

Imagine Counter-Imagine: Coleridge's Haunted Re-Dedications

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COLERIDGE, AS POET AND THEOLOGIAN, PRESENTS a striking instance of a range of practice and sensibility which cannot but illuminate a long-running debate on what possible relations, overlaps and conflicts there might be between composing a poem and offering a prayer.¹ Coleridge lived much of his creative and affective life between the (often turbulent) demands of making poems and a no less insistent urge towards being wholly open to prayer. My discussion will be mediated by the contrasting, but not necessarily contesting, insights from two recent studies on Coleridge's poetry, both of which have made brilliant interventions into ways of reading this poet's work. I aim to show how Coleridge's poetry, whether stormy or contemplative, never simply converts to prayer, but will at times move closer to something like a speaking silence, opening a space within itself which it cannot occupy wholly on its own terms. It is here Coleridge can find a way of closing or completing his poetry, not so much as failure or diminution, but by affirming a relationship with what it is not. Both poetry and prayer are formally incompleteable, of course, but my interest lies in what interruptions (or even intercessions) there can be between them, as they cross each other's path, however asymmetrically. Poetry, once so interrupted, shapes a silent fall, while prayer, in accord with its own willed intention, falls *into* silence. Poetry transcends itself by *not* transforming itself into an act of prayer, and as such remains tangible for readers as a uniquely resonant 'ontological construct'.²

Coleridge's lyrics have more in common, Jim Mays remarks, with seventeenth century poets like Herbert and Crashaw than any German Romantic or French Symbolist.³ Coleridge strikingly recorded that Crashaw's verses about Saint Teresa wanting to travel to martyrdom 'were ever present to my mind whilst writing the second part of *Christabel*' (IT II 369). Richard Crashaw himself became an emblem of the Catholic poet-saint after his death, though reckoned an awkward hybrid among his Anglican friends. His close associate, Abraham Cowley, composed a heart-felt though paradoxical elegy 'On the Death of Mr. Crashaw' which, while reserving judgment on his friend's Catholic faith, could be sure 'his life was in the right' (l. 56). This was followed by the double-edged wit of 'And I myself a Catholick will be, / So far at least, great Saint, to Pray to thee' (11.57-8). How might one pray to a 'Bard Truimphant' (l.59) from within a poem except via a sleight of technique? Cowley had already undermined both himself and his friend in the couplet:

¹ See, for instance, Henri Brèmond, *Poetry and Prayer* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1927); Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry* (New York, Philosophical Library, 1955); Elizabeth Jennings, *Every Changing Shape* (London: Deutsch, 1961); Karl Rahner, 'Poetry and the Christian' in *Theological Investigations*, 1 (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1966); William T Noon, *Poetry and Prayer* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1967); Francesca Bugliani Knox, and John Took, *Poetry and Prayer*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

² For the context of an 'ontological construct' see Noon, quoted in Knox and Took, 26.

³ J.C.C. Mays, *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 182.

Still the old Heathen Gods in Numbers dwell,
The Heav'nliest thing on Earth still keeps up Hell (ll. 17-8)⁴

Cowley can only pray to his lost friend in numbers which he recognises is a prayer drawing on daemonic forces. Sheer *technē* might have something further to instil, however, as when Geoffrey Hill insists that any doctrinal poetry can only be finally understood by something other than doctrine: what is 'other' is the gift of *technē*, but which *itself* becomes something other in the process of making the gift.⁵

In a trenchant analysis of Cowley's elegy, Simon Jarvis infers that 'Poetry is no helpmeet for theology, because it is an alternative and rival economy of salvation', even while acknowledging that 'the two economies can touch one another, of course (1).⁶ Coleridge was peculiarly sensitive to matters of touch or irritability, even refining a theory of double-touch,⁷ and in this essay I reflect on how these two economies, if they are such, can touch, but do this by shifting from the poetry/theology dichotomy, towards the even more delicate co-marginality of poetry and prayer, a relation based on overlap but also marked by intimate differentiation.⁸ Crashaw himself in his 'Hymn to Saint Teresa' acknowledges she was a writer and he can be her reader:

Those rare works where thou shalt leave writ
Love's noble history, with wit
Taught thee by none but him (ll. 155-7)⁹

The 'him' is Christ himself, and in Crashaw's poem 'The Name of Jesus' the poet urges his own soul to 'rouse the nest / Of nimble art and traverse round / The airy shop of self-appeasing sound' (32).¹⁰ Can Coleridge's own numbers ever be self-appeasing? I suggest they can, but for the most part indirectly, and not until his fascination with the daemonic forces of creativity become more broadly experimental. The more antithetical Cowley proclaims the relation between poet and saint in his elegy as a 'hard and rarest Union' (l. 3). We should read 'hard' not just as exigent but also brittle unless seasoned by a feeling for the ontological frailty of just such a poetic moment. Cowley's investigative wit suggests that what poems may sing *of* is a praying *to*, though without ever wholly becoming prayer. Should any overlapping of the two

⁴ All quotations from Abraham Cowley, *Poems*, ed. A.R. Waller (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1905).

