"And bid the mental drama rise renew'd": Coleridge, Thelwall and "Visions of Philosophy"

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HERE, AT THE COLERIDGE SUMMER CONFERENCE in Cannington, we stand at a turning point in our knowledge of the formative but highly-fraught relationship between Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Thelwall. For many years we thought that Nether Stowey, roughly five miles to the west, was the end of the road for that friendship, and that Thelwall's best-known poem, the "Lines Written at Bridgewater," roughly 5 miles to the east, was its epitaph. Now, thanks in part to the work of scholars associated with this conference, we know better. Now, we know that the "Lines" written by Thelwall upon his departure from Coleridge, on July 27, 1797, take just one turn in a conversation that revolutionized romantic poetry, and continued until the moment of both men's deaths, five months apart, in 1834. We also know that Thelwall had as much to do with the development of the "conversation poem" as Coleridge did. For it was Thelwall, at that time the senior member in their long-silenced partnership, who placed "sweet converse" ("Lines" 88)[1] at the heart of a philosophy based on the "universal principle of action and re-action,"[2] who had already found the ideal form for this poetics of reciprocal speech in the turn-counterturn of the classical ode, and who would spend the rest of his career developing an experimental prosody based on varied and complex "responses of correspondent accents and quantities."[3] In my book *John Thelwall in the Wordsworth Circle: The Silenced Partner* I build on research presented at this conference by Richard Gravil and David Fairer to show how these principles worked, through close analysis of "Lines Written at Bridgewater."[4]

Today, however, I am introducing another of Thelwall's conversation poems, in a sneak preview of the forthcoming companion volume of *The Silenced Partner*, my edition of *John Thelwall: Selected Poetry and Poetics*.[5] "Visions of Philosophy" is closer to a real epitaph: one of the last poems Thelwall ever wrote, it is a long, irregular, blank-verse ode that was never published, but that I have excavated from the Derby MS, the one-thousand-page treasure trove of Thelwall's poetry that I discovered in 2004 and that

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1 This phrase, which echoes through and structures "Lines Written at Bridgewater" and other poems in the Thelwall-Coleridge conversation, originates with Milton's *Paradise Lost* (9.909). "Lines" appears in John Thelwall *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement* (1801; rpt. Oxford: Woodstock, 1989), pp. 126-40.

2 John Thelwall, *A Letter to Henry Cline*, *Selected Political Writings of John Thelwall*, ed. Robert Lamb and Corinna Wagner, 4 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), vol. 4, p.15.

3 John Thelwall, "On the Metrical Composition of the Ode," *Poetical Recreations of the Champion* (London, 1822), p. 159.

4 My analysis in *John Thelwall in the Wordsworth Circle: The Silenced Partner* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), pp.45-49, is indebted to Richard Gravil, "The Somerset Sound; or, the Darling Child of Speech," *Coleridge Bulletin* 26 (2005), pp. 1-21 and David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 236-59. Other parts of *The Silenced Partner* (pp. 171-82, 235-42) and *John Thelwall: Selected Poetry and Poetics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015) expand upon the later development of these principles, whose scientific foundations are also explored in Yasmin Solomonescu, *John Thelwall and the Materialist Imagination* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

5 Palgrave Macmillan, 2015

forms the basis for my edition.[6] Although most of it was composed far away from Somerset in space and time, at its heart is a dramatic reminiscence and "body[ing] forth" ("Visions" 43) of what Thelwall called the "Academus of Stowey,"[7] in whose "rustic theatre" ("Visions" 45) so much of both poets' subsequent work had its origins. Echoing, responding to and rewriting a great deal of that work, "Visions of Philosophy" replays Thelwall's lifelong debate with Coleridge through the personae of ancient Greece. Casting Coleridge in the role of Plato, Thelwall celebrates but also corrects his rival's metaphysical philosophy, reconciling it with his own more materialist position, and reimagining their intellectual dialogue as it ought to have been. Casting himself in the role of Socrates, he also dramatizes his own martyrdom, at once accepting and resisting the obscurity in which he already (and still) finds himself, with a poignant plea for the preservation of his democratic activist legacy. Even more than "Lines Written at Bridgewater" (to which it also alludes), it is a striking performance of both retrospection and projection, wish-fulfillment fantasy and intellectual critique, which claims the last word in a 30-year conversation.

