"One travels along with the Lines of the mountain": Lines in Motion and Thoughts in Act in the early *Notebooks* of S T Coleridge.

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THE QUESTION OF THOUGHT, its origin, process and figuration, has puzzled philosophers and artists since the dawn of time. How can words or images embody thoughts, "turn them to shape"? Especially those "fleeting, elusive and shadowy thoughts" that Ted Hughes discusses in his monologue entitled "On thinking".[1] According to him, the creative thinking process implies "breaking into that inner life", this "world of memory, emotion, feeling, imagination, intelligence and natural common sense". Yet to break into that realm of fleeting thoughts, that is to try and capture something which is yet unformed because prior to meaning and symbolization, implies "a process of raid, or ambush, or dogged hunting, or surrender". So the gesture which symbolizes the passage from thought to some kind of material inscription is no smooth and natural process. I will argue in this paper that notebook writing enables this process of seizing and pinning down thoughts in their most undetermined, shadowy or experimental form. Coleridge intricately linked his process of thinking and his notebook writing so that they would become one, calling them his "Pocket-book Thoughts". When Coleridge pondered over the nature of his own train of thoughts, the "flux and reflux of his mind", he described it by various metaphors often suggesting excess and loss, either a "crowding to death" of thoughts or a wild polypus growth:[2]

> (…) but my Thoughts, my Pocket-book Thoughts at least, move like a pregnant Polypus in sprouting Time, clung all over with young Polypi each of which is to be a thing of itself—and every motion out springs a new twig of Jelly-Life.[3]

Studies on notebook writing and notebook poetics have been flourishing those last few years, owing partly to the materialist and pictorial turn which has been reconsidering the interactions between texts and images. Scholars usually agree on the fact that notebooks rarely tell us the story of self-absorbed minds. As it has been pointed out by French geneticist Louis Hay, "the main feature of the notebook, its size, serves its function: mobility".[4] Mobility is indeed what characterizes notebook writing in many aspects and what distinguishes it from the diary/journal. The notebook writer draws his material from the outside

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[1] Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making: A Handbook for Writing and Teaching,* London*:* Faber & Faber, 2008.

[2] CN III 3342 : "The first Thought leads me on indeed to new ones; but nothing but the faint memory of having had them remains of the others, which had been even more interesting to me.- I do not know, whether this be an idiosyncracy, a peculiar disease, of *my* particular memory – but so it is with *me* – My Thoughts crowd each other to death".

[3] CN II 2431.

[4] Louis Hay, *Carnets d'écrivains. Hugo, Flaubert, Proust, Valéry, Gide, du Bouchet, Pérec,* Paris : CNRS, 2002, p. 10. (*my translation).*

world, turning experience and perception into thought. He is furthermore usually physically experiencing the outer world, and writing about it almost concurrently. Because of this constant intertwining between the subject, space and movement, notebook writing feeds upon an increasingly porous line between the inner and outer worlds, between the thoughts and natural objects set in motion by perception. To recall Nietzsche's words, "all truly great thoughts are conceived while walking".

This paper aims at exploring those 'walking thoughts' and their material inscription by focusing on four key periods of his notebook writing: his trip in Germany, his discovery of the Lake District, his Scottish expedition and his short visit to Gibraltar during his voyage to Malta. Raimondo Modiano offers us a luminous reading of Coleridge's descriptive prose in *Coleridge & the Concept of Nature* stressing the "painter's eye intent on grasping harmonious designs under explosive variety of nature". My intent here will be to examine the descriptive fragments not merely in terms of textuality but as graphic compositions mixing verbal and visual signs that create 'images of thought'. Why and when did Coleridge use sketches and lines? What do they make visible? How do they connect to the textual signs? How can they signify? Are there any observable recurring patterns that could allow us to draw a 'grammar of the visual'? These images, I believe, aimed gradually at translating the experience of an embodied thought through space and the intertwining process between the outer world (the natural objects) and the inner reality of the self, between lines and thoughts.

1 *"To describe is a Chaos": Coleridge in Germany.*

When describing the landscapes he visited, Coleridge often lamented the arbitrariness of words, their inadequacy to feelings, dreaming to be "a Painter with the Poet's Feeling":[5] "I see what I write / but alas! I cannot write what I see".[6] Writing with words, as a linear discontinuous process, failed to grasp the intricate texture of landscape, its harmonious lines, the desiring gaze, the feelings and passions aroused by natural objects and their deep connection with the inner self.

