Beldam Nature: Witch and Goddess[1]

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> With other ministrations thou, O nature!
> Healest thy wandering and distempered child:
> Thou pourest on him thy soft influences,
> The sunny hues, fair forms, and breathing sweets,
> Thy melodies of woods, and winds, and waters,
> Till he relent, and can no more endure
> To be a jarring and a dissonant thing,
> Amid this general dance and minstrelsy;
> But, bursting into tears, wins back his way,
> His angry spirit healed and harmonized
> By the benignant touch of love and beauty.[2]

THIS EXTRACT FROM 'THE DUNGEON', a poem from the Quantock era, illustrates one extreme of Coleridge's attitude to Nature. The poem works by contrast: the passage quoted above follows a nineteen-line description of a prisoner being poisoned physically and morally by confinement in "the steams and vapour" of his dungeon. The second part of the poem tells how different the result would be if the prisoner had been released into the "soft influences" of Nature.

Here is unambiguous love of Nature expressed in the marvellous year of Coleridge's friendship and collaboration with William and Dorothy Wordsworth. It is a passage from his play 'Osorio', extracted for *Lyrical Ballads,* probably because it harmonises with one major message of that volume best seen in Wordsworth's exhortation "Come forth into the light of things, | Let Nature be your teacher" (LB 105), and in the climax to 'Tintern Abbey' when Wordsworth calls himself "A worshipper of Nature" (LB 118).

However, moving forward to 1825, Coleridge casts Nature as a "wily … old Witch" in a letter to James Gillman:

> alas! alas! that Nature is a wary wily long-breathed old Witch, tough-lived as a Turtle and divisible as the Polyp, repullulative in a thousand Snips and Cuttings, integra et in toto! She is sure to get the better of Lady MIND in the long run, and to take her revenge too. (CL V 497)

In this dynamic of Nature vs Mind Coleridge presents the mind—i.e. the shaping spirit of imagination—as an artist that seeks to paint its vision onto Nature, turning cloud formations into imaginary landscapes. Nature is the rival

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[1] From a talk at the Coleridge Study Weekend, Halsway Manor, 2019 in a golden age when we could associate freely; revised for publication in covid-19 self-isolation. Blessings to Greg Leadbetter for directing said golden age, and all the assembled Friends for their congenial participation. In particular, Tim Fulford taught me how to pronounce shek EYE nah, and Peter Shrubb corrected a misrepresentation of Herschel's cosmology.

[2] Wordsworth & Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 1991), 82–3. Cited as LB in text hereafter.

artist, who strives to turn the mind into a collection of dead facts and memories. Nature is thus set in opposition to imagination rather than being viewed as a source of inspiration.

The idealised view of Nature is held by young optimist radical Coleridge, roaming the Quantocks with the Wordsworths and their wild poesy. The disillusionment of the "wily witch" is held by the conservative and prematurely aged Sage of Highgate. These views of Nature are separated by twenty-seven years, and the difference between them can too easily be contrasted on the grounds of when they were written, as if they were respectively songs of innocence and experience. But looking deeper, it becomes apparent that these two views were maintained concurrently throughout Coleridge's life.

The optimistic view of nature was clearly to the fore in 1820 when Coleridge recited a previously unknown 'Sonnet to Nature' to Thomas Allsop, his intimate friend-cum-disciple.

> It may indeed be phantasy, when I
> Essay to draw from all created things
> Deep, heartfelt, inward joy that closely clings;
> And trace in leaves and flowers that round me lie
> Lessons of love and earnest piety.
> So let it be; and if the wide world rings
> In mock of this belief, it brings
> Nor fear, nor grief, nor vain perplexity.
> So will I build my altar in the fields,
> And the blue sky my fretted dome shall be,
> And the sweet fragrance that the wild flower yields,
> Shall be the incense I will yield to Thee,
> Thee only God! and thou shalt not despise
> Even me, the priest of this poor sacrifice. (PW 1, 2, 992–3)

Jim Mays, in his edition of the *Collected Poetical Works*, dated this poem to 1820, the year that Allsop wrote it down after hearing Coleridge's recitation. Although its contents are wholly in character with the 1797–8 era, and Coleridge gave Allsop the impression it was an early poem, Mays considered it more probable that Coleridge composed it on the spur of the moment in 1820. But even if it were an old poem, it must have matched Coleridge's state of mind in 1820, or he would not have felt the impulse to recite it. There is a similar dating mystery attached to the mysterious lines starting "O the one life within us and abroad" that Coleridge added to 'The Eolian Harp' when it was reprinted in *Sibylline Leaves* in 1817 (PW 1, 1, 233). Even if we imagine that he kept these brilliant lines in animated suspension unpublished for over twenty years, the act of publication is in itself an affirmation of their message.

