

Extraordinary Revelations in Coleridge's notebook jottings, with relation to his 'wild' walking

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IN THIS ESSAY I CONSIDER HOW Coleridge's religious imagination is expressed in the prose jottings of some of his earlier notebook entries, with brief additional references to letter extracts, marginalia and poetic fragments. The formally incomplete nature of these writings is a significant factor and is reflected in the gaps which they leave, the spaces for intense, sometimes unexpected insights. These are the spaces which open between what is perceived and what is glimpsed or half-seen, what is comprehended rationally and only half understood; they are the windows which open on the borders between the material and what lies beyond that and challenge our sensory and intellectual powers to precisely register or fully comprehend.

Gaps through which other possibilities are revealed suggests the religious concept of 'extraordinary revelation'. The emotionally heightened sense of this expression seems relevant both to religious conviction and poetic spirituality in denoting the inspirational insight and connection which catches one unawares: the 'surprised by joy' or 'seized by wonder'. The revelatory flashes of intuitive insight into the innate power or grander meaning of natural phenomena which Coleridge records in his nature observations can be categorised as such, certainly in the sometimes abrupt and unexpected way in which they seize the mind and imagination. Accident and surprise, as distinct from cerebral deliberation, is central to this kind of experience.

These perceptual gaps and openings can be related to bodily movement and activity, and the shifting visual and conceptual perspectives associated with movement. This is powerfully demonstrated in the notebook jottings produced in response to Coleridge's ramblings in wild nature. His journal records of his upland walking, often loosely structured and fragmented and driven by a spontaneous momentum, seem to reflect the walks' irregular rhythms, sometimes erratic patterning, and the new prospects the walker continually gains as he moves across landscape through changing weather conditions. Mind and senses are sifted and shaped by the elemental forces to which Coleridge is exposed in his pedestrian exploration of the fells and crags. As illustration, amongst other extracts, I offer excerpts from Coleridge's notebook records of memorable sights and experiences on the Cumbrian and Scottish walking tours of 1802 and 1803. The metaphor of a journey, of onward movement, is used in a reference by Coleridge to the function of his first notebook (containing observations made on walking tours) which he described in a letter of 1794 to Southey as a 'little blank book' in which 'as I journey onward, I ever and anon pluck the wild flowers of Poesy' (CL I 84).

In a consideration of the relationship between creative and physical energies, I balance the discussion of Coleridge's visionary imagination with a consideration of how this was affected by declining health and mobility and reduced opportunities for active connection with nature.

Some have argued, reasonably, that Coleridge's unusual intellectual powers surmounted any physical infirmities and continued to function robustly independently of them.¹ I would accept that physical limitations may well have concentrated and intensified Coleridge's mental energies, certainly as regards strenuous intellectual analysis. I would nevertheless argue for a correlation between physical mobility and intuitive creative agility. I suggest that physical restriction or immobility, by reducing opportunities for active connection with wild nature, inhibited for Coleridge the vivid imaginative connection reliant on sensory stimulus and the accident and surprise of revelation.

In this personal interpretation, I relate the concept of 'religious' to the liminal, the edge-land between the material, securely registered by the senses, and the unknown, or vaguely perceived: the dimension which opens up and invites speculation, engages imagination and enlarges it by inspiring sentiments of wonder, awe, fear or faith in a power that may be manifested physically, which animates and gives meaning to the material, but conjures another dimension. This non-specific 'religious' revelation can be identified with Edmund Burke's cultural interpretation of the awe-inspiring impact of the 'sublime' as manifested in natural landscape and phenomena.²

This takes us into Coleridge's conception of a unifying spirit and energy which underlies sensory or mental comprehension. I explore what is accidentally or unexpectedly revealed both to Coleridge and the reader specifically in unformulated writings outside formal attempts at theoretical structure. That is not, however, to ignore the way in which the insights expressed in Coleridge's jottings often represent the startling visionary insight which he categorised as the Primary Imagination, an intuitive, subconscious connection with the innate spirit of self, and, beyond that, the creative principle which drives and unifies all matter: 'the living power and prime agent of all human perception'. This resembles the visionary connection which for the religious faithful represented a relationship with the divine, the illumination of grace, if you like. This kind of knowledge could be viewed as being beyond the rational control of what Coleridge considered the 'Secondary Imagination', which orders and connects subconscious knowledge or insight through the operation of the 'conscious will'.³ Connection with this animating principle is intuitive and can be sudden, instantaneous, like the unexpected revelation of faith. It can elude the power of words to capture - at least securely- but finds expression in images or metaphors of startling and apposite vividness and beauty which possess an energy reflecting an excited movement of the mind.

