Evolution and Agency in Coleridge's Late Prose

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> Are God and Nature then at strife,
> That Nature lends such evil dreams?
> So careful of the type she seems,
> So careless of the single life;
> Alfred Lord Tennyson *In Memoriam* LIV, 41-44 (1850).[1]

IN THE LATTER STAGES of his career, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's writings are characterized by a particularly pointed anxiety about the threat to the significance of the individual human life posed by a system of nature that increasingly appeared to privilege the life of the whole over its parts. This anxiety is a reflection of a more widespread tendency towards an introspective and critical mood that dominates the literary community in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Erasmus Darwin's celebratory vision of procreating plants and industriously inventive scientists, which earned widespread popularity in the 1790s, had been overtaken in the middle of the nineteenth century by Tennyson's iconic representation of "Nature red in tooth and claw" in his 1850 *In Memoriam* LIV. Although it wouldn't be until 1852 that Herbert Spencer would popularize the term "evolution" in *The Development Hypothesis*, and until 1859 that Charles Darwin would propose the idea of evolution by the mechanism of natural selection into scientific and wider cultural circulation in *The Origin of Species*, the conception of an evolutionary nature governed by an unseen, unpredictable, and ultimately unknowable process announces itself through the prose writings and poetic forms of one of the major critical voices of the Romantic era.

In the discussion that follows, I situate Coleridge's late prose within the history of evolutionary materialism, which represents nature as an ongoing process that negotiates between the activity of the internal drives of living organisms and the constraints of external environmental forces.[2] First, I set up the terms of this ongoing conversation with brief snapshots of the evolutionary theories of Erasmus Darwin, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles

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[1] Alfred Tennyson, *Tennyson's Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Contexts*, *Criticism,* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999).

[2] Coleridge's relationship to materialist thinking has already been the subject of numerous studies that begin with his early infatuation with the associationist psychology of David Hartley and focus on his copious adaptations of German *Naturphilosophie*, particularly the work of Kant and Schelling in his *Biographia Literaria*, arguing for his general affinities with dynamic accounts of nature. For a concise argument that considers the nature of Hartley's influence on Coleridge's thought, see David Miall, "'I See It Feelingly': Coleridge's Debt to Hartley," in *Coleridge's Visionary Languages*, ed. Tim Fulford and Morton D. Paley (1993). Jerome Christensen argues that Hartley's influence on Coleridge lasts throughout his career in *Coleridge's Blessed Machine of Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). Trevor Levere draws connections between Coleridge's poetry and prose and nineteenth-century science in *Poetry Realized in Nature: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Early Nineteenth-Century Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Thomas McFarland also provides seminal accounts of Coleridge's struggle to align scientific and philosophical accounts of nature with his theological commitments in his landmark study, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), as well as in the "Prolegomena" to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Opus Maximum*: *Collected Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Darwin in order to establish the fundamental shift in emphasis between internal and external formative drives that takes place between them. My reading of Coleridge begins with his take on the vitality debate in the posthumously published *Theory of Life* and his twelfth public lecture on the history of philosophy, and continues through his *Aids to Reflection* and the extant fragments of his *Opus Maximus*. Coleridge attempts to reconcile an evolutionary nature with a positive assertion of human agency. In the *Theory of Life*, Coleridge turns a debate about the nature of matter and the definition of life towards a consideration of nature as an evolutionary process. In his philosophical lectures, instead of thinking of living organisms as either the product of matter driven by an externally granted vital force, or conceiving of that drive as a product of organization, he works with a dynamic conception of matter to formulate "organisation" as a principle of reciprocal causation. He continually asserts that there is a power "ab intra," or from within, that counterbalances and takes precedence over the powers "ab extra," or from without. Through this reading of Coleridge's later prose, I hope to place Coleridge within the geneaology of evolutionary thinking in order to argue for the centrality that the articulation of sources and models of agency play in explanations of transformation, change, and interrelationship in material nature. I argue that his ongoing struggle with scientific and philosophical approaches to evolutionary materialism is primarily a problem of negotiation between two interrelated paradigms of human agency: one that privileges the human being as an agent capable of originating action, and one that depicts the human being as a subject that emerges from an evolutionary system.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the search for the principles behind the development and transformation of organisms that would account complexity of life was dominated by explanations that assumed a narrative of ongoing progress driven by ontogenesis, or the process of development of an individual from a simple to a more complex organism. In his two-part medical treatise *Zoonomia* (1794-1796), for example, Erasmus Darwin hypothesizes an evolutionary conception of nature from the similarity amongst animals in their development from a "single living filament:"