Before I offer a simple introductory reading of Thelwall's "Visions of Philosophy," let me say a few words about its rather complicated structure and development, which cover Thelwall's entire career. It originates in, and takes its title from, one of the first and most fundamental chapters in his 1793 miscellany *The Peripatetic*. Here, like Wordsworth at the beginning of *The Prelude*, the young poet looks about and chooses his way,[8] invoking not Milton but the sages of ancient Greece, whose companionable conversation he wishes to revive in his own rustic recreation of their Peripatetic school. Twenty years later, in 1803, Thelwall returned to *The Peripatetic* when he moved to Kendal and conceived a book of *Poems, Chiefly Suggested by the Scenery of Nature* through which he sought to rejoin the Academus of Stowey (now reincarnated in the Lake School) by revising his early pastorals. This volume, faircopied around 1805 but never published, forms the core of the three-volume Derby manuscript, in which "Visions of Philosophy" begins near the end of volume two (see p.40, at the end of this article) but then continues, much revised and enlarged, on the inverted verso sides of the final pages of volume one. It is difficult to date these drafts: he probably began revising the poem in 1803-1805, but enlarged it substantially about ten years later, at the time of his head-to-head rivalry with Coleridge in the lecture theatres of London, responding in part to Coleridge's fiercely hypocritical disavowal of their friendship; and he evidently continued to work on it through the 1820s, when, having once again

[6] A complete transcript of the poem follows this article. We are grateful to Palgrave Macmillan for its first published presentation here.

[7] Thelwall referred to the "Academus of Stowey" in a letter written to his wife upon his arrival, which also describes the dell at Alfoxden where he, Coleridge and Wordsworth, "a literary and political triumvirate," discussed and recited poetry and "philosophised our minds" in a conversation that would continue for many years. The letter is reprinted in Damian Walford Davies, *Presences that Disturb: Models of Romantic Identity in the Literature and Culture of the 1790s* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), pp. 294-97.

[8] On the influence of *The Peripatetic* upon *The Prelude*, see Kenneth Johnston, *Wordsworth and the Recluse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 11-14, and my *The Silenced Partner* pp. 187-97.

been forced out of public life for political reasons, he spent three years in a rustic cottage in Brixton, in a mirror image of the Welsh exile that had followed his departure from Nether Stowey 25 years before. The poem therefore registers successive stages of his relationship with Coleridge, in a layered or palimpsestic landscape of repeated revisiting and revision; such returns and retracings, textual and geographical, were essential to inspiration and renewal in Thelwall's politico-sentimental peripatetic aesthetics.

By the end of this lifelong process, Thelwall had transformed the original 53-line poem into a sprawling ode of almost 300 lines. Although it lacks the perfect regularity of the Pindaric odes he extols in his critical essays, it has the triadic back-and-forth structure (based on the rhetorical or physical movement of a speaker from side to side of a question or a platform) common to both the classical ode and the romantic conversation poem. There are nine verse paragraphs divided into three units: a strophic introduction (four short paragraphs, taking in the entire original poem in almost 60 lines), an antistrophic address to Plato (three paragraphs, hugely expanded from two lines in the original to almost 200), and a final epode about Socrates (expanded from two lines to two paragraphs totaling almost 60 lines). Each of these units is further subdivided, in characteristically Thelwallian fashion, according to organic modulations of idea and image, sound and sense, moving back and forth, in and out, high and low, turn and counterturn, in the multiple correspondences that replace the simple in-and-out of the Coleridgean conversation poem or "greater Romantic lyric," as defined by MH Abrams.[9]