Although I do not formally frame Coleridge's religious imagination within denominational terms of reference, with respect to the concept of extraordinary revelation, he shows an affinity with missionary interpretations of revealed religion. Coleridge concurred, for example with John Wesley's

¹ See for example, Henry Nelson Coleridge, *Coleridge The Talker*, 144.

² Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757.

³ S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1817, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, Bollingen Series, 2 vols, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, Ch. 13, 304, 304n-5.

emphasis on the primary importance of an intuitive conviction of religious truth. 'Either faith is what Wesley says it is,' Coleridge scribbled in the margin of Southey's *Life of Wesley*, beside Wesley's famous account of his 'conversion' at the meeting at Aldergate Street, 'or it is nothing'.⁴ Here, however, I apply the concept of religious imagination more broadly to Coleridge's inspirational relationship with nature as a power that embodied deeper mysteries, and was experienced through what is now popularly termed 'wild walking'.

These movements of the visionary imagination were apparent in Coleridge's early experience of his world, as he recalls it in an autobiographical letter to Thomas Poole in October 1797. He was predisposed to look in wonder beyond prosaic, confining domestic boundaries. When the Rev. John Coleridge, his father, took him on a nocturnal ramble to look at the stars and planets, the young Samuel, as he describes it:

heard him with a profound delight & admiration, but without the least mixture of wonder or incredulity.' [...] From my early reading of Faery Tales, & Genii &' as he expresses it, 'my mind had been habituated to the Vast –and I never regarded my senses in any way as the criteria of my belief.⁵

Coleridge's imagination and enquiring intellect naturally hovers in the liminal spaces between the familiar and accessible and the mysterious, almost supernatural dimensions beyond. From childhood he shows a visionary wisdom which is not dependent on material evidence and in a speculative and imaginative sense naturally extends beyond its limits to the broader truths which it may embody, and to which it gestures.

Further perspectives and conceptual dimensions are opened as Coleridge's experience extends beyond the region of his birth and childhood into the more rugged north-western uplands. Walking in the early 1800s for Coleridge often supplied an escape from bodily infirmities through muscular exertion. In his longer walking tours, energy of mind is matched by energy of body – sometimes, of course, propelled by mental stress and the feverish symptoms of opium – which takes him beyond known physical boundaries. And he is drawn to landscapes which, topographically and atmospherically elevate, yielding an inspiring range of perspectives and climatic fluctuation for someone moving through a variety of weathers from serene to turbulent in sun, wind and rain. The compulsively restless energy which characterises Coleridge's early excursions of mind and body are reflected in his fascination with movement and change in the primal natural elements of water, light, wind. His notebooks

⁴ Coleridge, marginal comment in Robert Southey, *The Life of John Wesley and the Rise and Progress of Methodism*, 2 vols, 3rd edn (London, 1846), II: 82. Here Wesley had expressed his intense, sudden conviction of Christ's saving grace.

⁵ Coleridge to Thomas Poole, Oct. 16th, 1797, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-1971), 210, 354.

contain many brilliant observations of moving water, cloud and light which combine imaginative engagement with scientifically precise description. These in their turn intuitively combine incisive observation of material structures and processes with the spiritual perception of a harmonising power and principle. An equivalent capacity for imaginative immersion and analytical objectivity express the two sometimes opposing principles in Coleridge's intelligence which could inform each other creatively but were to become increasingly disconnected as his capacity for ecstatic visionary connection declined, as he felt it.

In his excursions in the Lakes of Cumberland, and the Scottish Highlands, Coleridge was thrilled by the explosive brilliance of waterfalls, in a letter to Sara Hutchinson in August 1802, giving a vivid description of the Halse Fall at Buttermere.

What a sight it is to look down on such a Cataract! – the wheels, that circumvolve in it – the leaping up & plunging forward of that infinity of pearls and Glass Bulbs – the continual change of the mater, the perpetual sameness of the form - it is an awful Image & Shadow of God & the World.
(CL II 853)

The energetic verbs: 'leaping up and plunging' convey a physical and corresponding creative energy with an emphasis on the change associated with movement. Coleridge is inspired and invigorated by the new perspectives gained, new perspectives revealed by the varied turns and twists of light. At the same time he is reassured by the cyclical unity and stability of the waterfall's static mobility which he interprets religiously as emblematic of a divine unifying power: 'the continual change of the matter, the perpetual sameness of the form - it is an awful Image & Shadow of God & the World'.

