Transnatural, Daemonic, Dionysian: Coleridge and the Drama of Becoming

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CONTRARY TO THE FAMOUS (AND OVER-QUOTED) LINE from Auden, poetry does make things happen.[1] There is, for instance, a fundamental relationship between reading Coleridge's poetry from the age of seventeen, as part of my A-Level syllabus, and the life that I now live as a poet, critic, and academic. Of course, I was not just reading Coleridge—but something in his work in particular set off synaptic flares, waves and currents that I am still faring. The inward effects of my reading have wrought—and continue to work—their own outward changes, and things now are that otherwise may not have been.

Coleridge became a kind of teacher to me: an inexhaustible poetic and philosophical supply to the life and development of my own thought and feeling. He is mercurial, wayward, and sometimes trying, for sure, but no less interesting, exciting, and extraordinary for that. His work constitutes a kind of wild syllabus in itself—a teeming matrix of literary, intellectual, and religious history—chiefly because he is such a committed fellow student. A reader can feel that they are learning *with*, as well as *through* and *by*, Coleridge. His omnivorous curiosity, when he gives it free rein—to which the better part of him is always inclined—is intrinsically productive, carrying in its very activity a power of disclosure by which something is spontaneously revealed. 'The End is in the Means', Coleridge wrote to his son Hartley, in 1820:

> Southey once said to me: You are nosing every nettle along the Hedge, while the Greyhound (meaning himself, I presume) wants only to get sight of the Hare, & FLASH!—strait as a line!—he has it in his mouth! . . . But the fact is—I do not care twopence for the *Hare*; but I value most highly the excellencies of scent, patience, discrimination, free Activity; and find a Hare in every Nettle, I make myself acquainted with.
>
> (*CL* V 98)

William Hazlitt thought he was damning Coleridge when he accused him of writing 'an endless Preface to an imaginary work': but for me, the exasperated Hazlitt had inadvertently hit upon a peculiar virtue of Coleridge's thought and writing. The imaginary work—potential, unactual but active—bears a mycelial relation to what Coleridge actually wrote: its invisible but nourishing, ordering, realising pattern manifests in the many fruiting bodies of his oeuvre. It is inherently 'endless' in character, because life and growth can never be final and at an end without ceasing to be what they are—and it is the progressive growth of life, physical and metaphysical, that fascinates Coleridge and leads him

[1] To be fair to Auden, the line is most often quoted without its context, which crucially conditions how it should be read: 'poetry makes nothing happen', he writes, but 'It survives, / A way of happening, a mouth' ('In Memory of W.B. Yeats'). We should of course also remember that Auden has written a poem, not a philosophical affidavit.

elatedly and wonderingly on. His work, even at its most concinnous, is indeed prefatory, inchoate, and propaedeutic on some level, because it is seminative: a seeding of more life, a quickening of the origins—and powers of origination—in ourselves.[2] The end is indeed in the means. The great flourishing of Coleridge's critical and philosophical writing and lecturing in the 1810s revolves upon these and kindred principles: the 'Method', for example, which both 'implies a *progressive transition*' and is itself a 'principle of progression' (*F* I 457). Coleridge's lifelong calling is essentially educative, in the fullest sense of that word: he is concerned with cultivating the inward, self-directing powers of human becoming, in opposition both to the reductive instrumentalisation of the mind or self, and what he calls the 'Tyranny of *Dogmas*' (*CN* V 5636). Education in this sense—the 'PROTOPLAST of true humanity', as he describes it (F I 494)—fosters, and indeed is inseparable from, the self-educative activity that it stimulates: empathising and imagining, enquiring and wondering, and the intellectual and experiential vitality that these nourish.

