'Wild Activity of Thoughts': Associationism and the Idea of Life

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DRAWING FROM PASSAGES WRITTEN BETWEEN 1794 AND HIS LAST WEEKS in 1834, my aim in this short essay is to explain how Coleridge corrects and incorporates (rather than abandons outright) David Hume's theory of abstract conceptions and David Hartley's, of association. Immanuel Kant's discussions of free will and rational ideas will serve as his guide. This interpretation will show how Coleridge reconciled opposed philosophical views to retain a modified association theory, enabling him to explain how the lower, natural and psychological processes of association can be reconciled to his freedom-oriented, post-Kantian idealism.[1] The concatenation of concepts and images always remain for him the law of the appetitive and sensuous-aesthetic mind. The sway of association is considerably lessened, however, in his theory of the understanding enlightened by reason, and of the imagination educing the ideas of the reason, which untouched by association, manifest life and give it meaning.[2]

The energizing thought that Coleridge retained from Hartley's neural theory was that of the pathways of pleasure and pain becoming spiritualized through a natural sublimation, as mysterious as gravitation, developing, from the final paragraph of the *Principia*, Isaac Newton's theory of 'a … most subtle', 'electric and elastic Spirit' that

> pervades and lies hid in all gross bodies; by the force and action of which Spirit the particles of bodies mutually attract one another … and all sensation is excited, and the members of animal bodies move … by the vibrations of this Spirit … along the solid filaments of the nerves …[3]

In Hartley's hands, this becomes a teleology that is inherent in organic nature and unfolds in human mental processing as sublimation, such that 'Some Degree of Spirituality is the necessary Consequence of passing through Life'.[4] Coleridge evolves this Hartleian concept of neuro-spiritual sublimation through his own notes and writings, such as in 'Religious Musings' (1794–6), where he hails Hartley as 'of mortal kind|Wisest', because he sought to establish moral and spiritual value on a scientific, material basis, and was 'first who mark'd the ideal tribes|Up the fine fibres thro' the sentient brain'.[5] While touching on others, I shall refer to four texts in particular: (i) his letter to Tom

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[1] For Kant, I mean, freedom is the orient (the rising sun, dawn) in the way that Juliet is the sun to Romeo. Thus 'orient' not 'orientated'.

[2] That is, 'the understanding enlightened by reason', *F* I 1. Coleridge retained this concept for the remainder of his life, referring, for instance, in his 1827 notes to Lacunza's *The Coming of Messiah*, to what arises when 'the understanding is enlightened by a superior power', *CM* 3: 425.

[3] Isaac Newton, *Principia Mathematica* (1687), tr. I. Bernard Cohen and Anne Whitman, with Julia Budenz (1999), in *Newton: Philosophical Writings* , ed. Andrew Janiak (revd edn, Cambridge, 2014), 114.

[4] David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*, 2 vols (London, 1749) 1: 82 (Ch. 1, §2).

[5] 'Religious Musings' (1794–6), *PW* 1: 189, ll. 368–70.

Wedgwood (14 January 1803), describing the 'ascent from animated Nature'—exemplified by the one he made, in a storm, up the Kirkstone Pass in the Lake District—as bringing a 'greater … Intensity of the feeling of Life'.[6] This account comes 'closest', John Beer observed, 'to expressing the philosophy of life that he had recently been exploring', with Coleridge 'engaged primarily with … the "ideas" of life that eddy and circulate continuously within the world of sense'.[7] I then refer to (ii) his 1811 literary lecture describing the exhilaration of Shakespearean wit as a reverse lightning conductor, shooting out hilarity to allow clearer focus on the graver material left behind; then (iii) his 1820 letter to Hartley Coleridge, on the thrill of intellectual pursuit akin to a mountain chase, the hound keenly following the scent; and finally (iv) his 1834 statement, a month before he died, diagnosing delirium and mania respectively as the unchecked associations of fancy and imagination.

