"[T]he fear of snapping the flower": Poetic Obscurity in the Sublime System of Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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> Critics, who are most ready to bring this charge of pedantry and unintelligibility, are the most apt to overlook the important fact, that besides the language of words, there is a language of spirits (sermo interior) and that the former is only the vehicle of the latter.[1]

WHEN EDMUND BURKE ENTWINED THE PASSION caused by the Sublime with 'some degree of horror' in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), he treated *obscurity* as an attribute of the Sublime.[2] To illustrate his thought (Part II, Section III-IV), Burke quoted two passages from Book 1 and 2 of *Paradise Lost*, for 'No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light by the force of a judicious obscurity, than Milton'.[3] Coleridge shared this oxymoronic view of 'a judicious obscurity' in a 1796 notebook entry, which is 'an abridged quotation from Jonathan Richardson's *Explanatory Notes and Remarks on Milton's Paradise Lost* (1734)' (*CN* I 276n):

> A Reader of Milton must be always on his Duty: he is surrounded with sense; it rises in every line; every word is to the purpose. There are no lazy intervals: all has been considered and demands & merits observation.
>
> If this be called obscurity, let it be remembered tis such a one as is complaisant to the Reader: *not that vicious obscurity, which proceeds from a muddled head &c.* (*CN* I 276)

Except the last half sentence—which I have emphasised—the rest was also quoted in MS1 (*PW* I.2.1238-39) of the Preface to *Poems* (1797), dated 27 February (*CN* I 276n.). A subtle difference crops up, however, concerning the way in which Coleridge conceives *clearness* alongside *obscurity*. Instead of elucidating, as Burke did, how 'obscurity' is more affective than 'clearness' in producing sublime passion,[4] Coleridge did not juxtapose the terms; rather, he implied *clearness*, as he sought to discriminate between different kinds of *obscurity*:

> you ought to distinguish between obscurity residing in the uncommonness of the thought, and that which proceeds from thoughts unconnected & language not adapted to the expression of them. When

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1 *BL* I 290. To trace how later Coleridge conceived the issues discussed in this paper, please refer to *BL* I 287-90.

2 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful,* ed. Paul Guyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 47.

3 Burke, p. 58.

4 Burke, p. 49.

> you do find out the meaning of my poetry, can you (in general, I mean) alter the language so as to make it more perspicuous—the thought remaining the same? — By 'dreamy semblance' I *did* mean . . . so as to make Reality appear a Semblance, and the Present like a dream in Sleep. Now this thought is obscure; because few people have experienced the same feeling. Yet several have—& they were proportionally delighted with the lines as expressing some strange sensations, which they themselves had never ventured to communicate . . . (*CL* I 277-8)

With reference to Burke's *Enquiry* (part II, sections III-IV), readers are able to feel the awe of sublimity primarily through 'great and confused images' in poetry 'which affect because they are crowded and confused', but will 'infallibly lose the clearness'.[5] For Coleridge, however, Milton's success derives not simply from creating obscure images, but in employing fitting expressions for 'the purpose'.

As an advance upon, if not a divergence from, Burke's differentiation, the kind of obscurity 'residing in', as a property of, the 'uncommonness of the thought' itself implied a Coleridgean distinction between *clearness* and clarity—even though they are not his terminology—serving as relational concepts for his interpretation of obscurity. This Coleridgean *clearness* is paralinguistic, or in a way more profound to the intellect than the mere clarity in expression: as the OED reminds us, *clearness* is 'fairness, beauty'; it is also a 'freedom from…obscurity' or 'from anything obstructive'.[6] This freedom living in the judicious representation of the obscurity of a thought is a faithful semblance of reality, which coexisted with what Coleridge called a 'perspicuous' representation of obscurity. The former is what I understand as true poetic obscurity that offers readers *clearness* of the thought; whilst the latter, if it is to be done inappropriately, is simply a linguistic defect contingent on 'thoughts unconnected & language not adapted'.