In the same way, it is not difficult to find a dark view of Nature in Coleridge's Quantock period. 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' as a whole can be put forward, but I will concentrate on a single episode from Part 3. The Mariner first spots "something in the sky". It looks like a "little speck", "a

mist" and takes an indistinct shape before revealing itself to be a spectre bark with a man and a woman. The man is Death and his mate only becomes identified as "Night-mare Life-in-Death" after 1817:

> Her lips were red, her looks were free,
> Her locks were yellow as gold:
> Her skin was as white as leprosy,
> The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
> Who thicks man's blood with cold.
>
> The naked hulk alongside came,
> And the twain were casting dice;
> 'The game is done! I've won, I've won!'
> Quoth she, and whistles thrice.
>
> (PW 1, 1, 387)

Any interpretation of this figure has to start with the primary fact of the subjugation to death that comes to everyone who lives in the realm of Nature. Although this ghastly figure is supernatural, her attribute of Life-in-Death covers the fundamental jeopardy and inevitable end of any living person or entity in the natural world.

The game of dice adds a further ill of the natural world: being subject to hazard; in an unfallen spiritual world all would happen in accordance with divine laws, but here below—in the natural world—you could in the course of one day die of a fever, or drown in a shipwreck. The 1817 gloss explains what is at stake: "DEATH and LIFE IN DEATH have diced for the ship's crew, and she (the latter) winneth the ancient Mariner." Death takes the crew; the Mariner is alive but owned by Life in Death. Welcome to the natural world!

* * *

The Spiritual World

Anyone's perspective on the natural world is altered if they can entertain the possibility that there is another world—a spiritual world—from which they come as a soul, and to which they will return after death. And as the example of John Keats' wonderful letter about the natural world being "the vale of Soul-making" shows, it doesn't have to be a conclusion arrived at through Christian faith alone.[3] While Coleridge did have a Christian faith throughout his life, this evolved as he came to different realisations, and he was always interested in filling the gaps, the metaphysical speculations that Christianity had no set position on. He had what he called his "darling studies" (CL I, 260), which included Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Hermeticism. These philosophies view the fate of the soul not only in terms of what happens after death, but where it has been before it was born. From this perspective birth is seen as a fall into matter. Or, as Wordsworth put it: "Our birth is but a sleep

[3] *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1935), 336.

and a forgetting".[4]

When Coleridge got news of the birth of his first son Hartley in November 1796 he wrote a very strange sonnet based on the idea of the soul's pre-existence: "Some have said | We lived ere yet this *fleshly* robe we wore" (CL I 246). He transcribed it in a letter to Thomas Poole adding as explanation that it was based on the idea "that *men* are degraded Intelligences, who had once all existed, at one time & together, in a paradisiacal or perhaps heavenly state" (CL I 246). In his sonnet he imagined that his newly-born son, Hartley, might be dead before he (Coleridge) got back home:

> O my sweet Baby! when I reach my door,
> If heavy looks should tell me, thou wert dead,
> (As sometimes, thro' excess of Hope, I fear)
> I think, that I should struggle to believe,
> Thou wert a Spirit to this nether sphere
> Sentenc'd, for some more venial crime to grieve—
> Didst scream, then spring to meet Heaven's quick Reprieve,
> While we wept idly o'er thy little Bier! (CL I 246)

"A Spirit to this nether sphere" is given "Heaven's quick Reprieve". Of course Coleridge claims this is only a way of coping with an outcome he dreads, and the notion that the departed loved one has gone to a better place is a common form of consolation, but here the sonnet includes the idea that being born is a punishment—an expulsion from heaven.