Descriptive prose appeared in the notebooks when Coleridge started using them more regularly during his trip to Germany in September 1798. His notebook entries were usually expanded in his letters to Sara. Descriptions then endeavored to make visible to Sara the landscapes that unfolded during his walking tours. Sketches of maps outlined the rough shapes of hills, rivers, crags, cottages and how they assembled together:

[5] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* Earl Leslie Griggs (ed.), Clarendon Press, 1996, letter n°281, p. 506.

[6] *Ibid,* p. 503.

> (…) came to Rubelland / enchanting scene – a few sweet Cottages in a vale of that formed a very small amphitheatre, a stream flowing thro' it c. the stream; B.b.b. an half moon Hill with firs one over the other like Spectators in Theatre with masses of rock-like Obelisks & Wall – c. the stream – a. a low green Hill with Cottages at its foot / D. Bare high Crags with some twenty scattered Firs, & companies of Goats on them.[7]

Visualizing the outline of natural landscapes through those sketches enabled Coleridge to have a complete visual representation of the scenery and of the assemblage of natural objects.[8] With this projected and simplified image made up of curves representing the outlines and letters symbolizing natural objects, he could organize the descriptive segments to match this perceptive image.

Coleridge saw himself as a very poor describer and wrote to Sara, after an attempt to translate landscape in text, that descriptions could only be "insupportably unmeaning for a reader who had not witnessed the scene",[9] an "accumulated repetition of the same words in almost the same Combinations", "so that the same description may in almost all cases be applied to 20 different appearances". Those non-verbal objects were thus introduced in the descriptive space in an attempt to work against description as a mere empty repetition of arbitrary signs, to connect textual landscapes to a specific geographic location and to reduce the gap between "the chaos" of linguistic signs and the harmonious lines of nature.

In descriptive notebook entries, almost all sketches precede the words, acting as visual representations of forms that have not yet been put into words or conceptualized. Graphic figures can then be seen as prefiguring rhetorical figures. Those graphs are usually incorporated in fragments, even in sentences, and the size of the graph is often in keeping with the proportion of the words, creating a connection and continuity between the graph and the word(s). Yet, as Louis Hay remarked: "even when text & graph say the same thing, they don't say it in the same way (…) as they don't belong to the same aesthetic realm".[10] Graphs then seem to act as something prior to language and meaning, a kind of para-language such as gesture, both a spontaneous movement and a

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7 CN I 415.

8 Referring to a notebook entry where Coleridge attempts to describe Sir Beaumont's pictures (CN 2 1899), Morton D. Paley comments upon those drawings (which Coleridge qualified as "Miserable Scribble" in this same notebook entry) and verbal devices as a means to "recreate the work of art in a verbal mode": "Coleridge also used pictographs (a better word for them than drawings) to indicate the shapes of things (…) the pictographs do succeed in diagramming the shapes of things and their relations to one another. Along with precise measurements and directions, they may have given Coleridge a sense of anchoring images in physical reality." *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts,* Oxford: OUP, 2008, p. 20.

9 S. T. Coleridge, *Collected Letters,* n°281.

10 Louis Hay, *La littérature des écrivains,* Paris *:* Editions Corti, 2002, p. 198. « Même lorsque texte et graphisme disent la même chose, ils ne le disent pas de la même façon. La forme d'une écriture, d'un dessin peuvent procéder des mêmes visées que le texte (…) ils peuvent s'y opposer (…) mais ils n'appartiennent jamais au même espace de l'art. »

form in becoming: a form beckoning to something that is not-yet-there, which has then the power to open up new, unexpected linguistic vistas.

One of his first graphs, sketched while wandering in the streets of Hamburg, was an attempt to shape and put into words a formless form:

> Their Streets narrow & fetid—& the Gable Ends of the Houses towards the street, some in the ordinary Triangle ~~Shape~~ Form / but most of them shapified with more than Chinese Grotesqueness— [11]

In his letter to Sara, the graph disappeared, replaced by the word "notched" which would become "scolloped" in *the Satyrane's Letters*. Coleridge called those small graphs "simple outline painting", suggesting a kind of condensation of the form. The next two fragments were jotted down during his German trip:

> Came to Poele a pretty little Cluster of House between Hills in the shape of a little half Moon completely covered with Beech.[12]

> There saw a wood to the brink of the water—open space with a house—woods
> (…) The woods on the left bank run up into semicircles & Triangles leaving green banks for the water— So the woods run for a mile from Rat. Then cease, and for a quarter of a mile naked Arable with one farmhouse at the end where the wood recommences.[13]

In the first fragment, the outline of the shape precedes the textual image ("a little half Moon"). In the second entry, the form also precedes the descriptive segment which sets the natural objects in motion. In both entries, the graph seems to open a kind of intermediary space between the perception of the natural objects and its textual inscription, empowering the mind to create poetic devices to translate motion in nature.