To place *clearness* within *obscurity* in poetry is a notion transcending the epistemological limits implied by Coleridge. This understanding of poetic obscurity, albeit rarely foregrounded as a Miltonic influence, appears to be the motive for some major revisions in 'Religious Musings' and 'Composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire' (the revised title of the poem first published as 'Effusion XXXV' and later entitled 'The Eolian Harp') in *Poems* (1797). In this article I take Burke as a point of reference to lay out the complexities involved in the Sublime system of the early (pre-1798) Coleridge, concerning the role of *obscurity* in justifying God epistemologically through faith and feelings, and in engendering the *clearness* of Truth in poetry.

These revised poems, which explored the Sublime, were all composed during the pre-1798 period. In 1796, Charles Lamb commented that the 1796 'Religious Musings' was 'the noblest poem in the language, next after Paradise

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[5] Burke, p. 51.

[6] "clearness, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017.

lost, & even that was not made the vehicle of such grand truths'.[7] Lamb's approval of Coleridge's rhetoric of the Sublime turned out not to be widely shared. Acknowledging whilst pardoning himself from criticisms, Coleridge wrote in the Preface to the second edition of *Poems* (1797):

> I have pruned the double epithets with no sparing hand; and used my best efforts to tame the swell and glitter both of thought and diction. This latter fault however had insinuated itself into my Religious Musings with such intricacy of union, that sometimes I have omitted to disentangle the weed from the fear of snapping the flower. A third and heavier accusation has been brought against me, that of obscurity; but not, I think, with equal justice. An Author is obscure, when his conceptions are dim and imperfect, and his language incorrect, or unappropriate, or involved. A poem that abounds in allusions, like the Bard of Gray, or one that impersonates high and abstract truths, like Collins's Ode on the poetical character; claims not to be popular—but should be acquitted of obscurity. The deficiency is in the Reader. . . . If any man expect from my poems the same easiness of style which he admires in a drinking-song, for him I have not written. Intelligibilia, non intellectum adfero.[8] (*PW* I.2.1232-33)[9]

On the one hand, when Coleridge speaks of the attempt to 'tame the swell and glitter', he implies that the grandeur of his subject matter should persuade the reader to overlook the flaws in expressions. On the other, Coleridge articulated a genuine dilemma beyond his voice of offended ego—that is 'the fear of snapping the flower'. This vivid image seems to be asking: what if the Sublime is so obscure (so high and abstract) that only representations of obscurity through the extensive use of allusions may suffice to preserve its delicate shape? In reply, Coleridge suggests that the wish to clarify through disentangling risks distorting, twisting or compressing the truth. The final Latin phrase encapsulated the same spirit: 'I offer things that are capable of being understood, not a thing [straightforwardly] understood' (*PW* I.2.1233n). Therefore, even with the revision he made in the 1797 version of 'Religious Musings', strenuous effort from the reader is demanded.

Coleridge was eager to meet the Miltonic standard that persisted in the eighteenth-century, yet obscurity in 'Religious Musings' seems to concern itself more with the weeds that surround the flower than with the flower itself. These weeds derive, perhaps, from Coleridge's 'dim and imperfect' perception of the Sublime and a disparity between his thought and moral feelings:

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[7] Charles Lamb, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb, Vol. I 1796-1801,* ed. by Edwin W. Marrs, Jr (London: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 95.

[8] *Tr*:'I offer things that are capable of being understood, not a thing [straightforwardly] understood' (*PW* I.2.1233n)

[9] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge Poems 1797, Revolution and Romanticism, 1789-1834*: A series of facsimile reprints chosen and introduced by Jonathan Wordsworth (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1997), p. xvii-xix. All 1797 versions of poems and footnotes are cited from it.