Notebook records of walks show a fascination with the changing but constant structure of waterfalls. Another jotting nicely captures this paradoxical combination of convergent self-containment and agitated, *divergent* restlessness: 'What a self-same Thing a Waterfall [...] if you look at it stedfastly, what fits and starts & convulsive Twitches of Motion' (CN I 1426).

Coleridge's craving for a unifying principle in nature reflects a philosophical and personal desire for stability, not in the sense of stasis, but as continual recurrent motion. Elements of the natural world expressing these qualities seem, as a consequence, to possess visionary significance for him. Such observations have a liberating, almost transcendent effect physically and imaginatively as the poet combines an image of vigorous physical movement with spiritual symbolism, or immanence.

This preoccupation with physical energy can be seen as a means of inhabiting the material while mentally escaping the limitations of human physicality: in Coleridge's case, the increasingly debilitating effects of opium addiction and as time passed, the restrictions of his prematurely ageing body. From the early years, Coleridge's journals and letters show a preoccupation

with his state of health which must in itself have depressed and inhibited creative energy. In another letter to Sara Hutchinson in the same year as the Halse Falls description Coleridge acknowledges his physical limitations and expresses a longing for the exhilarating freedom of body, mind and spirit which physical vigour and fitness confers:

O how I wished for Health & Strength that I might wander about for a Month together in the stormiest month of the year, among these places, so lonely & savage and full of sounds! (CN II 844)

This lament shows a keen awareness of how liberation of body and mind extends one's sphere of action and vision. He conveys a sense of immersion in loosened, roaming natural energies which is self-transcendent, possibly also offering the release of self-obliteration.

Observations of the movement and texture of water in landscape and air dominate his journal entries on walks in Cumberland and Scotland. Coleridge is particularly receptive to the deceptive effects of the wet mistiness of the northern highland climate which engage the visionary imagination and inspire numinous imagery. In a walking entry of 1799, he remarks on an:

exquisite network of Film so instinct with gentle motion which, now the Shower only steadies, & and now it melts it into such a mistiness as the Breath leaves on a mirror -; 'Ghost of a mountain - the forms seizing my body as I passed & became realities - I, a Ghost, till I had reconquered my Substance. (CN I 518, 523)

This wonderful evocation of the shifting atmospheric effects of the rain-blurred landscape expresses a transition to another state in which Coleridge inhabits a visionary space between sensory and spiritual awareness and identity. In his passage through the misty mountains his own material substance is thinned, changed, renewed and restored in an almost mystically transformative experience (outside, it would seem - or independent of - any ordinary sensation of physical discomfort).

Coleridge is acutely sensitive to the subtly transformative effects of light particularly evident in the active context of skating on frozen lakes in Ratzeburg, Germany, which, on one occasion in 1799, are for him magically transfigured by the hues of the setting sun. Natural substance is in transition from one state to another and reflecting in each other, movement and change opening new oblique angles and perspectives:

In skating there are three pleasing circumstances - the infinitely subtle particles of Ice, which the Skate cuts up, & which creep and run before the skater like a low mist, & in sun rise or sun set become coloured; 2nd, the Shadow of the Skater in the water seen thro' the Transparent Ice, & when very many are skating together, the sounds and the noises give an

imp[ulse to] the icy Trees, & the woods all round the lake *tinkle*
(CL I 462)

The many active verbs again convey structural transformation through the alert observation and imaginative interpretation of the viewer. The mood evoked combines exhilaration of movement with a spiritual peace achieved through harmony of setting, light and time, and the inter-relationship of people and landscape.

For Coleridge, as described in letters and journals, mobile effects of light on mist have an elusive visionary effect which captures sense and imagination. If recalled at a later date, such visions are startling and memorable enough to be recorded in all their original freshness and immediacy, as though the writer is still following the movement in real time:

All the objects on the opposite coast are hidden, and all those hidden are reflected in the Lake, Trees, & the Castle, (Lyulph's Tower) & the huge Cliff that dwarfs it! - 'Divine! - The reflection of the huge pyramidal Crag is still hidden, & the image in the water still brighter// but the Lyulph's Tower gleams like a ghost, dim and shadowy & the bright Shadow thereof how beautiful it is cut across by that Tongue of breezy water -now the Shadow is suddenly gone - and the tower itself rises emerging out of the mist, two-thirds wholly hidden, the turrets quite clear - & a moment all is snatched away - Realities and Shadows.
(CN I 553)