We can see these structural and prosodic complexities in the introductory section, which alternates images fundamental to Thelwall's once and future dialogue with Coleridge and Wordsworth to establish a pattern that reinforces the overall message of the poem in its attempt to bring philosophy down to earth and reconcile metaphysical speculation with political activism. In the first, 15-line apostrophe, "Immortal Sages" ("Visions" 1) are described in terms of heavenly light, images informed by Thelwall's 1825 "The Star. A Night Walk," which replies to Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode and sonnet to Milton, "London 1802."[10] These "Godlike Sires" also partake of "living sources" "sublime and pure" ("Visions" 8-12), recalling the enchanted dingle and brook near Alfoxden that inspired the imagination of all three poets forever after.[11] Anticipating the later pattern of the poem, however, these remote or

[9] M.H. Abrams defined the "conversation poem" in his influential "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 527-28 as, like an ode, "a sustained colloquy" that begins with a description of external landscape, moves inward for a reflection that "remains closely intervolved with the outer scene," and "ends where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation."

[10] These parallels are discussed in *The Silenced Partner*, pp. 242-53.

[11] Thelwall was so taken with this "Enchanting retreat" that within a few weeks of moving to Wales, he reconstructed it beside his cottage: "with hobbyhorsical industry I have built a cascade of 8 or 9 feet height & am making a rude hermitage (a sequestered summer study) in the dingle beneath" (Davies, pp. 296, 302). It is evoked in almost all the major poems he wrote there, as well as in his later garden at Brixton. Significant rewritings of the same source in Coleridge and Wordsworth include "This Lime Tree Bower my Prison," "The Idiot Boy," and parts of *The Prelude* and *Biographia Literaria*.

transcendent places of origin are already described interactively, in terms of what they kindle or sustain in mortal beings: the "soul of patriot fervour" and "what man in conscious dignity should be" (Visions" 7, 15). The second 15-line apostrophe moves more decisively down to earth, acknowledging the lowly status of the speaker, his exclusion from the privileged spaces of "Attic grove or Academe" (recalling both Thelwall's banishment from Somerset and his lack of classical education) and the degeneracy of the fallen world (described with the first explicit echo of Coleridge: "its sensual, vain pursuits" ["Visions" 27])[12]. Finally, in a kind of mini-epode, the second verse paragraph, as in the original poem, takes a social turn, to address Athens, idealized symbol of the free and equal Laws that are necessary for any true philosophy, and fundamental to Thelwall's version of the pastoral, from *The Peripatetic* forward.

The same rhythm of alternation between imagination and society continues in the two climactic paragraphs of the introductory section. In this key moment for understanding the poem, as well as Thelwall's poetics, he echoes Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and bids "the mental drama rise renewed" ("Visions" 51). Following the work of Alan Richardson and others, we are now familiar with "mental drama" as a descriptor of a definitive shift in the theatre of romanticism, from stage to closet, usually seen as a rejection of the public sphere in favour of the mind in isolation.[13] For Thelwall, however, it signifies the opposite. This mental drama is an attempt to reactivate philosophy, to reclaim sages both as inspirers of "eventful acts," and as patriot actors themselves. Thelwall defined poetry as both an art and an act, a speech act;[14] poetry is language that makes things happen, and we can hear it happening in the verbs here. The passage begins in the conditional mood: "might" imagination "body forth," "present" "reanimate" ("Visions" 43-48). In the next paragraph the verbs become more dynamic and declarative: the eye is "fir'd," and "kindling dilates," the "remote … revives" etc. ("Visions" 52-54). By the end of the strophic introduction of "Visions of Philosophy," and the beginning of its antistrophic heart, the inspiration has been enacted. The Academus is no longer a memory, or a plea, but a presence. Moreover, "[t]his grove, these hedgerows & these coppice bowers" ("Visions" 56) [15] are not just the suburban scene of his original peripatetic excursion, or even the dingle at Alfoxden and its mirror stage beside Thelwall's cottage in Llyswen Wales,[16] but

[12] An allusion to Coleridge's "France: An Ode": "The Sensual and the Dark rebel in vain" (85). See *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Oxford Authors*, ed. H.J. Jackson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 92.

