Gregory Leadbetter's
'Coleridge and the "Poetry of Nature": Self-Altering States in a More-Than-Human World'
A Review by the Editor

THIS IS THE TITLE OF THE TALK THAT GREG LEADBETTER gave at the Halsway Study Weekend last September. Destined elsewhere,[1] the paper was not available for publication in the Bulletin. In the interests of a complete record of the occasion, and based on the Director's original notes, the Editor has reviewed the talk in the following article. It is, though, far from an adequate representation of a very interesting paper.

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Leadbetter's talk began with Coleridge's distinction of the two modes of imagination operating in the *Lyrical Ballads*: exciting the sympathy of readers by 'a faithful adherence to the truth of nature' and 'the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination'.(BL II 5) Leadbetter devleops the thesis that if the imagination can present 'the truth of nature' then nature has the power to affect or alter the human self, a process he entitles, 'psychotropic', an adjective more often applied to the effect of drugs; on the other hand, the modifying power of the imagination can re-present or alter nature so that it becomes a language for inner and otherwise inexpressible powers. There is a two-way process between poetry, as an act of imagination re-presenting or altering nature, and nature which acts on and alters the individual. As Leadbetter said, his two themes were the idea of 'poetry' and the idea of 'nature', and in the interests of recognizing the balance between the two, he suggested they should be titled 'imaginal' and 'natural' respectively.

To refer back to the title before proceeding: 'self-altering states' I hope now partly explained; a more-than-human world is more difficult: would Coleridge have permitted the phrase? That there are less- or other- than-human worlds was a drone note of his work, with the necessary corollary that we have to construct ourselves to become fully human; or, as Leadbetter put it, Coleridge had 'a psychology of becoming' which required 'a willing exposure' to influences beyond the mind's deliberate acts; but what is there more-than-human? Can it be other than the divine, to which the imperfect human aspires, but never reaches, in order to fully realize their potential humanity?

Leadbetter thinks it can, and alights on a word, in this paper and in *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination*, that Coleridge uses himself—'transnatural'—which, for Leadbetter, describes his willingness to take on powers that do not belong to traditional spiritual and religious orthodoxies—dionysiac, bacchic, daemonic and chthonic—a 'wisdom deeper than Consciousness' (LL I 495)—as if the ideal poet was a familiar of the 'mysterious Pan', and embodied an 'intelligence blended with a darker power, deeper, mightier, and more universal than the conscious intellect of man' (BL II 117). But useful as this term may be as a

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[1] Destination not known at date of printing.

distinction from the supernatural, and as Leadbetter makes clear, Coleridge by no means confines it to these alternative energies, as, for example, in determining that 'Man will not be a mere thing of Nature', that he is not the slave of nature, he asserts that 'my Thoughts, Affections extend to Objects transnatural, as Truth, Virtue, God', that he is a 'Lord of Fire & of Light', probably a reference to Prometheus (CN III 4060).

The relationship between 'natural' and 'transnatural' might be thought of as a parallel to that of Cis- and Trans-Alpine Gaul, this side and the other of spontaneous or natural consciousness, or even between the pupa in the chrysalis and the butterfly—though both were originally used to illustrate a consciousness higher than that of the understanding. Leadbetter's insight into the transnatural seems to fit that suggestion:

> The idea of the 'transnatural' allows us to recognise the contingency of our own perception and participation in the living order – it leaves space for the unknown, the latent, the potential within the living order – but also lays claim to a creative, self-directive, participatory power in relationship to the living order, that has its own value as part of our life and that of the living order.