Both as a poet and critic, Coleridge is an exemplar and explorer of the psychotropic qualities of language.[3] Poetry—wherever it is characterised by fine attention to the effects of language and its self-altering life—presents a form and practice at the leading edge of such enquiry. It is at once bodily and intellectual, sensuous and psychological: it calls upon and embodies a holistic intelligence. And pursued to its horizons, it stirs up questions that are ultimately metaphysical: What is the relationship between the imaginal and the actual? What is the relationship between language and non-verbal reality? What is the relationship between the mind and the body? What is the relationship between aesthetic pleasure and truth? How and why do we experience what we experience? What is susceptible to intellection and what is not? What are the inescapable conditions of our being, and what is our power or agency within them? In other words: What is the nature of reality and our place within it? Reading Coleridge can show these cognitive leaps in action, and draw the reader into their vertiginous activity. However ostensibly simple the communicative moment, Coleridge reminds you that the ontological stakes are high. Language, for him, is 'the sacred Fire in the Temple of Humanity' (*CL* III 522), and words are 'LIVING POWERS, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined, and humanized' (*AR* 10). It follows that language—and at least potentially, poetry—is a potent matrix of human development, with a special role to play in its kindling and quickening.

Coleridge's writings are filled with figures of dynamic change and becoming, often linked directly to the operation of language and its character as a form and conductor of life. In these moments, Coleridge shows acute sensitivity to the ambiguous powers in play: to stimulate is also to disturb and unsettle a given order; to realise an altered state risks alienation. Take 'Kubla Khan'. It initiates for modernity a radical fusion of the mythic and the lyric, and as such changes the ideas of both lyric and myth that are available to us. Its semantic,

[2] 'Concinnous'—'elegant and harmonious'. (Ed.)
[3] 'Psychotropic'—'mind-changing'. (Ed.)

fabular and auricular forms work with and upon both cognitive and precognitive forces to produce, in the operative spell and space-time of the poem, an experiential knowledge inseparable from an activated mystery. Its hierophanic, incantatory drama is a lyric myth of the transfiguring effects of poetic fascination.[4] The 'flashing eyes' and 'floating hair' of its ecstatic visionary mark him as simultaneously exalted and estranged: a prophetic projection of the promise and the risk upon which he has fed, a daemonic figure, an object both of power and 'holy dread'.

The poem bears a curious correspondence to an autobiographical note of October 1812, in which Coleridge writes of his fascination with the 'transnatural'—the lure of self-altering orders of insight, being and knowledge, which may run counter to prevailing social and religious mores—and how this appetite is accompanied, in turn, by 'the apprehension of being feared and shrunk from as a something transnatural' (*CN* III 4166). His dread here is that in pursuing and participating in the transnatural he will be marked with its numinous quality and substance, becoming an object of superstitious fear in the sight of others. In his willing pursuit of the transnatural, he continues, 'shame & power' coincide and he becomes 'Δαιμων' (*CN* III 4166): a daemon. 'Kubla Khan' figures a pattern as fundamental to Coleridge's life as it is to his work.[5]

The preface with which the poem was published in 1816 draws attention to its relationship with another aspect of Coleridge's life: his consumption of opium. Given what Coleridge himself says about opium regarding the composition of 'Kubla Khan', and its likely date, the terms with which he describes the 'divine' repose laudanum gave him, in a letter of March 1798, are surely no coincidence: 'what a spot of inchantment, a green spot of fountains, & flowers & trees, in the very heart of a waste of Sands!' (*CL* I 394). Ten years later, in the privacy of his notebook, Coleridge clearly has his own experience in mind when he writes of a man whom 'a *pernicious Drug*' has made 'capable of conceiving & bringing forth Thoughts, hidden in him before', that in turn 'call forth the deepest feelings of his best, greatest, & sanest Contemporaries' (CN III 3320; Coleridge's emphasis). Still later, in a notebook entry of 1824, opium is lightly coded in Greek letters as a Delphic 'Oracle-mist and intoxicating vapour—yet an Oracle & truly Mem. mem. ΩΠΜ' (*CN* IV 5111).

This is the Dionysian Coleridge, manifest in one form or another across his career, which connects the ebullient figure smoking and drinking with Charles Lamb in the Salutation and Cat in the mid-1790s with the 'heaven-eyed creature' (as Wordsworth later described him) radiant with brandy and snuff in the drawing rooms of the 1820s. Indeed, the older Coleridge can be found embracing this Bacchic identity with relish: 'For in this bleak World of Mutabilities, & where what is not changed, is chilled, and in this winter-time of my own Being, I resemble a Bottle of Brandy in Spitzbergen—a Dram of

[4] 'Hierophanic'—'a manifestation of the sacred' (Ed.)

