Coleridge's Symbol and the Soul's Vocabulary

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THE BEST WORKS OF LITERATURE, AS WORDSWORTH WROTE, are those which 'improve the human mind and tempt to repeated perusal, and are read till they sink into it–and are even treasured up in the very shape they bore, when the reader first felt grateful to the Author for the good he had done him' (Letter to T. Wyse, May 3, 1838). The invitation to contribute a reflection on Coleridge's importance has called to mind my own gratitude for the good his writings have done me. Throughout his best works–from his psycho-theological poetry to his literary criticism–Coleridge furnishes a vocabulary for describing the inner life, especially those movements of spiritual experience and their relationship to the natural world. One important contribution of that kind is his concept of the symbol, which represents the confluence of two important currents of his thought–his theory of the imagination and his inquiries into nature. Coleridge's symbol is an essential, sometimes puzzling, aspect of his philosophy. It remains a significant contribution to English natural theology, language theory, literary criticism, and biblical hermeneutics. Yet Coleridge left no singular treatise on the symbol. Instead his thoughts on the subject lie scattered across his writings. Assembly is required to understand it best, but the subject is too complex for a full documentation here. This essay is more of a personal reflection on my engagement with Coleridge's symbol rather than a proper scholarly exposition. For me, his symbology helped make sense of my own complex experiences in nature.

I grew up in a small village in Louisiana and spent most of my time walking in the woods or sitting on the banks of the Pushepatapa Creek, a sandy rivulet that meandered silently through the light and shade of low hollows of vacant pine and hardwoods outside of town. I would watch the water wend past a wooded bend as it flowed on like an amber stream of resin. There was a beauty in that creek-bend that enchanted me. Actually, the beauty bothered me. There were times when the beauty at the creek seemed to allude to something beyond the creek itself. The experience was sometimes like that of melancholy, yet there was no cause for sadness. Other times, it was a question with no answer, a seeking without a path, an encounter with no words for description. The appearance of the creek had the weight of something significant. It *was meaning* something. Yet no one I knew spoke of these encounters. I listened for it in sermons, in hymns, in movies, in songs. There seemed to be no language for it. Still, I returned often to see the creek in different lights–sometimes in the morning when the rays of sun were breaking through the fine mist under the trees; or the heat of the day underneath the blaring cicadas; or in the summer evenings when twilight lingered long after sundown. I brought each time the same fascination and wordless perplexity.

I continued in this practice for a couple of years until Hurricane Katrina passed over the village and destroyed much of the woods. I saw the secluded hollows laid bare to the overcast skies which followed for days in the wake of

the storm. My family packed up what remained and moved to Florida. But before we left, I caught a last glimpse of the creek. Following the railroad tracks to the water, I clambered over fallen trees to the train bridge that crossed the bend. Its waters below, bloated and dark, rolled with branches, roots, roof tiles. With the beauty gone, it was clear that that *something* wasn't nature alone.

Displaced from my woods, I forayed into literature and theology in search of an expression for what I saw and felt at the creek. There were several clues. In scripture there were the haunting lines from Solomon's *Song*: 'Return, return, that we may look upon thee' (*AV*, 6:13). Elsewhere, St. Augustine's beauty, *tam antiqua et tam nova*; C.S. Lewis's 'joy;' Novalis's *Sehnsucht*; Wordsworth's fled 'visionary gleam;' John Clare's lament for the commons; Thoreau's musical hum heard in the pines on Spaulding's Farm.

There was Coleridge, too. A chapter epigraph in one of MacDonald's novels introduced me to his poetry with these lines from 'Dejection: An Ode:'

> Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
> A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
> Enveloping the Earth—
> And from the soul itself must there be sent
> A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
> Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

My imagination lit up. I thought, 'Is the 'glory' here the same *something* I saw at the creek?' I searched for Coleridge in library anthologies, found more, and read on, asking, 'Him, too?'

Following the thread to his larger works, I found Coleridge's writings on nature, which, to him, was comprised of

> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
> Of that eternal language, which thy God
> Utters, who from eternity doth teach
> Himself in all, and all things in himself
> ('Frost at Midnight,' ll. 59-62)

I felt a kinship to the one who, in 'Fears in Solitude' (1817), 'with many feelings, many thoughts, | Made up a meditative joy … found | Religious meanings in the forms of Nature!' (ll. 22-24). I wondered how the 'forms of Nature' might be the 'eternal language' of God, and how the soul might learn to read it. In one of his many digressions (Appendix C) of his *The Statesman's Manual*, I discovered his theory of the symbol, which fascinated me with an almost religious attraction.