Leadbetter's concern is to show how the senses can lead to the transnatural, to the altering of self, epitomized in Coleridge's phrase, 'we can only live by feeding abroad' (CN III 3420) and thus 'apprehending the living order we inhabit not as subordinate to us, but implicate within us, as we are implicate within that order'. That reminded me of Coleridge's fine declaration as to how we should relate to the input of the senses: 'For sensation itself is but vision nascent, not the cause of intelligence, but intelligence itself revealed as an earlier power in the process of self-construction' (BL I 286), which Leadbetter quotes. That confirms that the intelligence in us is the natal intelligence in nature, but also that the realization of that intelligence involves a process of self-construction in us, or self-becoming in Leadbetter's lexicon. It also implies a hierarchy, that all is known in the full realization of the human, or divine, intelligence; so when Leadbetter suggests that, consequently, 'experience of the natural world can have an *initiatory* effect, just as poetry can tease out fresh shoots of intelligence from the ground of intelligence…', this looks like a reversal of Coleridge's order (for the ground of intelligence is not nature but God) and I might question whether the less informed can be revelatory of the more informed. However, to counter my own countering, remember Coleridge's invocation, asking nature to work through Charles Lamb's senses:

> Ah! slowly sink
> Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
> Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
> Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
> Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
> And kindle, thou blue Ocean! So my friend

> Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
> Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
> On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
> Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
> As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
> Spirits perceive his presence. (This Lime-tree Bower)

That great prayer is continuous with Leadbetter's view that nature opens the door for 'the ingress of the unknown into the known'. And even if unsure about his reversal of the hierarchy of vision, I accept, despite any logical difficulties, that a willingness to allow the unknown is necessary to the development of consciousness; for it is, Coleridge remarks that 'by a negation and voluntary Act of *no*-thinking that we think of earth, air, water &c as dead'—which, as part of the vision nascent, of course they are not—or they are known as dead, but they have an unknown life. Yet, as Coleridge also says, this sense of their being dead is necessary, for, in Leadbetter's words, 'consciousness can't cope with the [excessive] influx of pyschosensuous experience', or, quoting Eliot, 'with too much reality'—though I have some doubt whether that is the reality Eliot meant. Coleridge adds, 'The truth is, we stop in the sense of Life just when we are not *forced* to go on' and 'that at times we should awake & step forward—& this is effected by Poetry & Religion /—. The Extenders of Consciousness—Sorrow, Sickness, Poetry, Religion—' (CN III 3632).

Leadbetter then provides a series of examples of self-altering states, the extenders of consciousness, mostly from Coleridge's notebooks and letters. These are classified into 'Landscape and elemental life' (providing most examples), 'the moon', and 'metamorphosis'. If there is a common theme to all the examples, it is that the life in us is the life in nature, and that there is commerce between them. Which appears to be driving which varies between examples, depending on whether Coleridge is leaning towards pantheism or towards infusing nature with the intelligence required to bring the nascent vision to birth. The dangers of using so many examples, and the necessary brevity of each is evident in Leadbetter's quotation of 'I love fields & woods & mountains with almost a visionary fondness' (CL I 397, March 1798) which certainly echoes his wish to present Coleridge's 'holistic sensuous response' to the world around him, but neglects another, imaginal, part of the letter which affirms his task is 'in poetry, to elevate the imagination & set the affections in right tune by the beauty of the inanimate impregnated, as with a living soul, by the presence of Life'. That implies an 'inanimate' nature which, to paraphrase Dejection, only lives in our life. On different occasions, Coleridge's mind works in both directions, hoping for instance, in the same poem, that 'the slant night-shower driving loud and fast! / Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed, / And sent my soul abroad, / Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give'. What perhaps is not sufficiently represented in Leadbetter's examples is this counter-tendency, responsive though he is to the

impulse of nature, to find the life of nature in the life of the mind, what one might call Coleridge's implicit logosophia—something that crops up in unexpected places; in *Christabel*, for instance, whose 'chamber carved so curiously, / [was] Carved with figures strange and sweet, / All made out of the carver's brain', which implies that the figures were not taken from life or nature at all, but entirely the product of the sculptor's imagination. The independence of mind from nature (something Coleridge was wanting to assert in his examples of the 'transnatural') is of course also, and paradoxically to those who see him as a nature poet, a perennial theme in Wordsworth's poetry.