What I would like to suggest at this point is that the graph is no simple pictorial representation of a natural object. There's no mimetic intent in this gesture. So what do they represent? How are they meaningful? And how can such an elliptical form enhance the creative process? Louis Hay writes that sketches and doodles in notebooks & manuscripts, which are doomed to disappear in published works or letters, are mental representations embodying themselves in a form.[14] Coleridge is not attempting to copy natural forms but

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[11] CN I 335.
[12] CN I 410.
[13] CN I 360.
[14] Louis Hay, *La littérature des écrivains,* p. 198. « Les tracés qui surgissent à la pointe de la plume sont des représentations mentales en train de s'incarner dans une forme ».

rather to grapple through various visual and verbal means with the question of how our mind apprehends natural phenomena and how its transcriber, language, "hooks on to the world", to use Hilary Putnam's words. Coleridge is not depicting a place or a natural object but rather giving shape to a not-yet-there place grounded in the mind, in memory, hope, affect and desire. I will contend then that those "scribbles" or graphs, as "mental representations" of objects, were an attempt to 'flycatch' and outline something elusive and unformed, to materialize the dynamics of the emerging thought in its interaction with natural lines. Or maybe to go further and quoting David Abram's reference to Merleau-Ponty's notion of "chiasm": to embody "the blending, the reversible exchange between my flesh and the flesh of the world that occurs in perception".[15]

2. "The soul of Curves" or Thoughts in Act.

In his essay "On Poesy & Art", [16] delivered as a lecture in 1818, Coleridge used his notebook observations to consider the idea of beauty in art and what art should be all about: "the power of humanizing nature", "of infusing the thoughts and passions of man" into every object of contemplation. And the mind, for Coleridge, must supersede nature: "And in our life alone does Nature live".[17] A great work of art is no imitation or copy of natural objects but an attempt to seize what is "active through form and figure", the abstract forces at work "within the object". The artist must then endeavor to capture the "forms in proceeding" rather than the "shapes as superinduced". So poesy, as any form of art, is the creative process not the creation in itself. Art is not about showing the visible but making visible a motion, something in the process of becoming. Therefore, art must abridge nature to outline those formative forces at work in mind and in nature. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has highlighted in his essay *Le Plaisir du Dessin* the ontological claims of the gesture of drawing as developing a sense of being: "The fever of drawing", he writes, "arises from the forceful desire to push the form to the brink of the unformed, as erotic fever pushes the bodies to the limits of their own forms".[18]

Descriptions in notebooks were maybe less an endeavor to master descriptive prose than an attempt to formulate a 'semiotics of mind in motion' that could image a thought in act holding inner and outer worlds together. Coleridge resorted to graphs while in the Lake District, still using those pictographs made of lines and letters. But increasingly, graphs were simplified, reduced to angles, curves and lines such as in the following fragments:

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[15] David Abrams, "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth" in Max Oelschlaeger (ed.), *Postmodern Environmental Ethics* (Albany : State University of New-York Press, 1995), p.75.

[16] S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, vol. II,* John Shawcross (ed.), Oxford, 1907, pp. 253 – 263.

[17] S.T. Coleridge, *Poetical Works,* E.H. Coleridge (ed.), Oxford, OUP, 1980, p. 365, v. 48.

