Community, Domestic Space and the Self in Coleridge's Conversation Poems

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WHEN COMPILING the first edition of his collected poems, *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), Coleridge gathered a number of his poems and grouped them under the heading "Meditative poems in Blank Verse"—"The Eolian Harp" (August 1795), "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement" (October 1796), "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" (July 1797), "Frost at Midnight" (February 1798), "Fears in Solitude", "The Nightingale" (both April 1798), "Dejection: An Ode" (April 1802) and "To William Wordsworth" (January 1807). These poems exhibit a particular style which enables a consideration of them as a group. They celebrate retirement, friendship, domesticity, happiness and the influences of the physical world. George McLean Harper described these poems as the Conversation poems taking the term from the subtitle to Coleridge's poem "The Nightingale. A Conversation Poem".[1]

Coleridge's Conversation poems explore the values needed to keep a community together. His ideal is based on the behaviour of such rural residents as himself, the Wordsworths, the erstwhile Pantisocrats and other retired radicals who had made a decision to dwell together. This paper examines the ideas of community, family and the poet's self as revealed in some of the Conversation poems.

These poems represent a number of themes present in all of Coleridge's poetry. Marriage, family, friendship, nature, the retired life, and the persona of the poet—all these recur in almost all the poems of this group. Insecurity made him yearn for and portray an ideal of retired familial community in his poems. According to George McLean Harper, the Conversation poems are Coleridge's "Poems of Friendship". They can be best understood when "we know what persons he had in mind when he wrote them". The Conversation poems were "composed as the expression of feelings which were occasioned by quite definite events".[2]

In July 1797 when Coleridge started living at Nether Stowey in Somerset, he had around him his family and a set of intimate friends. Hartley Coleridge, his son, had been born in September of the previous year. His friends included Thomas Poole, William Wordsworth, his sister Dorothy, and Charles Lamb, whom Coleridge had known at school and more intimately in London. John Thelwall, a radical orator and pamphleteer with whom Coleridge had corresponded during his radical Bristol days would also join him.

Writing to John Thelwall in a letter of December1796, Coleridge says that "The Eolian Harp" "is favourite of my poems".[3] The poem, written in 1795,

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[1] "Coleridge's Conversation Poems," in *English Romantic Poets* ed. M.H.Abrams. Oxford University Press, New York, 1960, pp.144-157.

[2] Ibid., p.145.

[3] *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. ed. Earl Leslie Griggs 6 vols. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1956-1971. Vol. I, p.295. Henceforth referred to as CL.

was first published in the volume *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1796 as "Effusion XXXV". It is a honeymoon poem beginning with the poet speaking to Sara, his wife, in a quiet conversational tone. The breeze is to the harp "Like some coy maid half willing to be woo'd"[4]. In a letter to Thomas Poole, Coleridge writes,

> We are settled—nay—quite domesticated at Clevedon—Our comfortable Cot!—! … The prospect around us is perhaps more *various* than any in the kingdom—Mine eye gluttonizes. —The Sea—the distant Islands—the opposite Coasts!—I shall assuredly write Rhymes—[5]

The harp sets off an associative process, which leads the speaker away from the actual circumstances.

In the *errata* of the *Sibylline Leaves*, Coleridge added the "one Life" passage to the final form of the poem.

> O! the one Life within us and abroad,
> Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
> A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
> Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where—
> Methinks, it should have been impossible
> Not to love all things in a world so fill'd;
> Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
> Is Music slumbering on her instrument.[6]

The poet is no longer separated from the ordinary course of life and as he realizes this, he thinks of Sara—"And thus, my love!"[7]. However the return is momentary. Imagination once again beckons him and the world and Sara are forgotten.

> And many idle flitting fantasies,
> Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
> As wild and various as the random gales
> That swell and flutter on this subject Lute![8]

However, Sara seems to remain a background presence: for after the speculative passage beginning "And what if all of animated nature/ Be but organic harps…" Coleridge's consciousness of Sara appears to save him from

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[4] *The Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Wordsworth Poetry Library, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Hertfordshire, 1994, p. 101, l. 15. Henceforth referred to as PW.

[5] CL, Vol. I, p.160.

[6] PW, p. 101, ll.26-33. Coleridge described the idea of "one Life" in a letter to William Sotheby in 1802— "In the Hebrew Poets each Thing has a life of its own & yet they are all one Life". (CL II 866).

[7] Ibid., l.34.