> I build all my poetic pretentions on the Religious Musings—which you will read with a POET's Eye, with the same unprejudicedness, I wish, I could add, the same pleasure, with which the atheistic Poem of Lucretius. A Necessitarian, I cannot possibly disesteem a man for his religious or anti-religious Opinions—and as an Optimist, I feel diminished concern.—I have studied the subject deeply &widely—I cannot say, without prejudice: for when I commenced the Examination, I was an Infidel. (*CL* I 205)

In this letter to Thelwall (late April 1796), Coleridge admits that a 'prejudiced' (i.e. conventional or orthodox) outlook would fail to appreciate his ambition to examine various religious opinions. As he appraised these religious positions, he was drawn to various modes of transgressive thought. The major revisions during the pre-1798 period unfold Coleridge's hesitation to commit to a single line of thought, which seems to entail obscurity in the poetic language in consequence of a 'muddled head'. But the poet's conscious 'fear of snapping the flower' urges readers to try to appreciate the *clearness* engendered in his poetic obscurity as a metaphysical quality inherent to the nature of the Sublime.

'Religious Musings' takes the Sublime as truth with Christ at the heart of it. In the first published version (1796), it commences with a scene of the birth of Jesus on Christmas' Eve:

> This is the time, when most divine to hear,
> As with a Cherub's "loud uplifted" trump
> The voice of Adoration my thrill'd heart
> Rouses! And with the rushing noise of wings
> Transports my spirit to the favor'd fields
> Of Bethlehem, there in Shepherd's guise to sit
> Sublime of extacy, and mark entranc'd
> The glory-streaming VISION throng the night. (1796, ll. 1-8)[10]

The present tense 'is' gives a theatrical tone to the sublime entrance of Jesus in a vision of the imagination. The use of enjambment, as, for example, between the end of line 6 and the beginning of line 7, adds a crescendo to the uplifting passion of 'Sublime' that breaks through the 'Shepherd's guise'. Towards the end of the poem, Nature's jubilant celebration—infused with alliteration and assonance—makes even more compelling this initial rapture at the second coming of Christ:

> The SAVIOUR comes! While as to solemn strains
> The Thousand Years lead up their mystic dance,

[10] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems on Various Subject 1796, Revolution and Romanticism, 1789-1834*: A series of facsimile reprints chosen and introduced by Jonathan Wordsworth (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1990). All 1796 versions of poems and footnotes are cited from it.

Old Ocean claps his hands! The Desert shouts!
(1796, ll. 380-82)

The thousand years that arrive *after* the second coming of Christ is a classic paradigm of millenarianism or, more precisely, post-millennialism. However, the 1797 footnote to 'The Thousand Years' (l. 365, 1797) confuses readers with a statement of millennialism that advocates, as Peter Kitson defines the matter, 'gradual amelioration of this world until it approximates the kingdom of Christ'[11] *before* his second coming—in other words, a pre-millennial process[12] Coleridge goes on, in this footnote about 'The Millenium' (Coleridge's spelling of the Millennium), to claim '[t]hat all who in past ages have endeavoured to ameliorate the state of man, will rise and enjoy the fruits and flowers, the imperceptible seeds of which they had sown in their former Life'. The people Coleridge refers to are:

Coadjutors of God. To MILTON's trump
The high Groves of the renovated Earth
Unbosom their glad echoes: inly hush'd
Adoring NEWTON his serener eye
Raises to heaven: and he of mortal kind
Wisest, he* first who mark'd the ideal tribes
Up the fine fibres thro' the sentient brain.
Lo! PRIESTLEY there, Patriot, and Saint, and Sage,
Him, full of years, from his lov'd native land
Statesmen blood-stain'd and Priests idolatrous
By dark lies mad'ning the blind multitude
Drove with vain hate. . . (1797, ll. 370-81)
*David Hartley.

The enjambment of the lines amplifies the rhythm and draws the poem towards the goal of the Millennium which Coleridge describes in a footnote as 'Man… contin[uing] to enjoy the highest glory, of which human nature is capable', here prepared for by the works of Milton, Newton, Hartley and Priestley.

