 'No myrtle-walks are these, no

groves / Where Love doth loiter!' Similar self-mockery may have informed the lover's station beneath a 'weeping birch' (*Betula pendula*), but Sternean sensibility is rapidly deflected by the reference to 'the Lady of the woods'. This a more authoritative voice, responsive to the tree's beauty and less inclined to be filling all things with himself. Under the boughs of this most beautiful of trees, the landscape seems to take charge, rendering the lover passive to its charms. It is as if a local muse has surprised him by opening his eyes to the beauties all around—in an understated version of Robert Burns's 'The Vision.'

During September 1802, when 'The Picture' was published, Coleridge was thinking about the responses of different poets to Nature, as he wrote to William Sotheby, 'A Poet's *Heart & Intellect* should be *combined*, *intimately* combined and unified, with the great appearances in Nature—& not merely held in solution & loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal Similies' (CL II, 864). In Greek poetry, for example, natural objects might contain a 'Godkin or Goddessling', but were nevertheless '*dead*', as Justin Shepherd has discussed in a fine article on 'The Picture', while in Hebrew and the best English poetry, 'each Thing has a Life of it's own, & yet they are all one Life' (CL II, 866).[8] Coleridge strove to create poems that embodied the essential life of the nature, but his efforts were threatened by the very comparative critical intelligence that enabled him to identify his aim. In 'Dejection', the adverse effect of 'abstruse research' on the 'genial spirits' is made explicit; in 'The Picture', the destructive potential of comparisons is enacted in the narrative. The first 'picture', a reflection in the pool, is disrupted by the flowers which draw attention to the woman reflected, but it fails to reappear and then undergoes further erasure as the landscape offers a new kind of picture to the distracted lover.

If the sudden view into the distance suggests a spontaneous response to natural beauty inspired by the 'Lady of the woods', the scene is actually carefully constructed. The weeping birch 'that overbrows the cataract' and the crescent hills that create a circular vale with a brook, a bridge and cottages, correspond closely to William Gilpin's ideal of picturesque beauty and recall his influential oval vignettes. It is just the kind of 'picture' that landscapes in the eighteenth century were meant to form, since Gilpin taught travellers to see British hills and valleys through the ideal lenses of Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa. If the new picture of the landscape represents a moment of release for the lover, it at once becomes obvious that what he sees is still determined by trained habits of perception. Indeed, the perfect arrangement of 'the landscape' in 'The Picture' may have been a contributory factor in Coleridge's later criticism of the poem's lack of unity, since the evident construction of distinct elements is closer to his mature definition of fancy than of imagination.[9] By 1819 moreover, when Coleridge made his dismissive comment, Gilpin's

[8] Justin Shepherd, 'The Picture, *or* The Lover's Resolution', *Coleridge Bulletin* NS 44 (2014), 49-55.

[9] Shepherd, 50-2. Heidi Thomson, however, argues that the later renunciation of the *Morning Post* poems of September-October 1802 reflects 'a need to purge his mind from the jealous sadness and guilt which those poems were associated with'. *The Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 31 (2008), 73-89.

theories of foregrounds with woods intermixed with rocks, side screens folding over each other, and cottages by streams, had fallen from fashion.

In 1802, when 'The Picture' was first published, however, Gilpin and his theories were alive and well. His very popular tours of the Wye and Wales, the Lakes and the Highlands, encouraged everyone to see the landscape as a sequence of pictures, just as the speaker in 'The Picture' does when standing beneath the silver birch. Gilpin also published *Remarks on Forest Scenery,* which was just as concerned with picturesque beauty and the contrast between the 'sublime' and 'beautiful', but focused on the character of trees, 'the *grandest* and most *beautiful* of all productions of earth'.[10] Coleridge's description of the tree by the waterfall and assessment of its being 'the most beautiful /Of forest trees' are strongly reminiscent of a passage on the birch in *Forest Scenery*, which may explain the authoritative parenthetical comment:

> Of the white birch there is a very beautiful variety, sometimes called the lady-birch, or weeping birch. Its spray being slenderer and longer than the common sort, forms an elegant, pensile foliage, like the weeping willow, and like it, is put in motion by the least breath of air. When agitated, it is well adapted to characterise a storm; or to perform any office in landscape, which is expected from the weeping willow.[11]