As a boy, Coleridge was similarly enthralled by the fluid play of light, as he reveals in an entry from his 1803 journal of the Scottish Tour: 'I see a Birch...alone in full sunshine, & the Shadows of its leaves playing on its silver Bark, an image that delighted my boyhood, when I had no waterfalls to see (CN I 1475). Elsewhere on the same excursion, he observes and notes:

beds of green fern, always alive & fluttering - but to my right the Hills break and lets in upon the view a triangular Mountain of fine outline. And in the break a little stream with glimmering waterbreaks and cowering Alders/wild Sheep-folds in the Hills but before me Ben More or the Huge Mountain/One of the highest in the Highlands, shaped like a hay-stack, which dallies with the clouds, that now touch, now hide, now leave it
(CN I 1475)

There is a power and a mystery in the capacity of the landscape and its distinctive climate to conceal and suddenly reveal, reclaim and vanish again. The constantly changing effects of light seem to tease the observer with visionary possibility. Such phenomena have traditionally inspired a sense of the sacred, as in mountainous regions like the Himalaya. The images of elusive light convey a nostalgia for a world which is beginning to recede beyond his

physical and imaginative grasp, the two allied in those inspirational excursions in wild places which would before long be inaccessible to him as he retreats to the more circumscribed sedentary security of the city.

The forces of nature are traditionally associated with sublime revelation, and in Coleridge's jottings often symbolically, if unintentionally suggestive of this; we see in the entries a juxtaposition of (and identification with) elemental extremes: the chastening and restorative power of water, wind, fire, sometimes with the sublimely theatrical chiaroscuro of a 'Storm seen by a Flash of Lightning—storm clouds enclosing as in a quasi-circle the stormy Light' (CN III 3258).

The awesome but inspiring impact of natural power and its sublime resonance is memorably expressed in Coleridge's famous account to Sara Hutchinson in August 1802 of his perilous descent from Sca Fell. Coleridge completed this solitary tour, from the 1st to the 9th August 1802, which took him to the top of the fell. Here, again, having deliberately (or heedlessly) embraced risk in his choice of downward path, Coleridge is mentally and physically suspended in an in-between state open to different possibilities; in this case, precariously balanced between life and possible death. The fall has transformed his physical orientation with a corresponding dramatic change in visual perception which has a revelatory impact.

I lay in a State of almost prophetic Trance & Delight - & blessed God aloud, for the powers of Reason & the Will, which remaining no Danger can overpower us! O God, I exclaimed aloud – how calm, how blessed am I now/I know not how to proceed, how to return/ but I am calm & fearless & confident/if this Realty were a Dream, if I were asleep, what agonies had I suffered! What screams!- When the Reason & and the Will are away, what remain to us but Darkness & Dimness & a bewildering Shame, and Pain that is utterly Lord over us, or fantastic Pleasure, that draws the Soul along swimming through the air in many shapes, even as a flight of starlings in a Wind. (CL II 842)

The sense of liberation so vividly expressed in this passage is achieved through a transcendence of the usual mortal anxieties and natural boundaries that resembles the exalted state of divine revelation. Coleridge is suspended between awe and fear but transported briefly beyond rational and bodily fear into wonder and, perhaps paradoxically, the peaceful, profound assurance that this excited recognition engenders. The 'Powers of Reason and the Will' engaged in the experience are, for Coleridge, spiritualised faculties identified with God (although in later marginal notes on Southey's *Life of Wesley* he more prosaically associates this kind of epiphanic sensation with drug-induced 'highs').⁶ In the mind at night, in dreams, he is trapped physically and in his own mind, a slave to his fears. In the narrow confinement of bed in a dark

⁶ 'As in dreams after I have taken a dose of calomel', Coleridge, *Marginalia*, Southey, *Life of Wesley*, II. 165.

room, he lacks the physical and mental perspective he gains on the mountains: 'If I were asleep, what agonies had I suffered! What screams!' Here he is translated and renewed. The movement of the mind described is positive, affirmative, imaginatively stimulating energetic images, liberating creativity. The literal elements of wind/air and water, and their metaphorical expression, embody energy, change, the freedom of movement. This contrasts sharply with his later experience of physical confinement.

Coleridge's visionary experience on the Sca Fell descent was immediate and intense, and its inspirational impact and significance is acknowledged by him in a letter sent to Southey later the same night, after his return home, in which he declares that 'of all earthly things which I have beheld, the view of Scafell and from Scafell (both views from its summit) is the most heart-exciting' (CN I 452).