Coleridge synthesised the ideas of these distinguished predecessors, and built his system out of theirs. In his contribution (written in 1795) to Book II of Southey's *Joan of Arc*, he criticises the materialist philosophy of Newton and Hartley (ll. 34-37) which he challenges with the less materialistic system of

[11] Peter Kitson, 'Coleridge, Milton and the Millennium', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 18.2, 1987, pp. 61-66, at p. 61.

[12] The goal of the Millennium may be attained through two trajectories: 'millenarianism (post-millennialism)' or 'millennialism (pre-millennialism)'. The 'post-' or 'pre-' represent the time of the Millennium appearing after or before the second coming of Christ. Millenarianism is more broadly taken as a faith in the second coming of Christ, and the millenarians believe that the second coming of Christ will be followed by the Millennium through divine intervention, which may be referred to as the apocalypse or even politically, a revolution. Millennialism on the contrary involves the human effort of progression to bring forth the Millennium. Failure of the French Revolution can then be seen by the Millennialists as either a setback to social progression or a divine will wrongly executed. More effort is required to attain the Millennium before the second coming of Christ.

Leibnizian monads—that is the binding together of autonomous simple substances (monads), each carrying perceptions and desires, but together forming a composite organic whole:[13]

> But some there are who deem themselves most free
> When they within this gross and visible sphere
> Chain down the winged thought, scoffing ascent
> Proud in their meanness; and themselves they cheat
> With noisy emptiness of learned phrase,
> Their subtle fluids, impacts, essences,
> Self-working Tools, uncaus'd Effects, and all
> Those blind Omniscients, those Almighty Slaves,
> Untenanting Creation of its God. (ll. 29-37)

That is the materialists dealt with. Then Coleridge turns to monads:

> Here we pause humbly. Others boldlier think
> That as one body is the aggregate
> Of atoms numberless, each organiz'd;
> So by a strange and dim similitude,
> Infinite myriads of self-conscious minds
> Form one all-conscious Spirit, who directs
> With absolute ubiquity of thought
> All his component monads, that yet seem
> With various province and apt agency
> Each to pursue its own self-centering end. (ll. 40-49)

The agency and conscious will that each monad embodies also forms part of and is directed by 'one all-conscious Spirit' (i.e. God), yet seems to drive its course of motion to serve its purpose independently. Coleridge's understanding of this Monadology appears to be the groundwork partially supporting his own thoughts in the *Rugby MS Draft 2* of 'Effusion', dated and transcribed by Paul Cheshire as a version of the text preceding the published version in April 1796:

> And what if All of animated Life
> Be but as Instruments diversly fram'd
> That tremble into thought, while thro' them breathes
> One infinite and intellectual Breeze?
> And all in different Heights so aptly hung,
> That Murmurs indistinct and Bursts sublime,
> Shrill Discords and most soothing Melodies,
> Harmonious form Creation's vast concént?

[13] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings*, Tr. Robert Latta (London: OUP, Humphrey Milford, 1925).

> Thus *GOD* would be the universal Soul;
> Mechaniz'd matter as th' organic harps,
> And each one's Tunes be that, which each calls *I*.—
> (Rugby MS Draft 2, ll. 36-46)[14]

The mind of each life resembles a unique instrument with a different tune, like monads seemingly pursuing their own ends. Coleridge's organic picture of 'Tunes', however, contains a further suggestion: from the harmonious music of all creation, '*GOD*' is inferred as the master mind which each '*I*' shares. Fascinatingly, though, the rhetorical questions seem to give greater weight to men than to their creator. The inference of our participation in the unifying force of God is the sublime destiny of mankind, a 'Truth' (the flower) inseparable from the awareness of our epistemological limits proposed in 'Religious Musings':

> 'Tis the sublime of man,
> Our noontide Majesty, to know ourselves
> Parts and proportions of one wond'rous whole:
> This fraternizes man, this constitutes
> Our charities and bearings. But 'tis God
> Diffus'd thro' all, that doth make all one whole;
> This the worst superstition, him except,
> Aught to desire, SUPREME REALITY! (1796, ll. 139-48)

The 'sublime of man' conveys two senses here: the grandeur of mankind and the destiny of mankind. This form of splendour, knowing ourselves as parts of 'one wondrous whole', is the sublime truth of our humanity. Equally, that 'God / diffus'd thro' all' is the 'SUPREME REALITY' is the *flower* that ought to be desired at all times, even if that God can only be apprehended, but not rationally comprehended, remaining beyond the limits of our understanding, and thus legitimately and sublimely obscure.