In Gilpin's judgment of their picturesque qualities, weeping willows and birches hanging beside romantic footbridges or trailing into streams and rivers, were deemed the most suitable for beautiful scenes—unlike oaks which belonged to the sublime. His description of the weeping birch also shows that its reputation for elegance and identity as a lady were already established some years before Coleridge wrote his poem.[12] As so often, a 'creation' attributed to Coleridge might more accurately be considered an adaptation (indeed, the entire narrative of 'The Picture' is more indebted to Salamon Gessner than was apparent to early readers (PW 1, 2, 711). In Coleridge's hands, however, the 'Lady of the woods' takes on a more complicated and mysterious character than Gilpin's 'lady-birch'. The influence of picturesque theory helps to illuminate 'The Picture' by highlighting Coleridge's interest in landscape art, but cannot fully explain his response to birch trees, nor the lasting legacy of his resonant phrase. To understand this, it is helpful to consider some of Coleridge's other landscape descriptions and aspects of the birch that are not visible in Gilpin's account.

In a recent study of Coleridge's fell-walking prose, Keir Davidson has pointed to the pervasive influence of Gilpin's guides on his first encounter with the Lake District. At Churnmilk Force, for example, the waterfall is seen, pleasingly, through the trees: 'the Copse, whose trees sometimes yielding & parting in the wind make the waterfall beneath the rock visible' (CN I 516).[13]

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[10] William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery* (London, 1791), 1.

[11] ibid, 66-70.

[12] Gilpin includes the tradition of the oak being the 'Hercules of the forest; and the ash, the Venus', 35.

[13] Keir Davidson, *O Joy for me!: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Origins of Fellwalking in the Lake District 1790-1804* (London: Wilmington Square Books, 2018), 78.

Davidson argues persuasively that once Coleridge felt more at home in Cumbria, his writing began to convey a 'growing sense of "connections" within the world of nature … soon to widen and include himself'.[14] Although Coleridge developed a highly personal mode of recording his experiences of the natural world, far freer in expression, emotion and physicality than Gilpin's highly controlled literary and artistic descriptions, the fundamental problem of conveying an affecting natural scene in words remained, and hence his frequent resort to quick sketches and maps in his Cumbrian notebooks. Even in his most energetic accounts, a frustration can be discerned over the limitations of words and difficulty of sharing powerful experiences with absent loved ones. Had the camera been invented, he would surely have been capturing every detail of his walks (although, as Larkin knew, the visual can be more limited than the verbal record, 'O Photography! as no art is, / Faithful and disappointing'). Coleridge had already recognised the limitations of visual art when articulating his dissatisfaction with Erasmus Darwin's poetry: 'a succession of Landscapes—or Paintings—it arrests the attention too often, and so prevents the rapidity necessary to pathos.—it makes the great little.—seems to have written his poem as Painters who of beautiful objects—take—Studies' (CN I 132). 'The Picture', a poem structured by a walk and exploring successive landscape pictures, confronts many of the same difficulties.

Coleridge's desire to capture the special visual qualities of a landscape—and frustration over not quite succeeding—is even more in evidence during the walking tour the following summer. The trip to Scotland with the Wordsworths was a mixed experience overall: the three old friends parted company after three weeks, whether because of Coleridge's ill health and self-obsession, or because of Wordsworth's ill health and self-obsession, or because they no longer found each other's company as easy as it had once been. Wordsworth was now happily married, a father, and still doted upon by his sister; Coleridge was now unhappily married, a father, but doting on Wordsworth's wife's sister—not the easiest basis for a touring holiday in which physical comfort was sparse and physical proximity close. After two weeks, Coleridge bid his travelling companions farewell and, once alone, a growing sense of liberation and energy is apparent in his writing. The notebook reveals a passionate response to the unfamiliar scenery – and many, many references to trees.