[13] See Alan Richardson, *Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988) and Catherine Burroughs, *Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romanticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

[14] In his "Introductory Discourse on the Nature and Object of Elocutionary Science," "The Vestibule of Eloquence," *Selected Political Writings of John Thelwall*, Ed. Robert Lamb and Corinna Wagner (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), Vol.4. p. 120, Thelwall defines elocution as the art, act and science of speech delivery or communication. Since he regarded poetry as the most perfect form of language, this stands as a definition of poetry as well. Although his speech theory bears little relation to modern speech-act theory, in poetic practice, as shown here, it relies on constructions that Austin would later call "illocutionary."

[15] Informed, as are so many of the poems written there, by Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey."

[16] My Lacanian pun acknowledges that Thelwall's obsessive (and lifelong) efforts to recreate the Alfoxden dingle, both materially and textually, while repeatedly rewriting the desire and disappointment associated with it, invite psychoanalytic interpretation.

the garden in Brixton where Thelwall continued to revise the poem in the 1820s. And the godlike actors are not just Plato and Socrates but Coleridge and himself. What's more, they are not alone. The odd but imperative and interactive construction that introduces Plato—"And see—who, you, his full expanse of brow" ("Visions 65)—turns the couple into a triumvirate, addressing the reader in the place of Wordsworth in 1797, or Aristotle in the original.[17]

It is curious, but entirely characteristic of Thelwall's poetics, that the object of "see" is not named. [18] Eventually it will be, 100 lines later, and of course, it is Plato, but even more obviously, it is Coleridge, in his famous lectures on metaphysics. Even before he enters the poem, phrases like "self-communion" and "occult profound" ("Visions" 62-63) point to him, but the real giveaway is the physiognomic shorthand that takes the place of a name, "his full expanse of brow / And eye of inspiration heavenward rears" ("Visions" 66).[19] What follows in the next three long verse paragraphs of this antistrophe middle section of the poem, is Thelwall's summary of those lectures, but also his response to them, informed by the philosophy put forward in his own rival lectures, and recorded in his annotations to *Biographia Literaria*.[20]

The 165-line middle section of "Visions of Philosophy" breaks down into another triad of turn, counterturn and stand. For the first 60 lines it is Coleridge at his most Platonically remote and inaccessible, working up to this summary:

> Thus, Seer divine
> In revelation of thy eye I read
> Thy soul's intense abstraction,—following thee
> As, inspiration led, thou rov'st thro all
> The maze of Nature up to Nature's Cause,
> The universal animating soul
> Of what or is, or was, or yet shall be.
>
> ("Visions" 115-21)

Surprisingly, perhaps, given the famous animosity between them, Thelwall's précis of Coleridgean metaphysics is not only accurate but admiring. There is none of the scathing critique of "abstruse, metaphysical, mistical rant" that

[17] Similar surrogate literary and political triumvirates are found in other Thelwall conversation poems, including the poets Homer, Milton and Shakespeare in the "Lines Written at Bridgewater," the hosts Norton, Newcomb and Partridge in "On Leaving the Bottoms of Gloucestershire," and the freedom-fighters Hampden, Sidney and the Gracchi in "Maria. A Fragment."

[18] Such suspension of the name occurs elsewhere, most notably in "The Star. A Night Walk," composed at the same time as some of the later revisions of "Visions."

[19] Contemporary descriptions of Coleridge always emphasize his "divine" eyes and forehead; the upturned eye, here, particularly recalls the portrait by George Dawe, based on Coleridge the lecturer. See Morton Paley, *Portraits of Coleridge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 44-50. As an elocutionist, Thelwall was highly aware of the language of gesture, even though his own theory relies less on the physiognomy than the physiology of speech production and reception.