The excitement of revelation is reflected in the loosely discursive nature of the Sca Fell entry's punctuation with its dashes, exclamations, half-sentences, breathless accumulation of clauses to the brilliant climactic analogy of ecstasy. In his use of striking natural metaphor and analogy to communicate the indefinable, Coleridge draws instinctively on the figurative resources and rhythms of poetry that also characterise the language of Hebrew scripture and psalms with its references to the strength of the Lord: 'setting fast the mountains, being girded with power', a power which 'maketh the outgoings of the morning and evening to rejoice'.⁷ He is similarly receptive to the spiritual resonance of this natural manifestation of power. Coleridge's jotted impression here flows from an intuitive, inspirational connectedness and operates independently of the conscious patterning which he ascribed to the secondary imagination, or the deliberate formulation of metaphor interpreted as 'fancy'. The free movement of the prose seems concordant with the free movement of the mind and the dissolving of boundaries. It could be seen as more truly (or more inspirationally) poetic in its fluent organic momentum than the more formally structured verse felt at the time to merit the title of poetry.

Coleridge's nature observations are generally communicated with an excitement which is visually expressed in the linguistically fragmented but innate cohesion of these prose jottings, somehow consistent with records often originally made on tour in pocketbooks carried in a knapsack (CN I xvii).⁸ In this additional example, the loose punctuation reflects the fluidity of the perceptual and emotional response and the instantaneous nature of the changing physical phenomena and visual effects.

The Moon full, now right opposite hanging directly above Barugh [...] – has hid itself in a cloud, that a few minutes ago was brassy bright, how far brighter than the moon that entered it – but now is pale and wan before the rising Intensity / See! The cloud parts – the moon comes out

⁷ Psalm 65, v 6-8.

⁸ Coburn suggests that the notebooks containing references to natural scenery on walking tours are likely to have been carried with him in his knapsack and used en route (CN I xvii).

and fills the interspaces, just touching the cloud above and below / & of the same colour with the Cloud / How sharp lined the shadows are on the Skiddaw / a Cloud, creeping & never getting away, in shape & size like a tortoise on its summit / & a little below the sharp shadow cuts it off, a section from the mountain / on the opposite Mountains, Grisedale &c the Shadows are loose, & treelike / The Sun! (CN I 1627)

Natural motion replicated in fluid prose through intense sensory connection is equally powerfully demonstrated in Coleridge's famously vivid poetic evocation of a starling murmur in a notebook entry of 1799, viewed this time through the windows of a coach. This again is a vision of individual motion mysteriously unified by a kind of instinctive collective compulsion.

Soon after this I saw starlings in vast flights, borne along like smoke, mist – like a body unendued with voluntary Power – now it shaped itself into a circular area, inclined – now they formed a Square -now a Globe – now from complete Orb into an Ellipse – then elongated into a Balloon with the Car suspended, now a concave Semicircle; still expanding, or contracting, thinning or condensing, now glimmering and shivering, now thickening, deepening, blackening! (CN I 582)

For Coleridge, true wisdom is achieved only through an inspirational, instantaneous connection which liberates the imagination. This imaginative stimulus is also, for him, the well-spring of poetry. In words that echo John Wesley and other evangelists' rejection of a purely cerebral religious 'faith', Coleridge remarks critically on the narrow vision of those rationally educated who are:

marked by a microscopic acuteness; but when they looked at great things, all became blank and they saw nothing – and denied (very illogically) that any thing could be seen; and uniformly put the negation of a power for the possession of a power - & called the want of imagination Judgement, & the never being moved to Rapture Philosophy! (CL I 355)

Coleridge asserts the need for a bolder sensory connection and a grander vision, and the need to preserve a capacity for wonder which is the source both of wisdom and happiness and innate in natural man.

Coleridge expresses the corresponding exhilaration of physical energy in his account of a:

route which he took past Scale Force '& stern Embrace of Rock'. The independent way he chose to forge reveals his mobile and adventurous spirit: 'here it was "every man his own path-maker," & I went directly cross it-on soft mossy Ground, with many a hop, skip, &

jump, & many an occasion for observing the truth of the old Saying:
where Rushes grow, a man may go.' (CL II 835)

It may be significant that the choices of active verb have overtones of youthful playfulness which would have had a poignant appeal for a man forcing physical exertion on a body already damaged by opium dependency at this stage. Yet this is activated through the energy of physical movement, and when this declines, in accordance with Coleridge's holistic philosophy, so, more often, does the resilient energy of the mind and the outreach of broader creative connection transcending the material. Through movement and change, perspectives shift, new prospects and directions are exposed.