Before they left Cumbria, Coleridge was already tree-spotting: a striking cherry tree, an ash hanging over the brook at Caldbeck, fine chestnuts, the old mulberry tree at Rose Castle, and a glorious Beech Elm ('I believe') by the river Caldew (CN I 1426-7).[15] Across the Border, he was initially disappointed by the flatness around the Solway, but once further north the mixed woodland at Cora Linn prompted a detailed description, full of colour and excitement. Of all the various flourishing trees, what pleased him most was a silver birch:

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[14] ibid, 101.

[15] For details of the trip, see Carol Kyros Walker, *Breaking Away: Coleridge in Scotland* (New Haven and London: Yale, 2002); Seamus Perry, 'Coleridge's Scotland', *Coleridge Bulletin* ns 17 (2001), 58-75.

> As I write this, I turn my head, & close by me I see a Birch, so placed among a number of Trees it alone is in full sunshine, & the Shadows of its leaves playing on its silver Bark, an image that delighted me in my Boyhood, when I had no waterfalls to see. (CN I 1449)

The dazzling effect of sun catching the trunk of the silver birch revived feelings from his childhood, in a Wordsworthian influx of visionary delight. His response also reveals a special longstanding association in his mind between birches and running water: the Lady of the woods was always the lady of the waterfall. Birch trees are often found growing by falls, but, with their gleaming white trunks and dark, protruding shapes, they also resemble long, narrow waterfalls. Since the images in 'The Picture' derived from the time (and probably places) spent with Sara Hutchinson, these recent associations may also have been mingling with early memories of birch trees to enrich his experience of the Scottish landscape. A little further on, the next fall prompted thoughts of Sara – 'O Asra, wherever I am, & am impressed, my heart akes for you' (CN I 1451). For Coleridge in Scotland, the lady of the woods was both the birch – and Sara Hutchinson.

After leaving the Wordsworths at Arrochar, Coleridge continued alone, turning north towards Glen Coe, where the mists gave 'phantoms of motion even to the Hills' and the trees 'looked like Apparitions' (CN I 1486). Isolation intensified his feelings for trees, such as the 'old, & *army'* ones in the Glen of Fingal or a clump which 'seemed as if they had no Business there / no abiding place at least, as if they were met there, on a Moorland *Fair-Day*' (CN I 1475; 1486). By 4 September, near Fort Augustus, he was admiring the sycamores along the Nevis and blessing 'my Sara!', when suddenly 'the River improved most surprisingly', as he describes: 'two or 3 yards beyond the Rock on that side, seen under Boughs of Birch trees, arching from the Bank to the Birch Bushes & Heath on the Rock, a fine fall' (CN I 1489). To capture the experience of being there, the passage continues without a pause, creating the effect of turning excitedly in another direction, 'on the other side close under me as I shall pass it the River flows rough & shallow over stones, the Bank naked, but fine young Birch Trees on the rock'. Waterfalls with birch trees had a very invigorating effect: Coleridge's account of Glen Nevis develops into one the liveliest in the entire tour. And yet, with mounting excitement came mounting exasperation. 'The Head of Glen Nevish,' he wrote, 'how simple for a Painter/ & in how many words & how laboriously, in what dim similitudes & slow & dragging Circumlocutions must I give it – so give it that they who knew that place best would least recognize it in my description' (CN I 1489). Coleridge was still in search of a language, simple, and yet true and profound, like that of the 'elder poets' who inspired *Lyrical Ballads* and were celebrated for their relationship with Nature in his letter to Sotheby.

In the Highlands, surrounded by scenery of a kind he had never encountered before, it was painters rather than poets who were most likely to succeed. His envy of their art increased as the days passed, peaking near the