⁵ Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford University Press, 2008), 377.

⁶ Simon Jarvis, Unpublished paper read at *Logos: Theology and Poetics in Conversation*, Cambridge, September, 2016, 1. I am very grateful to Professor Jarvis for having energised my own thoughts, and for helpful criticism of this essay.

⁷ The best account of Coleridge's speculative fascination with 'double-touch' is found in John Beer, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence*, (London: Macmillan, 1977), 80-88, 242, 257-7.

⁸ By 'poetry' I mean the act and process of poetic composition, and 'prayer' includes not only private and spontaneous devotion, but equally its repeated and liturgical forms.

⁹ Richard Crashaw, *The English Poems*, ed. Richard Rambuss (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2013), 235.

¹⁰ Crashaw, *English Poems*.

economies be possible, no *pristine* offer to bridge such a divergency is ever required: which is to say, any theory of the daemonic materiality of the poem needs to concede that compromised poems may work simultaneously toward an experimental aura of praying-towards. It is at this point that a daemonic intensity of creativity can glimpse a frailer but ultimately irreducible order of the ghostlier demarcations which surround it.

Why introduce terms like 'daemonic' and 'experimental' which are not obviously oppositional and whose distinct spheres of influence are not clear? In using the terms I am drawing on two remarkable recent studies on Coleridge: *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination*, by Gregory Leadbetter (2011), and J.C.C. Mays' *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics* (2013). Between them, these two titles present some of the most fruitfully challenging readings of Coleridge currently available. For Leadbetter, any repetition of the Fall is to repeat the original act of transgression necessary to human creativity. In Coleridge's poetics, the Fall comes to open the way to a dynamic pursuit of Gnosis and hence the divine source itself. It is an essentially Fortunate Fall (*felix culpa*) which emphasizes the role of restless, originaive imagination. Leadbetter finds a dynamic Heraclitean quality in Coleridge's imagination, whereby the way up and the way down are ever the same: thus 'exultation and originality blur with transgression and dissolution'. Leadbetter is clear, however, that Coleridge is no hapless victim of the daemonic, but a self-conscious devotee of what he calls the 'transnatural' in the poet's formative period, traces of which persist throughout his career.¹¹ Rather, any poetic faith has to pass through an act of poetic seduction, irradiating the known world with 'the shadow of imagination' (BL II 6; 220). And poetic seduction is indeed an act of will, given that the will itself becomes the means of exposing the self to forces beyond its immediate control. What Leadbetter calls the 'transnatural' is a chancy exposure to the risk and promise of hidden orders of insight: the daemonic is that image of mind fascinated with the transnatural as the conveyor of potential divinity and actual guilt.¹² Could it be, though, that here the supernatural itself is relegated to an inauthentically superior form of naturalism which alienates the latter, so that a 'trans' is needed to restore the natural to its own sense of mystery, albeit in the form of a compulsively extravagant self-sufficiency?

Leadbetter's powerful reading opens up a vital detour that future Coleridge interpretation needs to traverse, given that his thesis illuminates tensions undeniably crucial in Coleridge's poetry. The act of writing one of his major poems elicits for Coleridge deep forces of compulsion and ambivalent discovery: the poems' own compositional fields are more than momentary act or will, however, in that they open up their own queries about the nature of initial impulse and its relation to the poet's beliefs: what are the horizons and outcomes of such a radical exposure to the daemonic? It is here Jim Mays

¹¹ Gregory Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 50, 78, 155, 203.

¹² Leadbetter, 42, 1-2; 9, 63, 99.

alerts us to a more latent dimension in Coleridge's poetics, an experimentalism which probes and counter-weighs any single radical initiation. For Mays, Coleridge's best-known poems stimulated for their author as many opportunities to reject as to pursue. What went unexpectedly 'wrong' becomes as important to this poet as realizing any intended goals. Mays is hinting that what went 'right' poetically for Coleridge could nonetheless generate a 'wrongness' in other dimensions. And if anything is true about Coleridge, it is that he is a 'multi-dimensional' writer. His poems as creative processes never knowingly isolate themselves from other dimensions like gift and creation. Any notion of experiment, Mays insists, must acknowledge that it can be equally successful when what it provides is negative results that highlight unseen dangers, whereby the notion of failure itself within Coleridge's oeuvre becomes less simple. Coleridge as a multiple-domain writer learnt most from the poems never completed to his satisfaction, Mays shows us, allowing a more complex writer to emerge from the visionary seer, whereby conflict itself is inflected though never neutralized. As such, Coleridge's poetry probes and evaluates ideals in relation to the feeling person functioning as a poet.¹³ This implies a poetry which (experimentally) refuses to be nothing but poetry, or to offer dynamics which are as self-enclosed as they are explosive. Might this suggest that, for a more experimental Coleridge, his creative processes can manage at times to nudge beyond transnatural dynamics, recognising them as transformative but no less liable to become a dead end? Such a margin of emergence remains weak, however, able to do little more than persist internally adjacent to the major poems rather than fully actualised within the drive of their textures.