This change is demonstrated in the very different linguistic character of Coleridge's entries in the later journals written during a period of steadily declining health and mobility. Strenuous physical exertion of the kind that drove his Scottish tour, alone after parting with the Wordsworths, might temporarily keep the depressive reaction at bay by occupying the body's resources and focusing the mind - and in this case too, attempt to beat down the painful symptoms of opium withdrawal. As physical vigour declined, however, so inevitably did the opportunity and energy of will to manage and escape mental pressure in this way.

I see this illustrated in Coleridge's inverse application of 'light' as metaphor, the image so dominant in entries inspired by walking out of doors amongst the changing lights and colours of seasonal variation. Light was more than uplifting illumination; as a central metaphor for spiritual revelation and visionary inspiration, it was also a symbol of faith and hope. Light is also the material power which stimulates the energy of life and movement, which for Coleridge was the source of happiness.

The joy of these visionary insights is, however, countered by the fear of losing that inspired connectedness, and is thus precariously poised. The fear is rooted in a sense of the evanescence of visions conjured from the fluid elements of light and water in movement and transition. This is their nature; they are not fixed, irrefutable. It is therefore inevitable that, for him, a loss of hope and happiness is associated with a lack or loss of light. This is something which Coleridge had experienced periodically from early on in his writing career. The feeling is explicitly articulated in a letter to Sara Coleridge :

My imagination is tired, down, flat and powerless [...] I have, at times, experienced such an extinction of Light in my mind, I have been so forsaken by all the forms and colourings of existence, as if the organs of Life had been dried up; as if only simple BEING remained, blind and stagnant!

The internal visionary organ fails and he feels depleted, reduced, with a sense of disconnection. This strange state he compares to 'a man who should lose his companion in a desert of sand where his weary Halloos drop down in the air

without an Echo.' Emotional and sensory deprivation and isolation are powerfully conveyed in the loss of colour and non-returning echo. (CL I 471) The unexpected openings resulting from movement of mind and body become progressively less accessible to him. As his physical life becomes increasingly regulated and circumscribed through the necessary careful management of insecure health, so he is denied the startlings of joy and vision that can break in through movement and change.

Coleridge's increasing sense of imaginative and emotional disconnection was sensed and articulated earlier in his 'Dejection Ode' sent in a letter of 1802 to the woman from whom he had also constructed a visionary ideal, Sara Hutchinson:

Yon crescent Moon, as fix'd as if it grew
In its own cloudless, starless lake of Blue—
A boat becalm'd! dear William's Sky Canoe!
—I see them all, so excellently fair!
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are.

My genial Spirits fail –
And what can these avail
To lift the smoth'ring weight from off my Breast?
It were a vain Endeavour,
'Tho' I should gaze for ever
On that Green Light which lingers in the West!
I may not hope from outward Forms to win
The Passion & the Life whose Fountains are within! ⁹

The poem's images of light: 'The Green Light that lingers in the West', and water metaphors: 'The Passion and the life whose Fountains are within', dominate this entry as they do the descriptive observations of the notebooks, their loss for the poet metaphorically equivalent to blindness and thirst. To a greater extent for Coleridge than for Wordsworth, who would seem to have been most receptive to auditory stimulus, the *eye* for Coleridge was a crucial organ of connection with natural beauty opening and lifting the imagination.

The languor and despondency which Coleridge expresses to William Godwin on Jan 22nd, 1802, as succeeding moments of elation, expresses the inertia of depression. This is starkly opposed to the interplay of imaginative and physical energy that characterises the entries of the walking journals.

If ever I hope proudly of my future Self, this Hot Fit is uniformly followed and punished by Languor, & Despondency – or rather, by lazy & unhoping Indifference. (CL II, 784)

⁹ PW 289, ll.39-51.

And in a notebook entry of Spring 1810, he confesses:

Sometimes when I earnestly look at a beautiful Object or Landscape, it seems as if I was on the brink of a Fruition still denied – as if Vision were an appetite: even as a man would feel, who having put forth all his muscular strength in an act of prosilience, is at that very moment held back – he leaps and yet moves not from his place. (CN III 3767)

Emotional impulse and will is weighted and stifled by a muscular inertia which has infected the spirit, the description reinforcing the lament in the Dejection Ode: ‘What can these [genial spirits] avail?/ To lift the smothering weight from off my Breast?’ Coleridge’s description recalls the sensation of nightmare in which movement and desire is smothered by a kind of physical paralysis. Creative desire, though keen, remains an abstract objective if not impelled by physical capacity or will. To remain in one place is to be denied the possibly inspirational impact of visions gained, encounters made through movement, with the new openings and perspectives which this offers. The correlation of imaginative connection with physical impulse and need in the phrase: ‘as if Vision were an appetite’ suggests the relationship between creative and bodily energies, a relationship that supplies the spiritual liberation Coleridge craves.