Fall of Foyers, when he visited the General's Hut with its wonderful birch trees: 'That sweet delicate birch with its tri-prong Root— & the other twisty little creature near it. O Christ, it maddens me that I am not a painter or that Painters are not I!' (CN I 1495). All over Scotland, Coleridge admired birch trees, but at this point, almost intoxicated by their mysterious forms, he was desperate to preserve the experience, 'O never, never let me forget the beautiful birch stems.' What begins with affectionate familiarity at the sight of 'That sweet delicate birch with its tri-prong Root— & the other twisty little creature' rapidly turns into wonder. Coleridge was struck not by their elegance, but by the astonishing variety of shapes so distinctive as to demand a special coinage, 'Twisture'. The very struggle to recreate the visual experience in words produces a kind of prose poem of vivid images: 'like silver tarnished, rising out of the *chapped "Elephantiasis"* bark of the 6 lowermost feet of the Trunk / O the endless endless lines of motion'. Coleridge was now looking intently at birch bark in its natural habitat, tough and magnificent as an exotic animal, to real trees clinging to rocks, twisted in their weather-beaten growth to maturity. 'The *chapped Bark* of the lower part of the Trunk, the Bark like a Rhinoceros rolled in mud & exposed to the tropic Heat' hardly sounds like the 'Lady of the woods'.

The sense of failure over repeated attempts to convey striking scenes became more acute as his fascination with birch trees grew:

> The left hand the Lake & its now half copsy half cultivated bank/ the right, birchen Hills, more or less thick, now straight, now bulging, now concave, an Embracement, Heath, Fern, stones white with lichens, Birches of all shapes & Twisture, & white Clouds of many Shapes in the blue Sky above / S. Rosa had the conifers & chesnut / I would study the Birch / it should be my only Tree. (CN I 1495)

Unlike Gilpin's confident summary of the birch's slender elegance, the difficulty—and the thrill—was that these birch trees did not conform. Highland birches possessed characters entirely different, stirring thoughts of Salvator Rosa rather than Claude Lorrain—of sublimity rather than beauty. But if Gilpin's authoritative account of the character of trees seemed inadequate to the physical evidence before his eyes, how should they be represented? Though so different from the neat summary of the beautiful birch in *Remarks on Forest Scenery*, Coleridge was now corroborating Gilpin's assertion that trees were 'the *grandest*, and most *beautiful* of all the productions of nature'. Where Gilpin generally divided trees into separate sub-Burkean categories of grand sublimity and elegant beauty, the Scottish birches defied such clear-cut aesthetics. Earlier in the trip, at Cora Lynn, Coleridge had laughed with the Wordsworths at the well-meaning gentleman who had described the falls as 'sublime and beautiful', but now he saw in the arboreal counterpart of waterfalls a very real fusion of these contrasting qualities.[16] Since trees were

[16] Dorothy Wordsworth records the conversation at Cora Lynn in *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, ed. Carol Kyros Walker (New Haven and London: Yale, 1997), 64.

living organisms, they could not be kept permanently in one or other compartment: simply by virtue of age, growth and experience, they turned from beautiful little creatures into beings chapped, tarnished, and sublime.

In Scotland, cut off from anyone he knew, the birches or 'twisty little creatures' were like living companions. Though a species familiar since childhood, they were also strangely remote and unfamiliar, with a twistiness inviting and frightening, gripping the cold rocks with iron strength. If the sweet delicate birches fired Coleridge's desire to preserve the beauty of youthful budding and possibility, their old, twisty rhinoceros-like companions offered greater imaginative stimulus. In 'Christabel', the mystery of Geraldine, whose beautiful exterior conceals something so different as to be unnarratable, is far more arresting than the poem's heroine. During his walking holiday in Scotland, Coleridge was grappling with the passage of time, the transience of youth, the decay of the body, the insecurity of memory and the inadequacy of language, but he also began to recognise the magnificence, as well as the horror, of maturity and the way in which time might enable the natural transformation of beauty into sublimity.

After witnessing the extraordinary variety of birches in Scotland, 'The Picture' might well have come to seem limited in its pretty depiction of landscape and reliance on Gilpin's view of the birch. Conventional natural imagery had been challenged by confrontation with so many real and varied specimens and where 'The Nightingale' encouraged such exposure as redemptive, it now seemed more unsettling. Illusions might be vulnerable to destruction, but they could offer temporary comfort. If Coleridge's study of numerous birch trees contributed to his own dissatisfaction with 'The Picture', however, 'the Lady of the woods' continued to live on in the minds of readers, entering popular woodland folklore where she continues to thrive. This points to some widely recognised truth in the representation of the birch tree in 'The Picture', which is not solely reliant on a single, momentary view.