In this essay, I explore not only the shadows of Coleridge's imagination but also its recesses and abrupt turns by which it becomes sensitive to its own margins and rebounds. The poem can be catastrophic and 'encatastrophic', capable of sudden moral disaster and equally abrupt turns to the good. The *Ancient Mariner* is a shadowy tour de force but nonetheless implies turn, it never rests in itself, one meaning of the compulsive repetition of the old sailor's narrative by which there can be other meanings. The Mariner's shooting of the albatross is defiantly motiveless, though can be seen as a symbolic fall or the sheer mystery of evil.¹⁴ The action is certainly a way of provoking experience, however unlivable that experience will become. Leadbetter sees how the poem follows the Mariner from his willing exposure to superhuman force towards a daemonic gnosis. He is transformed, Leadbetter continues, into a kind of seer, where vision transcends the horizon of life and death.¹⁵ Even if the life/death horizon is transcended, the border between them is not fully suspended, I would argue, in that it remains a mark of passage alongside which questions of personal identity linger or reprocess themselves, at the very site of their own self-interruption. Can gnosis at this

¹³ Mays, 8.

¹⁴ Malcolm Guite, *Mariner: a Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017), 343, 149.

¹⁵ Leadbetter, 182, 170.

point only record an eruption? The poem does not exclusively focus on gnostic repetition of the Mariner's exposure to the unknowable, but simultaneously reaches out to the scarcely sustainable aftermath of that exposure. The poem lingers on after the close of its own narrative, after it has been shared with the one who must hear the tale, so that from due narrative process arises a secondary desire for procession, a pilgrimage to the kirk. To that extent, the Mariner's history has a capacity to provoke order or call on other stories, as Leadbetter reminds us,¹⁶ but that must also include the horizons or unrealised implications of those further narratives. Is the Mariner's own incomplete penance essentially a post-narrative one, one that he shares with readers of the poem as the events haunt their own interpretations? The Mariner's obsession with repeating himself to a chosen hearer is itself an implied experience, but also a story he tells himself by way of re-admitting the precarious hope of processing in community to the kirk.¹⁷

Leadbetter's essential insight is that what Coleridge called the mind's own 'directive power' is 'mutagenic' or at risk of a self-creating power which produces the Daemon.¹⁸ Any self-creating imaginative power waits upon the unpredictable, but what sort of availability is it which already privileges an underlying ethos of practical excess, so that no experimental use of the will can ever be without preconceptions? Self-exposure to an abyss may be a creative need for Coleridge but as a semi-deliberate heuristic devolves on a trail through conscience and the latter's own vibrations across further borders of the numinous.

Such a border seems encountered in the blessing of the water-snakes 'unaware', but Leadbetter anticipates me here by noting that the very blessing is an act of willing exposure to the influence of the Mariner's own fascination. The Mariner's joyous vision is thus coeval with his daemonic becoming.¹⁹ But it can also be seen as an emergent pre-prayer, not fully willed but already a receptivity towards a more chastened counter-imagination. Blessing arises from the margins of consciousness, the half-sleep of individual awareness which allows for a more participatory instinct. What is being refused or deflected here is any total privilege of self-initiation. As Mays notes, why poems never quite achieve resolution in themselves is because that resolution is always projected outside or beyond the poems' ending.²⁰ This lack of resolution, rather than fulfilling the uncanny implicitly, challenges the impulsive status of imagination (without being able to deny its instigation). It is this counter-force which makes possible the strange tail-piece of the procession to the kirk, no longer part of the main-stream of the action, and with a riskily lowered degree of tension (in terms of ballad poetics) but which inevitably follows in the wake of the Mariner's temporary release. If there has been some sort of daemonic

¹⁶ Leadbetter, 164.

¹⁷ See my essay 'Repetition, Difference, and Liturgical Participation in Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner"' in Peter Larkin, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Promising Losses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 193-204.

¹⁸ Leadbetter, 58.

¹⁹ Leadbetter, 174.

²⁰ Mays, 80.

revelation, here is its after-life in the longing for a radically mild transformation beyond it, though Coleridge offers us no other pretext except the Mariner's tormented voyage. The poem stages a move towards an horizon it can never remain alongside on its own terms.