In 1803, Coleridge still used the term 'idea' in its Humean sense of a concept or recollection, less vivid than a direct 'impression'.[8] As he argues in that letter to Wedgwood, ideas taken as abstractions from the stuff of life allow 'Death' into our experience. Accordingly, Coleridge argues, 'Feelings die by flowing into the mould of the Intellect, & becoming Ideas',[9] that is, fixed images and concepts of the fancy and the 'unenlivened generalizing Understanding'.[10] In this vein, in 1811, but now correcting his former, empiricist, sense of the word 'ideas' with 'images' and 'conceptions', he finds that 'passive … Fancy', in converting living memory into fixed concepts, is like 'the Gorgon Head, which *looked* death into every thing'.[11] The fixity rendered by this mode of perception (fancy) is what converts life (the flow of symbolic, meaningful experience) into inert mental units (fixed images and inert concepts). In such texts, then, from 1794 through the 1810s and '20s, to 1834, Coleridge in fact retains the Humean notion of mental abstractions as less vivacious impressions that have become concepts worn smooth like pebbles, or coins of common currency. Unlike Hume, however, he sees more to the mind than this economy of sensations and images, and develops a view of a higher, living intellect, to which the natural level of association becomes subordinated.

Rather than there being a period when Coleridge uses the word 'idea' in two opposed senses, there is a cut-off point (in 1806) when he abandons the empiricist usage as a misnomer and thence reserves the term for his transcendental-cum-Platonic idealist meaning. Thus he remarks in 1806 that 'Mr Hume and his Followers … misname IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS' in an

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6 *CL* 2: 916, to Thomas Wedgwood (14 January 1803).

7 John Beer, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (London, 1977) 208. Noel Jackson, 'Coleridge's Criticism of Life', *Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 37, 2011, 21–33, also discusses the soul-eddying 'Leaf in Autumn' passage, relating Coleridge's being 'courted by the . . . storm cloud' (23) to the 'Ode to Dejection', especially the lines 'To her may all things live, from Pole to Pole,|Their life the eddying of her living soul!' (ll. 135-6).

8 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford, 2007) 7 (Book 1, §1).

9 *CL* 2: 916 (14 January 1803).

10 *LS* 28.

11 *CN* 3: §4066 (April 1811).

'unphilosophical jargon … in direct contrariety, to the original and natural sense of the words'. In this letter, Coleridge then conveys the positive sense of 'idea' as ultimate reality that he retains for the remainder of his life, holding that 'the Thoughts of God, in the strict nomenclature of Plato, are all IDEAS, archetypal, and anterior to all but himself alone'.[12] From 1809, Coleridge consistently uses the word in his publications to refer to the individuated powers of reason, as when he describes:

> the pure Reason … the power by which we become possessed of Principle, (the eternal Verities of Plato and Descartes) and of Ideas, (N.B. not images) as the ideas of a point, a line, a circle, in Mathematics; and of Justice, Holiness, Free-Will, &c. in Morals.[13]

Yet Coleridge's sense of a universal power that is simultaneously a being and a knowing was one he was already trying to articulate in 1803. The outward appearances and a sympathetic sense of the inner vivacity of nature increasingly persuaded Coleridge of the living, loving universal of intellectual, spiritual life, confiding in his notebook that 'Every season Nature converts me from some unloving heresy—& will make a *Catholic* of me at last/'. A month later, in the 14 January 1803 letter to Wedgwood, Coleridge introduces his main theme by describing 'the Intensity of the feeling of Life' that he experiences as he ascends a mountain, and how at such times, 'Life seems to me … a universal spirit, that neither has, nor can have, an opposite.'[14]

He will later define this 'universal spirit' in terms of 'Ideas … in the total Platonic sense, alike contra distinguished from Notions, Conceptions, and Images' to convey 'in Platonic Language the same convictions which the Spiritual Christian conveys in the language of John and Paul'.[15] This Platonic idea is for Coleridge—modifying Fichte and Schelling's triadic logic—the prothesis, the higher-level identity of thesis and antithesis that itself has no opposite, just like his 'feeling of Life' twenty years earlier. Only the logically subsequent manifestations of a prothetic idea, he will later claim, such as physical or social forces or powers (e.g. light and gravity; church and state),[16] have—and indeed must manifest as—opposites. It is therefore as prothetic, universal powers that Coleridge describes:

> the *Ideas* ⟨living truths—the living Truths,⟩ that may be re-excited but cannot be expressed by Words, the Transcendents that give the ~~true~~ Objectivity to all objects, ~~that give~~ the Form to all Images, yet are themselves untranslatable into any Image, unrepresentable by any particular Object …[17]

[12] *CL* 2: 1194, 1195, to Thomas Clarkson (9 October 1806).
[13] *F* 2: 104 n.
[14] *CN* 1: §1302 (19 December 1802); *CL* 2: 916 (14 January 1803).
[15] *CN* 4: §5089 (December 1823).
[16] e.g. *CN* 3: §4319 f126 (December 1816), §4420 (August–September 1818); and *CM* 5: 266 (1823 or earlier) annotating Henrik Steffens; *C&S* passim.
[17] *CN* 5: §6742 (September 1833).

Consonant with Coleridge's Kantian theory of the psychological and the spiritual, conjoined at and mediated by the understanding, the 'wild activity of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion'[18] of the 14 January 1803 letter are scattered at one level, yet collected, and directed where possible, by a superordinate idea of reason. By the end of that year, he refines this theory to consider 'the Origin of moral Evil from the streamy Nature of Association, which Thinking = Reason, curbs & rudders/'.[19] This is similar to a note, seven years later, on the function of conscience:

> The intrepidity of a pure conscience and a simple Principle, compared to a Life-boat—and somewhat in the detail—stemming with a little rudder the tumbling ruins of the Sea, rebounding from the rocks & shelves in fury—[20]

The image of the rudder has a central significance in both illustrations: reason (source of the 'simple Principle') and conscience (revealing one's misalignment) operating as a steering power that works not automatically or passively, but requires the activity implied in taking the tiller. Note the *plurality* of what is to be 'curbed' or controlled: in the 1803 letter, 'thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion'; in the later entry, 'the tumbling ruins of the sea, rebounding from the rocks and shelves'; the individuated, scattering *many*, in contrast to the singular rudder, the organizing and guiding *one*.

Note, too, that the exhilarating mental commotion increases as he climbs away from biological, 'animated Nature' into the slanting rain, asking his wife to return home by horse, downhill, 'with the storm to her Back'.[21] The mental elevation accompanying the commotion is like Kant's

> aesthetic idea … that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e. *concept*, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible. … it is the counterpart (pendant) of an *idea of reason*, which is, conversely, a concept to which no intuition (representation of the imagination) can be adequate.[22]

The broader intuition of the idea of 'Life' balances here against the ever inadequate mental flurries it evokes. Further, the physical exertion of the ascending hike unites the lower *energetic* (physical and psychological) level of impressions and associations to the higher *energic* (rational and spiritual) level of free thought and what he calls 'universal spirit'.[23] This stirring of the energic

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[18] *CL* 2: 916.

[19] *CN* 1: §1770 (29 December 1803).

[20] CN 3: §3745 (March 1810).

[21] *CL* 2: 914, to Thomas Wedgwood (9 January 1803). In this letter Coleridge describes how he continued in to Grasmere despite the storm (indeed relishing it), the subsequent letter of 14 January, responding to Wedgwood's exasperation at Coleridge's lack of concern for his health, giving his explanation of why he behaved so.

[22] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), ed. Paul Guyer, tr. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge, 2000) 192 (§49, *Ak.* 5: 314).

[23] Peter Cheyne, 'Coleridge's "Order of the Mental Powers" and the Energic-Energetic Distinction', in Peter Cheyne, ed., *Coleridge and Contemplation*, (Oxford, 2017), 171–92.

by the energetic leads to a consequently excited sense of freedom.