Long before his encounter with twisted and grotesque Highland birch trees, Coleridge was open to the darker, less manageable forces of nature and the mind.[17] 'Kubla Khan', 'Christabel' and 'The Ancient Mariner' all convey a sense of inexplicable powers, working through images that are deeply suggestive but ultimately resistant to decoding. Although 'The Picture' is more obviously grounded in a real world of recognisable physical detail, it still carries hints of the uncanny in its puzzling sequence of pictures, reflections and mirrored scenes. The birch tree in the poem may retains its conventional beauty, but its role in the poem is greater than that of a mere picturesque prop. Although there is no acknowledgement of the birch's remarkable tendency to darken with age, 'The Picture' does dwell on the destruction of a moment of visionary loveliness, simply by moving on to new sights and new pictures. The relationship between the lover and the 'Lady of the woods'—both arboreal and human—is also charged with mystery. The overwrought state of mind created

[17] See Gregory Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

in the opening section makes every natural detail part of an internal drama, but both the lady above the pool and the Lady of the woods seem to possess an existence quite independent from the speaker. What might in a conversation poem surprise him into a state of receptive gratitude and joyful liberty, offers a more equivocal sense of rival power. The lady above the pool can destroy his vision simply by strewing it with flowers; the Lady of the woods by the waterfall can enable the sight of another perfect image; this is in turn overwhelmed by the poem's third picture, apparently created by the lady of the pool. Immediately after the pastoral vignette, the speaker is startled by another version of the same view:

> But what is THIS?
> That cottage, with its slanting chimney-smoke,
> And close beside its porch a sleeping child,
> His dear head pillowed on a sleeping dog –
> One arm between its fore legs, and the hand
> Holds loosely its small handful of wild-flowers,
> Unfilletted, and of unequal lengths.
> A curious picture, with a master's haste
> Sketched on a strip of pinky-silver skin,
> Peeled from the birchen bark! Divinest maid!
> Yon bark her canvas, and those purple berries
> Her pencil! See, the juice is scarcely dried
> On the fine skin! She has been newly here;
> And lo! yon patch of heath has been her couch—
> The pressure still remains! O blessed couch! (PW I, 2, 716)

Far more interesting to the lover than the landscape he has just seen is the picture of the same scene drawn by Isabel, whose reflection he admired and lamented. Since the artist means more to him than the subject of her picture, the moment in which nature had apparently intervened to save him from self-absorption is effectively destroyed by the sketch, making his liberation from love just another illusion. The explosive discovery of the sketch recalls the moment when the reflection was broken up by the wildflowers, though these gentle agents of destruction are now gathered up again in Isabel's picture, in the hand of a sleeping child. Although the broken image in the pool is not recreated, there is a form of restoration in the gathering of flowers and time. Whether the child strikes the speaker as an image of his future or his past, it is altogether more tranquil than the tormented present.

If Isabel initially seemed guilty of destroying visions, she proves able to create pictures more real and substantial. What might have struck the lover as a Narcissistic moment by the pool could as easily be an impulse free of vanity, since she broke her own reflection and then drew a picture of the very scene that failed to hold his attention. She creates 'the picture' by working with the 'Lady of the woods'. For Isabel, the birch is not so much an object of beauty, but an ally, providing a means to spontaneous creation. The 'divinest maid'

takes a strip of birch bark as her canvas and whortleberries as pencil and paint. If Gilpin's art attempted to improve on nature and in so doing set a distance between the viewer and the objects viewed, the final picture in Coleridge's poem dissolves the distinction by turning the natural growth of a summer's day into art. Isabel is creating with nature and, while the lover remains a separate observer, her art is '*intimately* combined and unified, with the great appearances in Nature.'

