Shakespeare ♓ Milton: Coleridge's Psychomachia

Paul Cheshire

THE ♓ SYMBOL IN MY TITLE, which is one of the fundamental building blocks of Coleridge's thought, doesn't—as far as I know—have a name. It's one of many symbols he used in his notebook writing, as shown here (illustration) in an elaborate key—one example of several—that he wrote out at the beginning of a notebook for use as a reference.[1]

Coleridge's Key to Symbols

4403 27.1 N.B. Throughout these Memoranda the abbreviations or marks are and mean as follow:
= equal to, or one with. ⊖ the same as.
♓ opposed to, in Antithesis. ♓ contrary to.
– without, less by,
+ with, more by, or in addition
× multiplied by or into
÷ divided by. ⌒ connected with, as by a Bridge
X any not yet known or understood Quantity or Degree.
Y ditto
Z ditto.
A, B, C, D—to W, known quantities or degrees.

CN III 4427

On the right-hand side is the straightforward opposition with symbol ♓ meaning "contrary to", while on the left is ♓ "opposed to, in Antithesis", which is an opposition based on relationship: they are two ends of the same pole and make a whole when considered together. This simple thesis-antithesis polarity is only the first stage of Coleridge's more complex models, which include the relationship of four used to express the dynamics of the Christian Trinity (CN III 4427), and the intersecting polarities of diagrams he sketched in letters to the Swedenborgian C. A. Tulk in 1817 (CL IV 767-76).

This thesis-antithesis structure also applies to his view of Milton and Shakespeare. From various statements Coleridge made throughout his life, we find a consistent treatment of these two figures as types that stand in an antithetical relationship. This well-known instance comes from *Table Talk*:

> Shakspeare is the Spinosistic Deity—an omnipresent creativeness. Milton is the deity of Prescience; he stands ab extra, and drives a fiery coach and four, making the horses feel the iron curb which holds them. Shakspeare's poetry is characterless; that is, it does not reflect the individual Shakspeare; but John Milton himself is in every line of the Paradise Lost. (TT II 86-7)

This is Coleridge's basic equation, which lines up these two giants of English Poetry as complementary principles. Although the elevation of Shakespeare and Milton to this supreme position was not unique to Coleridge, I will be concentrating solely on Coleridge's own views regardless of their eighteenth-century antecedents. I am not considering Coleridge in his capacity as a critic, but as an apprentice who had to choose between masters (one could almost

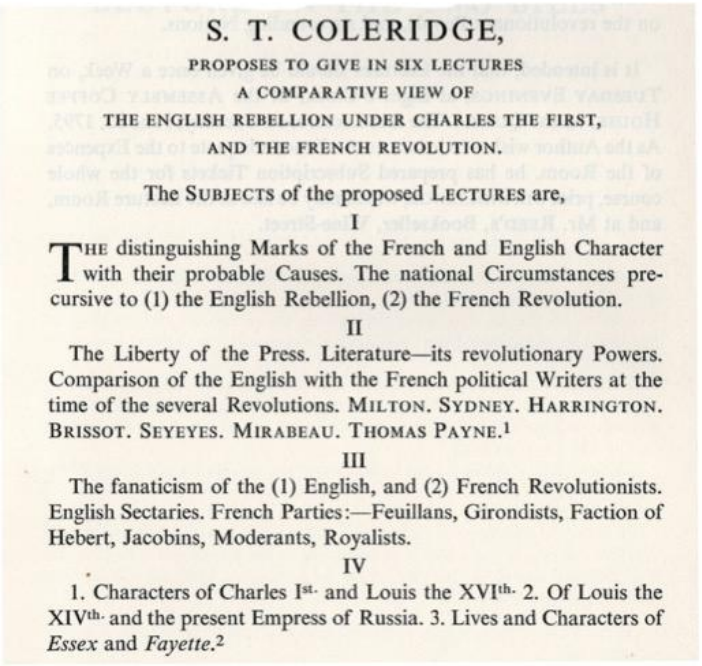
[1] See CN II 2384; CN III 4241; CN III 4403

talk in terms of role models) in order to form his own identity as a poet. The significance of each should become apparent as I take them one by one. It seems very clear that Coleridge started with the strong desire to emulate Milton. And this is where I will start:

Political Engagement – The Miltonic Role

The shaping generational event of the French Revolution—as can be seen from the prospectus (illustration) for a 1795 lecture series that was never delivered—led naturally to an interest in the parallels between that revolution and what is called here the "English Rebellion", which culminated in the overthrow of the monarchy and the execution of Charles I. The first name to appear—in the proposed second lecture—is MILTON, in his capacity as a political writer. Coleridge repeatedly referred to Milton's political engagement as one responding to the call of his time. In *Biographia Literaria*, he named Milton as an exemplar "of the close connection of poetic genius with the love of liberty and of genuine reformation" (BL I 208).