Coleridge anticipated the loss of his poetic powers but paradoxically expresses the experience in a vivid aptness of metaphor which might seem to contradict the assertion. Confessing to Godwin as early as 1801 his sense of creative sterility he declares:

The Poet is dead in me - my imagination (or rather the Somewhat that had been imaginative) lies, like a Cold Snuff on the circular Rim of a brass Candlestick, without even a stink of tallow to remind you that it was cloathed & mitred with Flame. That is past by! – I was once a volume of Gold Leaf, rising and riding on every breath of fancy – but I have beaten myself back into weight and Density, & now I sink in quicksilver, yea, remain squat and square on the earth amid the hurricane, that makes Oaks and Straws join in one Dance, fifty yards high in the Element. [...] I repeat that I am unfit to decide on any but works of severe Logic.’ (CL II 714)

The active verbs ‘riding and rising’ replicate the restless mobility of the creative imagination with an emphasis on the upward, outward movement of joy and elation from which Coleridge feels himself excluded. The elemental metaphor of ‘flame’ and ‘hurricane’ also conjure the elemental powers with which he contended on his upland walks and denote a connection with natural energies. While he overstates his loss of imaginative power and takes no account of the inspirational capacity of grief, his declining physical energies and resilience increasingly weighted his mind with fears rooted in a deepening sense of poetic—and premature physical—impotence. The visual imagery separately applied to

the contrasting states (of mind) effectively denote the bright buoyancy and potency of youth: 'gold', 'flame', 'dance', and the heavy density of physical stasis: 'I have beaten myself back into weight and Density: 'remain squat and square', and sterility: cold snuff, 'unfit for anything but works of severe logic' etc. The term 'religious' would also seem apposite here for an imagination which is described in exalted terms as 'cloathed and mitred in flame', expressing reverence for an elevated visionary faculty. Such imagery figuratively evokes revelation and mystical authority. It implies the capacity for sudden insights achieved through changes in perception that cannot be experienced in a fixed and static state.

This is the inspirational outreach which is the movement of imagination that connects us with an energy and meaning outside ourselves, a universal spirit of harmony and truth. This sense of severance induces in Coleridge an ache of homesickness for what seems a state of blessedness—a semi-divine inheritance that he has lost.

Now Afflictions bow me down to Earth –
 [...] But oh! Each Visitation
 Suspends what Nature gave me at my Birth,
 My shaping Spirit of Imagination! (CL II 449)

These 'visitations' are not uplifting revelation, but painful reminders of mortality.

After further deterioration in a physical condition increasingly depleted by opiate addiction, Coleridge was, from 1816, supported in the home of the Gilman family in Highgate. His reduced physical mobility might be seen to be reflected in deliberate, searching, but book-bound, static philosophical speculation. The script of many of the later notebook entries is in marked contrast to earlier entries of natural description, which in response to physical change and movement, charge the reader with their energy and engage us with their brevity and intensity.

Many later notebook entries illustrate a very different kind of writing reflected in a far more densely scripted arrangement on the page. Although many such entries are driven by the same philosophical and scientific curiosity, they lack the sharp *sensory* engagement of earlier entries which reflects an active relationship with the natural world. The intensity and immediacy of sensory connection - its quickness and suddenness- is therefore absent from the language.

The more formal register and structuring of other late entries may also reflect Coleridge's increased interest in religion as an institution, supported from 1827 in a more systematic reading of the Bible.¹⁰ The prose in most later entries is continuous, if sometimes more laboured and halting in its rhythms, with a larger proportion of corrections and crossings out than in earlier, more

¹⁰ As in *Notebooks IV*: 5086, and many others.

spontaneously composed nature observations.¹¹ While containing strenuous and astute calculations, the reader might agree with Virginia Woolf's observation that the style can be 'burdened with laborious detail and pedantic expression', lacking the quick uplift and flight of metaphor and luminous phrase in the earlier jottings of the walking notebooks.