> … would it be too bold to imagine, that in the great length of time, since the earth began to exist, perhaps millions of ages before the commencement of the history of mankind, would it be too bold to imagine, that all warm-blooded animals have arisen from one living filament, which The Great First Cause endued with animality, with the power of acquiring new parts, attended with new propensities, directed by irritations, sensations, volitions, and associations; and thus possessing the faculty of continuing to improve by its own inherent activity, and of delivering down those improvements by generation to its posterity, world without end![3]

[3] Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia* (New York: AMS Press, 1974), p. 505.

The process is generative, creative, and reciprocal; as each individual organism grows and increases in complexity through the gradual accumulation of minute particulars within the system of nature, the system as a whole, united through a first cause, continues to develop. Darwin's system is primarily internally driven; each part possesses agency in creating the whole, accompanied by a responsibility to improve it.

Jean Baptiste de Lamarck later formulated a theory of "transformation," or evolution, to account for the difficulty that he encountered in detecting and articulating the difference between species when taking into account several members. In his account of the state of biology previous to Charles Darwin, Gavin de Beer writes that Lamarck explains evolution through two factors, the first "a supposed tendency to perfection and to increased complexity," which he takes for granted in assigning man to the top of a scale of beings that begins at the bottom with the simplest organisms.[4] He presumes, then, an internal factor as the driving force of evolution that bears a resemblance to the powers that Erasmus Darwin had earlier ascribed to the "single living filament." Lamarck, however, also explicitly includes a second, external, environmental factor as a way to explain the discontinuities—and imperfections—in a supposed perfect series of organisms graded from less to more complex. The inner drives adapting an organism to its environment were the primary explanation for growth and speciation, with the environment playing a direct and visible role in setting up the parameters for those changes. Ontogenesis, then, is a method of explanation that places the emphasis on the part, or the agency of the individual, even as it takes into account the formative pressures placed upon that part by the whole of nature.

Charles Darwin's landmark concept of natural selection, then, approaches this struggle between internal and external drives, between the activity of the individual and the constraints of the environment, by redefining and elevating the external forces driving development. Stephen Jay Gould summarizes the factors that distinguish his approach in *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*:

> A common thread unites all these abandoned approaches: for they all postulate an internal drive based either on large pushes from variation (saltationism) or on inherent directionality of change. Most use ontogenetic metaphors, and make evolution as inevitable and as purposeful as development. Natural selection, by contrast, relies entirely upon small, isotropic, nondirectional variation as raw material, and views extensive transformation as the accumulation of tiny changes wrought by struggle between organisms and their (largely biotic) environment. Trial and error, one step at a time, becomes the central metaphor of Darwinism.[5]

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[4] Gavin DeBeer, *Charles Darwin: Evolution by Natural Selection* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 6.

[5] Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 94.

The transition between internal to external drives is particularly visible in the final passage of Darwin's 1859 *Origin of Species*:

> It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. [6]

Darwin's account of the transformation of species shifts the emphasis from the internal to the external, emphasizing the action of laws acting upon organisms rather than the powers at work within them. He accounts for individual organisms as products rather than producers, forgoing ontogenetic explanation with one that focuses on a portrait of the complex, emergent, and indirect activity of the "external conditions of life." Gould's identification of "trial and error" as the "central metaphor" of Darwinism highlights one of the central motivations of pre-Darwinian evolutionary theory—an impulse, either as a self-conscious effort or an unexamined motivation, to avoid the ascription of "error" to the products of natural processes, to attribute the development of the "higher" beings to inevitability rather than accident.