J. Robert Barth remarks that 'poetry eventuates in words, while prayer moves towards silence'.²¹ So we can ask in what way can a poem intend its own eventual silence or the silence around it, so as not to rebound into the midst of its own generative maelstrom? The nearest the Mariner gets to praying is when he 'looked to heaven, and tried to pray' (l. 244) which is prayer as non-prayer, or prayer encountered at the moment of its practical impossibility.²² Poems can't reach into silence by becoming prayer themselves, but in the determined low-key coda of the *Ancient Mariner* Coleridge hints at a poetic sounding of that very fall into another's silence, into the silence of a distinct register of relation. Malcolm Guite suggests, particularly of the *Rime* in its 1817 version, that through prayer a page or text of life is offered to God to be glossed by his grace. The *Ancient Mariner* is not an achieved Christian poem but it leaves a devotional trail in its wake, the sort of salience which doesn't seek to repress imagination but to stretch it until it almost or barely speaks silence. The 'He prayeth best' conclusion, as Guite notes, however banal, chimes its way through internal rhymes, telling of the wellness of a call to prayer.²³ Here we have Coleridge's own poetic minimalism, as it waits on prayer, chiming just one tone above its own basic and barely adequate verse. This is not a counter-elasticity, however, but an elasticity towards a counter-dynamic. Geoffrey Hill maintains 'the poet is the first to seek conversion of his "daemon" towards a belief in altruistic responsibility'.²⁴ Can this conversion ever take place or sound within the body of poetry itself, or is it only at a brink, at a largely impermeable border with the life of prayer?²⁵

Christabel has left its mark as one of Coleridge's most provocative and resonant experimental failures. Is it a record of self-blockage or essentially incompletable but continuing interminably within reader responses? How do we read its own declared intention to be completable and can that be wholly reduced to its actual state of non-completion? Is it a poem of failed ideal resolution, or if not, can it still gesture past its own labyrinth, a labyrinth stimulating mystery but also resisting any negative insistence on the incompletable as such? Barth sees in this poem the religious imagination working at full stretch.²⁶ Exactly how the poem stretches out remains moot,

²¹ J. Robert Barth, *Romanticism and Transcendence: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Religious Imagination* (Columbia: U of Missouri Press, 2003), 103. For T.S. Eliot also, 'prayer is more / Than an order of words...or the sound of a voice praying' (*Little Gidding*, I) but this is by way of affirming praying is never *less* than an order of words or their accompanying sounds: it is a reaching out to what language can let go once its work is done, and as such is finally faithful to how it is words do embody the prayer they give way to.

²² See also Eliot's 'hardly, barely prayable/ Prayer of the one Annunciation' (*Dry Salvages*, II) where prayer is both embodied and radically naked, within its failed or obstructed aspiration.

²³ Guite, 258, 386.

²⁴ Hill, 19.

²⁵ Here my interpretation rebounds on the work of Henri Brémond, who re-ignited the poetry/prayer debate in the early 20th century. See Brémond, 218.

²⁶ Barth, 104.

however, negotiating different dimensions of itself, rerouting connections between its textual body and compositional horizons. Coleridge himself claimed to have a plan of the whole but one which he later confessed could not be executed as its idea was so exceedingly subtle and difficult (TT II 245). Whether such a plan was generative or only an accompanying fiction, it is offered as a paradigm against which Coleridge wants his poem to be received and judged, so as to enter (belatedly) into any reading of what *Christabel* is or does. Derwent Coleridge and James Gilman believed the purpose of the poem had been to open a full range of narrative in which Christabel (a figure for a martyred Abel whose suffering brings grace to others) defeats the evil which has personified and overcome Geraldine, and so save her own distant lover.²⁷ Barth reminds us that in Crashaw's original poem it is not martyrdom Teresa seeks but union with the Beloved.²⁸ The emphasis on love could be a later rationalisation of the Coleridge's poem's ideal span, or the experimental horizon that got it off the ground: if so, it remains no less formative than the actual daemonic interruption which grips (and equips) the poem. *Christabel* is most visible where it gazes at its own horizon, as it were, or at its unrealisable but recessively ever-present wake. It is here we can see what a religious imagination might be like when under full stretch: the poem offers itself to a prayerful silence but at other moments will collapse into it from within its own self-jamming, as it acts out interior detours and blockades in the only way it knows.

Leadbetter sees that Christabel is, in an important way, 'already silent' at the outset of the poem, which tells the story of her desire contained in that silence 'by revealing its unspoken form'. In knowing Geraldine, Christabel realizes what she cannot speak and becomes literally 'the body of her transnatural knowledge'.²⁹ Is her silence the same as the silence of the poem, however? The latter silence, as reserve and non-completion, embodies not just an experience of the transnatural but a space in which to probe further how that experience is lived out or might be offered on. Can this be a creative chastening into further relation, or the outcome of indeterminate ambiguity which itself demands a further body of experience to be lived through? Such might have been the exceedingly subtle and difficult *materia* the poem was trying to provoke. Christabel is one 'Who, praying always, prays in Sleep' (l. 322) which might portray an untouched naiveté and certainly suggests something not fully realised and only implicit, but, nonetheless, unceasing. There is the half-wish for sleep to be open to a depth of relation unable to find its full breadth in waking life. As such, it participates in a reverie for the lost mother and echoes the Mariner's own gratitude for 'the gentle sleep from Heaven' which 'Mary Queen' sent to him and which slides into his soul (ll. 292-6). That 'sliding' records a reception deeper than a self-judging, self-tormenting consciousness. This is fantasy but it retains a dedicational structure, a sense of ontological

²⁷ See Humphry House, *Coleridge* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), 128-9.