[18] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le plaisir du dessin,* Paris : Editions Galilée, 2009, p. 99 « La fièvre du dessin, la fièvre de l'art en général naît du désir forcené de pousser la forme jusqu'au contact de l'informe, comme la fièvre érotique pousse les corps aux limites de leurs propres formes. »

The River now curves, like an S —rudely made by a tremulous Hand, as far [as] Drigg, then runs *straight* south into Ravenglass Bay —[19]

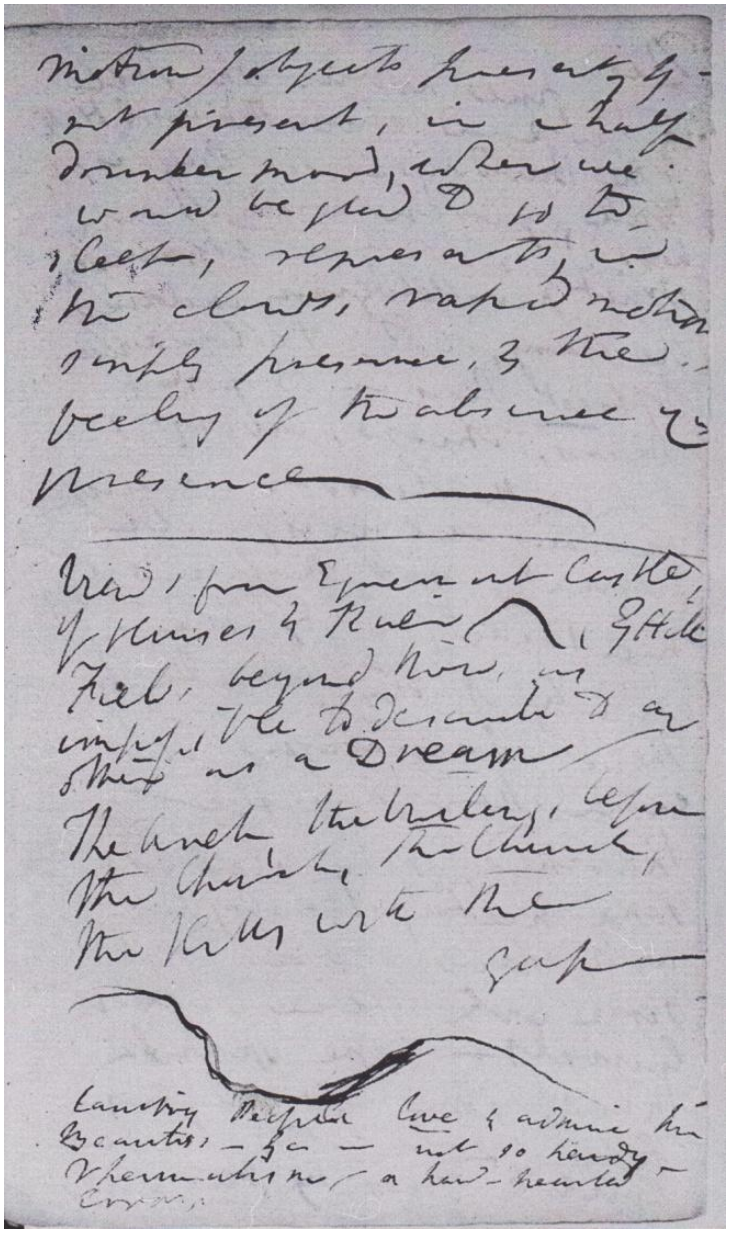

Figure 1: S.T. Coleridge, Notebook 2, BM Add MS 47,497, *f* 7, 1802. (CN I 1210 and 1211)

[19] CN I 1205.

On the manuscript pages of the *Notebooks*, there are many more lines and traces than Kathleen Coburn could render in her edition, and they tell us much, I believe, about the sensuous act of writing and tracing: the hand, for instance, lingering on the last letter of the word "presence" as if this bodily gesture of tracing meant feeling the presence (CN I 1210). There is also a kind of similitude between this lasting "e" of presence and the line of the view from Egremont Castle, pointing out to some kind of deep connection between feelings and forms.

> Motion of objects present & not present, in a half drunken mood, when we would be glad to go to sleep, represents, in the clouds, rapid motion simply presence, & the feeling of the absence & the
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> View from Egremont Castle, of Houses & River, & Hill. Fields beyond River as impossible to describe to an other as a Dream / The Arch, the buildings before the Church, the Church, the Hills with the gap—
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>
> Country people *love* & admire the Beauties—&c—not so hardy—rheumatism / a hard-hearted Error /

As Suzanne Langer writes: "non-discursive form in art (…) articulates knowledge that cannot be rendered discursively because it concerns experiences that are not formally amenable to the discursive projection (…) the rhythms of life, organic, emotional and mental which are not simply periodic, but endlessly complex and sensitive to every sort of influence"[20]. Interestingly, after his Lake District tour in 1802, Coleridge's graphic practice became more elliptical and condensed, suggesting maybe a changing function of graphs.
During his stay in Malta, Coleridge increasingly conceptualized natural outlines, bestowing them with universal values such as spaciousness and motion. And so, by some kind of gradation, they would come to represent the perfect emblems of soul:

[20] Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form : A Theory of Art developed from Philosophy in a New Key,* Scribner, 1953, pp. 240-241.