Coleridge's essay, *Hints Towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life*, was posthumously published in 1848, but composed around 1816, the same period in which he started to dictate his *Biographia Literaria*. In the *Theory of Life*, Coleridge transforms a debate about the nature of matter into an evolutionary theory, shifting a question about the line separating life and death into an inquiry about the significance of the individual human life in the ongoing process of development that characterizes physical nature. Coleridge states the primary ground of his critique of contemporary theorists of life—including John Hunter, William Lawrence and John Abernathy—in the first paragraph of the essay following the introduction. He argues that their explanations, derived from the research in the physiological sciences, "presuppose the arbitrary division of all that surrounds us into things with life, and things without life—a division grounded on a mere assumption" (SWF 488). Like Lamarck, he recognizes that species cannot be distinguished by essential distinctions. Coleridge's inquiry seeks to define life, not in terms of discrete categories, but on a scale that takes into account the more complex relations that make up physical nature.

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[6] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (Toronto: Broadview, 2003), pp. 397-8.

As is characteristic of Coleridge's critical impulse, he continually searches for the most inclusive and infinitely flexible starting point from which to theorize "Life" in the context of the experimental findings of the biological sciences. He proposes his own definition of life "as *the principle of individuation*, or the power which unites a given *all* into a *whole* that is presupposed by all its parts" (SWF 510). The formative drive, then, which combines part and whole and constitutes the various degrees of organic forms, is what Coleridge calls the "*tendency* to *individuation*." This tendency is itself manifested in degrees:

> Thus, from its utmost latency, in which life is one with the elementary powers of mechanism, that is, with the powers of mechanism considered as qualitative and actually synthetic, to its highest manifestation, (in which, as the *vis vitae vivida* [living life-force], or life *as* life, it subordinates and modifies these powers, becoming contradistinguished from mechanism,* ab extra [from without], under the form of organization,) there is an ascending series of intermediate classes, and of analogous gradations in each class. (SWF 511)

The footnote denoted by * provides a more concise articulation of this proposition: "Thus we may say that whatever is organized from without, is a product of mechanism; whatever is mechanised from within, is a production of organization." Like other early nineteenth century evolutionary theorists, Coleridge posits the emergence of the complexity and diversity of life through an opposition of internal drives and external forces, based on a fundamentally anti-dualist conception that matter is already living. As Tilottama Rajan points out, his perspective also relies on an ontogenetic mode of explanation: "While insisting on man's uniqueness, he wants to see the same 'life' in minerals and organisms: he thus posits a formative impulse that works itself out phylogenetically and is then ontogenetically recapitulated in man."[7] Through a gradual and progressive process, matter, whose impulses are first subject almost entirely to environmental influence, gradually develops to a point at which the *vis vitae vivida,* the powers "ab intra," are able to overpower and subordinate the forces from without, or "ab extra."

In a lecture given during March 1819, Coleridge elaborates on the concepts of organization and individuation that he employs in "The Theory Of Life," contextualizing his position within the history of philosophical materialism. He begins by contrasting the assumptions of what he terms the "ancient" and "modern" schools of materialist thought:

> It is sufficient for our purposes to know that the fundamental positions of ancient materialism were, first, that motion and sensation are properties of a specific kind of atoms and that the mind is but a species of sensation, and all the processes of perception and of reflection purely

[7] Tilottama Rajan, "The Unavowable Community of Idealism: Coleridge and the Life Sciences," European Romantic Review 14 (2003), p. 403.