²⁸ Barth, 107.

²⁹ Leadbetter, 206.

dependence, which is already marking and graining any pure experimental levity. Not only is there an echo of 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17 here, that we should pray continually, ('Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing') but a glimpse of prayer as a redeeming rhythm of foundational innocence, a pulse of life implicit beneath and beyond experience. To that extent, what the poem encompasses is implicit prayer, though never wholly actual: *Christabel's* failed realisation of the life of prayer derives from an experimental over-realisation of itself as an act of composition. It is this process as such which lures the transnatural but cannot embody the whole poem which remains attached as body, paradoxically, to its quizzical horizons of remote outcome and further relation. This is what animates the complex presence of the poem, both for its creator and us.

Spirit and flesh are not in ultimate opposition for Barth in *Christabel* but are conflicted forms of an energy always struggling to reunite itself.³⁰ Exterior drives insist on becoming internalized (this is also one of the effects of the transnatural) but any interiority remains residually lured towards an original purity of intending the good. As Coleridge confessed to his friend, Thomas Poole, 'Something ... stirs up anew the passion to promote *permanent* Good ... till *Existence* itself is swallowed up in Being' (CL II 758). By 'Being' Coleridge is gesturing towards a state in which Creator and Creation no longer have an abyss between them. The abyss was to remain generative, however, but turns self-stultifying as a substitute for more authentic horizons, horizons no less genuine for being recessive. Barth reads the enigmatic conclusion of Part II of *Christabel* as representing Coleridge's own response to his poem so as to convey implicitly the impossibility of reconciling the poem's warring forces and hence of completing it. The conflict is not just in the poem but in the poet himself, Barth concludes.³¹ This returns us to *Christabel's* experimental profile: its incompleatability is not just a torrent of daemonic access but accompanied by silent or semi-silent horizons, including the pre- and post-life of the poem in Coleridge's own understanding of it, either as written or unwritten. The process which the poem fails to complete is not exclusively a passage from innocence to a transnaturally haunted enigma. There is indeed a realm of ecstasy and mystery which *Christabel* is drawn to and which the 'unfallen' self cannot know; this would be to remain self-dazzled in an enigmatic vortex, however, unless there is the possibility of 'falling upward' in some way. Barth argues that only the entire gamut of human energy can relate to the search for God.³² Unless the transnatural can sense this entirety to a degree, it remains horizonless, unwilling to distinguish between knowledge as creation and knowledge as destruction. For the transnatural there can be no such discernment but only an endless labyrinth of alluring detours. If there is no path along which love can counter-distinguish itself from a primal life-energy, an abyss of self-generation overflows the possibility of relationship

³⁰ Barth, 110.

³¹ Barth, 113.

³² Barth, 114.

itself. An autonomous but suffocating drive overrides and so lacks any creaturely self-insufficiency of genuine ontological seeking.

For Wordsworth, the whole *Christabel* project had never discovered a plan for itself, or where Coleridge believed he had arranged things, upon trial 'they proved to be mere embryos'.³³ Wordsworth implies such embryos are also stunted forms of growth, but nonetheless has touched on the genuinely experimental aspect of Coleridge's way of drafting a poem, whose pre-forms and post-stages remain integral, exercising a haunting aura. What is involved is not just creative energy (however maimed or handicapped) but its continuing capacity for self-bestowal. Barth's conclusion is that *Christabel* not only represents us all from within her irresolvable conflict, but precisely as such prays for us all:³⁴

But this she knows in Joys and Woes
That Saints will aid if Men will call. (PW 176 330-31)

Of course, the poem as we have it cannot be that call, but does project its own compositional field as in a state of active expectation of a counter-imagination: as such its own failure in the face of daemonic entrapment is no longer exemplary, even though completely colluded with, encountered, enchanted by and endured.

'Constancy to an Ideal Object' emerges from a more belated Coleridge, but still a poet whom one critic can admire for his 'persistent experimentalism'.³⁵ Neither is a spectral element missing, as 'Constancy' will close with its haunting analogue of the Brocken Spectre in what becomes virtually an apostrophe to it: And art thou nothing? Such thou art, as when

The woodman winding westward up the glen
At wintry dawn, where o'er the sheep-track's maze
The viewless snow-mist weaves a glist'ning haze
Sees full before him, gliding without tread,
An image with a glory round its head; (PW 357 25-30)

A poem seeking to surrender the impossible ambiguity of ideal love equally acknowledges how it is marked and directed by a spectre, one that delineates both a symbolic intensity and a symbolic inadequacy. Coleridge's nostalgia is for a happy domicile. Lacking the beloved, however, without her it 'were but a becalmed Bark' (l. 22) as we revisit the Mariner's God-deserted scene of oppressive oceanic stasis 'Whose Helmsman on an Ocean waste and wide / Sits mute and pale his mouldering helm beside' (ll. 23-4). In *The Ancient Mariner* there was little need for a helmsman once the Polar Spirit took charge,

³³ See Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* 2 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1851), 2:306-7.