> Yon long not unvaried ridge of Hills that runs out of sight each way, it is spacious, & the pleasure derivable from it is from its running, its motion, its assimilation to action / & here the scale is taken from my Life, & Soul (…) Space (…) is the most perfect image of Soul.[21]

> (…) the soul of curves ~~whose~~ from activity & positive energy (…) here is motion, motion in its most significant form, it is motion in that form, which has been chosen to express motion in general, hieroglyphical from preeminence (…) Actual motion & therefore a balancing *Figurite* of Rest and Solidity.[22]

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The "soul of curves" is both as an emblem of motion and of something that could hold together nature and thought, but also motion and rest, that could in fact make extremes meet. In another notebook entry, Coleridge underlined the "vital semblance" of the lines of rocks which themselves infused infinite repose in the onlooking subject.

> The rocks and stones put on a vital semblance; and Life itself thereby seemed to forego its restlessness, to anticipate in its own nature an infinite repose and to become as it were, compatible with Immoveability.[23]

Reflecting on the intensity and forcefulness of drawing and on the reciprocal dimension of this gesture, Jean-Luc Nancy writes: "I blend with the line I am gazing at or with the musical movement I am listening to. I can feel their desire rise anew in myself – or rather in a remote body which is not 'me', but this other 'self' in me which can attune with this motion and emotion"[24]. Or as Coleridge words it in a beautiful notebook fragment:

> One travels along with the Lines of a mountain (…) how fine is Keswick Vale, would I repose? My Soul lies & is quiet upon the broad level vale – would it acte~~d~~? It darts up into the mountain Tops like a Kite, & like a chamois goat runs along the Ridges.[25]

Lines in nature encapsulate the infinite in act and what Coleridge may be highlighting through his use of curves and lines, is the intense paradox of representation : that the most complex, unformed and unseizable aspects of

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[21] CN II 2402.
[22] CN II 2343.
[23] CN I 1189.
[24] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le plaisir du dessin,* p.116. « (…) j'épouse la courbe de la ligne que je regarde ou celle du mouvement musical que j'entends. Leur désir renaît en moi, pour moi – ou plutôt, dans un corps retiré, qui n'est pas 'moi' mais cela, cet autre 'soi' en moi qui sait s'accorder avec cette motion, cette émotion. »
[25] CN II 2347.

human experience might be captured by the most elliptical and abbreviated form, a surging form mirroring this desire for the infinite.

3. Forms and feelings: Coleridge in Gibraltar.

Coleridge increasingly focused his gaze on outlines of ridges, crests and rocks that would become those "nameless silent forms of nature" described in Gibraltar "working on [him] like a tender thought in a man who is hailed merrily by some acquaintance in his work"[26], thus losing their connection with a specific location. So the drawing of the graph encapsulated the form, the thought of other forms (usually associated with loved figures), the feelings revived and the pleasure of its recreation. Those 'walking thoughts' and their notebook material inscriptions were deeply permeated with the intensity and ambivalence of his feelings for Sara Hutchinson. Many critics have suggested the intense physicality of his descriptive writing which is not about landscape (which is always something out of reach) but about the sensuous experience of a body entering the texture of the world. Coleridge wanders through space rather than overlooks it. His descriptions are more about paths, motion and progress, climbing and descending, rather than visualizing a specific spot. He is like the "wandersmanner" of Michel De Certeau whose body complies to a text that he writes while walking without being able to read it.

Solitary walks were for Coleridge as much a poetic act as an affective one, taking him back to happy memories in the Lake District but also to this wrenching feeling of loss and absence. This feeling became increasingly present during his Scottish tour:

> The last Island, which I see (there are four running across the Lake in one line) – the second & third small & fish Shape – the ~~second~~ third, sword fish, the second Dolphin-shaped – the first & fourth, very large – you look over the first to Dunbarton Rock, & the fourth vaults in those
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> plunging Lines, & connects itself with the mountain, whose Tongue of Land almost meets it, of the same bounding, plunging, vaulting Line of Descent.-
>
> What? tho' tha World praise me, I have no dear Heart that loves my Verses—I never hear them in snatches from a beloved Voice, fitted to some sweet occasion, of natural Prospect, in Winds at Night—[27]