Coleridge's description of the peeled piece of bark, 'a strip of pinky-silver skin', reveals his own close attention to the natural world—a piece of birch bark, peeled from the trunk has a white outer side while the inner is flesh-coloured and remarkably smooth. In his day, birch-bark was a common substitute for paper, which was hard to acquire and prohibitively expensive, but it contributes more than artist's material to 'The Picture'. Isabel vanishes from sight, leaving very physical traces in the bilberry juice 'scarcely dried / On the fine skin!' In Coleridge's drama of erotic pursuit and disappointment, the Lady of the woods offers a tantalising glimpse of flesh, touched by the endlessly elusive maid. The strip of bark has a transformative effect on the graceful birch, which suddenly becomes a living, breathing agent, a mysterious Lady of the woods, with a pale outer appearance hiding smooth pinky-silver skin. It is a rejection of Ovidian metamorphosis, as a nymph (or 'Goddessling') falsely imprisoned in a tree is restored to proper oneness. There is nothing dead about the natural imagery of a poem in which a birch is at once a Lady of the woods, a Muse, a protector and an enabler of art, while retaining its essential character as a tree.

Those who still regard the birch tree as 'the Lady of the woods' are rarely influenced by more than a few words of Coleridge's strange tale of frustrated pursuit and bark-painting. 'The Picture', however, tapped into something that cannot be easily explained in rational language, but works its way through resonant images. What birch trees inspire is widely felt, rarely articulated fully, and probably best conveyed through poetry and art. Coleridge's special sensitivity to the species, so obvious in the Scottish tour, is also evident in another mysterious poem of 1802, 'The Knight's Tomb' (which lies 'Under the Twigs of a Young Burch Tree!' PW I, 2, 725) as well as the unfinished 'The Ballad of the Dark Ladiè':

> Beneath yon Birch with Silver Bark,
> And Boughs so pendulous and fair,
> The Brook falls scatter'd down the Rock:
> And all is mossy there!
>
> And there upon the moss she sits,
> The **Dark Ladiè** in silent pain;
> The heavy Tear is in her eye,
> And drops, and swells again. (PW I, I, 523)

There is no explanation for the setting, but the affinity between the weeping

birch and the Dark Ladiè is immediately felt, if not understood. Coleridge's resonant images anticipate Sorley Maclean's 'my love is at the Burn of Hallaig, / a birch tree', where in a deserted Hebridean settlement ghost girls figure as 'a wood of birches, straight their backs, bent their heads'.[18] Even when birches form the setting of a celebratory love song, they can be shrouded in mystery, as in Burns's 'Birks of Aberfeldey', splashed 'wi' misty showers' at the falls.[19] The birch has very old folkloric associations, with love, with witches and with otherworldliness.[20] Though none of this is obvious in 'The Picture', such traditions deepen its visionary atmosphere, enhancing the power of the maiden, whose appearance in the pool and flower-strewing on the water enchant the speaker. In this respect, she is a kind of Belle Dame sans merci, whose magnetism is far more powerful than the lover's resolution to free himself. If the flowers scattering on the water are an image of innocence, strengthened perhaps by memories of the offerings made by Sabrina's votaries in Milton's *Comus*, they may also suggest more sinister associations, of Circe, or more local witches, especially as the foxglove was widely associated with fairies and witchcraft.[21] The birch, too, is an ancient symbol of power and as, the Lady of the woods, holds human beings in thrall. In 'The Picture', however, the nature of her power is never explained.

Coleridge was fascinated by the stories and symbolic meanings of plants, such as the forget-me-not in 'The Keepsake' or the gentian in the 'Hymn before Sun-rise', also published in the *Morning Post* in September 1802. In the same week that 'The Picture' appeared, he criticised Milton scholars for their crass readings of *Comus*—'all the puzzle to find out what Plant Haemony is—which they discover to be the English Spleenwort—& decked out as a mere play & licence of poetic Fancy' (CL II, 866). Coleridge knew that Milton 'wrote nothing without an interior meaning' and that his poetry defied literal-minded glosses. Plants have the power to work their magic in poems, but they are often most effective when left unexplained and free to convey something greater than is immediately visible. All we really know of 'the Lady of the woods' is that she is the 'most beautiful /Of Forest trees.'

[18] Sorley Maclean, 'Hallaig', *The Poetry of Scotland*, ed. Roderick Watson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 621.

[19] *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. J. Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), II, 353.

[20] Fiona Stafford, *The Long, Long Life of Trees* (London: Yale, 2016), 167-78.

[21] Grigson, 300-304; Mabey, 332-3; Stafford, *The Brief Life of Flowers* (London: John Murray, 2018), 113-23.