Dejection, Fancy, and Imagination: Anna Laetitia Barbauld's Poetic Influence on Coleridge's Religious Imagination

Michael Raiger

COLERIDGE'S FAMOUS DECLARATION OF THE LOSS OF HIS POETIC POWERS in *Dejection: An Ode*—the suspension of his "shaping spirit of Imagination"[1]—has been linked with various losses in his personal life, most notably his ill-fated relationship with Sarah Hutchinson, the growing distance from his poetic collaboration with Wordsworth during the *annus mirabilis* of 1798,[2] and the failing struggle against opium addiction. However, Stanza III, which articulates the key idea that poetic imagination originates not in "outward forms" (45) of nature, but with the soul of the poet, "The passion and the life, whose fountains are within" (46), begins with the statement: "My genial spirits fail" (39); the terse sentence is in fact a literary allusion that problematizes strictly biographical interpretations of the poem. Seen in conversation with *Tintern Abbey*, where Wordsworth expresses confidence that, even with the loss of nature, the presence of his sister Dorothy will not "Suffer my genial spirits to decay,"[3] Coleridge claims that his own loss of poetic power will not be sustained by nature's ministry, while the loss of congenial female companionship, in the person of Sara Hutchinson, is suppressed in the published versions. As Patrick J. Keane has shown,[4] these similar phrases rework Samson's cry of despair in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*:

> All otherwise to me my thoughts portend,
> That these dark orbs no more shall treat with light,
> Nor the other light of life continue long,
> But yield to double darkness nigh at hand:
> So much I feel my genial spirits droop
> My hopes all flat, nature within me seems
> In all her functions weary of her self.[5]

The loss of vision of which Samson speaks resonates in both *Tintern Abbey* and *Dejection*, but with a difference, as the possible or actual loss of subjective faculties, or "functions," resides not in physical eyesight but in imaginative or spiritual vision and the accompanying alienation from nature which such a loss

---

1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Dejection: An Ode*, in *Poetical Works*, 3 vols, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 1.2, p. 700, line 86. In this paper, I am referring to the first published version which appeared in the *Morning Post*, 4 October, 1802. All subsequent references to *Dejection* will be cited in text, by line number.

2 See William A. Ulmer, "Radical Similarity: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the *Dejection* Dialogue," *ELH* 76 (2009): 1198-9.

3 William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," in "*Lyrical Ballads" and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992), lines 126-7.

4 Patrick J. Keane, *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic "Light of All of Day,"* (Columbia: U of Missouri, 2005), pp. 230-1.

5 John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, in *The Complete Poetry of John Milton* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1971), p. 591, lines 590-6.

brings. However, I want to argue that this constellation of poetic phrases is mediated, in *Dejection*, through a literary source that is historically closer, and thematically more suggestive, of Coleridge's own preoccupations, discovered in Anna Laetitia Barbauld's 1773 blank verse poem *A Summer Evening's Meditation*. And while at a decisive moment in this poem Barbauld repeats, with a meaningful alteration, Samson's agonistic cry, the Miltonic text that most fully informs the narrative and thematic structures of Barbauld's lyrical exploration of the night sky is *Paradise Lost*, and in particular, central scenes in the epic where Adam and Eve seek a knowledge of God from the motions of celestial bodies at night. My paper will trace the literary origins of *Dejection: An Ode* in Milton's epic and Barbauld's poem, employing an intertextual reading which deepens an understanding of Coleridge's famous strategy, found in this poem and elsewhere, of finding a spiritual, or poetic, or imaginative gain, in some experiential loss. I will suggest a line of interpretation by which Barbauld's gendering of the daytime and nighttime skies might shed a new light on the powers of imagination characterized in the *Dejection* poem.

In Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve observe the sky as it darkens into night before entering their bower. Adam instructs Eve concerning their pattern of work and rest, which follows the ordering of day and night. After Eve assures Adam that her enjoyment of all things depends upon sharing those experiences with Adam, she responds with meek submission: "My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst / Unargu'd I obey; so God ordains, / God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no more / Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise;"[6] she then goes on to raise a seemingly innocuous question concerning the stars: "But wherefore all night long shine these, for whom / This glorious sight, when sleep hath shut all eyes?" (IV. 657-8) Eve's question is foreshadowed in her lyrical description of the life she shares with Adam preceding this question, as she seems less interested in what is illumined by the sun's "orient beams" (IV. 644), and more allured by the prospect of a "walk by Moon / Or glittering Star-light" (IV. 655-6). Such a Romantic stroll under the sublimity of the starry night sky, forbidden by the divine ordering of the rhythms of the diurnal cycle, would, of course, delay, or even replace, the sexual intercourse enjoyed by Adam and Eve in the bower of bliss, which, we must presume, takes place every evening. But if Adam senses this possibility, he does not address it; rather he assures her that the celestial lights, "though unbeheld in deep of night, / Shine not in vain, nor think, though men were none, / That heav'n would want spectators, God want praise" (IV. 674-6). With the assurance that the farther reaches of creation, though unknown and beyond human comprehension, find their purpose in God, and not in human ends, Adam leads Eve into the privacy of the bower of bliss to perform those "Rites / Mysterious of connubial Love" (IV. 742-3).

Only with the dawning of the next day do we see the sinister implications of

[6] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Complete Poetry of John Milton* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1971), book IV, lines 635-8. All subsequent references to *Paradise Lost* will be cited in text, by book and line number.

Eve's questioning. For it is precisely this advance into speculation upon the divine purposes of night outside of human knowing, intentions, and divinely ordered purposes, that Satan capitalizes upon in laying the ground for tempting Eve. Satan employs Eve's curiosity about the night sky in the disturbing dream she has had that very evening. It is through "The Organs of her Fancie, and with them forge / Illusions as he list, Phantasms and Dreams" (IV.802-3), that Satan has whispered his temptations, while the organs of sense perception and reason are asleep. Upon awakening later than usual, and in a "discompos'd" (V. 10) state, Eve recounts that she did not dream of Adam, as she always does, but of herself alone, tempted, by a voice like Adam's, to emerge from the bower and enjoy the evening, whose "more pleasing light / Shadowie sets off the face of things" (V. 42-3). Under this dimmer light she is promised by the voice to be made the center of attention and desire of the whole universe, assured that "Heav'n wakes with all his eyes / Whom to behold but thee, Natures desire, / In whose sight all things joy, with ravishment / Attracted by thy beauty still to gaze" (V. 44-7). Satan, aware of her latent narcissism, knows that Eve is the object of desire of all creatures in Edenic paradise, for she consummates and sums up all natural desires; in the dream, this is expanded to include the whole cosmos, both natural and angelic. The effect is an inversion of the hierarchy of beings, and a displacement of Adam as her sole lover. In the dream, Eve emerges to find the world at night "Much fairer to my Fancie than by day" (V. 53); after being offered the fruit from the forbidden tree by a beautiful angel, who promises she will attain to the status of a "Goddess" (V. 78), she partakes. The effect is immediate as she is transported into the night sky: "Forthwith up to the Clouds / With him I flew, and underneath beheld / The Earth outstretched immense, a prospect wide / And various: wondering at my flight and change / To this high exaltation; suddenly / My Guide was gone, and I, methought, sunk down, / And fell asleep" (V. 86-91). It is precisely this promise of becoming a goddess beloved by all that Satan will make to Eve while awake, thus bringing the image of fanciful desire into the conscious, active, intentional realm of consent. The dream images are set to plant this desire, allowing it come to fruition at the fated time. Satan's strategy for tempting Eve originates in proposing to "the Organs of her Fancie" the image of herself as a goddess, thus playing upon the faculty that brings desire to seek whatever end is suggested by a proposed image. As we shall see, the image-making faculty of fancy will play a major role in Barbauld's *Meditation*, where her reworking of Eve's fancy serves as a literary source for Coleridge's own thinking on the distinction between fancy and imagination.