Those graphs as 'mental images', mapped a location and the whole array of emotions, feelings, memories and hopes connected to this spot of time and space. A poetic fragment may give us a key to a specific location. As Coleridge

[26] CN II 2026.
[27] CN I 1462 & 1463.

described the plunging lines of Ben Vorlich and Ben Lomond in Loch Lomond, a poetic fragment suddenly interrupts the narration of his tour:

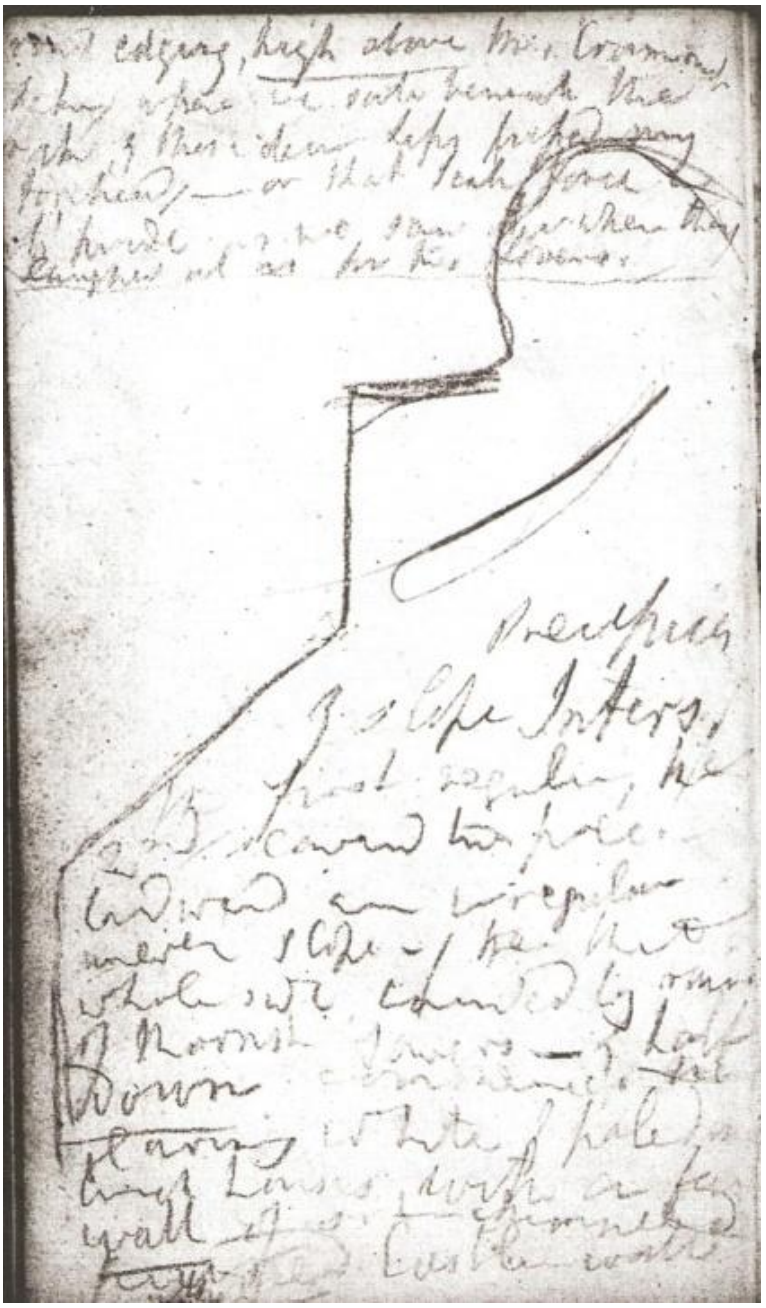
> The Head of the Lake as seen from Luss & a mile or more above it, is very simple—Point ———& Ben Vorlich run down & Ben Lomond runs down between them—/ & beyond all Ben Loy runs like a broken wall, closing the Prospect—
>
> Upon a rock beneath a Tree
> Its shadow on the sandy shore
> ~~Our~~ Its Image in the glassy Lake /[28]

The next entry resumes the description of Ben Lomond, comparing Loch Lomond to "Ullswater, with a character of Crommock". The poetic image in fragment 1467 is certainly an ambiguous one as the image of the two lovers seems crossed out ("~~Our~~") as if censored and the only image that remains is that of the rock beneath the Tree reflected in the lake. This same image in words and in lines will reappear in the Malta notebooks which I would like to conclude with.