³⁴ Barth, 117.

³⁵ Richard Hocks, "'And Art Thou Nothing?': Permanence and Evanishment in 'Constancy to an Ideal Object'", *Coleridge Bulletin*, 16 (2000), 71.

but here the visionary Spectre will appear already deflated. Implicitly, 'Constancy' is already deferring (or obliquely referring) to more impersonal philosophical and theological reflections undertaken elsewhere.³⁶ This is how the Spectre can be so smoothly seen through, but leaving imagination still tied to its own visionary effect. It's not that Coleridge doubts the truth of symbolism in itself, so much as its tenuous and reversible embodiment. Asra remains thinly available only through a constancy of yearning thought, which draws from the poet an *active* insufficiency of symbolic thought but one opening up an horizon of rededication, even though it cannot stay secure within this poetic moment. What 'liv'st but in the brain' (l. 4) may be the disillusionment of a contrary or collapsed imagination, but must be sited within the symbolic tableau of the counter-imagination, itself never wholly reducible or transparent. Any poetic act of dedication at this stage, for Coleridge, must traverse a lack of plenitude. What the counter-imagination is attempting here is to offer the symbol a face (and remain within an imaginative milieu). This encounters a sense of incompleteness as an actual insufficing rather than any blander hope in unexplored possibility. The burden of loss is spell-breaking but only in terms of a chastened fidelity to an horizon which goes on offering a constancy: both a constancy of love and an affirmation of the persistence of symbol, albeit in a weakened state. The 'enamoured rustic' can't know 'he makes his own shadow' but the shadow the poem inherits from him reaches out amid a poverty of chastened effort towards a ground of relation which can see round or beyond not only a pseudo-glory of effect but also its nihilistic collapse.

With 'Song from Osorio / Remorse' Coleridge dramatises how any sweetness of spirit must remain alert to a spell:

Hear, sweet spirit! hear the Spell,
Lest a blacker Charm compel! (PW 151 1-2)

A sweet, welcoming spirit remains implicated in a charm, albeit a counter-charm, but still in essence an incantation which gives time for darker compulsions to be delayed or even diverted. This is the sole recourse of a counter-imagination (as distinct from formal faith), as it is deployed by a poet who signs on as 'Even me, the priest of this poor sacrifice' ('To Nature' l. 14). It is the blacker charm which in 'Ne Plus Ultra' becomes a no longer indifferent negativity, but a positive Death, and such is the 'Sole interdict of all-bedewing Prayer' (l. 16). The counter-imagination figures death not as a hungry abyss but open to further quietening horizons of reflection and contemplation. It is not itself visionary, however, rather it is revisionary so as to keep open a tenuous space outside final disillusionment and demystification:

That HOPE, which was his inward bliss and boast,

³⁶ My discussion at this point draws on my essay "'I Mourn to Thee': Dedication and Insufficiency in "Constancy to an Ideal Object"" in Larkin, 157-66.

Which waned and died, yet ever near him stood,
 Though changed in nature, wander where he would—³⁷

Hope remains redemptively addressed by a metaphysics but can't be fully assimilated in poetry. What is 'changed in nature' no longer participates in the One Life and yet remains standing near. This nature of change follows a loss of presence in Nature but does still sound poetically. The change is utterable, though how it has changed is not. This is a recession rather than an absence, a staying near but in a largely unrecognisable way. It is more directly sounding in 'Limbo' where an old man:

... gazes still, his eyeless face all eye—
 As twere an organ full of silent Sight (PW 478 16-17)

Here the blinded eye still emits an active light, so that a 'silent sight' can become an equivalent for prayer, acceptive even where it cannot be receptive. This is an alertness, not a passive acceptance, and as such explores an unconditional relationship not further diminishable. In the *Opus Maximum* Reason presents itself as a free gift, actualised by the will without which it could be received no more 'than the light falling on an eyeless face' (OM 171). The poem images a blindness that refuses to be non-receptive, an impercipient bears the symbol of a recipient. The old man cannot pierce his blankness but nonetheless offers his interior gaze, a gaze which has a face, face to face with the 'all eye' of faith. The poem can't quite believe this itself, for a face all eye might no longer be a face, but it remains haunted by the arresting image, and is willing to be detained by it in the midst of its own nihilistic anxiety.

In 'Coeli Enarrant' [Imitations of Du Bartas Etc] there is a suspension of positive negation that can only be glimpsed from within the poetic texture itself:

The groaning world now learns to read aright,
 And with it's Voice of Voices cries out, O! (PW 416 40-41)

The 'O' is the primal cry of the globe itself, and as such, if an abyss, an abyss of creation. The poem knows this as a 'blank portent' on high, readable only as 'one large Black Letter' (l. 37) or as that which insists on reading the blankness as intensive negation. What is soundable, what is cryable, though, is the hollow space within the 'O' through which other resonances, other frequencies of transients, can flow. The sound is a sufficient hint, actively waited on by the counter-imagination from the midst of the pain of the poem.