Another instance of a spirit taking form in the material world is the appearance of the daemonic spirit Geraldine at the start of 'Christabel'. What kind of place daemonic spirits come from is a question too complicated to address here. My interest is in the process of how she takes on bodily form. When Christabel not unreasonably asks her "How cams't thou here?" Geraldine explains:

> Five Warriors seiz'd me yestermorn,
> Me, even me, a Maid forlorn;
> They chok'd my Cries with Force and Fright,
> And tied me on a Palfrey white; (PW 1, 1, 486)

Five knights versus a single damsel smacks of overkill. If they were all to seize her simultaneously, they would only get in one another's way. But in the symbolic language of the Neoplatonists and the early biblical commentators this number five would be interpreted symbolically to represent the five senses; Geraldine's narrative would be thus regarded as a description of the soul's fall from the spiritual into the "fleshly robe" of material existence.

This form of allegorical interpretation of ancient texts had been popularised in the 1790s by the Platonist Thomas Taylor, who used his translations of Neoplatonic works to support the interpretation that the descent into the underworld—as represented in the Mystery Religions of the Ancient World—

[4] William Wordsworth, *Wordsworth's Poems of 1807*, ed. Alun R. Jones (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 134.

was to be understood as an allegorical representation of the soul's fall into matter. The Fathers of the early Christian church followed the same interpretative method. Consider Jesus's mysterious conversation with the woman of Samaria at a well when he tells her "thou hast had five husbands" (John 4: 16-18). St Augustine, in his commentary on this passage, views this number five as representing "the senses of the flesh", arguing that this is the only interpretation that makes sense of what Jesus said.[5]

Coleridge wrote poems throughout his career that express unhappiness over his embodied life. One enigmatic example is the poem 'Phantom or Fact'—probably written in 1830—where he describes his own spirit "newly come from heaven" trying to re-enter him. The spirit is trying to enter Coleridge's soul rather than his body, but the context shows this 'soul' is the inner conscious identity of an incarnate being. 'Phantom or Fact' is set as a dialogue between 'Author' and a 'Friend', who wonders whether or not this is an experience, something that actually happened to Coleridge. These personae are reminiscent of Yeats's 'Hic and Ille'.

AUTHOR.

A lovely form there sate beside my bed,
And such a feeding calm its presence shed,
A tender love so pure from earthly leaven
That I unnethe the fancy might control,
'Twas my own spirit newly come from heaven,
Wooing its gentle way into my soul!
But ah! the change—it had not stirr'd, and yet—
Alas! that change how fain I would forget!
That shrinking back, like one that had mistook!
That weary, wandering, disavowing look!
'Twas all another, feature, look, and frame,
And still, methought, I knew, it was the same!

FRIEND.

This riddling tale, to what does it belong?
Is't history? vision? or an idle song?
Or rather say at once, within what space
Of time this wild disastrous change took place?

AUTHOR.

Call it a moment's work (and such it seems)
This tale's a fragment from the life of dreams;
But say, that years matur'd the silent strife,
And 'tis a record from the dream of life. (PW 1, 2, 1119)

[5] St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, *Homilies on the Gospel According to St John*, trans. ed. Members of the English Church, 2 Vols (Oxford: Parker, 1848), I, 241-2. (Hathi Trust). For the esoteric "language of parables" see Maurice Nicholl, *The New Man* (London: Vincent Stuart, 1953).

Although the onset of "shrinking back" turns the experience painful, this is mostly because the brief glimpse of a heavenly state of bliss is curtailed. This feeling of connection, this passing into another dimension of life has nevertheless happened. And it could happen again. And bliss, pain, faith and doubt have been melded into a very accomplished poem.

* * *

The Spider

The predicament of the spirit enclosed in matter, time and space is frequently represented in Coleridge's notebooks by the image of the spider and its web. As in this passage addressed to Ann Gillman in 1825:

> Have you ever noticed the Vault or snug little Apartment which the Spider spins and weaves for itself, by spiral threads round and round, and sometimes with strait lines, so that its Lurking-parlour or Withdrawing-room is an oblong square? This too connected itself in my mind with the melancholy truth, that as we grow older, the World (alas! how often it happens that, the less we love it, the more we care for it; the less reason we have to value it's Shews, the more anxious are we about them! […])
>
> What was I saying:—O—I was adverting to the fact that as we advance in years, the World, that *spidery* Witch, spins its threads narrower and narrower, still closing in on us, till at last it shuts us up within four walls, walls of flues and films, windowless—and well if there be sky-lights, and a small opening left for the Light from above. (CN IV 5192) [6]

That all-important "Light from above": as if Coleridge was a diver into the world of matter needing that connection, that vital supply of spiritual light, without which he would die.