The idea of 'Life' indicated here suggests a metaphysical yet experientially rooted sense of the supernatural. Coleridge described to Wedgwood how, facing the 'wild & outrageous' storm, his 'spirit careers, drives, and eddies, like a Leaf in Autumn' as he ascends Kirkstone Pass, away from 'cattle, & the common birds of the woods & fields', towards 'hills, & rocks, & steep waters'.[24] Such nature writing is simultaneously psychological observation. It communicates an enthusiastic mental vitality, an energetic scattering of the powers, nonetheless balanced by the concentrated, energic pursuit of reason that Coleridge later insisted characterizes his own mind.[25] The flurries of this restless, wind-blown attitude are therefore supervised by the higher mental energy that for him strains towards ultimate ends and meaningful values. Hence, when harnessed and uplifting in the service of 'universal spirit', he calls this mental dynamism 'a sort of *bottom-wind*, that blows to no point of the compass'.[26] It animates, surging through the body to elevate one in a mental third dimension—beyond the compass—to a spiritual connection, it seems to him, that reveals universal life in the absence of individual lifeforms. In this upsurge of imagination, rather than feelings pouring into the moulds of fixed concepts to die, the energy remains fluid and alive; settling on no concept, these feelings set in motion sublime ideas. This imaginative drive described as a '*bottom-wind*' that propels one toward 'universal spirit' and sublime ideas anticipates Wordsworth's image, two years later, of 'Imagination! lifting up itself|…|Like an unfathered vapour', 'when the light of sense|Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us|The invisible world'.[27]

While the '*bottom-wind*' describes for Coleridge an inner, transcending power (blowing 'to no point of the compass') that brings an excitement of spirit and a sense of universal life touched by the divine, he uses the more immanent imagery of breezes and gales that definitely do blow to earthly compass points to portray physical desires and sensual associations. The image of the trembling, whirling leaf, for example, representing thoughts and feelings blown about by the breezes of association, occurs several times in Coleridge's earlier poetry. In 1797, he writes of

> The One red Leaf, the last of its Clan,
> That dances as often as dance it can,
> Hanging so light and hanging so high
> On the topmost Twig that looks up at the Sky.

This innocent and passive, nervous yet heaven-aimed dance he mirrors with the juxtaposed 'beating Heart of Christabel!'[28] Graham Davidson relates these

[24] *CL* 2: 914 (9 January 1803), 916 (14 January 1803).
[25] *TT* 1: 464 (1 March 1834); Cheyne, 'The Energic-Energetic Distinction'.
[26] *CL* 2: 916.
[27] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), ed. James Engell and Michael D. Raymond (Oxford, 2016), Book 6, ll. 25–7, 34–6.
[28] 'Christabel' (1798), *PW* 1: 484–5, ll. 49–53.

lines to a poem composed two years earlier,[29] an analogy on the consequences of premarital sex for a woman Coleridge compares to a trembling leaf about to fall, with the lines:

> Sad I saw thee, heedless Leaf!
> Love the dalliance of the Gale.
>
> Lightly didst thou, foolish Thing!
> Heave and flutter to his sighs;
> . . . . . .
>
> Gaily from thy mother stalk
> Wert thou danc'd and wafted high;
> Soon on this unshelter'd walk
> Flung to wither and to die![30]

Here, passivity to desire pulls the 'Unfortunate Woman' from her stable position, and innocence is lost as the once connected part falls into the sway of Bacchic energy.[31] This dynamic later contributes to Coleridge's cosmology where organic life arises in the oppositional union of the organizing, intellectual powers (the ideas) and the passions and drives that he sees as often scattering, impulsive, and unconscious. This union produces what he will come to understand as the main characteristic of life: 'the *tendency to individuation*',[32] the 'perpetual reconciliation, and … perpetual resurgency … of … universal polarity' in a 'tendency to independent existence'.[33] In his pneumatology, the higher, spiritual pole elevates elements of the lower, '⟨And what it cannot elevate⟩, it strengthens and improves'.[34] 'Unregenerate',[35] passions and fancy-driven associations often lead to dissolution, yet 'in the regenerated Soul', Coleridge attests, it is possible that 'every successive act becomes higher and other … from the nominal same'.[36] In September 1802, in 'To Matilda Betham, from a Stranger', he describes how

> Poetic Feelings, like the stretching Boughs
> Of mighty Oaks, pay homage to the Gales,
> Toss in the strong winds, drive before the Gust,
> Themselves one giddy Storm of fluttering Leaves—
> Yet, all the while, self-limited, remain

[29] Graham Davidson, 'Christabel: A Poem of Transformation', *Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 50, 2017, 36.