What Coleridge finds alive in nature are the functions and workings of the mind, and many of Leadbetter's examples reflect the dual processes of mind and nature, how one may disclose the other, particularly in his early work. Despite asserting the independence of mind, Coleridge believed, paradoxically perhaps, as did Wordsworth, that the life that is in nature is also the life that is in us, that there is but one life, and thus that the forms of nature are revelatory not only of the powers, but also of the strangeness and the waywardness of the mind: thus, though Leadbetter avoids the cliché, the movements of the water-beetle as an emblem of the working of the mind in the act of self-thinking. As does Ralph Pite, Leadbetter notes the frequency of water, waterfalls, or fountains in Coleridge's notebooks, which he believes represent 'the fluid dynamics of a sensuous intelligence'—the key feature of which is often and paradoxically constant in its self-altering: thus, 'Sameness in a Waterfall, in the foam Islands of a fiercely boiling Pool at the bottom of the Waterfall, from infinite Change' (CN I 1725). On Moss Force he writes to Sara Hutchinson,

> What a sight it is to look down on such a Cataract! - the wheels, that circumvolve in it − the leaping up and lunging forward of that infinity of Pearls and glass Bulbs - the continual change of the matter the perpetual sameness of the form - it is an awful Image and shadow of God and the World." (CL II 853; 25 August 1802)

A comparable thought occurs to him in Rome some four years later:

> The quiet circle in which Change and Permanence co-exist, not by combination or juxtaposition, but by an absolute annihilation of difference / column of smoke, the fountains before St Peter's, waterfalls / GOD! – Change without loss – change by a perpetual growth, that (once constitutes & annihilates change) the past, & the future included in the Present // oh! It is aweful. (CN II 2832)

Leadbetter, true to his theme, concentrates our attention on the idea that perpetual growth and continuous or infinite change can be achieved without loss—a premonition, perhaps, of time past and time future all being contained in time present. What he seems to set to one side is what I would call the underlying idea which informs or energizes Coleridge's imaginal response to the natural, which of these three quotations, is most evident in his letter to Sara Hutchinson—not used in the talk; what he sees in Moss Force is an 'awful

Image and shadow of God and the World', a phrase Coleridge does not explain, and which is simply 'GOD!' in the Rome note, and which might therefore be taken as little more than an expostulation, and so passed over. What he seems to be suggesting is the immanent presence of God as the sustaining power of all things natural, all sights and sounds as His intelligible language. But that is my reading, and I would have liked to have heard Leadbetter's response to, or acknowledgement of, the ideas that can be seen to underlie Coleridge's observations of nature. Leadbetter's notes do suggest that such a response is liminally there, remarking that 'idem et alter' go to the 'heart of Coleridgean metaphysics'. But this is not developed in the notes nor, as I remember, in the talk.

My further point is that without these ideas, explicit or implicit, then Coleridge's notes would lose much of their purpose and energy—they would become nothing more than records of sensuous and aesthetic pleasure, or as Coleridge put it, to 'the refined Sensualist, the pure Toutos-kosmos Man', such images would be no more than 'what a fine specimen of Calligraphy would be to an unalphabeted Rustic' (CN IV 5428); or as Wordsworth put it, no more than a barren picture on the mind—believing nothing we see nothing. That is, we need to pay as much attention to the source of the imaginal as we do to the images of the natural to get the beauty of Coleridge's notes hot.

Closely related to the idea of change without loss, is the notion of 'eddying', which as Leadbetter reminds us, has long been recognized as a key Coleridgean word, particularly by John Beer and Edward Kessler. What it points to, however, is not self-evident. Jim Mays, commenting on the conclusion to the Verse Letter, in which Coleridge, addressing Sara Hutchinson, believes that were 'all Things [to] live from Pole to Pole', it would be because 'Their Life [is] the Eddying of thy living Soul', notes that one of Coleridge's criticisms of Wordsworth's verse was that it presented 'an eddying instead of a progression of thought' (BL II 136; PW I ii 691). On the other hand, Leadbetter quotes from a letter of January 1803:

> I never find myself alone within the embracement of rocks & hills, a traveller up an alpine road, but my spirit courses, drives, and eddies, like a Leaf in Autumn: a wild activity, of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion, rises up from within me

and comments on the sense of participation, the performative, incantatory element of the writing—all to the point, as it is a very involving passage of prose-poetry, and concludes with the remark that here 'the ineffable drives effusion'. Indeed it does, and Coleridge then does his best to describe this ineffable power:

> – a sort of bottom-wind, that blows to no point of the compass, & comes from I know not whence, but agitates the whole of me; my whole Being is filled with waves, as it were, that roll & stumble, one this way, & one that way, like things that have no common master … The farther I ascend from animated Nature, from men, and cattle, & the common

> birds of the woods, & fields, the greater becomes in me the Intensity of the feeling of Life; Life seems to me then a universal spirit, that neither has, nor can have, an opposite. God is every where, I have exclaimed, & works every where; & where is there room for Death? In these moments it has been my creed, that Death exists only because Ideas exist / that Life is limitless Sensation; that Death is a child of the organic senses, chiefly of the Sight; that Feelings die by flowing into the mould of the Intellect, & becoming Ideas; & that Ideas passing forth into action re-instate themselves again in the world of Life. (CL II 916)

Perhaps that was too much to take in during a talk. But it contains what one might call the conflicting emphases that Leadbetter and I place upon Coleridge's work. If he would look to the transformative, self-altering, transnatural, then here it is in all its wonderful force—that 'bottom-wind' coming from the unknown, blowing to the unknown, filling his being with waves, with no common master—that phrase so telling of the energetic chaos he is encountering, what he called elsewhere, 'the organic energies of the universe', the wild, the undisciplined. And given that my emphasis is on the root of life as logosophic, in generative ideas, I have to face the fact that in such moments 'it has been my creed, that Death exists only because Ideas exist / that Life is limitless Sensation'. I must admit I hardly know what to make of that—except to say, perhaps, he means ideas in the Lockean or Hartleyian sense, concepts, rather than the ideas of Reason. But then he goes on to rescue ideas in some sense, for feelings or sensations die becoming ideas as they pass into the mould of the intellect, but the intellect re-activates those ideas, originally feelings, 'in the world of life'. And right in the middle of it all, is God, who is everywhere.

What is also notable is that this response to an uncharted energy is experienced only a few months after his highly prescriptive method for the re-uniting of mind and nature, thought and feeling, at the conclusion of the Dejection poems. The one can hardly sit happily by the other—for such sentiments as 'only the pure / And in their purest hour' has absolutely no place here. The passage is as magnificent as it is confusing, but whatever else it does, it certainly illustrates Leadbetter's insight into the transnatural.

These reflections began with 'eddying', and the difficulty of deciding whether it is to be looked on as indicating narrative limitation or a power constantly renewing and refreshing itself. There is an implicit sense of eddying in the changing without loss of waterfalls and fountains, and perhaps that is the form of energy that Coleridge is imagining that Sara Hutchinson's soul is infusing itself into all things. In April 1802, the month of the Verse Letter, he wrote this brief note: 'Quiet stream, with all its eddies, & the moonlight playing on them, quiet as if they were Ideas in the divine mind anterior to the Creation' (CN I 1153). All of which might be compared to what in the *Lay Sermons* he calls 'the permanence and the self-circling energies of the Reason' which organize 'the flux of the Senses' and so give birth to a system of symbols—that is a logosophic power is exercised upon the fluid or chaotic to produce the

poetry of the Bible. That on the one hand. On the other Coleridge clearly applies the word to a much more lawless and anarchic power. Thus it is possible that 'eddying' is a word that, for Coleridge, has work to do in both transcendental and transnatural worlds.

One of Coleridge's best known observations, of the murmuration of starlings, is closely related to the idea of eddying, a note which Leadbetter uses to illustrate how 'spontaneous self-ordering [can be] a form of self-altering':

> Starlings in vast Flights, borne along like smoke, mist—like a body unindued with voluntary Power … still expanding, or contracting, thinning or condensing, now glimmering and shivering, now thickening, deepening, blackening! (CN I 1589; cf CN I 581-2 and CN I 1779)