The first significant appearance of a spider is in a notebook entry written in 1803

> On S[t] Herbert's Island I saw a large Spider with most beautiful legs floating in the air on his Back by a single Thread which he was spinning out, and still as he spun, heaving in the air, as if the air beneath were a pavement elastic to his Strokes/—from the Top of a very high Tree he had spun his Line, at length reached the Bottom, tied his Thread round a piece of Grass, & re-ascended, to spin another/a net to hang as a fisherman's Sea net hangs in the Sun & Wind, to dry.— (CN I 1598)

This *seems* to be a natural observation, but it is clearly written from memory and immediately before this in the notebook he has written an extended meditation on his sense that "Nothing affects me much at the moment it happens" (CN I 1597). In the course of this meditation he describes the mind as a kind of web in which ephemeral events are caught, and wait in suspension,

[6] In this, and other notebook entries, I have omitted Coleridge's deletions unless I regard these as essential information for capturing the sense of a passage.

until the spider part of the mind is ready to assimilate them. When Coleridge called his later notebooks "Fly catchers", he was utilising this same image. [7]

The spider's significance as emblem is made explicit in this notebook entry from the Malta period.

> Like the Gossamer Spider, we may float upon air and seem to fly in mid heaven, but we have spun the slender Thread out of our own fancies, & it is always fastened to some-thing below. (CN II 2166).

The enclosing web not only threatens to cut off the light from above, it is also here "fastened to some-thing below".

And as a final sample:

> O Lord! What thousands of Threads in how large a Web may not a Metaphysical Spider spin out of the Dirt of his own Guts/but alas! it is a net for his own super-ingenious Spidership alone! It is so thin that the most microscopical Minitude of Midge or Sand-flea—so far from being detained in it—passes thro' without seeing it.— (CN II 2784)

"A net for his own super-ingenious Spidership alone". This is written in brackets as a self-reflexive comment, a reflux following an extended flight of metaphysical elaboration. The spider is Coleridge himself: so enchanted by his self-created web that he is trapped in it.

* * *

'Imitations of Du Bartas': Coleridge's 1807 Fragments.

This sequence of Coleridge's reflections on spiders is necessary preparation for the poem I want to take a close look at: a forty-one-line suite of three poetical fragments drafted in a notebook in 1807 (CN II 3107). The third of these fragments was the only one to appear in print prior to publication of the notebooks. It was first printed in E.H. Coleridge's 1912 edition under the title 'Coeli Enarrant' (being the first words of Psalm 19, 'The Heavens Declare', in Latin). Hence, it risked being interpreted as if it were a complete poem rather than a closing counterstatement. Coleridge did not provide a title, but added at the end, "I wrote these lines, as an imitation of Du Bartas, as translated by our Sylvester." Hence Jim Mays (whose fair copy edition of these fragments I follow here) gives them the title 'Imitations of Du Bartas etc.' (PW, 1, 2, 830-1). In what follows I will refer to them as the 1807 Fragments.

Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas was a French poet who lived between 1544 and 1590. He wrote an epic poem on the Genesis account of the six days of divine creation which was translated into English by Josua Sylvester (1563–1618) and published in 1605 as *Du Bartas His Divine Weekes and Workes*. Sylvester's translation was very influential in England—Milton, for example, drew on it when describing the six days of creation in Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*. [8]

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[7] Paul Cheshire, 'Coleridge's Notebooks', in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 289–90.

[8] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1971): Bk VII, 1–7n and 323n.

One main point should be highlighted as particularly relevant to the opening lines of Coleridge's poem: Du Bartas describes not only the creation of the solar system and stars, but also the creation of space and time.