The gist of the 'sublime of man' hinges on a two-fold realisation: 'to know ourselves, / Parts and portions of one wond'rous whole' and to recognise that 'tis God / Diffus'd thro' all, that doth make all one whole'. In this paradigm, there is no place for the second person of the Trinity. The Unitarian Coleridge would have applauded, although the poems tell a slightly different story. In 'Composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire' (1797), for instance, Coleridge revised lines 36-46 of the *Rugby MS Draft 2* into lines 36-40 of this version:

> And what if all of animated nature
> Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps,
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze,

[14] Paul Cheshire, 'The Eolian Harp', in *Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series 17, Summer 2001, pp. 1-22, at p. 8.

> At once the Soul of each and God of all?—
> But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
> Darts, O beloved Woman! nor such thoughts
> Dim and unhallow'd dost thou not reject,
> And biddest me walk humbly with my God. (1797, ll. 36-44)

The revised lines 36-40 are more lucid, without changing the essence of the lines' original meaning. Framed as a rhetorical question however, Coleridge mingled his speculation with a note of uncertainty—'And what if …?' Erasing the line-break between lines 40 and 41 and adding a dash to the end of line 40 in this 1797 version, Coleridge dramatizes his growing awareness of 'unhallowed' religious infidelity. The same awareness features in a letter to Thelwall dated 14 October 1797:

> I can at times feel strongly the beauties, you describe, in themselves, & for themselves—but more frequently *all things* appear little—all the knowledge, that can be acquired, child's play——the universe itself—what but an immense heap of *little* things?—I can contemplate nothing but parts, &parts are all *little*—!—My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something *great*—something *one & indivisible*—and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty!—But in this faith *all things* counterfeit infinity!— (*CL* I 349)

The sublimity in Nature sourced from the Oneness of the universe in this passage appears also in 'Religious Musings'. The stark difference, however, lies in the last phrase: 'But in this faith *all things* counterfeit infinity!'. The word 'counterfeit' suggests a gap between a known orthodox reality and the idealised imagination that generates sublime passion. This elucidation sheds light on the lines revised into a rhetorical question ('And what if . . . / At once the Soul of each and God of all?') in both 'Effusion XXXV' (1796) and 'Composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire' (1797). The revision is less a case of linguistic cautiousness than a reflection of a disparity between what Coleridge would like to believe as he pursued the Sublime and the 'heap of *little things*' he recognised as worldly reality. Coleridge did not commit firmly to either of these positions, which makes it difficult to accept the description of him as 'a compulsive monist', as M. H. Abrams proposed.[15]

And yet, Abrams is right to suggest that 'for [Coleridge] the intellectual cultural, and moral aim of man is not to return to the undifferentiated unity at the beginning of development, but to strive toward the multeity-in-unity at its end'.[16] This is precisely why Coleridge paid tribute to his predecessors whose ideas, though incongruent with his, aspired to improve the state of men. Unlike

[15] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 267.
[16] Abrams, p. 269.

these predecessors however, Coleridge spoke of his inner struggle while musing about various unorthodox religious positions in both 'Effusion XXXV' and 'Composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire':

> These shapings of the unregenerate mind,
> Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
> On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.
> For never guiltless may I speak of Him,
> Th' INCOMPREHENSIBLE! save when with awe
> I praise him, and with Faith that inly feels;
> Who with his saving mercies healed me,
> A sinful and most miserable man
> Wilder'd and dark, . . . 1797, ll. 47-55)