[8] Ibid. pp. 101-102, ll.40-43.

idle speculation. This return from intellectual vanity to domesticity, to his wife, reveals Coleridge's conviction that intellectual activity without faith is almost equal to death. It is here that the link between the poet and his salvation through his wife are re-established and the conversational tone is resumed.

Coleridge believed that the "most expansive Benevolence is that effected and rendered permanent by social and domestic affections".[9] Domesticity was, hence, closely linked with social feelings. He was also aware of the great threat to family and home posed by imperial expansion and slavery. In his 1795 lectures, Coleridge laments that Englishmen and slave alike have been cruelly "torn from the bleeding breast of domestic affection."[10] The effects of imperial policies on the home preoccupied Coleridge through the 1790s, pervading his lectures of 1795 and poems such as "Fears in Solitude".

In his preface to *Poems on Various Subjects* (1797), Coleridge argued that the essential function of the imagination is a feeling of oneness with things vastly different. Sympathy has a major role to play here, for it is "a law of our Nature, he, who labours under a strong feeling, is impelled to seek for sympathy."[11] It is by this capability of identification that poetry can "domesticate with the heart."[12]

The Conversation poems begin with a sense of loss and isolation and move towards forging a link between nature, man, God—what Coleridge referred to as the "one Life". "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement" opens with the description of a landscape, a scene of retirement, very similar to that of "The Eolian Harp". The poem is about pastoral retirement and also about active life, it functions as a private discourse of poetry but also as a public one, implied in 'Sermon'. The opening of the poem establishes the pleasant setting: "Low was our Cot: our tallest Rose/ Peep'd at the chamber-window."[13] The skylark's song asserts Coleridge's love for Sara. The effect of the song and of Sara is "inobstrusive" and implies a unity since both evoke pleasantness. Coleridge presents a well-attuned consciousness for nature.

> 'Such, sweet Girl!
> The inobstrusive song of Happiness,
> Unearthly minstrelsy! then only heard;
> When the Soul seeks to hear; when all is hush'd,

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[9] *Coleridge, Lectures on Revealed Religion. Its Corruptions and Political Views, in Lectures 1795*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, vol. 1 of *Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* pp. 75-229, 162. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971-2001.

[10] Coleridge, *Conciones ad Populum,* in *Lectures 1795*, p. 62; Coleridge, *Lectures on the Slave-Trade, in Lectures 1795*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, vol. 1 of *Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, pp. 231-51, 247. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971-2001.

[11] Coleridge, Preface to the First Edition, in *Poetical Works*, bk. 1, part 2, pp. 1230-2, 1231. *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, vol. 16 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971-2001.

[12] Ibid., p. 1206.

[13] PW, p. 106, ll.1-2.

And the Heart listens!'[14]

The little, picturesque idyll of the cottage is presented as a natural place. The cottage is a "Blessed Place" because it appears to be a place that is complete in itself. This picture of the cottage is reflected in the larger prospect that the speaker sees from the hill in the second verse paragraph, "It seem'd like Omnipresence! God methought,/ Had built him there a Temple!"[15] The return, in the final verse paragraph, to the initial context of retirement is charged with a sense of all that has intervened. The reference to social suffering and the concern to alleviate the suffering of others makes him 'leave' the wonderful spot and thereby achieve a 'return'.

In the year 1797, Coleridge wrote "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," in which he achieved a wonderful blend of feeling, thought, imagery and structure. The poem was transcribed in a letter to Southey along with the circumstances of its composition: "dear Sara accidentally emptied a skillet of boiling milk on my foot, which confined me during the whole time of C. Lamb's stay & still prevents me from *all walks* longer than a furlong."[16] The poem begins with a sense of loss that the speaker has suffered.

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
This lime-tree bower my prison![17]

Thomas Poole's garden is not an aspect of nature but a prison within which he is locked. The poet assumes knowledge here of the theories of memory and association which he shared with Wordsworth.

I have lost
Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness![18]

The poem moves from retirement and apparent loneliness to introspection, to the 'joy' the poet feels and the ultimately enlivening response to nature. This joy is achieved as he imaginatively traverses the journey undertaken by his friends. The descent into the "dell" is a projection of his dark mood. However, once he emerges into the open sky, everything is changed. He celebrates the fact that he shares with Lamb, an external influence on the mind of man which brings "joy's deepest calm".