Satan's temptation of Eve begins in speculation concerning the causes of the universe and its hidden purposes; through the image-making faculty of "fancy," where imagination brings desire into play, Eve's native wish to be loved by Adam is perverted by Satan's intrusion into her dream. The temptation here is erotic, and has the form of unfaithfulness: she is no longer the sexual object of Adam's sole desire, but displays her naked form for the entire cosmos to gaze upon and love, thus transforming physical intimacy with

Adam in the bower of bliss into a representation of herself as the profligate desire of all beings. In the dream, Satan has managed to alienate Eve's sensual enjoyment of Adam's body from her own: projecting that desire into a formal, and alienated, representation, Satan tempts Eve into accepting the absolute objectification of her own body in fanciful representation, thereby isolating Eve's self-awareness from her own body. The sensual enjoyment of the body—the pleasure she takes in her own body and Adam's—is renounced for a disembodied image of herself under the gaze of all creation, in an act of self-imprisonment under the male-dominated structure of Milton's narrative. In the dream, Eve replaces God as the idolotrous object of the entire universe; unfaithfulness to Adam is disobedience to God. But Adam has his own form of disobedience, which lies on the plane of reason. Later, in Book VIII, the archangel Raphael is sent to warn Adam of Satan's temptation. Part of his instruction is to explain the workings of nature in order to teach Adam to give greater glory to God. In the course of this discourse, Adam succumbs to a similar temptation as Eve, when he enters into speculation concerning the divine purpose of the night, those "Spaces incomprehensible" (VIII. 20), which seem so disharmonious to his nature. Adam has entered into the aesthetic domain of the sublime with such speculations; Raphael immediately acknowledges his probing of nature, but also gently warns him that he has begun to embark upon illicit speculations. Raphael states that the heavens "the great Architect / Did wisely to conceal, and not divulge / His secret to be scann'd by them who ought / Rather admire" (VIII. 72-5). After pointing out to Adam his inability to comprehend the motions of the universe, Raphael adds a final warning against such speculations:

> Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid,
> Leave them to God above, him serve and fear…. joy thou
> In what he gives to thee, this Paradise
> And thy fair *Eve*; Heav'n is for thee too high
> To know what passes there; be lowly wise:
> Think onely what concerns thee and thy being;
> Dream not of other Worlds, what Creatures there
> Live, in what state, condition or degree,
> Contented that thus far hath been revealed
> Not of Earth onely but of highest Heav'n. (VIII. 167-78)

Raphael's use here of the word "dream" clearly links Adam's speculations with the idolatrous form of Eve's dreaming "fancy;" for Adam, the speculative use of reason to seek to understand the ways of God leads to false dreams, while for Eve, the abuse of fancy in self-representation leads to false desires.

But Raphael's words of warning are incongruous to the task of dissuading Adam from seeking knowledge of God's ends from the nature of celestial bodies; while valorizing Adam's use of reason—the archangel even acknowledges to Adam: "To ask or search I blame thee not, for Heav'n / Is as

the Book of God before thee set, / Wherein to read his wondrous Works" (VIII. 66-8)—he gives no sure test for recognizing its limits. Adam is encouraged to contemplate the universe with wonder, and to praise the God Who made it, but is left to wonder at how far that contemplation should go. For at what point does contemplation of God's works pass over into contemplation of God's nature? Adam and Eve's transgression, their ultimate disobedience of God, is bound up then with a desire to place themselves higher than their terrestrial state allows: for Adam, it is the search for knowledge of God's causes, and so, an initiation into God's providential plans, that figures as the form of transgression; for Eve, it is her wish, based upon vanity, to be the object of desire of all beings, thus supplanting God as the end of creation's desire, that informs her act of disobedience. Both entail forms of representation—in Adam, of knowledge of nature and God, in Eve, of herself as an object for others to gaze upon in idolatrous love—that prepare for the radical act of transgression against God. In *A Summer Evening's Mediation*, Barbauld draws upon the constellation of narratives I have just presented from *Paradise Lost*, folding both Adam and Eve's night-time speculations into a lyrical excursion into the heavens, thus transforming, or valorizing, not only Eve's desire to experience the world under the shadings of lunar and stellar light, but representing Eve's celestial excursion not as an illicit form of dreamscape, but as a religiously-ordered approach to finding God. Barbauld's lyrical meditation transforms Eve's Satanically induced nightmare of idolatrous eroticism, and Adam's native desire to know God by means of the motions of the celestial realm, into an imaginative exploration of astral worlds which open the interpretive keys to divine mysteries.