The 'Bubbles that glitter' are reminiscent of the stylistic 'swell and glitter' that Coleridge attempted to tame in 'Religious Musings', which after all is a minor issue. The fact that these bubbles would break bespeaks a more fundamental problem of his approach to the Sublime: Philosophy's inability to untangle the weeds around the truth has taken Coleridge further away from the *flower*, rendering truth 'incomprehensible'—all produced by 'A sinful and most miserable man', as Coleridge calls himself, and all done in 'vain'. The poetic obscurity to which he confessed looks forward to the untangling of the weeds by the Divine Being who transcends all imperfection and limitations. By the end of the 1797 'Religious Musings', Coleridge gave Truth a Platonic and visionary form:

> Believe thou, O my soul,
> Life is a vision shadowy of Truth;
> And vice, and anguish, and the wormy grave,
> Shapes of a dream! The veiling clouds retire,
> And lo! the Throne of the redeeming God
> Forth flashing unimaginable day
> Wraps in one blaze earth, heaven, and deepest hell.
> (1797, ll. 402-408)

'Life is a vision shadowy of Truth'—the reality of the obscure Sublime is contrasted with Divine revelation on the 'unimaginable day' when the 'redeeming God' reconciles the epistemological gap between him and his creations.

A footnote to this paragraph of the 1797 'Religious Musings' contains a fascinating reflection: 'This paragraph is intelligible to those, who, like the Author, believe and feel the sublime system of Berkley; and the doctrine of the final Happiness of all men'. 'The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge, 1793-8' confirms that Coleridge wrote to Joseph Cottle about his finishing of 'Religious Musings' for the first edition of *Poems* in early March,

meanwhile he also started reading the second volume of George Berkeley's works from 10-28th March 1796.[17] A passage in *Alciphron* echoes closely and summarises the metaphysical argument Coleridge lays out in 'Religious Musings':

> To me it seems the man can see neither deep nor far, who is not sensible of his own misery, sinfulness, and dependence; . . . and who would not be overjoyed to find that the road leading thither was the love of God and man, the practising every virtue, . . . and so using this world as not to abuse it. . . . Can there be a higher ambition than to overcome the world, or a wiser than to subdue ourselves, or a more comfortable doctrine than the remission of sins, or a more joyful prospect than that of having our base nature renewed and assimilated to the Deity, our being made fellow-citizens with angels, and sons of God? . . . Let any man who thinks in earnest but consider these things, and then say which he thinks deserveth best of mankind—he who sincerely believes the gospel, or he who believes not one tittle of it [?] . . . do but scan the characters, and observe the behaviour of the common sort of men on both sides: observe, and say which live most agreeably to the dictates of reason? How things should be, the reason is plain; how they are, I appeal to fact.[18]

This passage is akin to the way in which Coleridge concludes 'Religious Musings'—by affirming the necessity of a universal redemption that ensures the final happiness of men. Coleridge's theism requires him not only to believe in but also to feel the force of a 'Sublime system'; analogously, what looks like linguistic obscurity in his work becomes clear when illuminated by the author's and reader's own faith and feelings.

As a response to Burke, *clearness* in a Coleridgean sense becomes an integral part of *obscurity*, as our faith and feeling affirm the reality of the obscure Sublime. Musings on religious positions coupled with a lack of certainty contribute to Coleridge's poetic obscurity, which is also a kind of imaginative freedom within the inherent obscurity of the Sublime. It is his paradoxical achievement to convey the link between *clearness* and authentic obscurity, that show the need to entangle the *flower* of Sublime revelation with *the weeds* of endless conjectures about and various approaches to apprehend the Truth.

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[17] George Whalley, 'The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge, 1793-8', *The Library*, 5th Series, IV (Oxford, 1950), pp. 114-32, at p. 122.

[18] George Berkeley, *The Works of George Berkeley, Vol II: Philosophical Works 1732-33*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1732), pp. 198-99.