[5] See Gregory Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), *passim*.

alcoholic Fire in the center of a Cake of Ice' (*CL* VI 532). In person, Coleridge could possess a Bacchic glamour to his friends: in a comic sketch of him in 1810, Lamb wrote that 'Coleridge has powdered his head, and looks like Bacchus, Bacchus ever sleek and young. He is going to turn sober, but his Clock has not struck yet, meantime he pours down goblet after goblet'.[6] In 1808 Coleridge made notes for a mythic poem inspired by his Dionysian impulse, which figured divine intoxication as the path to an exalted state in a fallen world. It would tell the story of how 'Bacchus', a double-natured god with 'mixt effects', came to re-infuse the 'Dionysus' in humanity, so that man could once more experience 'the Heavenly Bacchus' of a paradisal state (*CN* III 3263). This idea for a poem shows how seriously Coleridge took the figure of Dionysos-Bacchus, and the idiosyncratic ways in which he conceived the significance of the god. Lecturing, also in 1808, Coleridge remarks that Bacchus presides over 'something innate, and divine, a felicity above and beyond Prudence', which connected him to 'all the vehement and aweful Passions and the events and actions proceeding from such Passions':

> with the ancients Bacchus, or Dionysos, was among the most aweful & mysterious Deities . . . worshipped in the mysteries as representative of the <organic> energies of the Universe, that work by passion and Joy without apparent distinct consciousness—and rather as the cause or condition of skill and contrivance, than the result (*LL* I 44-5)

The organic energies and innate self-generating powers Coleridge here identifies with Dionysos-Bacchus correspond to fundamental aspects of both the substance and the genesis-story of 'Kubla Khan'—to such an extent that the reader might reasonably speculate that Coleridge's experience in composing 'Kubla Khan' shaped the development of his thinking on Dionysos-Bacchus. Coleridge's conception of the god in his 1808 lecture prefigures both the psychophysiological power Goethe would later describe as 'daemonic',[7] and Coleridge's own later remark, in notes for a lecture of March 1818, that 'there is in Genius itself an unconscious activity—nay, that is *the* Genius in the man of Genius' (*CN* III 4397).[8] To arouse and work in concert with that power was for Coleridge inextricably involved in his ideal of the poet, in which his poetics and metaphysics fuse and consummate: Shakespeare, his paragon in this regard, is 'a Nature humanized, a genial Understanding directing self-consciously a power & a[n] <implicit> wisdom deeper than Consciousness' (*LL* I 495).

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[6] *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marrs, Jr., 3 vols (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975-78), III 61. Lamb alludes to Dryden's *Alexander's Feast* ('*Bacchus* ever Fair and Young'), to which Coleridge himself referred in his 1808 lectures (LL I 44 and n 3).

[7] In *Dichtung und Wahrheit*; see the English translation and discussion in Charles I. Patterson, 'The Daemonic in *Kubla Khan*: Toward Interpretation', *PMLA* 89:5 (October 1974), 1033-42, 1037-8; and for an in-depth study, Angus Nicholls, *Goethe's Concept of the Daemonic: After the Ancients* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), *passim*.

[8] Coleridge's notes engage with F.W.J. Schelling's 1807 lecture, published in 1809, 'Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zu der Natur'. For an English translation, see that of Michael Bullock, 'Concerning the Relation of the Plastic Arts to Nature', included in Herbert Read, *The True Voice of Feeling* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 323-64. Schelling addresses the role of the 'unconscious' in art at 331.