> passive, and all the acts, or more accurately, all the phenomena or appearances of life (just as the seeming acts of a dream), are wholly mechanical or produced by necessitating antecedents. (LHP 518)

Ancient materialism, then, falters in its attribution of latent and prescribed powers to specific species of matter; such a scheme, according to Coleridge, leads to a system of necessity that renders life a series of passive and predetermined events. In contrast, he argues, "… the modern scheme of materialism differs… by representing life, mind, and will as the result of organisation, not as pre-existing in the specific [atoms so organised]" (LHP 518). Although the "modern scheme of materialism" presents its own set of problems for Coleridge, he points to this distinction as a starting point for his continual assertion that life—here conflated with mind and will—are not given and essential properties, but emergent and ongoing processes.

"Organisation" is the key term for Coleridge in his theorization of life. He divides the prevailing opinions of his own time into those that claim organization as the source of vitality, or life, and those that claim a superadded vital force as the source of life. His own approach is to re-evaluate the assumptions behind the term:

> For what, again I say, is organisation? Not the mere arrangement of parts as means to an end, for in that sense I should call my watch organisation or a steam-engine organisation; but we agree these are machines not organisations. It appears, then, that if I am to attach any meaning at all to the word "organisation" it must be distinct from mechanism in this, that in all machines I suppose the power to be from without, that if I take my watch there is nothing in the component parts of this watch that constitutes it peculiarly fit for a watch, or produce[s] it… (LHP 524)

Here, Coleridge argues against a Deist branch of natural history, most recognizable in the work of William Paley in his famous argument for a clockwork universe operating on rational principles, set in motion by a benevolent deity in the role of watchmaker.[8] Instead, he draws on a Kantian assertion of reciprocal causation to conclude: "Organisation, therefore, must not only be an arrangement of parts together as a means to an end, but it must be an interdependence of parts, each of which in its turn being means to an end, as arises from within" (LHP 524).[9] The relentless transformation of nature is a result of the tendency toward individuation, as the end, or whole, to which the parts are striving, exerts its influence on them in an ongoing process:

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[8] See F. Le Gros Clark, *Paley's Natural Theology*, (Elibron Classics), particularly pp. 9-16.

[9] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Translated by Paul and Eric Matthews Guyer, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 247-8. Kant argues in paragraphs 64-66 of the third Critique for the existence of "natural ends," working with a principle that states: "an organized product of nature is that in which everything is an end and reciprocally a means as well. Nothing in it is vain, purposeless, or to be ascribed to a blind mechanism of nature."

> We may suppose, for instance, with Newton, that in nature there is a continual antagonism going on between universal life and each individual composing it. We will suppose then that there is a tendency throughout nature perpetually to individuate, that is, in each component part of nature to acquire individuality, but which is as harmoniously counteracted by an attempt of nature to recall it again to the common organisation. (LHP 528)

Again, he returns to the tension between inner striving, or ontogenetic development, and outside influence, depicted tellingly here as a "continual antagonism." The "attempt of nature" to recall the individual into the "common organisation" begins to hint at the kind of indirect environmental effects that lead to the idea of natural selection:

> … in short, there is through all nature, and we must assume it as a ground of all reasoning, a perpetual tendency at once to individualise and yet to universalise, or to keep, even as we find in the solar system a perpetual tendency in each planet to preserve its own individual path, with a counter-tendency which of itself would lead it into the common solar centre." (LHP 529)

This assertion grants an agency to nature that is echoed by the descriptions of a personified nature in the process of actively shaping organisms that dominate the final pages of the "Theory of Life." Coleridge simultaneously depicts nature as a struggle, or "antagonism," and as a process that is carried out "harmoniously" between the efforts of inner drives "acquire" individuality and the tendency of Nature to "recall" those efforts back to itself.