On the Speedwell, Coleridge's gaze turned increasingly inward and so the forms of rocks and mountains he witnessed while approaching Gibraltar were even more intensely connected with remembered landscapes and loved (and lost?) figures. While approaching Gibraltar, Coleridge sketched several times in his notebooks and letters the form of the rock with a strange willingness to pin down this form. Was Coleridge just sketching in his letters and notebooks the peculiar form of Gibraltar or was he attempting to capture something else?

[28] CN I 1466 & 1467

Figure 2: ST Coleridge, Notebook 15, BL Add MS 47,512, *f* 10v, April 1804.



Interestingly, this graph departs from Coleridge's usual graphic practice: it is oddly large, taking the whole space of the page, so that the line is no more a generator of language but seems predominant as the text is inserted within the form. Furthermore, the graph runs over the above fragment where Coleridge is

once more recalling a blissful reminiscence of Sara and him at Crummock Lake:

> (…) while I am talking of Government or War or Chemistry, there comes ever into my bodily eye some Tree, beneath which we have rested, some Rock where we have walked together or on the perilous road edging, high above the Crummock Lake / where we sate beneath the rock, & those dear Lips pressed my forehead[29].

The graph both represents the Gibraltar rock but seems to re-create something else, something maybe inarticulable, which is neither a location (the space is rather undetermined: "some Rock", "some Tree") nor a pictorial image but a complex pattern of feelings.

In the second fragment (CN II 2044), Coleridge is on the rock, walking up to Europa Point. He describes the intense activity going on and ends his entry with those words: "My brain was active, my heart very full of Love, ~~and~~ tender Recollections, and if possible, yet more tender Hopes and Dreams of the Future."

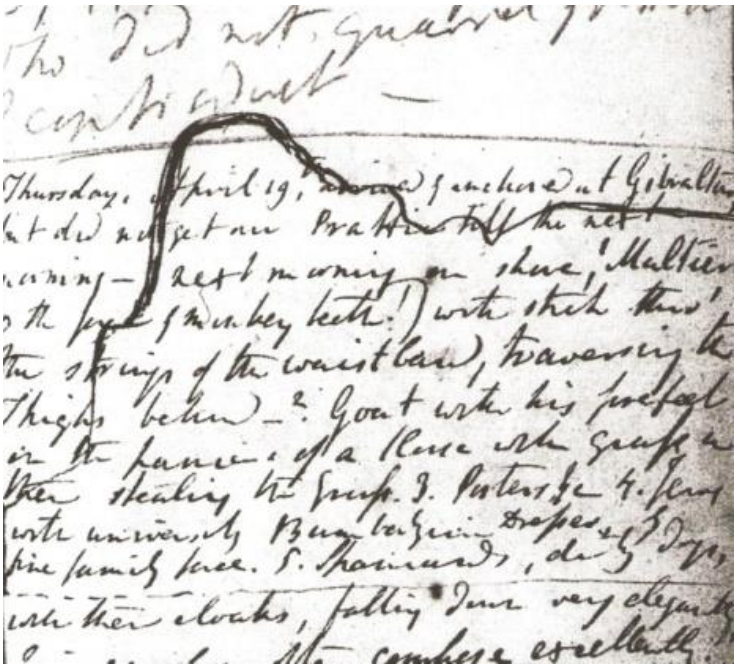


Figure 3: ST Coleridge, Notebook 15, BL Add MS 47,512, *f* 11v, April 1804.

The same line, outlining the Gibraltar rock, has been drawn on the fragment, so that the line here is not the representation of a form that the poet is

[29] CN II 2036.

contemplating but a visual embodiment of those "tender Recollections" and "Hopes and Dreams of the Future". In other words, the outline of Gibraltar rock acts as a kind of "feeling-in-form" to use Suzanne Langer's expression, a hieroglyphical representation of feeling.