1807 Fragment One

Fire, That slept in it's intensity, Life
Wakeful over all knew no gradations,
And Bliss in it's excess became a Dream,
And my visual powers involved such Sense,
all Thought, Sense, Thought, & Feeling,
and Time drew out his subtle
Threads so quick, That the long
Summer's Eve was one whole web,
A Space on which I lay commensurate—
For Memory & all undoubting Hope
Sang the same note & in the selfsame
Voice, with each sweet *now* of
My Felicity, and blended momently,
Like Milk that coming comes & in it's
easy stream Flows ever in, upon the
mingling Milk, in the Babe's murmuring
Mouth/ or mirrors each reflecting each/—

Dometa Wiegand's article on this poem explains how the new astronomical observations made possible by Herschel's telescope caused a crisis in astronomical understanding.[9] Herschel discovered that stars were continually in the process of being created and destroyed: the apparently fixed stars were now seen to be a vast maelstrom of swirling fiery balls that had emerged from a central fiery explosion. *Cosmography*—the representation of the apparently fixed stars—gave way to *cosmogony,* the study and observation of the dispersal of a vast maelstrom of swirling fiery balls that had emerged from a central explosion. Our solar system was just one of this infinite vortex of particles.

Coleridge's first line about Fire and Life thus shows the emergence of a polarity between *fire* from which the physical universe emerges, and *life* (i.e. consciousness) that comes to wakefulness in a pure undifferentiated form.

How are these poles connected? The key phrase that unlocks the sense of this fragment is "I lay commensurate—". The formation of the external web of time and space is mirrored by a waking into consciousness. They are two, yet are in perfect union. And this state—at this stage of the poem—is anything

[9] Dometa Wiegand, 'Coleridge's "Web of Time": The Herschels, the Darwins, and Psalm 19', *Coleridge Bulletin* NS 28 (Winter 2006), 91–100. The Bulletin article is cited because it is readily available online. It was revised in print subsequently for a chapter in a brilliant wider study, Dometa Wiegand Brothers, *The Romantic Imagination and Astronomy: On All Sides Infinity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

but terrifying. It is a blissful "sweet *now* of My Felicity". [10]

Formation of the universe, formation of conscious life in the matrix of space and time, all experienced on a "long Summer's Eve", as a new-born baby drinks its mother's milk "each reflecting each". It is such an overloaded combination of images that you can well understand Coleridge deciding that he should whittle this down to essentials. And hence the second fragment is a condensation of the first, which selects for its central metaphor the spider imagery that I have been tracing:

1807 Fragment Two

Life wakeful over all knew no gradation
That Bliss in its excess became a Dream;
For every sense, each thought, & each sensation
Lived in my eye, transfigured not supprest.
And Time drew out his subtle threads so quick,
And with such Spirit-seed & silentness,
That only in the web, of space like Time,
On the still spreading web I still diffused
Lay still commensurate—

This blissful experience is almost certainly opium based, and Coleridge contemplates the paradox of using a drug to gain spiritual vision in an 1808 notebook entry. How is it, he asks, that "a *pernicious* Drug" makes a person:

> capable of conceiving & bringing forth Thoughts, hidden in him before, which shall call forth the deepest feelings of his best, greatest and sanest Contemporaries? […] Or is it not, that the dire poison for a delusive time has made the body […] the unknown somewhat, a fitter Instrument for the all-powerful Soul.—As the Instrument, so will be the manifestation, the Epiphany, of the Soul. (CN III 3320)

Several of Coleridge's notebook entries round this time contain blissful love-reveries centred on Sara Hutchinson that have a similar feeling to these 1807 Fragments, but these poems make no mention of her. In the first fragment his love-reverie—such as it is—is focused on the milk provided by mother Nature, making her pervasive in her gifts of space and time rather than present as a separate object. Neither of these fragments could be described as a love poem, but the milk is certainly the "milk of Paradise".