For Coleridge, the idea that this process, whether harmonious or antagonistic, could be possibly devoid of—or oblivious to—the internal strivings of the individual is literally unthinkable. He dismantles the notion in an 1811 notebook fragment, later reprinted as "Human Life, on the Denial of Immortality" in his 1817 collection *Sybilline Leaves*:[10]

> If dead, we cease to be; if total gloom
> Swallow up life's brief flash for aye, we fare
> As summer-gusts, of sudden birth and doom,
> Whose sound and motion not alone declare,
> But are their whole of being! If the breath
> Be life itself, and not its task and tent,
> If even a soul like Milton's can know death;
> O Man! thou vessel purposeless, unmeant,
> Yet drone-hive strange of phantom purposes! (PW, *482*, 1-9).[11]

[10] For the notebook fragment, see CN III 4073.

The poem begins as a series of propositional arguments, a repeated series of if-then statements. If there is no life after death, if physical qualities like "sound" and "motion" are not the visible effects of, but the "whole of being," if breath, or life, is also an effect and not a telos, then "Man" becomes a "vessel," paradoxically "purposeless" and filled with "phantom purposes." The stress of the passage, however, indicated by the double stress in the final line, falls on "unmeant." The next five lines elaborate on the nature of this un-meaning:

> Surplus of nature's dread activity,
> Which, as she gazed on some nigh-finished vase,
> Retreating slow, with meditative pause,
> She formed with restless hands unconsciously!
> Blank accident! nothing's anomaly! (PW, *482*, 10-14)

Such a depiction of nature's activity goes against the progressive vision that he sets forth in the "Theory of Life," which has its telos in human life: "In Man the centripetal and individualizing tendency of all Nature is itself concentred and individualized—he is a Revelation of Nature!" (SWF 551). This teleological trajectory is non-linear, yet still driven by the goal-directed "individualizing tendency" of nature, as opposed to the activity of "restless hands." At this point, the poem resumes its original argumentative structure:

> If rootless thus, thus substanceless thy state,
> Go, weigh thy dreams, and be thy hopes, thy fears,
> The counter-weights! – Thy laughter and thy tears
> Mean but themselves, each fittest to create,
> And to repay the other! Why rejoices
> Thy heart with hollow joy for hollow good?
> Why cowl thy face beneath the mourner's hood,
> Why waste thy sighs, and thy lamenting voices,
> Image of image, ghost of ghostly elf,
> That such a thing as thou feel'st warm or cold?
> Yet what and whence thy gain, if thou withhold
> These costless shadows of thy shadowy self?
> Be sad! be glad! be neither! seek, or shun!
> Thou hast no reason why! Thou canst have none;
> Thy being's being is a contradiction. (PW, *482*, 15-29)

According to Coleridge, there is no *being* without something that is not defined solely through the physical categories of "sound and motion," something to oppose the "restless hands" of "nature's dread activity." To assert such is a contradiction of the very definition of being, and indicates the first step on the path to a hopeless relativism.

Coleridge returns to this struggle in the Conclusion to *Aids to Reflection*. He starts with the possibility that matter is characterized by inherent active

properties, which lead to a more conscious, collective agency: "perhaps the material particles possess this combining power by inherent reciprocal attractions, repulsions, and elective affinities; and are themselves the joint Artists of their own combinations?" (AR 398). He continues to give an account of form as not a given property, but a characteristic acquired through an emergent physical process in which an "invisible central power" evolves the form of an organism through the acquisition of "material Mass." The acquisition of form through an emergent process separates the "Organ from a Machine," the living from the non-living. His account of this process from the perspective of the whole bears a striking resemblance to Charles Darwin's closing reflections in the *Origin of Species*:

> As the unseen Agency weaves its magic eddies**,** the foliage becomes indifferently the Bone and its Marrow, the pulpy Brain, or the solid Ivory. That what you see *is* blood, *is* flesh, is itself the work, or shall I say, the translucence, of the invisible Energy, which soon surrenders or abandons them to inferior Powers, (for there is no pause nor chasm in the activities of Nature) which repeat a similar metamorphosis according to their kind;— (AR 398)

Coleridge, however, does not characterize this "unseen Agency" as the secondary external operation of a factor like Natural Selection, not as a negatively defined attribute, but rather as a positively defined quality, an internal drive. Yet, the activity of this unseen agency, which resembles the threatening and indifferent "restless hands" of Nature that he invokes in poetic form in *Human Life*.