The Dionysian and the daemonic are figures of Coleridge's fascination with transnatural agency, altered and self-altering states, the 'terrors and the promises of spiritual Growth' (*BL* II 244) and the mysterious powers of becoming. This entails a fundamental relation to poetry, which activates and directs the transnatural agency and life-altering life of language itself. Poetry—not opium—is the real psychoactive agent to which Coleridge guides his readers. The 'blessed Organ of Language' (*CN* I 1623) becomes, in the ideal of poetry to which his practice and criticism leads, an organ of psychic growth and experience—and as such, a form of knowledge with the power to evolve and renew our relation to the living order we inhabit.[9]

Coleridge's writings testify to an immersive, participatory relationship with the natural world. His fascination with other living forms shares a vital connexion to his fascination with the life of language. This interaction is mutually regenerative, cultivating qualities of attention, values and attitudes that remain of radical significance. The natural world is a realm of wonder and mystery in Coleridge, teeming with the untold possibilities intrinsic to life. The known and the unknown inextricably enfold each other, provoking greater orders of insight and enquiry. Coleridge's writing reveres what is present within but cannot be seen in natural forms—dimensions of existence we do not know or understand—as much as what we can directly observe of them. Again and again, Coleridge returns his readers to the mystery, and makes clear that life must be cherished as much for what we do not and perhaps cannot know of its being, as for what we do.

For Coleridge, the natural and the transnatural are in this way mutually implicated: the one involves the other, the way a horizon involves both what is before and beyond it. The continuous relationship between the human and the more-than-human implies also the nature of the relationship between creative agency and the '<organic> energies of the Universe': between the natural, the imaginal, and the artful. Humankind is continuous with nature, and yet, Coleridge writes, 'Man will not be a mere thing of Nature—he will be & will shew himself a power of himself' (*CN* III 3339). The metaphysical conundrum involved in these questions is inseparable for Coleridge from 'the foundations of religion and morals', which in turn involved his quest (as he put it) for 'a solid foundation, on which permanently to ground my opinions, in the component faculties of the human mind itself' (*BL* I 200, 22). Indeed, Coleridge's metaphysical ambitions are exhilaratingly vast, animated by a radically syncretic wish 'to reduce all knowledges into harmony' (*TT* I 248). Coleridge was avowedly Christian, and his writings are everywhere informed by his engagement with Christian tradition. In reaching for the *foundations* of 'religion' in ourselves, however, he reaches beyond its familiar doctrinal and institutional manifestations, to its origins and perpetual re-origination within

[9] These and the related themes touched upon throughout this essay are developed further in Gregory Leadbetter, 'Poets in a Transnatural Landscape: Coleridge, Nature, Poetry', *Romanticism* 27.1 (April 2021), 46-62; 'Savage, Holy, Enchanted: Coleridge in Concert with the Wild', in *Wild Romanticism*, ed. Markus Poetzsch and Cassandra Falke (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 59-73; and 'Nature Lyrics', *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (new edition), ed. Tim Fulford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 46-61.

human life itself. The patterns of Coleridge's pursuit of the transnatural—the promise of new orders of apprehension, knowledge and being, sometimes beyond the pale of existing cultural and religious mores—constitute a peculiar formative principle that unsettles the boundary between the religious and the secular (and the Christian and the non-Christian), discomfiting both. This proposes an alternative reading of the ongoing cultural changes that are depicted in M.H. Abrams's classic study *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) as the secularisation of traditional theological concepts. Rather, Coleridge's work prefigures an historically new expression of a radical continuity between the secular and the religious that both predates and postdates their division. (The quintessential Coleridge always points towards a 'tertium aliquid' (*BL* I 300): a 'third something', neither one thing nor the other, but partaking of both.) In this, I read Coleridge as a pioneer—often in spite of himself—of a distinctively modern supra-religious practice and philosophy, which foregrounds 'Poesy, that highest in which Phil[osophy] & Poetry interpenetrate, & mutually co-inhere' (CN IV 4692), and for which we still lack an adequate vocabulary. '[*H*]*ic labor, hoc opus est*' (SWF I 59).[10]

The transnatural horizon that fascinates Coleridge—like the 'one Life' of 'The Eolian Harp'—is 'within us and abroad': its mysteries and wonders are not of 'an *other* World, that is to come', but 'the other world, that *now* is' (*SWF* I 569).

[10] 'This is the toil, and this is the task' (SWF I 59 n 3).

STC at 32
By or after James Northcote (1746-1831); oil; 1804; (30 x 25 in.)
The Wordsworth Trust; MP cat. 9A

STC circa 23
Peter Vandyke (1729-99); oil on canvas; 1795; (22 x 18 in.)
National Portrait Gallery; MP cat. 1