In both of these fragments, unlike in the examples from the notebooks I showed earlier, the image of the web is entirely benign. It is not a trap, it is a sympathetic enclosure—a correspondent receptacle that fits perfectly all the perceptions, needs, and feelings of its inhabitant. But the continuation of the final fragment shows that the feeling does not last. The sequence as a whole

[10] This experience is contemplated in other notebook entries around 1807-8. "a consciousness within a Consciousness, yet mutually penetrated, each possessing both itself & the other—distinct tho' indivisible!" (CN II 2999); "the original unific Consciousness, the primary Perception" (CN III 3295).

has the same binary dynamic of opposing states, one good one bad, as the poem 'The Dungeon' with which I started. But here the blissful state comes first, and the imprisonment last. instead of a "sweet *now* of | My Felicity" in which Hope, described as "undoubting", is experienced as pleasurable, the poem moves into a state of lack:

1807 Fragment Three

What never is but only is to be
This is not Life—
O Hopeless Hope, and Death's Hypocrisy!
And with perpetual Promise, breaks its Promises.—

The Stars that wont to start, as on a chase,
And twinkling insult on Heaven's darkened Face,
Like a conven'd Conspiracy of Spies
Wink at each other with confiding eyes,
Turn from the portent, all is blank on high,
No constellations alphabet the Sky—
The Heavens one large black Letter only shew,
And as a Child beneath it's master's Blow
Shrills out at once it's Task and it's Affright,
The groaning world now learns to read aright,
And with it's Voice of Voices cries out, O!

This third fragment has been well covered by Dometa Wiegand and others, and I've been trying to redress the balance by placing emphasis on the earlier fragments which are less well-known. It is enough here to point out that the blissful state has passed, and we are once more marooned in an alien inhospitable universe. Nevertheless, that timeless moment, that sense of belonging, of oneness with the universe, has happened, and has been preserved in a poem that deserves more praise and acknowledgment than it has yet received. That it was a result of opium should not invalidate it. Without this consoling "milk of Paradise" there would be no 'Kubla Khan'.

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Beldam Nature: Witch and Goddess.

The experience of loving union with a feminine personeity [11] who is identified with Nature lies at the core of the first two 1807 Fragments, and in this next section I will pursue the question of Coleridge's relationship with a feminine aspect of the divine, although this was an idea that he resisted.

Coleridge presents a relationship between mother and infant in "The Origin of the Idea of God in the Mind of Man", a chapter from *Opus Maximum* (OM 119).

[11] 'Personeity' is a term coined by Coleridge to indicate a quality of personhood he believed essential to God (OM cxiv-cxix).

> As sure as ever the heart of man is made tender by the presence of a love that has no self, by a joy in the protection of the helpless which is at once impulse, motive, and reward, so surely it is elevated to the universal Parent. The child on the knee of its mother and gazing upward to her countenance marks her eyes averted heavenward, while yet it feels the tender pressure of her embrace and learns to pray in the mother's prayers and knows this alone, that they mean love and protection […]. That which the mother is to her child, a someone unseen and yet ever present, is to all. (OM 126)

Although this progression from child to mother to God could be viewed as a continuum extending by degrees from the human to the divine, Coleridge holds the child-mother link to be a pedagogic prelude, a human act that is preparatory for the later experience of connection with God (who is gendered as male). Coleridge thus sets his habitual firm border between God and Nature: "To deduce a Deity wholly from nature is in the result to substitute an apotheosis of Nature for Deity" (OM 118). But his attraction to this numinous maternal figure is evident from the passages quoted and deserves exploration.

My title, 'Beldam Nature: Witch and Goddess' replicates the idea of the Great Mother as an archetype or symbol, of the female component of the human psyche that is experienced and represented in mythology as the Triple Goddess — as Good Mother (the beldam), Terrible Mother (the witch) and Great Mother (the Goddess). Erich Neumann's book *The Great Mother* sets out the history of how these three figures appear in mythology from the earliest days of humanity.[12] Neumann treats mythology as a reflection of universal collective patterns of thought which the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung called archetypes. Jung argued that the unconscious contained collective supra-personal elements, or archetypes, in opposition to his erstwhile mentor Freud, who held that the unconscious only contained repressed thoughts and impulses pertaining to the individual.

Jung's archetypes provided a way of understanding mythology as a record of these supra-personal psychic contents, and most importantly for those who accepted his theory, the gods and goddesses of ancient cultures were—even if unrecognised—still alive as psychological presences within every human mind, whose integration into conscious awareness would bring great benefit. Two twentieth century English language poets have applied this idea of the importance of these archetypal forces, reviving the Triple Goddess as a fount of poetic inspiration from a forgotten bardic tradition. Robert Graves (whose book *The White Goddess* has been so influential) was the first of these, but Ted Hughes is the most important figure for an examination of Coleridge's engagement with the numinous feminine, because he wrote an extended essay on Coleridge's visionary poems from this point of view.