As with Adam and Eve's contemplation of the evening sky, Barbauld's poem begins at dusk, when "Fair VENUS shines."[7] The light of the sun is troped negatively as "The sultry tyrant of the south" (1) whose "short-liv'd rage" (2) has abated. Daylight is gendered as an angry male lusting for power, giving way to female forms under the more benign influence of "meeken'd Eve" (14), a phrase that ushers in an ironic allusion to Milton's Eve: for while the light of night is meek, her female form of poetic representation is bold, overturning the Miltonic priority of light over dark. The phrase also introduces a host of Miltonic language and imagery, that only further highlights Barbauld's overthrow of Miltonic religious values. Immediately, the superiority of night over day as engendering a time for "Contemplation" (18) is announced. Under the light of the sun the mind "mused away the gaudy hours of noon" (21), but now the dimmed sky

> with radiant finger points
> To yon blue concave swell'd by breath divine,
> Where, one by one, the living eyes of heaven
> Awake, quick kindling o'er the face of ether

[7] Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *A Summer Evening's Meditation*, in *Poems* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1773), p. 132, line 10. All subsequent references to Barbauld's poem will be cited in text, by line number.

> One boundless blaze; ten thousand trembling fires,
> And dancing lustres, where th' unsteady eye
> Restless, and dazzled wanders unconfin'd
> O'er all this field of glories: spacious field! (23-30)

This is not the lifeless space of Newtonian physics, but the living universe of celestial forms in *Paradise Lost* that draw the mind to wonder, and awaken a desire to love, producing a wandering without limits, in defiance of Raphael's warning to cautious contemplation. And in opposition to a Miltonic religious poetics, Barbauld's female form of poetic imagination instantiates the night sky as the highest articulation of God's book of nature:

> And worthy of the master: he, whose hand
> With hieroglyphics older than the Nile,
> Inscrib'd the mystic tablet; hung on high
> To public gaze, and said, adore, O man!
> The finger of thy GOD. (31-5)

The image of God's hand and finger in association with the night sky renders the relationship between Creator and creation ambiguously, immediately problematizing any Miltonic conception which sharply differentiates them. While the night sky articulates a divine alphabet, it does so cryptically, and silently. It is a language that is largely unintelligible—clearly meaningful, but requiring interpretation. After a set of calm and tranquil images, the poet expresses this in a striking paradox: "How deep the silence, yet how loud the praise!" (47)

Despite the conflation of creation with God, this act of reading the night sky as an index of God's nature remains, barely, within the limitations set upon Adam and Eve, who are advised by Raphael to scan the stars in order to wonder at its incomprehensible circuit, and praise the God who made it. However, Barbauld introduces a question that marks an advance upon the limits imposed upon Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*. The poet asks: "But are they silent all? or is there not / A tongue in every star that talks with man, / And wooes him to be wise; nor wooes in vain?" (48-50) Evocative of Eve's astral ascent, the language suggests a mildly erotic form of romantic discourse with the stars that draws the human soul to wish to rise. In *Paradise Lost*, this would be the tempting voice of Satan eliciting the desire to transgress upon God's proscribed limits. The language that follows suggests not merely a desire to transgress against natural boundaries, but a projection of the mind into astral spheres: "This dead of midnight is the noon of thought, / And wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars" (51-2). The celestial transport here imagined produces a recognition of the soul's kinship with those spiritual beings who inhabit the night skies, and leads to a moment of self-reflection. The movement upward and outward marks a turn to the self:

> At this still hour the self-collected soul
> Turns inward, and beholds a stranger there
> Of high descent, and more than mortal rank;
> An embryo GOD; a spark of fire divine,
> Which must burn on for ages, when the sun,
> (Fair transitory creature of a day!)
> Has clos'd his golden eye, and wrapt in shades
> Forgets his wonted journey thro' the east. (53-60)

The rejection of the light of the sun and its male-dominated forms of religious thought have come full circle here, and is now seen under the shadow of starlight as beautiful; the night discloses the divinity within, in kinship with the stars, which communicate the divine origin of the human soul, immortal in nature. Barbauld's poem valorizes the stuff of dreams that Adam and Eve have been warned against, transformed by Satan into a nightmare world of transgression and sin.

With the recognition that comes from self-reflection, Barbauld gains the courage to directly address those "seats of GODS" (61), as the form of the poem turns to apostrophe. The poet imagines herself residing there in her "future home (62);" the language is one of rapturous transport: "Seiz'd in thought / On fancy's wild and roving wing I sail" (71-2), beyond the known planets:

> fearless thence
> I launch into the trackless deeps of space,
> Where, burning round, ten thousand suns appear,
> Of elder beam; which ask no leave to shine
> Of our terrestrial star, nor borrow light
> From the proud regent of our scanty day. (82-7)

The rejection of the "sultry tyrant of the south" at the beginning of the poem has released the poet from the dominion of that "proud regent;" thus the soul finds itself liberated from male forms of religious representation, and into darker, deeper forms of knowing ungoverned solely by the ordering of reason alone. Having sailed into regions beyond human purposes on "fancy's wild and roving wing," Barbauld redeems Eve's use of fanciful imagery, valorizing what was seen as illicit desire. Unlike Eve, however, self-reflection has led her into these unknown regions; the advance into the regions of the sublime have not destroyed the self, but now uncover a voice in the first person, who propels herself, solitary and alone, into the abysses of night. But still the poet is led on by a questioning power not wholly her own, until the progress of the poem can go no further, checked by a dual abyss discovered beyond the solar system, where the "Sons of morning, first born of creation reside, / And only less than him who marks their track, / And guides their fiery wheels" (83-5). At the emptiness at the origins of creation, which is at one with the emptiness at the

heart of human thought, the poet halts:

> Here must I stop,
> Or is there aught beyond? What hand unseen
> Impels me onward thro' the glowing orbs
> Of inhabitable nature; far remote,
> To the dread confines of eternal night,
> To solitudes of vast unpeopled space,
> The desarts of creation, wide and wild;
> Where embryo systems and unkindled suns
> Sleep in the womb of chaos; fancy droops,
> And thought astonish'd stops her bold career. (85-94)

Barbauld's meditation upon the night sky has taken the poet to ends of the universe, to the point where creation and God become indistinguishable.

Barbauld's gendering of day and night has allowed for an astonishing series of transgressions against the religious and aesthetic conventions of the eighteenth century informed by Milton's epic. When "fancy droops, / And thought astonish'd stops her bold career," the female poet has successfully established the grounds for her poetic career on this failure of representation. Thought itself here is feminized (repeating Samson's own reference to his soul as female), converting Eve's transgression into a positive religious insight, and redeeming Eve's fanciful sensibility into a power that discovers the limits of poetic representation. The key difference from Eve is that Barbauld remains a subject, an observer, and not the object, of celestial desires, refusing the temptation to be treated as the object of voyeuristic gaze for male representation. Barbauld writes herself into the narrative of poem, and, on fancy's wings, flies into the void of space, retaining her own subjectivity and attaining to an expression of her own sublime voice, unlike Eve's abject fall into objectivity under the perpetual gaze of all others.[8] This has been marked by reclaiming the force of the sublime, wresting its power from a Burkean aesthetic which links the beautiful with the female, and sublime with the male. In asserting the power of the sublime in association with the female features of night in religious contemplation, Barbauld has claimed a poetic power outside of male-dominated forms of representation.[9] Further, she goes on to reclaim for her own poetic uses the Miltonic invocation of God's revelatory power, as she finds a female voice to address God directly:

> But oh thou mighty mind! whose powerful word
> Said, thus let all things be, and thus they were,
> Where shall I seek thy presence? how unblam'd

[8] I take Barbauld's poem to be an eighteenth-century example of Hélène Cixous' *écriture feminine*.