[30] 'To an Unfortunate Woman, Whom the Author had Known in the Days of her Innocence' (1797), *PW* 1: 324, ll. 7–10, 13–16.

[31] In 1808, anticipating Nietzsche, Coleridge notes that 'with the ancients Bacchus … was among the most aweful & mysterious Deities … worshipped in the mysteries as representative of the organic energies of the Universe, that work by passion and Joy without apparent distinct consciousness … thus distinguished from Apollo and Minerva'. *Lit Lects* 1: 44.

[32] 'Theory of Life' (1816), *SW&F* 1: 511.

[33] Ibid., 537.

[34] *Opus Maximum*, 149–50.

[35] The unregenerate versus the regenerate mind or soul is a favourite idiom of Coleridge's; e.g. *CN* 4: §5244 (September 1825), *CN* 5: §5495 (April 1827), §5612 (October 1827), §6012 (April 1829), §6381 (July 1830), and §6394 (August 1830).

[36] *CN* 3: §4455 (October–November 1818).

> Equally near the fix'd and solid Trunk
> Of Truth and Nature, in the howling Storm …[37]

Windblown leaves around a sturdy oak, or still attached to it, comprise one of many recurring images and expressions of Coleridge's reconciling, two-level view of passive, twitching flow at the lower and periphery levels, under the purview of a higher, more permanent centre: an ordering, rational steadiness that uses and redeems the energetic flurries which would otherwise dissipate into chaos.

The agitation, the rolling and stumbling, in this two-level view of scattering impulse and collecting, ordaining idea, is, nonetheless, not ultimately nor merely scattered. The 'giddy Storm of fluttering' 'thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses' are, at the other end of the arboreal metaphor, like a tree's roots, feeling for crannies. The broader the motions and wandering, the greater the stability and nourishment found for the tree itself. The root filaments taken separately or in abstraction appear scattered and chaotic, but within the whole they serve a living stability that draws from and directs the 'numberless goings-on of life'.[38] In August 1803, after writing the 'Matilda Betham' poem, and the 'Leaf in Autumn' letter, he proposed to Southey

> that association depends in a much greater degree on the recurrence of resembling states of Feeling, than on Trains of Idea/ … & if this be true, Hartley's System totters. … . Ideas *never* recall Ideas [in the empiricist sense] … any more than Leaves in a forest create each other's motion— The Breeze it is that runs thro' them/ it is the Soul, the state of Feeling—.[39]

Coleridge envisions a holistic, more humane advance on the philosophy of 'Hartley, entirely defecated from all the corpuscular hypotheses'.[40] In *Sibylline Leaves* too, leaves are whole units of thought, poems, as prophetic principles, released to the breeze, the mechano-empiricist spirit of the times which he opposed.

Impressed by the third *Critique* (1790), which he read over the winter of 1800–1, Coleridge cultivated Kantian feelings of the sublime. In Kant's theory, the sublime in nature excites in the individual mind a universal idea. When cloud-topped mountains, for example, suggest powerful but ungraspable ideas of reason, the impression buffets one up, through, and beyond the phenomena into the ideas of reason and the intimated but incomprehensible infinite that leads one to 'a supersensible substratum … which is great beyond any standard of sense'.[41] The often physically felt response to this intellectual buffeting is expressed by Coleridge in terms of 'the Breeze … the Soul … of Feeling', the 'one giddy Storm', the '*bottom-wind*' that brings one into a mental sense of the