[12] Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: an Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). See also Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

Ted Hughes and 'The Snake in the Oak'

In his essay, 'The Snake in the Oak: The Mythos of Coleridge's "new principle" of Metre', [13] Hughes does not claim that Coleridge was consciously worshipping the Goddess; he bases his interpretation of Coleridge on his own experience as a poet: Hughes believes that his inspiration comes from something numinous beyond the bounds of normal day-to-day consciousness, and that the female aspect of the divine through which such visitations come has been repressed by our Protestant Christian culture.

In the same way that Blake believed the true hero of *Paradise Lost* to be Satan, because Milton was "a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it", so—for Hughes— Coleridge was one of the Goddess's party without knowing it. [14] In support of this view Hughes quotes an 1825 entry from Coleridge's notebook:

> Ah, but even in boyhood there was a cold hollow spot, an aching in the heart, when I said my prayers—that prevented my entire union with God—that I could not give up, or that would not give me up—as if a snake had wreathed around my heart, & at this one spot its mouth touched at & inbreathed a weak incapability of willing it away … that spot in my heart [is] even my remaining and unleavened *Self*—all else the Love of Christ in and thro' Christ's love of me.[15]

"The Christian Self", says Hughes "was the one [Coleridge] wanted to be" (377), but the "unleavened *Self*" was the poet of the three visionary poems 'Kubla Khan', 'The Ancient Mariner', and 'Christabel'. The snake that Coleridge describes is (unknown to him) the source of his inspiration. Hughes views the snake as an adjunct of the eternal feminine in Nature which is the authentic fount of poetry, and believes that for Coleridge this represented a pagan self that was at odds with his Christian self.

It is possible to object that Hughes is forcing his own interpretation here. In the passage Hughes quotes, Coleridge is not explicitly saying that he has two selves: he is distinguishing between his self which is "unleavened", and the Christ within him that is (to adapt St Paul's words) "not I, but Christ liv[ing] in me" (Galatians 2:20). But this Pauline division does nevertheless effectively amount to a split between two drives competing within the same individual, and this makes Hughes' interpretation as tenable as it is stimulating. Hughes's approach provides a thrilling reading of Coleridge's three visionary poems which—in Hughes's view—enact Coleridge's personal "mythos" of his relationship with the Goddess.

By virtue of his being a significant poet in himself, Hughes's essay ranks

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[13] Ted Hughes, 'The Snake in the Oak' in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* ed. William Scammell (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 373–465

[14] William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' Plate 6, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, newly revised ed. (New York: Anchor, 1988) 35

[15] Cit. Hughes, 377. This is a lightly edited version of CN IV 5275.

with Blake on Milton or Yeats on Shelley.[16] Even if we disagree with Hughes' narrative of Coleridge dying as a poet around the year 1802, Hughes gets to the marrow of the daemonic vitality of these visionary poems, and—to his credit—he is not claiming for his essay any status of absolute truth: he insists that every reader should come up with their own interpretation.[17] The idea of Coleridge finding poetic inspiration in spiritual intimations that are partly daemonic and perceived as transgressive is a major theme of Gregory Leadbetter's *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination*, in which Leadbetter also brings in an awareness of Coleridge's capacity to harmonise different modalities of truth which offsets the starkness of Hughes's battle between two opposing selves.[18]

The Shekhinah

Coleridge makes explicit references to the feminine divine in the privacy of his notebooks. She features mostly in connection with Sarah Hutchinson, whom Coleridge in his notebooks identifies with the *Shekhinah*, a Hebrew term which originally meant the Divine Presence: as in the Rabbinic saying: "When ten people sit together and occupy themselves with the Torah, the Shekhinah abides among them."[19] In later Kabbalistic writings the *Shekhinah* came to be seen as "a quasi-independent feminine element" within God. [20]

Coleridge's application of the *Shekhinah* to Sarah Hutchinson has been studied closely by Tim Fulford in his *Coleridge's Figurative Language*. He dedicates a whole section to Sara, the *Shekhinah*, and Coleridge's enigmatic use of the Hebrew letter *shin* as her ciphered name, which bears a number of spiritual interpretations including possibly the first letter of the word *Shekhinah*.[21]

As a first example, Coleridge wrote in 1807 the passage that follows, immediately after an entry addressed to Sara.