Leadbetter attends to 'the sound-patterning' of this kind of writing, and especially in this instance, 'how it builds in "now" and "now" to that dactylic cadence' and thus 'how language evokes / invokes [a] psychophysiological response'. And one might add, perhaps, that use of the present participle, instead of the present tense—'expanding' not 'expands'—adds to the immense fluidity that Coleridge felt in what he saw. This note has been put to many uses and Peter Anderson's definitive article in *The Coleridge Bulletin* 32, (Winter 2008) lists some of the principal examples. But considering it as a form of 'spontaneous self-ordering', Leadbetter seems nearer to its impetus than those Anderson cites, for it ties in with Coleridge's own comment, 'like a body unindued with voluntary Power'. Within that phrase however, but not fully evident in this note, lies the power of the transnatural, a power that Coleridge is often reluctant to admit. It begins with his adventures on Scafell, and the fear associated with the partially-taken route down that made return impossible:

> My limbs were all in a tremble … I lay in a state of almost prophetic Trance and Delight and blessed God aloud for the powers of Reason and the Will, which remaining no Danger can overpower us! … If this reality were a Dream, if I were asleep, what agonies had I suffered! what screams! When the Reason and the Will are away, what remain to us but Darkness and Dimness and a bewildering Shame, and Pain that is utterly Lord over us, or fantastic Pleasure that draws the Soul along swimming through the air in many shapes, even as a flight of Starlings in the wind.
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> (*Inquiring Spirit* 235-6)

Remove self-determination, remove voluntary power, and one enters two very different but equally dangerous transnatural worlds—'a bewildering Shame, and Pain that is utterly Lord over us' cannot but remind us of The Pains of Sleep, composed a year later, 'aye entempesting anew / The unfathomable hell within'—and we should never underestimate the reality of that hell for Coleridge, even if, for most of us, it is little more than a metaphor. And 'fantastic Pleasure', uncontrolled by any voluntary power, and yet 'drawing the Soul along', metamorphosing continuously through an endless variety of form.

This is the sort of pleasure Coleridge had known in Cambridge and London, his insight into which made Southey exclaim that brilliant as Coleridge was, he was utterly baffled by his motivation—as we may say, was Coleridge himself—but it is the kind of energy that lies behind Kubla Khan, and Christabel, and is still evident in such a late poem as The Garden of Boccaccio—an energy of which Coleridge was either afraid or would not admit, and yet its urgency forced these poems out of him.

Possibly the only way to conclude this wandering and wavering account of our Director's deeply engaging talk is to note how difficult Coleridge found it to know how much nature teaches, how much the mind informs, and which takes precedence, if precedence there is. Leadbetter notes that 'In Coleridge's metaphysics and poetics (which are 'intimately combined and unified') the natural and the imaginal, or the natural and the transnatural, have the same *educative* effect' and then quotes from one of Coleridge's most wonderful of notes, which I present at greater length:

> In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro' the dewy window-pane, I seem to be seeking, as it were *asking* a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new. Even when that is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phaenomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner Nature/ It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! It is Λογος, the Creator! <and the Evolver!> (CN II 2546)

Leadbetter re-coins the 'evolver' as 'the self-alterer'. Here, apparently, is the Logos that Coleridge began to re-integrate into the Trinity at this period of his life, the evolver or creator of nature. But look at the two final sentences carefully: 'It' begins both. Is it the same 'it' in each case? The first refers to 'that new phenomenon', in this case the 'moon dim-glimmering thro' the dewy window-pane', which awakens in him 'a forgotten or hidden Truth', and is interesting, not just for itself, but because it is 'a Word, a Symbol', of that truth. But that second 'it' might be understood as the truth itself, 'Λογος, the Creator! and the Evolver!', so that there is a distinction between the phenomenon or the symbol, and that which evolves the phenomenon into a symbol. That takes us back to the very beginning of the note, his 'looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking', a phrase we pay little attention to because we are distracted by the delightful image that follows. But surely that 'thinking' is the imagination acting on those objects, the finite logos imitating the infinite I am, thus creating or evolving a world symbolic of, and an intelligble language for, what is otherwise inexpressible.

I am conscious I cannot read this note to my satisfaction. And that must also be my summary of this most engaging of talks. If I demur about something from one point of view, I find myself substantiating it from another, wandering from side to side along the glorious path that Leadbetter has plotted through the Coleridgean countryside.