How seriously does one take the imagination of a poet-philosopher, and if this suggests an imagination with more than one register, will this compromise

³⁷ 'The Visionary Hope', PW 467 17-19

Coleridge the poet in any case? Leadbetter reminds us that for Coleridge the poetry and the metaphysics share a common root, and that the turn to philosophy in the *Biographia* is precisely a poetic investment.³⁸ Mays is confident that the evolution of a pleasure-based poetics in Coleridge's style is not separate from his philosophy, so that they advance together.³⁹ Mays also sees how the main trunk of the canonic poems generates distinct branches after the lead shoot itself self-destructs.⁴⁰ This can be an analogy for the poet/philosopher duality: on the one hand vitally communicating internally but increasingly diversifying externally. Poetry's prophetic force largely migrates to reflective or analytic prose while the verse records acute ontological and personal disappointment. The later verse rarely softens its predicament but neither does it compromise the exploratory waves generated by *Aids to Reflection* and the *Opus Maximum*. This in itself is a sort of imaginative feat, the capacity to respect and indwell what does and does not have hope but allow them to co-habit. As Mays notes, the poetry arises from Coleridge's quarrel with himself, and this will always overflow the aesthetic category.⁴¹ As the philosophical musings extend to a new stage, there are bounds to what poetry can properly do. The limits are achieved through actual testing.⁴² But perhaps such limits have only been grasped through disparate registers, or re-registers, of the imagination itself, for which a limit is not so much containment as a turn or looming horizon? This is why Mays is justified in saying that Coleridge's analytical work needs to be elucidated by his poetry and not the other way round.⁴³

Writing on Simone Weil, Geoffrey Hill concludes that 'simultaneous composition on several planes at once is the law of artistic creation, and, wherein, in fact, lies its difficulty'.⁴⁴ With Coleridge, the difficulty also involves a degree of deficiency as the cost of such a broad vision advancing on several fronts and registers simultaneously. Each has the capacity not just to resonate with, but at times blunt or enfeeble the other, as the price of the sharp integrity of each creative moment. Leadbetter is correct, therefore, to observe that Coleridge's theory of poetic faith (in the *Biographia*) is essentially a 'modulation of his own transnatural appetite'.⁴⁵ How far, though, can modulation go without encountering another key-centre, with the chance of being held to it and glimpsing a wholly different tonic basis, even if there can be no final migration at this particular outset? Coleridge's gnostic strain, as identified by Leadbetter, can't be completely exorcised and need not be so, as long as it doesn't totalise in a gnostic world view. And this is not what Leadbetter would claim. It is not towards such a realm that Coleridge's most impressive poetry tends, but always to a more awkward diversity of register,

³⁸ Leadbetter, 161.

³⁹ Mays, 6.

⁴⁰ Mays, 98.

⁴¹ Mays, 7.

⁴² Mays, 112.

⁴³ Mays, 183.

⁴⁴ Hill, 573.

⁴⁵ Leadbetter, 156.

something subtler than outright turbulence as such.

For *Aids to Reflection* a 'delightful Dream' can be a 'Dream of Truth' and even the 'bewildered Tale' of the mystic mingles truth with its dreaminess. Fantasy can be on a pilgrimage to truth (AR 394), just as superstition can seat Reason on her throne (PW 110, ii 87-8). Such pilgrims seem deeply implicated in the very capacity of imagination itself to open up, question and rework itself. Coleridge was unhappy with the idea that 'material particles ... are themselves the joint Artists of their own combinations' (AR 399). For him, materiality remains compromised by mechanism and therefore blind, but his word 'artists' is already moving some way towards a less divisive horizon. Might transcendence itself paradoxically emerge through a progressive 'combination' which can be genuinely receptive in its apprehendings? Just such a materiality, counter-imagined, could transcend the self-insulations of naturalism, an even more productive way to 'shift the mystery' (AR 398).

There is a hint of this in the *Lay Sermons*' insistence on the conscience as a 'spiritual sensation' where the second term clearly modifies the first, so as to move sensation towards a 'testifying state' (LS 66-7). It is this which Coleridge's experimental poetry tries to border, and by 'experimental' I assume with Mays an aesthetic which outlives its initial impulse but remains organically part of it. There is a 'transnatural' élan here indeed but it is open to a recasting, not to put an end to itself but to put an edge to itself. In *Aids to Reflection* no 'Gift of God does or can contradict any other gift' (AR 204). Such faith doesn't preclude an acute tension between gifts, by which the inclusiveness undergoes an often painful pilgrimage, a constant re-evaluating of the journey and the baggage brought along. Something very like a counter-imagination will proclaim, however: 'The life we seek after is a mystery; but so both in itself & in its origin is the Life we have' (AR 204). In '*Nature* there is no origin' (AR 273) but in re-imagining the horizons of material immersion something much less dualistic can be glimpsed. Nothing less than this might account for the persistence of the poetic at the heart of Coleridge's metaphysical works, which are led by a moral imagination much more than by system.