[20] On Thelwall's annotations and rivalry with Coleridge as lecturer, see my *The Silenced Partner* pp. 87-99.

had appeared in his 1796 response to Coleridge's "Religious Musings."[21] This may reflect an increasing spirituality in Thelwall's old age, for which there is some evidence in Thelwall's late poems.[22] But it also reflects his lifelong intellectual broad-mindedness; it is worth remembering that, as Monika Class has recently shown, Thelwall read Kant before he met Coleridge, having attended Friedrich Nitsch's Kantian lectures in London.[23] There is no satire here, except perhaps in polysyllabic tongue-twisters like "in infinite proportions variegate" and "thro the illimitably inexplorable" ("Visions" 99, 112). Such tonal tongue-in-cheek captures the position of the lowly "we" of Coleridge's audience, who are excluded from the perfect Platonic vision of the lecturer, and must use sense-organs, "tympanum, or palate, or report/ Olfactory" to "partial acquire" the knowledge which an "Eternal whose perception needs / No aid organic" apparently "embraces unacquired" ("Visions" 88-95).[24] The attention to anatomy and the physiology of sensation in this passage reflects Thelwall's medical training; its introduction here prepares for the shift that occurs a few lines later, as he brings his salutary materialism to bear upon Coleridge's religious metaphysics.

That shift happens suddenly when, halfway through this rapturously long metaphysical summary, the stream of Coleridgean abstraction is interrupted by the "soft ripplings of the neighbouring rill" ("Visions 124). This brings the grateful ear of the reader back to the "mundane sphere" of "Matter in her sense-recognis'd forms" (Visions" 127), and Thelwall back to the dells at Alfoxden and Llyswen, for a counterturn recapitulation of the long-ago and continuing debates of his literary and political triumvirate (debates also dramatized by Wordsworth in Books 2-4 of *The Excursion*).[25] Like an antistrophe within an antistrophe, the next 50 lines put forward his case for a more materialized metaphysics. They speak of "Another element—another mode/ Of the creative mind" that is more dynamic, as shown in the waterfall of active verbs—"bounds & fertilizes, decks & feeds, / And freshens & sustains" ("Visions" 131-32)—that displace the abstract nouns and static adjectives of the previous passage. This emphasis upon vital action takes us to the heart of Thelwall's philosophy, from his early essay on animal vitality (evoked here in the passage about "materiality … by immateriality impregned"

[21] Warren E. Gibbs, "An Unpublished Letter from John Thelwall to S.T. Coleridge," *Modern Language Notes* 25.1 (1930), p. 87.

[22] Both Thelwall's 1825 "The Star. A Night Walk" and the paean to Imagination in his 1827 *Musalogia* use similar transcendental language and imagery. There are also two explicitly religious meditative poems of 1816 and 1824 that may or may not be by Thelwall, reprinted by his evangelical son Algernon Sidney as evidence of "a mind going mad for the want of religion." See A.S. Thelwall, *Thoughts in Affliction* (London, 1831).

[23] Monika Class, *Coleridge and Kantian Ideas in England 1796-1817* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 2.

[24] This passage is consistent with a sarcastic remark in Thelwall's *A Letter to Henry Cline:* "I do not go the lengths I have heard ascribed to Professor Kant. – I do not mean to say—that 'Speech is a faculty purely mental; and that a man might become an orator, tho he had neither teeth nor tongue, by the mere action of the mind.' I am no such *intellectual philosopher*. I trust, alone, to the facts of *physical experience*, and the inferences of *logical induction*; and leave the visionary theories of metaphysicians to those who imagine that they understand metaphysics" (*A Letter to Henry Cline* 36)

[25] As I have explored in *The Silenced Partner*, pp. 264-73.