Coleridge includes this argument in the Conclusion as a part of his larger refutation of dualism. According to Coleridge, this evolutionary account of nature is something that any serious thinker must contend with, asserting: "These are not fancies, conjectures, or even hypotheses, but *facts;* to deny which is impossible, not to reflect on which is ignominious." In particular, he is confident that continued reflection upon the fruits of empirical research in the natural sciences will be enough to learn a powerful lesson: "the utter emptiness and unmeaningness of the vaunted Mechanico-corpuscular Philosophy, with both its twins, Materialism on the one hand, and Idealism, rightlier named Subjective Idolism on the other: the one obtruding on us a World of Spectres and Apparitions; the other a mazy Dream! (AR 398-9)." This objection to the dualist "Mechanic or corpuscular Scheme" echoes his argument against the variety of "ancient" materialism that he criticizes in his philosophical lectures, which he claims, "it its absoluteness and strict consistency was first introduced by Des Cartes." He opposes the removal of all positive properties from corporeal substance, referring to such attempts here, and repeatedly in the philosophical lectures as a "*Fiction of Science*." Previous to the reintroduction of dynamic forces into nature by the scientists that Coleridge professes admiration for in *Theory of Life* and earlier in the

Conclusion, "Des Cartes," having been cited as the major source of modern dualism, "propounded it as *truth of fact*." The price of dressing this fiction as truth and fact, according to Coleridge, is steep, leaving behind "a lifeless Machine whirled about by the dust of its own Grinding" (AR 399). Coleridge invokes the familiar Enlightenment threat of the man-as-machine to counter, on the one hand, a mechanistic "Materialism," and on the other, "Subjective Idolism."

Coleridge's struggle to reconcile the emergent processes of material nature with his insistence on the originating power of human agency continues until his death, and recurs as a significant thread of inquiry throughout the notebooks that comprise the unfinished synthetic magnum opus. In fragment 4 of the extant manuscripts recently published as *Opus Maximum*, he continues to assert the powers from within against the powers from without:

> …there must be a power acting in an opposite direction to that which is supposed in the science of mechanics, and contradistinguishes mechanical force, and which, considered as opposed to the mechanic, is as a power ab intra to a power ab extra, and again as a power anterior to and causative of the pheanomenon, viz, figure, quantity, extension, etc., to a power caused by and in immediate dependence of the phenomenon. (OM 301)

Through his continued engagement with evolutionary materialism, Coleridge poses an important series of questions: What are the ethical consequences of a conception of nature in which the individual matters less than the whole, or the "species"? How is it possible to hold on to the meaning of the human self if that self is seen as the product of a material process whose primary goal is the preservation of the whole? In his search for answers to these questions, Coleridge consistently places the driving force of development internally—with the part or with the individual—rather than externally—in the surrounding environment or the whole. According to Coleridge, there is no being without something to oppose the "restless hands" of "nature's dread activity." Yet, his anti-dualist philosophical commitments prevent him from simply positing a Soul that stands completely separate from the material world, and he continues to represent the self as a continuous, reciprocal process of material and divine creation. It is indicative of Coleridge's critical prowess that his writing continually enacts the clash between two paradigms of matter and agency taking place in the development of evolutionary thinking in the early nineteenth century. One of these paradigms begins with an internal conception of form and defines the human being as an agent capable of originating action; the other grants more power to an emergent, environmental or external system of forces that render the human being as a subject—or in an extreme version, an accident—of an evolutionary system of nature. This conflict lies at the foundation of the widespread rewriting of the relationship between human and nonhuman life that unites the scientific, philosophical and aesthetic projects of the Romantic era, a rewriting that continues to pose challenges to conceptions of human agency in the present day.