Coleridge's Prospectus for June 1795 Lectures on the 'English Rebellion'.



S. T. COLERIDGE,

PROPOSES TO GIVE IN SIX LECTURES

A COMPARATIVE VIEW OF

THE ENGLISH REBELLION UNDER CHARLES THE FIRST,

AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION.

The SUBJECTS of the proposed LECTURES are,

I

THE distinguishing Marks of the French and English Character with their probable Causes. The national Circumstances precursive to (1) the English Rebellion, (2) the French Revolution.

II

The Liberty of the Press. Literature—its revolutionary Powers. Comparison of the English with the French political Writers at the time of the several Revolutions. MILTON. SYDNEY. HARRINGTON. BRISSOT. SEYEYES. MIRABEAU. THOMAS PAYNE.[1]

III

The fanaticism of the (1) English, and (2) French Revolutionists. English Sectaries. French Parties:—Feuillans, Girondists, Faction of Hebert, Jacobins, Moderants, Royalists.

IV

1. Characters of Charles I^st. and Louis the XVI^th. 2. Of Louis the XIV^th. and the present Empress of Russia. 3. Lives and Characters of *Essex* and *Fayette*.[2]

Most importantly, Coleridge writes of Milton hanging on to his principles through dark times:

> The same calmness, and even greater self possession, may be affirmed of Milton, as far as his poems, and poetic character are concerned. He reserved his anger, for the enemies of religion, freedom, and his country. My mind is not capable of forming a more august conception, than arises

> from the contemplation of this great man in his latter days: poor, sick, old, blind, slandered, persecuted,
>
> "Darkness before, and danger's voice behind"
>
> in an age in which he was as little understood by the party, *for* whom, as by that *against* whom he had contended. (BL I 36-7)

Milton survived political disappointment. He salvaged vision from the apparent failure of his idealism—his aspiration to build a better world—by writing the great epic *Paradise Lost*. Its very title, *Paradise Lost,* reflected a literal experience of loss as experienced by those who had dreamed of a golden age of justice and equality. The work required of these disappointed revolutionaries was the same as that asked of Adam and Eve in Milton's poem, where the consequences of the Fall bring about a promise of redemption by means of a kind of enlightenment so satisfying to Adam that he can bear the prospect of leaving paradise forever:

> Greatly instructed I shall hence depart,
> Greatly in peace of thought, and have my fill
> Of knowledge, what this vessel can contain;
> Beyond which was my folly to aspire.[2]

Instruction is a fundamental duty for this Miltonic type of poet. Although he was later to disown the poem, Coleridge's 'Religious Musings' was, when he wrote it, his main attempt at writing the poem he believed was needed as a response to the crisis of the time. It's the first example of an aim that was to possess him and then be passed over to Wordsworth as the worthier instrument. His charge was to write the great philosophic poem for the age that would instruct (words like console or fortify are not strong enough) those who felt their hopes dashed by the failure of the French Revolution to bring about a new age.

His admiration and desire to emulate Milton are well caught in a letter Coleridge wrote to Joseph Cottle in 1797:

> Observe the march of Milton—his severe application, his laborious polish, his deep metaphysical researches, his prayers to God before he began his great poem, all that could lift and swell his intellect, became his daily food. I should not think of devoting less than 20 years to an Epic Poem. Ten to collect materials and warm my mind with universal science. I would be a tolerable mathematician, I would thoroughly know Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Optics, and astronomy, Botany, Metallurgy, fossilism, Chemistry, Geology, Anatomy, Medicine—then the *mind of man*—then the *minds of men*—in all Travels, Voyages and Histories. So

[2] John Milton, *Paradise Lost* ed. Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1968) XII 557-60.

> I would spend ten years—the next five to the composition of the poem—and the five last to the correction of it.
>
> So I would write: haply not unhearing of that divine and nightly-whispering Voice, which speaks to mighty minds of predestinated garlands, starry and unwithering. God love you, S. T. Coleridge [3]

At this stage, as the young Hazlitt noted when visiting Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Quantocks in May 1798, Shakespeare appears as a troubling figure:

> Some comparison was introduced between Shakspear and Milton. He said "he hardly knew which to prefer. Shakspear appeared to him a mere stripling in the art; he was as tall and as strong, with infinitely more activity than Milton, but he never appeared to have come to man's estate; or if he had, he would not have been a man, but a monster."[4]