When Coleridge addressed the early nineteenth-century readers in the first of his *Lay Sermons*, *The Statesman's Manual* (December 1816), he sounded out of touch. His voice was like that of a seventeenth-century divine–a Baxter or a Flavel–instead of a voice of his times. The cry of the prophet Jeremiah, 'Ask for the ancient paths' (*AV*, 6:16) may speak as the heart of Coleridge's lay

sermons, as well as for much of the public-facing prose of his later years. In the sermon, Coleridge sought to counter 'the present Distresses' of the state of English society following the war with France.[1]

Among those present distresses, as Coleridge saw it, was a lost regard for nature as sacred and alive with a spiritual reality intelligible through the imagination. His contemporary readers turned more readily to William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), which reduced the natural world to a collection of mere tokens of proof for a divine Creator. Such evidence, Coleridge believed, was commonplace: 'That in its obvious sense and literal interpretation it declares the being and attributes of the Almighty Father, none but the *fool in heart* has ever dared to gainsay' (*LS*, 70). Paley's natural theology was trivial and platitudinous compared to England's earlier divines. In a notebook entry written in 1809, Coleridge compared Paley's prominence in the nineteenth century to that of Eriugena in the ninth century:

> O place before your eyes the Islands of Britain & Ireland in the reign of Alfred, its wide Morasses & dreary Heaths, its bloodstained and desolate Shores, its untaught and scanty Population/--and then behold the Monarch listening now to Bede, now to Joannes Erigena--/& then behold the same Realm, a mighty Empire full of motion, full of Books . . . and behold them, yea, their Rulers & their wise men, listening to Paley, and Malthus--/--O it is mournful. (*CN*, III, 3560)

Coleridge's symbology, where it appears in the *Lay Sermons*, sought to further an appreciation of the natural world as a living revelation. Where it appears in *The Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge's symbol was largely interventional and aimed to recover an old way of reading nature that could be traced back from England's protestant and medieval scholastic divines to Greek philosophers and Hebrew poets. Nature, as a 'revelation of God,' and not merely the *evidence* of God, has 'been the music of gentle and pious minds in all ages . . . to read it likewise in a figurative sense, and to find therein correspondencies and symbols of the spiritual world' (70).

To read nature symbolically, 'in a figurative sense,' means, among other things, to recognize the reflection of the divine mind in the laws of nature. As he wrote elsewhere, nature becomes 'transparent to us, when we regard the forms of matter as words, as symbols, valuable only as the expression, an unrolled but yet a glorious fragment, of the wisdom of the Supreme Being' (*PL* II, 541). Coleridge's symbology balances, on one hand, the typological or didactic interpretation of nature, commonly found among English Reformed scholastics, and, on the other, the Paleyan idea of nature as mere documentation left behind by a divine hand. Symbols were not lifeless characters of divine script. They were windows. Coleridge characterized the symbol 'by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence

[1] Writing to R. H. Brabant, Coleridge describes how he had been solicited 'to give . . . a small Tract on the present Distresses in the form of a Lay-Sermon. . . .' Coleridge to R.H. Brabant 21 Sept., 1816.

of the Eternal through and in the Temporal; It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part of that Unity, of which it is the representative' (*LS*, 30). It seemed to me that what I had seen at the creek bend was not the creek bend itself, but something *through* it.

Coleridge's concept of the symbol began to develop as he explored the relationship between the mind and natural world. What happens when we look upon a beautiful landscape, or a flower, or the moon? Why should it arouse in us a sense of beauty and of something more permanent and true than what the mere material seems to be? These were questions Coleridge pondered while looking out of a window from the island of Malta one evening. He wrote:

> In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro' the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing any thing new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phenomenon 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 Logos, the Creator! and the Evolver! (*CN* II, 2546)

The symbol exists somewhere between the imagination and nature–but not exclusively in either. The bodily senses behold the outward forms of nature, but in those forms the imagination infuses the sense of the eternal. The mind contemplates the objects of nature–in this instance, the moon through a dewy window–and intuits something *beyond the moon*. The moon itself is a common sight, but even if the moon were a 'new phenomenon,' it would still speak of something 'that already and forever exists' and would excite 'a forgotten and hidden Truth.' The image of the moon arouses the sense of questioning suggested by the imagination, which sees through it and recognizes something evocative and familiar within the image. For Coleridge, the 'Logos, the Creator! and the Evolver' was the divine, creative power working transcendently and imminently through the natural world and the imagination. Yet nature alone is not always a positive force for Coleridge. In later years, Coleridge would come to a generally neutral, and sometimes a negative, view of nature:

> … in Nature the natural ground or origin is *evil*. But this respects the *potential* only: for the Ground itself is only the Potential contemplated in it's Unity [sic.] … Nature is but a term for Hades, the chaos, or the fallen non-absolute Distinctities as blended in undistinguishable multeity, or one by negation of all number, below or above.— (*CN* V 6272, f8v-9)

Nature is, in part, redeemed by the imagination. In this way, the imagination is what Coleridge called 'logosophic,' because it acts upon nature with a living power. The outward forms of nature take on a positive, symbolic significance through the power of the imagination, which orders the chaos of nature into signifiers of divine order and truth—just as the creative act of the divine *Logos*,

the Word of God in the preamble to St. John's Gospel, spoke form and fullness into the chaos and void of creation.

Coleridge's symbology offers a way of understanding how the imagination discovers higher, sometimes religious, meanings in the outward forms of beauty. It is a method of interpreting the natural world as figures of truth that, together, constitute a way of making sense of beauty. As Nicholas Halmi observes, the symbol is meant 'not to describe objects of perception but to condition the perception of objects'.[2] Coleridge believed that this conditioning involves a productive interpretation of natural objects depended upon the imagination, 'the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception,' opposed to the 'counterfeit product of the mechanical understanding' (*BL* II, 304; *LS*, 30). In this sense, the symbol is neither exclusively objective or subjective. James Engell explains, 'The subjective pole of being and the objective pole of natural phenomena 'interpenetrate' (a word Coleridge coined) through the imagination, which yields a language capable of communicating and being understood'.[3] With his theory of the symbol, Coleridge attempts to refresh the interpretation of nature as a living 'revelation' (*LS*, 70). Nature, so revealed, is a living text, another 'great Bible of God,' containing characters and signs that do not merely *signify* or *point* to religious meanings but also contain those meanings within them (*PL* II, 541). For me, this seemed to account wholly for my own encounters with beauty.

These accountings are vital. In light of today's impoverishing lexicon for such encounters, this remains an important provision of Coleridge's intellectual prose. Interpreting and evaluating his literature grants critics an occasion to enrich the vocabulary by which such aspects of literature are discussed. Dennis Taylor, emeritus professor of Boston College, addressed this concern when he wrote:

> There is a need in our time for religious interpretations that are substantial enough to enter into a productive and competitive relation with the reigning critical discourses. . . . The need for a religious literary criticism not only is reflective of a present scholarly void, but also comes out of a spiritual hunger, felt by many teachers and students, for a way of discussing the intersections of their own spiritual lives with what they read.[4]

Many Romanticists, and especially Coleridgeans, have performed this well and should continue to advance this discourse. In a similar way, Coleridge's poetry and prose offer the opportunity to ministers and lay people in the Christian church and among religious and spiritual communities more broadly. Current discourses surrounding spiritual life and practical theology can be elevated and strengthened by Coleridge's writing.

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[2] Halmi, Nicholas, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1; 101.
[3] Engell, James, *The Creative Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 339.
[4] Taylor, Dennis, 'The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism' in *Seeing into the Life of Things: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience*, ed. John L. Mahoney (Fordham University Press, 1998), p. 3.

A proper spiritual sensibility was something that Coleridge believed essential to human nature, and one method of strengthening that sensibility was to enlarge the vocabulary for such experiences. Coleridge's aesthetic vocabulary did more than provide a language for understanding my own encounters at the creek. It confirmed the reality of past occasions with beauty; prevented such moments from sinking into forgetfulness amidst the variety of life; provided a means by which such experiences might be discussed and understood; and located them within wider traditions of others who have encountered beauty upon similar terms. The creek by which I was 'nourished and invisibly repaired' (Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 1850, xii, l. 215), was, though lost, given new meaning through Coleridge's writings. The best writers give this. They are not those who merely give us things to think about, but rather, as MacDonald wrote, they 'wake things up that are in us'.[5] Such depths of feeling might be both confirmed and awakened by the honest searchings of Coleridge's writings. Certainly one very good provision furnished by the best of literature and religion—and the best of Coleridge—are the references for grasping such ineffable motions of the human experience.

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William Holl (1807-1871); from William Shuter's portrait of circa 1798; stipple and line engraving; 1852; (6 x 4 in.) Used as the frontispiece for Edward Moxon's 1852 edition of Coleridge's poems; MP cat 3.

[5] MacDonald, George, 'The Fantastic Imagination,' *Dish of Orts*, Sampson Low, Marston & Co., London: 1895, p. 319.