[37] 'To Matilda Betham, from a Stranger' (September 1802), *PW* 1: 727, ll. 34–40.
[38] 'Frost at Midnight' (1798), *PW* 1: 453, l. 12.
[39] *CL* 2: 961, to Robert Southey (7 August 1803).
[40] *CL* 2: 949, to William Godwin (4 June 1803).
[41] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 139 (§26, *Ak.* 5: 255).

transcendent powers beyond the surrounding phenomena. This Kantian theory translated into Coleridge's experience when, stuck perilously on a ledge on Broad Crag, Scafell Pike, he lay 'in a state of almost prophetic Trance & Delight', blessing 'God aloud for the powers of Reason & the Will'.[42] But the 'universal life' intuited beyond common life-forms as he ascended Kirkstone Pass in the storm in January 1803 has even closer affinities with Kant's pre-critical *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. There, Kant contrasts the beautiful, as 'grazing herds' and 'meadows strewn with flowers' on a clear sunny day with the sublime of 'mountain … peaks', 'a raging storm', and dark skies.[43] The mental commotion, to reiterate, accrues as Coleridge ascends beyond biological, 'animated Nature', and the inner sense of 'universal life' is matched in mountain rock and waterfalls with greater force and sublimity than if there were sparrows, tourists, cattle, and daffodils around too, as the beautiful is left behind for the sublime. This elevating process can be understood as a fourfold activity:

First is *compensatory balance*: the sense of life 'within us and abroad' expands in projective compensation as one departs from ordinary signs of life.

This leads, secondly, to *a broader intuition of 'Life'*: The creative, *natura naturans* sense of Life is more powerfully felt to be 'every where' when there are fewer biological life-forms around, and 'hills, & rocks, & steep waters' therefore resonate more recognizably with this elevated, inner sense of life. This universal life as a '*bottom-wind*' transcending the compass plateau returns in 1817 as the 'one intellectual breeze', 'the Soul of each', 'the one life within us and abroad|Which meets all motion and becomes its soul',[44] in the *Sibylline Leaves* addendum to 'The Eolian Harp' (1795–6), where Coleridge earlier used the phrase 'animated nature', repeated in the 1803 'Leaf in Autumn' letter.

Thirdly, ascending Kirkstone Pass in the storm, the *physical exertion unites the energetic to the energic*: in Coleridge's mind, filled with the Kantian sublime, physical ascent stimulates an ontological one, and the *energetic* struggle is cheerfully compelled by the *energic* movement toward intuiting 'universal spirit'. With a stimulated, energized body, 'Life' and 'Being' are then contemplated from a higher vantage.

Fourthly, in Kantian vein, *an excited sense of freedom* ensues, as sublime surroundings stimulate the ideas of reason, which, according to Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, can find no equivalent in the concepts of the understanding. Classically sublime, the lifeless rocky peak thus excites the idea of freedom, evoking what Mary Warnock describes as 'Kant's strange theory … that the feeling of sublimity in nature is a glimpse of our own indomitable Freedom, one of the great "Ideas of Reason"' that 'Coleridge's head must have been full of' at this time (1802), 'so accurately does he describe what Kant held that he ought to feel.'[45]

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[42] *CL* 2: 834, to Sara Hutcheson (5 August 1802).

[43] Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), tr. and ed. Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer (Cambridge, 2011), 14–15.

[44] 'The Eolian Harp', *PW* 1: 233–4, ll. 47–8, 26–7.

[45] Mary Warnock, foreword in Cheyne, ed., *Coleridge and Contemplation*, vi.