Gregory Leadbetter, who first drew this passage to my attention, has explored its significance in terms of what Coleridge called the transnatural: a kind of illicit crossing of the threshold of natural human powers, that he saw in Shakespeare.[5] It is the contrast with the Miltonic principle, to which Coleridge had apprenticed himself, that makes the dangerous quality of the Shakespearean principle apparent. Milton stands for what Coleridge called "sternness of discipline" and "shew of self-control".[6] Shakespeare on the other hand, in Coleridge's view, is the "Spinosistic Deity" who becomes everything imaginable.[7]

'Religious Musings' then, was Coleridge's attempt to write the great poem for his time. At the end of the poem Coleridge addresses the eternal spiritual entities he believes are watching over the revolutions of time, and pledges himself to (as he put it) "discipline [his] young novitiate thought" to his grand Miltonic mission:

> Contemplant Spirits! ye that hover o'er
> With untir'd gaze th'immeasurable fount
> Ebullient with creative Deity!
> And ye of plastic power, that interfus'd
> Roll thro' the grosser and material mass
> In organizing surge! Holies of God!

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[3] CL I 320-1. Amended following CPW I 327, line 36. The MS of STC's letter does not survive, and the printed transcription followed by Griggs gives "rightly". The same line in 'to the Rev George Coleridge', from which STC quotes, reads "nightly", thus echoing *Paradise Lost* VII 28-9.

[4] William Hazlitt, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Ronald Blythe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970 repr. Penguin Classics 1985) 62-63.

[5] Gregory Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 63.

[6] CN III 4494 f143v (Also LL II 385).

[7] See BL II 27.

(And what if Monads of the infinite mind?)
I haply journeying my immortal course
Shall sometime join your mystic choir! Till then
I discipline my young novitiate thought
In ministeries of heart-stirring song,
And aye on Meditation's heaven-ward wing
Soaring aloft I breathe th'empyreal air
Of LOVE omnific, omnipresent LOVE,
Whose day-spring rises glorious in my soul
As the great Sun, when he his influence
Sheds on the frost-bound waters—The glad stream
Flows to the ray and warbles as it flows.[8]

Passing the Miltonic Baton to Wordsworth

But this ambition was never fulfilled: within a short time of their collaboration in the Quantock year, Coleridge's admiration for Wordsworth's powers grew to such an extent that he decided Wordsworth was the man to write this great philosophic poem. The first sign of Coleridge's move in this direction is a letter to Joseph Cottle in March 1798:

> —The Giant Wordsworth—God love him!—even when I speak in the terms of admiration due to his intellect, I fear lest tho[se] terms should keep out of sight the amiableness of his manners—he has written near 1200 lines of a blank verse, superior, I hesitate not to aver, to anything in our language which in any way resembles it. Poole […] thinks of it as likely to benefit mankind much more than any thing, Wordsworth has yet written. (CL I 391)

Wordsworth called this poem 'The Recluse or views of Nature, Man, and Society'. when writing of it to a friend.[9] Although he referred to it as *a* poem (singular) it was at this stage probably a group of up to four poems, the most substantial of which was 'The Ruined Cottage'.[10] Wordsworth was not quite as gushy as Poole in his language, but his own understated characterisation of it as "a poem which I hope to make of considerable utility" is an indication of this group consensus as to its purpose.

At this stage presumably there could have been room for two great poems: Wordsworth's 'Recluse' and Coleridge's projected epic with similar intentions that was to be called 'The Brook'. Eighteen months later, however, on his return from Germany, perhaps having been impressed by Wordsworth's 1799 start on what was to become *The Prelude*, Coleridge started urging on his friend in a manner that was almost strident. Not only was Wordsworth to

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[8] 'Religious Musings' (1796 Version), lines 429-446
[9] *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years 1787-1805* Ed. Ernest de Selincourt, Rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 214. (Hereafter WEY)
[10] Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 5.

continue with 'The Recluse', but Coleridge also gave very explicit instructions as to what purpose that poem should serve:

> I am anxiously eager to have you steadily employed on 'The Recluse'… My dear friend, I do entreat you to go on with 'The Recluse;' and I wish you would write a poem in blank verse, addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hope for the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness, disguising the same as domestic attachment and contempt for visionary *philosophes*. It would do great good, and might form part of 'The Recluse,' for in my present mood I am wholly against the publication of any small poems. (CL I 527)

The dating of this letter—of which only a transcribed fragment survives—to September 1799 is conjectural. But whenever it was written, it shows, alongside Coleridge's letters to others praising Wordsworth and decrying his own abilities as a poet, that Coleridge believed he would not be able to write such a poem himself. This has been described by Richard Holmes as "a gesture of renunciation both heroic and curiously tragic".[11] Certainly this perceived loss of poetical powers was part of a difficult period in Coleridge's life, but the fact remains that it happened, and Coleridge became the John the Baptist figure whose main function was to announce the coming of the true Messiah.