[9] For a feminist reading of the *Meditation* which argues that Barbauld establishes a genuinely female poetic voice, see Jennifer Krusinger Martin, *Raising a Nation: Anna Laetitia Barbauld as Artistic and Pedagogic Mother of the Romantic Citizen*, Chapter 4 (Doctoral Dissertation, Northeastern University, 2010).

Invoke thy dread perfection?" (95-8)

This invocation repeats Milton's invocation at the beginning of Book III: "Hail, holy light, offspring of heaven first-born, / Or of the eternal co-eternal beam, / May I express thee unblamed?" (III. 1-3) However, Barbauld invokes a God best approached through the sublimity of the night.

The loss of poetic power expressed in Coleridge's *Dejection* poem cannot be read without reference to the problematic relationship with Sara Hutchinson. Anya Taylor's argument that the published poem transforms the expression of suffering and despair in the "The Letter to Sara——" into one of poetic creativity, whereby the Lady's joy inspires the musical harmony of the verse,[10] can be deepened by recognizing that the poem is governed by two female muses, one experiential, one literary: his beloved Asra and the Bluestocking poet Barbauld. When Coleridge introduces his loss of poetic power with the line "My genial spirits fail," his loss is one of imaginative vision, as articulated in Samson's "My genial spirits droop." But mediated through Barbauld's truncated phrase: "Fancy droops," that loss becomes clearly associated with the image-making faculty of poetry. It is the poet Barbauld who both interiorizes, and spiritualizes, Coleridge's allusion to Samson's blindness in *Dejection*, transforming the ocular blindness it evokes into a loss of imagination effected by the evacuation of all images of sense in the sublime. Barbauld's sublime discovery of an "Embryo GOD" in the interior regions of the self, dwelling amidst the "embryo systems" at the origin of creation, initiates the dialogic encounter between Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode* and Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode*, both of which affirm the origin of poetic inspiration in the soul of the poet, which, at the limits of cosmos, is at one with, and passes over into, the origins of created being. Barbauld's female troping of the sublime ironically yields a God, she says, who "hast a gentler voice" (105), a thought that carries Coleridge through to the blessings upon the unnamed Lady with "Gay fancy, cheerful eyes" (133), voiced at the end of his ode. And though Barbauld returns at the end of her poem to the daylight of everyday life dominated by males, she waits, "longing to behold her Maker" (107), at the coming of the greater night of death, "When all these splendours bursting on my sight / Shall stand unveil'd, and to my ravished sense / Unlock the glories of the world unknown" (116-18). Coleridge is schooled here by Barbauld's poetic expression of Christian patience and sublime suffering, whereby loss can willingly be borne, allowing for the discovery of a greater gain. Coleridge's representation of the night as a propitious moment for religious meditation finds its source in Barbauld, not Milton. At bottom then, the loss of feeling articulated in *Dejection* finds its source in both lived and literary experience: the sublimation of the loss of Asra's love into blessing and joy, and the loss of the feeling of the power of sublime transport in a religious contemplation of nature. The source of that feeling lies with an articulation of its power, and its

[10] Anya Taylor, *Erotic Coleridge: Women, Love, and the Law against Divorce* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 118-22.

power in loss, by a female poet articulating the power of sublime rapture. But for Coleridge, where fancy fails, imagination presses forward, creating symbolic images that probe the nature of God; it is this loss of imaginative power that is felt so forcefully, and expressed so deeply, in *Dejection: An Ode*. In this way, the loss of feelings associated with Asra's womanly love, and Barbauld's feminine sublime, marks the original source of the suspension of Coleridge's "shaping spirit of imagination."