["Visions" 81-82]) to his elocutionary theory and practice founded upon [26]"that universal principle of action and reaction which governs all reiterated and progressive motion." But above all, we find in this section the same argument (and agreement) with, and corrective modification of, Coleridgean metaphysics that are evident in Thelwall's extensive annotations to his copy of *Biographia Literaria*, which probably date from the same period. Beside Coleridge's discussion of body and spirit in chapter 8 of the *Biographia*, for example, Thelwall notes:

> that is to say [body and spirit] may be considered as different modifications of our continuous essence … one dense engross & therefore confined to locality, form & motion; the other infinitely rare & subtle & therefore capable of pervading all space & substances. Of this subtile specie of materiality let us suppose seperability, or identilified portions [sic], & we have the souls of Men (& of Brutes)—or let us admit (in which there would be no incongruity) constantaneous omnipresence, & we have God, the universally pervading consciousness, the source of all volition, order, creation—the soul of the universe: but if this be not materialism, materialism & immaterialism are but a strife of words. JT.[27]

Likewise, in the margin beside Coleridge's image in chapter 15 of the *Biographia,* of Shakespeare's creative power and intellectual energy intermingling "like two rapid streams," Thelwall writes that

> Strongly indeed must I necessarily approve and admire this chapter:—the doctrines of many parts of it, particularly of the last section, nay sometimes the very illustrations + language seem as if they were but the echo of those I have so long + so frequently inforced in my Lectures.[28]

In his poem, as in his annotations to *Biographia Literaria*, Thelwall presents his own "Visions of Philosophy" as a harmonious complement to those of his old friend. By introducing them as the sounds of a "neighbouring rill," he not only recalls Coleridge's stream image from *Biographia Literaria* but amplifies the idealized prospect of "philosophic amity … beneath the neighb'ring thatch" in "Lines Written at Bridgewater," where he had hoped they would engage in "sweet converse" on matters "Of Metaphysic, or of Ethic lore … Agreeing, or dissenting—sweet alike, / When wisdom, and not victory, the end" ("Lines"

[26] John Thelwall, *A Letter to Henry Cline*, p. 15. Thelwall's "An Essay on Animal Vitality" is reprinted in vol. 1 of *Selected Political Writings of John Thelwall*, Ed. Robert Lamb and Corinna Wagner (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), pp. 9-30.

[27] Thelwall's annotated copy of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817) is in the Fales library of New York University. This passage is found on p. 128-29 of that edition. I follow my own transcriptions, rather than those published by Burton Pollin in "John Thelwall's Marginalia in a copy of *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 74 (1970), pp. 73-94.

[28] John Thelwall, annotation to *Biographia Literaria* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), pp. 21-22

88-108). The sweet harmony that might have been, had Thelwall been allowed to stay in Somerset, is realized here, as always for Thelwall, aurally, in "musical meanders" of sound: the lovely liquids of "dwells," "till recall'd," and "rill" ("Visions" 124-25); the half-rhymes of "mazes trace" and "mass" ("Visions" 128-30); the alternation of assonance and consonance in "hoarse thunders there / Bursting infuriate on the opposing shore" ("Visions" 140-41); and the half-line patterns of "infinite mutation interchange": "ignious to aqueous, aqueous into flame"; "solid, fluid—fluid, firm; "clouds the fountains, fountains feed the clouds"; working up to the Heraclitean "all in each & each in all contained" ("Visions" 160-70). Indeed that phrase "infinite mutation interchange" captures the essence of Thelwall's poetics, based upon infinite variations of correspondence and modulation. Thus in answer to Plato-Coleridge's "Philosophy with Poesy combin'd" ("Visions" 177), he offers his own combination, in sounds harmoniously corresponding to Coleridge's symbols.