For the purpose of following this Miltonic strand to its conclusion I would like to stress one important detail: the Miltonic ambition of this poem. All descriptions are in terms of its effects: we know whom the poem is addressed to, we know it is supposed to lead to the "amelioration of mankind"; but the contents are expressed in such universal terms that it is like the Cheshire Cat: we can see its smile but the specifics of its body elude us. The 'Recluse' project remained intact—in prospect at least—as late at 1814, when Wordsworth's *The Excursion* was published, and announced as the second part of 'The Recluse' (see illustration on the final page of this paper).[12]

The preface describes the plan for 'The Recluse' as a whole and quotes from a poem originally written between 1800 and 1802 that states its objectives.[13] First Wordsworth eulogises Milton as "the Bard, | Holiest of Men", then he invokes Urania, Milton's Muse, and then he goes on to stake his own claim:

> I sing:—"fit audience let me find though few!"
> So prayed, more gaining than he asked, the Bard,
> Holiest of Men.—Urania, I shall need
> Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such
> Descend to earth or dwell in highest heaven!

[11] Richard Holmes, *Coleridge, Early Visions* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989) 243.
[12] William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. by Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007) 38-41.
[13] ibid 7.

> For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
> Deep—and aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
> To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.
> All strength—all terror, single or in bands,
> That ever was put forth in personal form;
> Jehovah—with his thunder, and the choir
> Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones,
> I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not
> The darkest pit of lowest Erebus
> Nor aught of blinder vacancy—scooped out
> By help of dreams, can breed such fear and awe
> As when we look into our Minds, into the Mind of Man,
> My haunt, and the main region of my Song.[14]

This is a pretty unambiguous statement of intent. In just the same manner that Milton spurned the pagan heroics of Homer and Virgil's epics in favour of his high Christian theme of the Fall of Man, so Wordsworth mocks the ancient personifications of "Jehovah—with his thunder, and the choir | Of shouting Angels" in favour of *his* higher argument: "the Mind of Man".

To round off Coleridge's view of the Miltonic principle, I should just add that the very strength we see in this passage brings with it certain dangers. Milton makes "the horses feel the iron curb"; he takes charge of his material and makes it subordinate to himself and his high purpose. This sense of mission leads to a self-absorption amounting to egotism. And Coleridge did indeed praise *Paradise Lost* for its "intense egotism".[15] Egotism, for Coleridge, was not a bad quality in Milton, but there were one or two moments when contemplating "the Giant Wordsworth" that he found egotism somewhat less admirable.

Coleridge and Shakespeare

The move to Shakespeare

If I return to the quote from *Table Talk* with which I started and remove the Milton statements, it starts to get fuzzy: "Shakspeare is the Spinosistic Deity—an omnipresent creativeness. […] Shakspeare's poetry is characterless; that is, it does not reflect the individual Shakspeare. […]" (*TT* II 86-7). The variant spellings of Shakespeare's name as it appears in texts during Coleridge's lifetime contrast fittingly with the unvaried spelling of Milton's throughout this same period. This mutability seems appropriate to what Coleridge saw as Shakespeare's unstable nature; he likened him to Proteus, the mythical Greek sea god, who could assume any form. As Proteus turns into river, fire, or lion, so Shakespeare "becomes all things, yet forever remaining himself" (*BL* II

[14] Ibid 39-40.
[15] *TT* I 420, Cit Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999) 214.

28).[16] But what is this self? It is a diffused state of dissolved identity: a substance with no inherent characteristics that can become anything. When Wordsworth wrote "Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour", we know what he wanted from him.[17] If he had written "Shakespeare thou shouldst be living at this hour", we would have no idea what he expected Shakespeare to do.

Once Coleridge has handed over the Miltonic mission to Wordsworth, how does he cope with emulating Shakespeare? A notebook page from October 1803 shows Coleridge setting out this Milton-Shakespeare polarity in two very well-known and striking passages.[18]

> I lay too many Eggs <in the hot Sands of this Wilderness, the World!> with Ostrich Carelessness & Ostrich Oblivion. The greater part, I trust, are trod underfoot, & smashed; but yet no small number crawl forth into Life, some to furnish Feathers for the Caps of others, & still more to plume the Shafts in the Quivers of my Enemies, of them that lie in wait against my Soul. (CN I 1248)

Then he turns his attention to Wordsworth and his great work:

> I am sincerely glad, that he has bidden farewell to all small Poems—& is devoting himself to his great work—grandly imprisoning while it deifies his Attention & Feelings within the sacred Circle & Temple Walls of great Objects & elevated Conceptions.—[…] Now he is at the Helm of a noble Bark; now he sails right onward—it is all open Ocean, & a steady Breeze; and he drives before it, unfretted by short Tacks, reefing & unreefing the Sails, hawling & disentangling the ropes.—His only Disease is the having been out of his Element – his return to it is food to Famine, it is both the specific Remedy, & the condition of Health. (CN I 1546)