Conscious of self-division, and with a sense of the loss of his creative identity, Coleridge feared that he might 'by abstruse research [...] steal/ From my own nature all the natural man.' (CL II 449). He mourns the loss of organic poetic fluency resulting from a failure of imaginative and spiritual connectedness. This is poignantly expressed in a later notebook entry from 1830, in an observation on cloud formations where he remarks on:

One or two ominous & magnificent Piles with a watery eye of Light in them', but regrets: 'On the charm of sweet words in sweet sequence must it depend – but I could once on a time have done it. (CN V 6366)

Coleridge's poem, 'Work Without Hope' in an entry of 1825, mourns a sense of disconnection from the living world around him as his life becomes increasingly restricted physically through precariously stable but declining health. The poem still illustrates his capacity to observe and articulate precisely this disconnection, however.

All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair;
[...]
And I, the while, the sole unbusy thing,
Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.
[...]
Call the world Spider, and at fancy's touch
Thought becomes image and I see it such.
With viscous masonry of films and threads
It joins the Waller's and the Weaver's trades,
And see a twilight tent enclose me round
A dusky cell! – but hush! For all too long
I linger in the [preamble/precincts] (CN IV 5192 f84)

The lines of the poem (the last word appropriately obscure and indistinct) powerfully articulate the poet's sense of exclusion from a world of active engagement and purpose. The image of the spider's web on one level expresses connectedness, but also conveys a smothering sense of entrapment and immobility. The attention to minute, individual animal detail suggests a fragmentation that lacks a broader visionary unity. It reiterates a philosophical frustration expressed in 1797 in a letter to Thelwall:

¹¹ See for example, *Notebooks* III: 3901-02.

More frequently, all things appear little – all the knowledge, that can be acquired, child's play – 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!
(CL I 349)

Yet though the sudden startling visionary insights gained through movement and change may be denied Coleridge, he could be seen to acquire a different wisdom through passive and static reflection, a meditative concentration - or reflective prayerfulness - succeeding the initial revelatory insight. As in 20th century poet Philip Larkin's expression of spiritual barrenness in his poem 'Aubade', a poetic articulation of desolation can in itself be a positive creative act paradoxically demonstrating emotional and imaginative connection.

Later prose notebook entries may show much thoughtful engagement with doctrinal questions and their socio-political implications, as in Coleridge's *Lay Sermons*, published in 1817, but in these more finished, published works, the imaginative connection and excitement is often absent, certainly in the view of William Hazlitt in his possibly overly harsh comparison of what he considered the turgid prose and reasoning of the *Lay Sermons* with the inspired energy of the inspired inaugural sermon delivered at the Unitarian chapel in Shrewsbury which the young acolyte had walked 10 miles in the mud to hear the prospective future parson Coleridge preach. Virginia Woolf concurs with this view of Coleridge's sometimes leaden prose style when she complains that: 'Often he is prolix to the point of incoherence, and his meaning dwindles to a wisp on the mind's horizon.'¹²

The implication is that deliberate, strenuous efforts of 'abstruse reasoning', with mathematical and geometrical formulations of the foundation of human nature, will not bring us closer to a truth which is often emotionally experienced and unexpectedly revealed. Intellectual calculation of this kind may take us to the threshold, but that urgent movement of connection is absent. As in Coleridge's 'Work without Hope', one may be spinning a web which elaborately spreads its filaments, but ultimately confines, like Dr. Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, in his self-defeating attempt to find the 'key to all mythologies'. Some might argue, however, that it this 'wisp on the mind's horizon', in Woolf's phrase, which can represent the elusive vision of the spiritual eye, or the religious imagination.

We need to remind ourselves that although we should endeavour to climb them, we can't dwell on the heights for ever and must descend to the demands of daily domestic reality. The older Coleridge often remained stranded on the boundary between the material and visionary - and cloistered in the intellectual sphere - with the first (and last) increasingly predominating. It should, however, be possible to retain our original human capacity for wonder and the

¹² Virginia Woolf, quoted by Griggs, *Letters I*: xxxvi.

ability to connect emotionally and imaginatively with the mysteries which lie outside the known and seen, which we can call the religious imagination. Despite the increased physical infirmity of premature old age, Coleridge retained this capacity to some degree but was always to mourn the loss of the energy of inspirational connectedness which was the joy both of self-fulfilment and self-transcendence and, for him, intimately related to *physical* identity in the health and mobility of the body.

Although he may have sought to close the gaps in a search for universal, choate meaning, maybe the meaning lay in those very gaps as visionary openings to mysteries which cannot be defined or fixed in a system, yet powerfully engage the spiritual imagination. In this respect, Coleridge's fragmented nature jottings have a weight and sufficiency, a spiritual fullness and poetic completeness that he may not have recognised.