At this point there is another major turn, as the first mention of Plato's name in a new paragraph introduces another, very different, aspect of his philosophical legacy, his "not less fervid … glow" of "more than patriot virtue" ("Visions" 180-81). In this 55-line epode of the long middle section of the poem, Thelwall recounts Plato's residence at the court of Dionysius the Younger in Sicily (or Trinacria), where his free speech so angered the tyrant that he sold Plato into slavery on the island of Aegina, until he was ransomed by an admiring stranger.[29] Thelwall adapts this anecdote to fit his shared experience with Coleridge in a way that blurs the distance, temporal and ideological, between them. For example, he describes Plato arguing for the rights of man:

> In the Despot's court,
> Where sanguinary licence rioted—
> Even to the footstool of Trinacria's throne,
> I see thee with undaunted firmness stand
> Pleading the Cause of Man,—hear thee denounce
> With all the fervid force of eloquence
> Oppression's fearful crime;
>
> ("Visions" 189-95)

These lines look back to Coleridge's 1796 "Ode to the Departing Year," in which a "fervent Spirit" who could be either Thelwall at Copenhagen Fields or Coleridge in his Bristol lectures pleads eloquently on behalf of Man and Nature before the "deaf Synod" of the "ethereal multitude" ("Ode" 68-102).[30] In the light of Coleridge's travels (and political servitude) in the Mediterranean,

[29] Alice Riginos, in *Platonica* (New York: Columbia University, 1976), pp. 86-92 cites varying accounts regarding the circumstances and identity of the rescuer, usually named as Anniceris, a Libyan returning from the Olympic games.

[30] S. T. Coleridge, "Ode to the Departing Year," *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Oxford Authors*, ed. H.J. Jackson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 33-34.

including Sicily, in 1804-1808, the account of Plato's being "condemned," "sold to bonds" and "doom'd a space / In base Aegina's hostile chains to toil" ("Visions" 221-24) gathers further layers of ironic meaning. Yet these lines also resonate with Thelwall's experience of treason trial and imprisonment, while the detail about the "treachery of the pilot wretch suborn'd / Entrusted in thy flight" (not present in any anecdotes of Plato) is unmistakeably aimed at Coleridge's betrayal of Thelwall at Nether Stowey in 1797, with an ironic echo of "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," intertextually deepened by the dramatic shipwreck scene of Thelwall's epic *The Hope of Albion*, in which "the pilot, struck / With palsied terror, to the frantic winds / All masterless, leaves the distemper'd bark" (*Hope of Albion* III. 184-86).[31] Such ambiguous identifications and shifting positions are, like the deferral of names, consistent with Thelwall's elusive, multiply allusive technique of seditious allegory, a feature of his political satire that extends into his poetic conversations with Wordsworth and Coleridge—and their replies, as is evident in Coleridge's use of the same technique in "Rime".[32] While Thelwall's political ballads and lectures exploit seditious allegory to avoid prosecution, in his poetic conversations he explores its psychological potential. In the representation of and address to Coleridge as Plato in "Visions of Philosophy," Thelwall works through his always-ambiguous feelings for his old sparring-partner over many years. He is at once remembering their friendship, reliving the pain of its betrayal and hoping for a reconciliation; still blaming Coleridge, but making allowances for mitigating circumstances and his complex, chameleon character; perhaps forgiving his old friend, perhaps hoping still to be freed from—or by—their admiring estrangement, as Plato was ransomed by the mysterious stranger in Aegina.

The rhetorical, psychological and chronological complexity of Thelwall's climactic plea for redemption is amplified in the brief but poignant final section of "Visions of Philosophy," a two-paragraph epode in which Socrates is introduced, "[t]hy predecessor & thy early guide / In wisdom's sacred path" ("Visions" 233-34). Again he is not named, but he is described in ways that unmistakeably identify him with Thelwall's trademark activities and values: he

> Brought from her clouds of mystery down to earth
> Divine Philosophy to walk with men
> In open haunt and in the public mart—
> Unmask'd the Sophist's flimsy rhetoric—

[31] In this published fragment, as in the entire unpublished epic (which like "Visions" is the much-revised but unfinished work of a lifetime), Thelwall uses a narrative from ancient history to rewrite (and overcome) the shipwreck of reform in his own time. The lines I quote are taken from the fragment titled "The Shipwreck," published in Thelwall's *The Poetical Recreations of the Champion* (London 1822), p. 121.