The third fragment is a riddle and what I will suggest is mere conjecture. It was written or rather scribbled one year later probably through influence of opium or deep anxiety, a moment when desire and pain ravish the will:

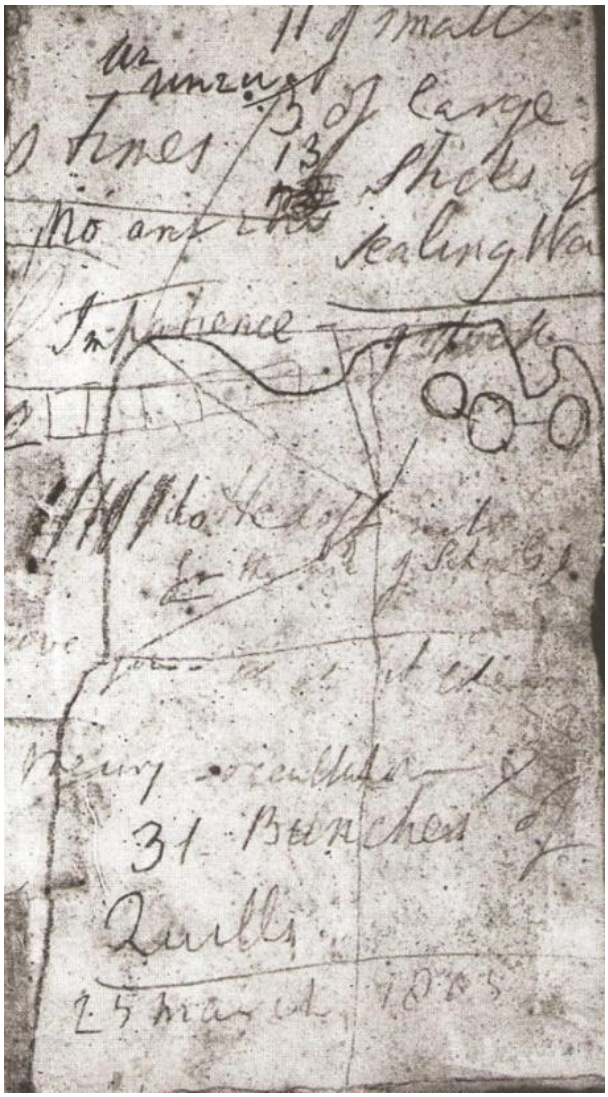


Figure 3: ST Coleridge, Notebook 15, BL Add MS 47,512, *f*126, April 1804.

Words are jotted down: a list of things to buy, words steeped in affect: "Impatience", "No anxious", "love you—or is it like Mercury", oblique lines, a kind of grid but what draw one's attention is this line which covers what is

already unreadable: can this line be connected to the one drawn one year before while Coleridge was in Gibraltar?

Those three lines, I believe, question the links between the act of tracing and the emergence of the affective thought, the one Coleridge struggled to conceal with action and abstract thinking. The graph here might figure the desire of expressing the inarticulated affect, not through words which failed him ("Silly words I am vexed with you" / "Words halt over and over again!") but through the gesture of tracing a line awaiting a form.

This paper has attempted to trace the evolution of Coleridge's graphic imagination in the *Notebooks*. From visual representations of outer space, those graphs were increasingly attempting to "give outness to Thoughts". The graph, as the opening of a form, "a form in proceeding", was an important figure of his descriptive prose (Coleridge believed that man was "but a half-animal without drawing"), enabling the mind to set lines in motion and to empower thoughts with the creative forces at work in nature. Coleridge would probably have agreed with Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy who sees the act of drawing less attached to its object than to the process of creation. When Coleridge rambled through the Lake District, his attention was constantly drawn to images of fluidity and shapelessness: eddies, waterfalls, fountains, streams, pillars of light, flight of starlings[30]: all those "companionable forms" or analogon of a creative mind. But as Seamus Perry remarked, in Coleridge's writing, "you find not simply a concept at work, but a concept and its alternative or counter-concept". Eddies were both emblematic of his ontological quest, the union of change and permanence, but also terrifying images of self-absorption which prefigured Freud's topology of melancholy: a reversed engulfing eddy. The flight of starlings had also this ambivalent turn where dissolution is not linked to recreation but to this absorbing hollowness: "now thickening, deepening, blackening". Now maybe this image of the flight of Starlings, which is emblematic of so many aspects of Coleridge's creative thinking and writing, suggests also the infinite power of combinations of those 'images of thoughts' materialized by words and graphs yet also their deep ambivalence and reversibility.

[30] An interesting reading of this recurring motif can be found in Peter Anderson's article, "Thickening, deepening, blackening: starlings and the object of poetry in Coleridge & Dante". Coleridge Bulletin New Series 32, Winter 2008.