The first level of reading these passages is in line with the narrative I have been tracing – the handing over of the Miltonic task. We have Coleridge's self-deprecation: "I lay too many eggs with ostrich carelessness", while Wordsworth is "devoting himself to his great work—grandly imprisoning while it deifies his Attention & Feelings within the sacred Circle & Temple Walls of great Objects & elevated Conceptions." All the imagery is of concentration and industry as Wordsworth writes the great Miltonic poem that Coleridge had conceived for him. Meanwhile while Coleridge is dropping eggs in the wilderness that have threatening autonomy: they hatch into forms that are beyond his control, and are hostile to boot. This is the diffuse

[16] BL II 28.
[17] 'London, 1802' from William Wordsworth, *Poems of 1807*, ed. Alun R. Jones (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987) 63.
[18] CN I 1248 and CN I 1546: revising Coburn's dating of the former – see detailed argument in Paul Cheshire 'From Infant's Soul to Black Book' *Coleridge Bulletin* NS 31 (Summer 2008) 19-41, 34-6.

Shakespearean pole: its strength lies in the capacity to leave its centre and dilate into identification with everything; but in that dilation it risks losing any stable identity of its own.

These troubling ostrich lines don't only hold the Shakespearean mode in their teeming plurality, they are borrowed in part from a piece of writing *about* Shakespeare. This was only spotted about fifteen years ago by David Chandler. This imagery was taken from the eighteenth-century Shakespeare scholar Edward Capell, whose preface had just been reprinted in an 1803 variorum edition of Shakespeare's works. Shakespeare, wrote Capell, seemed bafflingly careless about the preservation and publication of his works.

> It is said of the ostrich, that she drops her eggs at random, to be dispos'd of as chance pleases; either brought to maturity by the sun's kindly warmth, or else crush'd by beasts… she is in this a fit emblem of almost every great genius: they conceive and produce with ease those noble issues of human understanding; but incubation, the dull work of putting them correctly onto paper and afterwards publishing, is a task they cannot away with.[19]

Thus Coleridge as careless ostrich has repositioned himself as the Shakespearean genius and he can leave the "dull task of incubation" to Wordsworth. This is scant consolation given the bleak wilderness in which he finds himself. What is this Shakespearean territory?

Shakespeare as "Spinosistic Deity"

The best way of approaching this question is to examine what Coleridge meant by calling Shakespeare "The Spinosistic deity". Spinoza had solved a major philosophical problem of the late seventeenth century by setting out with adamantine logic his proof that everything that exists—mental or physical—is a manifestation of one inherent substance, which is God.[20] Because everything is God, there is no separation between creator and creation. God is not a *transcendent* being looking on and managing the universe from outside—*ab extra* in the Miltonic style—he is every individual wave on the infinite ocean of existence. This compression of God and nature bothered Coleridge immensely; he was attracted to it philosophically, but would recoil from it, viewing it as an atheistic system in which God, as he put it, "becomes a mere power in darkness" (CL II 1196).

The best known anecdote that captures Coleridge's ambivalence is in Crabb Robinson's diary. [21] When Coleridge picked up Robinson's book of Spinoza's works, he "kissed Spinoza's face at the title page, said his book was his gospel,

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[19] Cit David Chandler, 'Coleridge the Ostrich and Capell's Shakespeare', *Notes and Queries* 45. 2 (June 1998) 192.

[20] Benedict de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works,* tr. ed. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 93, (*Ethics* Book 1 P14).

[21] Henry Crabb Robinson, *On Books and Their Writers*, 3 vols ed. Edith Morley (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1938) I 112.

and in less than a minute added that his philosophy was, after all, false" and declared his adherence to the Christian Trinity.

Seamus Perry, whose detailed examination of this Milton-Shakespeare issue has been invaluable for me, puts forward the reason for Coleridge's fears concerning this Spinozistic or—as he calls it here—"One Life" deity:

> The One Life deity is prone to losing any authoritative unity, becoming instead dispersed among the diverse constituent parts of creation—rather as the "feminine" Richard II "scatters himself into a multitude of images" (L I 560,382). […] Shakespeare also provokes a background fretfulness in his disquieting proximity to the diffusive divisibility of life which troubled Coleridge elsewhere. [22]

Might the fearfulness of this multiplicity be behind Coleridge's statement to Hazlitt about how a fully-grown Shakespeare would become a monster? That is, the monstrous quality is not that of a single giant-being, but of a power that leads to "dreadful productivity"(CL VI 555). There is an associative thread between these images of Spinoza, sandy deserts of Arabia, and a monster, in two consecutive 1799 entries in Coleridge's notebooks:

> If I begin a poem of Spinoza, thus it should begin/ I would make a pilgrimage to the burning sands of Arabia, or &c &c to find the Man who could explain to me there can be oneness, there being infinite Perceptions—yet there must be a oneness, not an intense Union but an Absolute Unity, for &c. (CN I 556)

> Original?—Yes! Tis implied in the very idea of a Monster. (CN I 557)

This "sands of Arabia" passage was transcribed into Coleridge's notebook in October 1803 (as CN I 1561) a page away from the ostrich eggs passage. There is a further instance in 1817 where Coleridge uses the "Desart of Arabia" as a Spinozan location. On this later occasion he adds that Spinoza's "system is to mine just what a Skeleton is to a Body, fearful because it is only the Skeleton," thereby using a fearful image to explain and diffuse the fearful association. [23] But we know what he means: the body adds unifying personhood to what is otherwise just a dead assembly of bits. This "one and many" association with sandy deserts adds significance to another odd 1799 notebook entry, which was repeated in 1803: "Thousand—from Thou + Sand?" [24]

There is a terrible paradox in the way Coleridge absorbed this Spinozistic scheme. Spinoza offers a view of life as a divine unity that is potentially a philosophical support for the One Life philosophy shared by Coleridge and

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[22] Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 209-280: Chapter 5, 'Radical Differences: Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth', p.244

[23] CL IV 775. See also BL I 152 – "sandy deserts of utter unbelief"; again, this occurs close to a mention of Spinoza.

[24] CN I 1582 An October 1803 rewrite of an entry first made four years earlier (CN I 456).

Wordsworth in their Quantock era. Judging by the "spy nosy" joke, it was cherished with some playfulness.[25] On the other hand, the Spinozan philosophy with its lack of a reassuring personal God looking on from outside, evoked for Coleridge the horror of infinite grains of sand, or multiplicity. And this is a quality he associated with Shakespeare.

Shakespearean instability

This view of Shakespeare arrived at through the Shakespeare-Milton antithesis is inherently unstable. It gives the illusion of definite form only as long as it is set in opposition to the Miltonic. And indeed this is exactly what Coleridge found when he tried to elaborate these so-called Shakespearean features. In the course of explaining why, although Coleridge valued both these principles equally, he wrote so much more about Shakespeare, Seamus Perry makes an astute observation: "Milton tends to represent a pure case (which doesn't actually excite much extended criticism), while Shakespeare is at once counter-principle to idealism, and also the place where the rival claims of idealism and realism might be reconciled" (234).

And thus it comes about that once Coleridge is analysing Shakespeare outside this Milton-Shakespeare polarity, we find him introducing other elements to give him shape. Hence in *Biographia* he represents Shakespeare as the interplay of two opposing forces:

> In Shakspeare's *poems*, the creative power, and the intellectual energy wrestle as in a war embrace. Each in its excess of strength seems to threaten the extinction of the other. At length, in the DRAMA they were reconciled, and fought each with its shield before the breast of the other. Or like two rapid streams, that at their first meeting within narrow and rocky banks [etc.] (BL II 26)

Shakespeare "no mere child of nature

The idealisation of Shakespeare as a "child of nature"—an untutored genius—was a critical consensus in the eighteenth century. And in many ways Coleridge's Shakespeare—the natural chameleon who effortlessly turns into all forms thrown up by his imagination—would seem to fit that model. Yet when he came to examine this issue in his extended discussion of Shakespeare in Chapter 15 of *Biographia,* he began to make some important modifications: he needed to add Miltonic qualities of will and purpose to what was otherwise a rather passive vehicle of inspiration.

In this chapter he starts by making a distinction between poetry that originates by means of "an act of the will", and poetry that originates from "the inspiration of a genial and productive nature". (BL II 19). This looks like a version of the Shakespeare-Milton split. Only the "act of the will" has the

[25] Nicholas Halmi 'Coleridge's Ecumenical Spinoza' Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net, 61 (April 2012) http://www.erudit.org/revue/ravon/2012/v/n61/1018604ar.html?lang=en is a fine survey.

inferior quality he calls "*talent*", thus making the Miltonic, which he had previously presented as an equally valid antithetical principle, into a lower order of poetry. The inspired poetry, being the sign of Shakespearean genius, he defines as something born not made. He proceeds to exemplify this point by selecting Shakespeare's early works for commentary: 'Venus and Adonis', and 'The Rape of Lucrece', reasoning that Shakespeare's poetic genius in first blossom is a sure sign that his genius is an innate quality, that he is "born not made". But then comes the switch, as Coleridge goes on to argue that this native genius rather than being innate is the product of work and discipline:

> What then shall we say? even this; that Shakspeare, no mere child of nature; no automaton of genius; no passive vehicle of inspiration possessed by the spirit, not possessing it; first studied patiently, meditated deeply, understood minutely, till knowledge become habitual and intuitive wedded itself to his habitual feelings, and at length gave birth to that stupendous power, by which he stands alone, with no equal or second in his own class; to that power, which seated him on one of the two glory-smitten summits of the poetic mountain, with Milton as his compeer not rival. (BL II 26-7)

This description of Shakespeare's preparatory study calls to mind the "observe the march of Milton" letter we saw earlier. He then redraws the distinction between these two great poets in a much subtler way, that makes both active principles that move in opposite directions: Shakespeare "darts himself forth and passes into all the forms of human character and passion" while Milton "attracts all forms and things to himself, into the Unity of his own ideal".

Shakespeare's amoral imagination

Shakespeare's deemed capacity to pass "into all the forms of human character and passion" as an active agent raised a further problem with regard to the morality of a person who seemed to relish low-life and villains as much as his virtuous characters. This was sensed by many eighteenth-century commentators: Dr Johnson for instance wrote that "Shakespeare seems to write without any moral purpose".[26] Coleridge resisted this possibility, stating categorically in one of his lectures that Shakespeare "was able to become anything in fact, but the vicious", without adding any explanation as to why this was so.[27] A notebook entry from 1804, which follows a passage about Shakespeare's "Proteus Essence", shows Coleridge mulling over this very question:

> His pure mind met Vice and vicious Thoughts by accident only, as a Poet in running thro' terminations, in the heat of composing a rhyme-

[26] Cit Perry 244.
[27] LL I 308, Cit Perry 244.

> poem on the purest and best subjects, startles & half-vexedly turns away from a foul or impure word &c. [28]

The idea behind this seems to be that Shakespeare, although not in any way attracted to "vice and vicious thoughts", could stumble innocently in and away from them untainted. This is shaky ground: Coleridge is describing here a process of what psychoanalysis would call free-association. After Freud it is hard to maintain that "foul or impure words" popping randomly into our minds are coming from outside. They are eruptions from within.

This problem became more acute in Shakespeare's Sonnets, where he was thought to be writing in his own person rather than assuming a dramatic character. Edmund Malone's 1780 introduction to a new edition of Shakespeare included an essay on the sonnets breaking the news that 120 of them were addressed to a man. For the previous 150 years the sonnets had been edited, with alterations and omissions, in such a way as to imply that any amorous intent was directed at a woman. Malone's view caused a great deal of shock, and was resisted by his fellow editor.[29] Coleridge's manoeuvring around the possibility of Shakespeare indulging in what he called "that very worst of all possible vices" is inconsistent. On the one hand he insisted in *Table Talk* that "the sonnets could only have come from a man deeply in love, and in love with a woman; and there is one sonnet which from its incongruity I take to be a purposed blind." Thus he explains away Sonnet 20, which most explicitly pricks out the gender of Shakespeare's beloved. On the other hand he wrote, in 1803 at half past three in the morning, a marginal note regarding the sonnets, addressed to his seven-year-old son Hartley for his future contemplation. He urged Hartley to read a chapter about ancient "Greek Lovers" to get a sympathetic understanding of the noble nature of the love between men expressed in the Sonnets. "This pure love", he continued, "Shakespere appears to have felt—to have been no way ashamed of it—or even to have suspected that others could have suspected it."[30] Oscar Wilde's wonderful defence of this ideal male love at his trial is hardly more eloquent.

Conclusion

Coleridge's grand conceptions, such as this Milton-Shakespeare antithesis, are stimulating. They have an aura of profound and fundamental truth; we are taken to the top of a mountain from where we can make sense of the world through a wiser man's eyes. The fact that these grand conceptions—fancy and imagination, for instance—tend to break up when applied to concrete examples, and that it's hard for people to agree on their practical application, is

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[28] CN II 2275. Although this note does not name Shakespeare, the two preceding notes do: CN II 2273 has lines from 'Venus and Adonis', and 2274 refers to Shakespeare's "Proteus Essence". The concept leaves little room for doubt as to the subject of 2275.

[29] Katherine Duncan-Jones, *The Arden Shakespeare : Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Thomson Learning, repr. 1998) 44.

[30] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *A Book I Value: Selected Marginalia* ed. H.J. Jackson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 5-6. Or M I 41-3 (*Anderson's British Poets,* Copy A).

similar to the way Aristotelian analysis makes Platonic forms difficult to sustain. There will always—there must always—be Platonists.

Although reducing the real-life Milton and Shakespeare to Coleridge's antithetical types is problematic for literary criticism, the scheme has a validity as an aesthetic division—an analytical tool—in the same manner as the sublime and the beautiful, or as Schiller's distinction between the naïve and the sentimental. It also works as a polarity of principles internal to Coleridge, out of which he wrote his poetry. Yeats' self and anti-self come to mind as a fully articulated and explicit development of this method.