[32] On seditious allegory as a technique that exploits the mobility, materiality and multiplicity of language, see Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), esp. pp. 111-27. In *The Silenced Partner* pp. 125-46, I read the shifting figures of betrayal and redemption in "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as allusions to both Thelwall and Coleridge, bound together through mutual moral response and responsibility, and suggest that both Coleridge and Wordsworth turned the techniques of seditious allegory back upon the master from whom they learned them.

> The juggling logic of the schools; instill'd
> Truth, wisdom, virtue, reason's golden rules
> And what to equity & right pertains
> In phrase familiar to the general ear,
> And to the workshop & mechanic's stall
> (Whose ignorance is the politician's bliss)
> Brought useful knowledge & intelligence.—
> For this condemn'd,
>
> ("Visions" 244-55)

These lines are virtually a transcription of the passage in Thelwall's 1796 *The Rights of Nature* in which he introduced the term seditious allegory, identifying it, and himself, with Socrates, whom he portrayed as "the first democratical lecturer, mentioned in history" who "in the midst of … persecutions and proscriptions, … was found … in the workshops of the artists, and among the labourers in the manufactories, uttering seditious allegories, and condemning the desolating tyranny of the Oligarchy."[33] In closing the "Visions" by vindicating himself by analogy with Socrates, as he had done so often, Thelwall is once again replaying the trial of his life, showing the same layered range of response to the prospect of death that he did in his prison sonnets of 1794, a prospect that he dodged at that time, but that now, after forty years of elusion and allusion, repetition and revision, he knows he can no longer avoid:

> With steady hand unfaltering, undismay'd
> By apprehension of the doom decreed,
> He held the fated cup, & to the throng
> Of griev'd disciples, circling him around
> Pour'd forth sublime the eloquence of soul
> That sets at nought the transient vanities,
> The envy, & the malice & the frauds,
> The tyrannies & partial distributions,
> And disappointments of this demy-life
>
> ("Visions" 263-71)

He thus uses this epode to utter his last words (and to reclaim the final word in his conversation with Coleridge), setting the record straight with a summary of his Socratic life and values that stresses his powerful eloquence, his notorious atheism ("blasphemy against their 'establish'd Gods" ["Visions" 239]) and above all, as always, his integrity:

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[33] John Thelwall, "The Rights of Nature against the Usurpations of Establishments" Letter 1, *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall*, ed. Gregory Claeys (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 400-401.

disdaining to preserve
By mean evasion, or the suppliant's plea
A life devoted to the sacred cause
Of truth & rectitude

("Visions" 255-58)

The same stalwart heroism shows in his willingness to accept the "fatal cup" and "calmly with Socratic firmness die" ("Visions" 286-94). At once restrained and melodramatic, simultaneously self-glorifying and self-sacrificial, but entirely lacking in self-pity, it is a remarkable finale both to the poem and to Thelwall's career. It is also consistent with the endings of his other major late poems, like "The Star. A Night Walk," in which, looking forward to Yeats and Stevens a century later, he pursues his way to the bottom of the night, going down to darkness in extended song; or *Musalogia,* in whose final, self-assertive and self-cancelling elegy he admits his own poetic failure but retains his faith in posterity. And so he does in the "Visions of Philosophy." In the voice of Socrates addressing his "griev'd disciples" ("Visions" 266), Thelwall eschews the claims to, yearnings for, or intimations of immortality so prevalent among his Romantic contemporaries (though they are acknowledged in allusions to "fields Elysian" and "starry realms," ["Visions" 277]), and accepts his fate of poetic and philosophic obscurity. But he hopes still for someone—surely not Coleridge, by the late 1820s—to "tread his steps / And to the admiring ear of future times, / Transmit" the lesson of his "mortal eloquence" ("Visions" 287-90).

Thelwall trusted in the ear of the future. After almost two centuries of silence, it is up to us to train our ears to him again, to tune our tongues and make his mental drama rise renew'd, here and now, in this new Academus of Stowey.