In the Coleridgean pneumatics of mental focus, this 'wild activity of thoughts … and impulses' is a disburdening that lets loose, allowing one to centre on the intuition of 'universal spirit', toward which the figurative '*bottom-wind*' blows. Similarly, in a literary lecture of 1811, Coleridge argues that

> The Wit of Shakespeare was like the flourishing of a man's stick when he is walking along in the full flow of ~~his~~ animal spirits. It was a sort of overflow of hilarity which disburdened us & seemed like a conductor to distribute a portion of our joy to the surrounding air by carrying it away from us.[46]

Within his bipolar theory of mind, the whirl-brained, streaming associations, and paths of pleasure are energetic flurries, outpouring to new niches. To suppress these would suppress vitality and joy. Wit, freeing the out-flowings, steadies the centre as the out-whirling of hilarity keeps the weightier matter for pondering: 'While too it disburdened us it enabled us to appropriate what remained to what was most important and most within the aim our direct aim'.[47] Hence the scattershot 'wild activity of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion', with the reverse lightning conductor of wit, serves the broader arc of the superordinate form of reason that in his 1818 'Essays' and 'Treatise on Method', he calls 'the *leading Thought*', 'the INITIATIVE', or 'captain idea'.[48]

In 1820, describing the thrill of intellectual pursuit to his 24-year-old son Hartley, he evokes in thrilling language the sensuality of a hunting attention that is internally focussed on its eventual object while finding traces of it along its external path. This cognitive nisus marshals the 'wild activity of thoughts', exercising 'the excellencies of scent, patience, discrimination, free Activity', to 'find a Hare in every Nettle'.[49] As he later relates in *Table Talk*, if the empirical check of the senses or the intellectual ordinance of the reason is absent, the whirls of association become delirious or manic respectively.

> You may conceive the difference in kind between the Fancy and the Imagination in this way—that if the check of the senses and the reason were withdrawn, the first would become delirium, and the last mania.[50]

Thankfully, the internal homeostasis of association, along with the hilarity of merely going with the flow, can be harmonized within the ambit of the epistemic and moral value of reason and its ideas, which harness the scattered energetic outpourings, though usually with the reins relaxed.[51] Thus, in the 1820 'Hare in every Nettle' letter, he returns to the thoughts and imagery of

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[46] *LL* 1: 295 (5 December 1811, London Philosophical Society, Fleet Street).

[47] Ibid.

[48] 'Essays on the Principles of Method', *F* 1: 455; 'Treatise on Method' (1818), *SW&F* 1: 630.

[49] *CL* 5: 98 (August 1820), to Hartley Coleridge.

[50] *TT* 2: 291, 330 (23 June 1834). *BL* 1: 84, argues that the distinction of fancy from imagination 'is no less grounded in nature, than that of delirium from mania'; and 1: 111, refers to delirium in the context of a discussion on Hartleian associationism.

[51] *BL* 2: 16.

the 1803 'Leaf in Autumn' missive. In 1803 he joked to Thomas Wedgwood

> that my soul must have pre-existed in the body of a Chamois-chaser; the simple image of the old object has been obliterated—but the feelings, & impulsive habits, & incipient actions, are in me, & the old scenery awakens them.

Seventeen years later, he tells Hartley that

> I follow the Chamois-Hunters, and seem to get out with the same Object. But I am no hunter of *that* Chamois Goat; but avail myself of the Chace in order to a nobler purpose—that of making road across the Mountains, on which Common Sense may hereafter pass backward and forward, without desperate Leaps or Balloons that scar indeed but do not improve the chance of getting onward.—[52]

The archetypal hunt become intellectual is always tied for Coleridge to keenness of intuition and attention. The flow of association is able to retrieve nearly forgotten objects and traces, and with this keen inner sense of the conceptual, its auxiliary wanderings are best methodized when its pursuits are given the scent of a leading idea. Thus the 'wild activity of thoughts' become—as he put it in *The Statesman's Manual*, his book on governance via the symbol, the aesthetic representative of ideas—movements above which apprehended or intimated ideas of reason may commence 'organizing (as it were) the flux of the Senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the reason'.[53] From praising David Hartley's theory of neural association cum spiritual sublimation, through his critically adapting it in the light of the Kantian sublime and the ideas of reason, Coleridge returned—now writing to Hartley Coleridge, named after the associationist—with a more confident grasp of how the basic processes of the empiricists, especially that of association, fit within, and are marshalled by, the ordinant and value-realizing powers of the ideas of reason.

[52] *CL* 5: 98 (August 1820), to Hartley Coleridge.
[53] *LS* 29.