Coleridge confides to a Notebook: 'what I could *do* with exulting Innocence, I can not always *imagine* with perfect innocence' (CN II 2539). Leadbetter sees that Coleridge identifies the power of his own imagination with a shame in which innocence is exchanged for 'uneasy self-knowledge'.⁴⁶ It is certainly true that imagination will offer a riper but darker aura of its own, from which the possibility of counter-imaginative rededication can emerge, but it is by way of the shame. The counter-imagination does not take shame for resistance to a further referring or sharing of ambiguous self-knowledge. Leadbetter's most radical move is to show how Coleridge came to believe that a '*Fall* of some sort or other—the creation ... of the Non-Absolute—is the fundamental *Postulate* of the Moral History of Man' (TT I 106-7). Leadbetter reads this not as Calvinistic pessimism, but as a symbolic narrative of the

⁴⁶ Leadbetter, 57.

'fractured nature of moral experience'. It is not a gulf between good and evil but an essential divergence which flows from the 'possibility of moral agency itself', allowing the 'Non-Absolute' to open up a qualitative difference in human action and experience.⁴⁷ Certainly, the power of creative origination cannot be abandoned in the midst of its ontological ambiguity but neither need the sense of fracture become a substitute unconditional. Rather, an horizon of faith might be counter-imaged from the midst of the very bewitched body of imagination. This horizon partakes of the original allurements but remains in reserve. An ontological insufficiency, Coleridge's 'felt' insufficiency which he remained faithful to, can't be ballasted by an ever expanding, super-efficient imagination: rather, imagination must retrace its own weakness to re-experience and rework the lineaments of vision. This is to wait upon post-natural horizons or translate even more radically the 'trans' of the transnatural. It can only be done, however, in a mode of after-weakness or scarcer creative resources. To be efficacious the creative imagination needs to play itself out fully, and it is at that point that its most radical experiments can surface, however tenuous.

Mays recognises that it is Coleridge's in-between status as 'poet, philosopher or both or neither' that turned out to be his salvation;⁴⁸ which is almost to say that Coleridge turned *himself* out to await his salvation, self-exile becoming the most intimate companion of his strongest poetry. The wistfully resolute reversals that his poetry so often implies emerge from the core of the poetry's compulsive scenarios. Mays sees how Coleridge's poetry after his return from Germany overflows its own aesthetic towards love, dream or absence which will go on to mutate into the terms of 'personal redemption': 'less as meditation on his psychological makeup than as almost a form of prayer'.⁴⁹ The 'almost' defines the mode of the counter-imagination, indwelling the limits of poetry even so far as its humiliation, but opening up its essential intimacy with all it cannot simply be 'on'. Coleridge's poetry can't strictly overlap with prayer from within its own intentional field but it does lap against a border offering itself as a membrane. The offer as membrane fails, poetry returns to itself, but the offer *as* offer does not do so, complicit as it is with the poetry's own primary generosity, its hyperbolic projections beyond itself.

According to the *Biographia* religion can go beyond Reason only 'where the eye of Reason has reached its own Horizon; and that Faith is then but its continuation: even as the Day softens away into the sweet Twilight ...' (BL II 247). The counter-imagination is something of a twilight imagination, but it is also a second comer, or takes an essential detour around a poetry understood as the Gnostic sum of its own drives, while remaining wholly internal to it. If not, as Daniel M. McVeigh finely summarises the matter, 'a self-contained poetics ... finally loses the poem'.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Leadbetter, 12.

⁴⁸ Mays, 181.

⁴⁹ Mays, 7.

⁵⁰ Daniel M. McVeigh, "Coleridge's Doctrine of the Imagination and the Enigmatic Name of God", *Religion & Literature*, 17, 1 (1985), 71.

A mind self-appointed to the losing side is not lost to its own creation whilst in the midst of prayer. There is one poem ("To William Wordsworth") in which Coleridge dramatises this concluding insight with a lyric intensity which knows exactly how and when not to go beyond itself:

Scarce conscious, and yet conscious of its close
I sate, my being blended in one thought
(Thought was it? or Aspiration? or Resolve?)
Absorbed, yet hanging still upon the sound –
And when I rose, I found myself in prayer. (PW 401 108-12)

To hear poetry read is to be totally absorbed within its field but also to be in a state of suspension, hardly aware but alert to one thing: how poetry, counter-imaginatively, needs to close. It is no longer possible to name thought beyond the suspension, neither aspiration nor resolve belong to this moment. Coleridge's poem imagines a prayer unbidden but also knows prayer cannot be itself unless fully entered into as a willed act, however unknown the outcome. Otherwise, the poet would be merely 'found out' in prayer. Such a prayer can be really offered and taken forward, and will remain encapsulated as well as launched in its creative holding, so long as the poem has the resources to close at that point.