The interplay of these two principles in Coleridge's poetry is easy to see. Using 'The Eolian Harp' as a basic template we can see the loss of control—the being at the play of nature—as the Shakespearean role, and the return to Christian discipline at the end as the return to the Miltonic haven. We generally find his movements towards loss of control most poetically exciting: they have a dynamism within the poem because they present an escape from something confining. The rapt conclusion to 'Kubla Khan' is a striking instance of this movement.

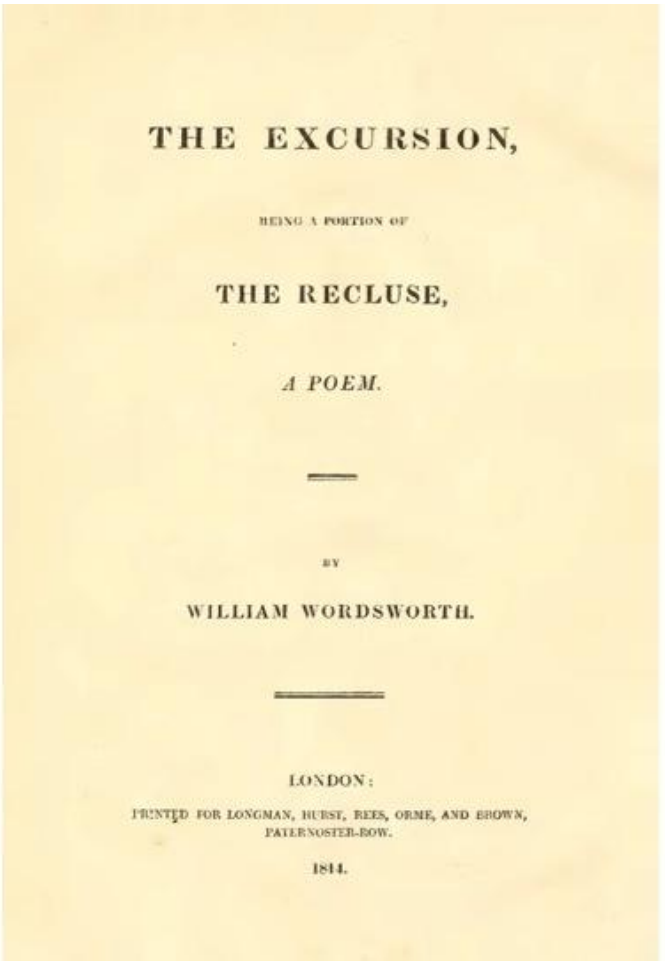
However, I will end with a tentative completion of the narrative that my chronological arrangement seemed to promise: that once Coleridge surrendered the Miltonic vocation to Wordsworth, he entered a Shakespearean mode. 'The Picture or, The Lover's Resolution', written in 1802, is the poem that I was put in mind of more than any other as I was following up the Shakespeare-Spinoza connection.[31] And if my chronological scheme of the Miltonic handover has any validity other than as a means of exposition, it would be fair to look for a poem around that time. Its Shakespearean echoes are well known, but one passage illustrates the Spinozan bard's ego dilating into self-extinction, as Coleridge himself was later to concede:

> Here Wisdom might resort, and here Remorse;
> Here too the love-lorn Man who, sick in soul,
> And of this busy human heart aweary,
> Worships the spirit of unconscious life
> In tree or wild flower.—Gentle Lunatic!
> If so he might not wholly cease to be,
> He would far rather not be that, he is;
> But would be something that he knows not of,
> In winds or waters, or among the rocks.
>
> (CPW I (Part 2) 712-3)

Coleridge was to recall these lines over twenty years later in a letter describing a recent spell of "indolence": a "state of mind […] in too close a neighbourhood to the relaxing Malaria of the Mystic Divinity, which affects to languish after an

[31] See Justin Shepherd 'The Picture or, The Lover's Resolution' CB 44 (Winter 2014) 49-55 for an excellent close reading.

extinction of individual Consciousness."[32] In such a state, he wrote, he would fall "out of God into the abysm, the dreadful productivity, of my own corrupted Soul". All these are features of the Shakespearean principle I have been describing, attesting to the continuing complications of Coleridge's guilty yearning for the Shakespearean dissolution.



THE EXCURSION,

BEING A PORTION OF

THE RECLUSE,

A POEM.

BY

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR LONGMAN, HURST, REES, ORME, AND BROWN,
PATERNOSTER-ROW.

1814.

[32] Cit J. C. C. Mays CPW I (Part 2) 712 from CL VI 555, February 1826.