> I fall asleep night after night watching that perpetual feeling, to which Imagination or the real affection of that organ or its appendages […] has given a place and seat of manifestation a *shechinah in the heart*.—Shall I try to image it to myself, as an animate self-conscious pendulum, continuing for ever its arc of motion by the for ever anticipation of it?—or like some fairer Blossom-life in the centre of the Flower-polypus, a life within Life, & constituting a part of the Life, [that] includes it? A consciousness within a Consciousness, yet mutually penetrated, each possessing both itself & the other—distinct tho' indivisible!
>
> (CN II 2999: emphasis added)

[16] W.B. Yeats, 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry' in *Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1924), 79–116.

[17] Hughes's essay has been perceptively assessed by two Coleridge scholars: Gregory Leadbetter, 'The Snake, the Goddess and the Poet's Learning: Ted Hughes and the Contentions of Criticism', *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* 5:2 (2016), 7-21; John Beer, 'Coleridge's Afterlife' in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 241–2.

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

[19] *Mishna* 3.7 cit. Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Kabbalah & Jewish Mysticism: An Introductory Anthology* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 39.

[20] Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Schochen 1969), 105.

[21] Tim Fulford, *Coleridge's Figurative Language* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 86–101.

Fulford acknowledges that "Coleridge's Sara speculations became so divorced from the reality of their daily relationship that both their lives were strained by the attempt to conform to them" (90). But he goes on to show sympathy for the metaphysical dimensions of this link, granting that "the speculations did have a vital intellectual role" (91). He explains the permutations of Coleridge's use of this symbol and its relation to the Kabbalah in some detail.

The extent of Coleridge's use of love as a spiritual vehicle—a contemplative technique—is apparent in this next passage from his notebook.

> Love—and the grandeur of loving the Supreme in her—the real & symbolical united/—and the more because I love her as being capable of being glorified by me & as the means & instrument of my own glorification/In loving her thus I love two Souls as one, as compleat, <by anticipation, and yet in conseq. of anticipation> as the *ever improving* Symbol of Deity to us, still growing with the growth of our intellectual Faculties:—<and so uniting the moving impulse & the *stationary* desire.> O that I may have heart & soul to develope this Truth so important and so deeply felt. (CN II 2530)

However problematic the relationship between the two embodied humans Coleridge and Sara, such deification of the love object matches Dante's adoration of Beatrice, and Petrarch's of Laura, both poets—like Coleridge—regarding their love as spiritual rather than sexual. Petrarch's case is particularly interesting, because of his private notebook where—in an imaginary dialogue with St Augustine—Petrarch tries to justify his love as a spiritual practice by insisting that "loving her has increased my love for God". But Augustine won't have any of it and, in the dialogue, forces Petrarch to concede that this supposedly spiritual love was self-deception, and his love for Laura, carnal.[22] This dialogue was written twenty-seven years before Petrarch's death, and in spite of Augustine's condemnation, Petrarch spent those subsequent years writing yet more "spiritual" sonnets to Laura.

Conclusion

Coleridge maintained these divergent attitudes to Nature throughout his life without finally dropping one in favour of the other. He regarded Nature both as the healing fount of life, and as a fleshly prison through whose bars he could barely glimpse the light above. In the image of the spider and its web he arrived at a balanced image where the web of space and time was both a trap and yet a perfect loving maternal container for the embodied human soul. The first two 1807 Fragments capture this last experience, and the third fragment shows its fleeting nature. However close Coleridge may have come to according Nature the full divinity ascribed to her by the ancients, his philosophical resistance (or what Hughes called his "Christian self") always made him step back. It is this resistance that makes his rare moments of surrender and "felicity" in the 1807 Fragments so precious.

[22] Francis Petrarch, *My Secret Book*, trans. J.G. Nichols (London: Hesperus Press, 2002), 63.