The happiness and joy that he achieves is a distinctive quality of Coleridge's experience of nature. The vivid and beautiful description of the play of light in the garden testifies to Coleridge's belief in the presence of an

[14] Ibid., p. 107, ll.22-26.
[15] Ibid. ll.38-42.
[16] CL, Vol. I, p.334.
[17] PW, p. 178, ll.1-3.
[18] Ibid., p. 179, ll.2-5.

all-pervading spirit in nature: "A delight/ Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad/ As I myself were there!"

The delight attributed to Lamb is also Coleridge's own, and makes a claim for the divinity in nature which constitutes the highest form of experience: "Henceforth I shall know/ That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure". He arrives at the attainment of this joy through an act of imagination which enables him to trace the path taken by his friends and thereby share in their experience. There is the sense of connectedness with the human community which is a result of the change of his mental state.

> 'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,
> That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
> With lively joys the joys we cannot share.[19]

The rook also provides a connection in the experience of the friends.

> …when the last rook…,
> Flew creeking o'er thy head, and had a charm
> For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
> No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.[20]

Joy is associated throughout Coleridge's poetry with the domestic circle and has the connotation of personal relationships and a stable home. Joy is the result of a sense of shared community.

"Frost at Midnight" is a wonderful example of the pattern that George McLean Harper has denoted as the "return". The poem begins with the leitmotif of the Conversation poems—the poet all alone, separated from nature and society:

> The Frost performs its secret ministry,
> Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
> Came loud – and hark, again! loud as before.
> The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
> Have left me to that solitude, which suits
> Abstruser musings…[21]

Almost as in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison", unable to achieve the joy inherent in nature, he hopes that his son sleeping by his side will be able to see the joy inherent in the silence of nature:

> But thou, my babe! shalt wander like breeze.
> By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags

[19] Ibid., p. 181, ll.65-67.

[20] Ibid., ll.73-76.

[21] PW, p. 240, ll.1-6.

> Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
> Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
> And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
> Of that eternal language, which thy God
> Utters …[22]

The first section of the poem establishes the mood and sets the scene of the poem. It also introduces the influence of nature on the poet's imagination.

> Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
> Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing,
> Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
> Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
> Making it a companionable form.[23]

Disturbed by the silence all around, the poet's mind begins to wander first outward to the surrounding countryside and then to the fireplace within the cottage. The sooty film on the grate leads the poet's mind into playful fantasy. It is a presentation of these thoughts that constitutes the second section of the poem. The childhood memories described by the poet mirror the present situation he finds himself. He moves out of the past to the immediate present and projects his desire for permanence onto his son sleeping by his side. The son becomes an image of the poet's ideal self. As the speaker transcends his own limitations, he becomes aware of his sense of loss, and gains a sense of the certainty of imagination through his love for his child. The third stanza is an explanation of what had been hoped for in the earlier stanza. This is expressed in terms of the child's future and the oneness he will feel with nature and the sense of his participation. As he is filled with hopeful expectation for his son's future, he is able to move away from his loneliness towards imaginative reunion—the "one Life".

The poem returns in the last stanza to the simple description and the frost of the opening lines. These final lines are a realization of the unity that has emerged from the speaker's experience.

> Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
> Whether the summer cloathe the general earth
> With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
> Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
> Of mossy apple-tree …[24]

Relationships with friends and family are at the centre in the Conversation

[22] Ibid., p. 242, ll.54-61.

[23] Ibid., p. 240, ll.15-19.

[24] PW, p. 242, ll.65-69.

poems. At the beginning of "Frost at Midnight" the poet's identity is distinct from his friends. As he reflects on nature in which he plans to bring up his son, he becomes involved in the collective natural harmony.

The Conversation poems have at their core the family around which his life revolved and in the pursuance of and enjoyment of common goals and ideas rather than the individual voice. In "The Eolian Harp" it is the voice of the family, the household harmony that is assured. In "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison", it is the collective identity of all those on the walk that enables the poet to join in their joys. In "Frost at Midnight" it is his son, the "babe" who brings the ideas of family into the poem. All three poems, like the rest of the Conversation poems, deal with the idea of bringing the community together into coherence. It is Coleridge's friends and family that become the rallying point in these poems.

The Conversation poems present the transformations of his inner conflict to achieve what he lacked in personal life. Tormented and torn as he was in his personal life, he succeeded in conveying in his poetry a sense of wholeness reaching indeed to great heights at times, yet the trials of his personal life left an imprint on some of his poems which could not escape from the brokenness of his condition.