

Coleridge and the Natural World: Halsway Study Weekend 2019

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THIS YEAR'S HALSWAY WEEKEND 13TH–15TH SEPTEMBER had as its theme 'Coleridge and the Natural World'. With glorious weather throughout, we were treated to five excellent lectures, a remarkable presentation of photographs of the flora and fauna of Somerset, and a happy excursion across the Quantocks.

Paul Cheshire began proceedings on the Friday night. His lecture, 'Beldame Nature: Witch and Goddess', explored a tension in Coleridge's writing between nature's 'soft influences' in 1797's 'The Dungeon', and nature, as described to James Gillman in 1825, as a 'wary wily long-breathed old Witch' who 'is sure to get the better of Lady MIND'. Paul took as a centrepiece for his talk a notebook fragment which Coleridge wrote 'as an imitation of Du Bartas' and reworked three times in 1807 (CN II 3107). In its first two versions the fragment seems poised between Memory and 'undoubting hope', as time's 'subtle web', a network of enabling moments, creates 'each sweet *now* of / My Felicity'. In its third version, the fragment becomes despairing, preoccupied with a form of nonexistence: 'What never is but only is to be'. Leading us through the fragment's changes, Paul read it as offering a palimpsest of Coleridge's ambivalent relationship with nature and as a reminder that for Coleridge intellectual pleasures are physical too. Paul went on to suggest how nature, conceived as goddess and as the feminine in God, unsettled and inspired Coleridge's Christian faith, his metaphysical speculations and his poetic creativity.

On Saturday morning, we enjoyed two more lectures. First, Fiona Stafford spoke about 'Coleridge's Trees'. Fiona's talk reminded us that trees are ordinary, everywhere, but suggest and mark an extraordinary range of imaginative possibilities. She concentrated upon the birch tree and invited us to appreciate Coleridge as a botanist and a poet. She teased out the birch's living significance for Coleridge as a useful, natural presence and as a mythological symbol. His appellation—praising the birch as 'the lady of the woods'—has become a commonplace in tree literature. The phrase first appears in 'The Picture or the Lover's Resolution'. Appearing in *The Keepsake* in 1802, the poem is told from the point of view of a love-lorn man who seeks his beloved but also hopes to forget her in the seclusion of the woods. As Fiona suggested, it works as an Ovidian tale in reverse. The natural world gradually affords more and more certain signs of a human presence. Eventually, the lover finds a drawing his beloved has made using berry juice as ink, 'Sketched on a strip of pinky-silver skin / Peeled from the birchen bark!' Fiona pointed out that this detail faithfully reflects the traditional use of birch bark as the poor man's paper. Her talk led into a rich discussion which allowed space, *inter alia*, for Blake's oppressive and exuberant trees, Burke's oak as symbol of the constitution, Paine's tree of liberty, the Lime tree as prison and

bower, the children's fear of the birch in Thomas Shenstone's 'The School Mistress', and the natural dispersal of birch seed which makes the tree a pioneer outside the forest community.

Ralph Pite's lecture 'The brook runs over Sea-weeds' considered the importance of liquidity in Coleridge's writing. Taking his lead from chapter 10 of the *Biographia*, Ralph traced with imaginative assiduity Coleridge's failed attempt to realise a poetic project entitled the Brook. Through readings of poems and letters, Ralph demonstrated that Coleridge's thought in the 1790s was much concerned with connections and the need to keep them natural. This concern encompassed metaphysics and politics and showed up in Coleridge's fascination with the relations between parts and wholes, between objects and mind, between people as members of one society, and between a river and the land through which it flows. The lecture attended closely to water and air as aesthetic objects and vehicles for metaphor. Water offers a mirror but not a medium for human inhabitation. It flows powerfully, shifts rock, and combines with itself as drops, streams and rivulets. Air currents cross landscapes, with gentle touch and sweeping power. These distinct and various poetic effects invite differing conceptions of personal identity. Touchingly, Ralph suggested Coleridge's admission that he 'melted' on first seeing the baby Hartley was testament to the disturbed surprise he experienced on becoming a father.

The rest of Saturday brought us closer to nature outside the lecture room. Peter Larkin led a beautiful walk across the Quantocks. We stopped periodically to contemplate the trees, the sun glistening on the Bristol Channel, and to hear Pamela Woof reading us apposite selections from Dorothy Wordsworth's Journals. In the evening, Ian and Jean Anderson treated us to a remarkable slide presentation which was also combined with readings from Dorothy's Journals. The product of years of patient endeavour, the show consisted of an extraordinary variety of beautiful photographs of animals and plants native to Somerset and provided a soothing and educative end to the day.

Sunday began with Gregory Leadbetter's lecture 'Coleridge and the "Poetry of Nature": Self-Altering States in a More-Than-Human World'. Greg invited us to understand 'self-altering' in two senses: nature altering itself alters the self. He demonstrated, by leading us through a selection from the notebooks and the poetry, that Coleridge's writing and thought is much concerned with the human encounter with the more-than-human. The lecture encouraged us to understand poetry as the writing of the imaginal, which Greg defined as the reality of the imagined. Drawing from David Abram's account of the participatory life of the senses, arising from the natal pact between body and world, Greg positioned Coleridge's writing as an active expression of the desire to be something beyond what one is and as a receptive appreciation of the ingress of the unknown into the known. In a memorably simple formulation, Greg suggested that Coleridge invited us to affirm poetry's productive provisionality: it offers a way of naming and of resisting naming. This claim

was made good with an intricate disquisition that included happy considerations of vision as an appetite, of how the ineffable drives effusion, and of the charms of moonlight and the excitement of vision by sound in 'The Nightingale'. The lecture ended with Coleridge's fine reflections on faith: 'it is to the Spirit of Man the same Instinct, which impels the chrysalis of the horned fly to build its involucrum as long again as itself to make room for the Antennae, which are yet to come, tho' they have never been—O the *Potential* works *in* us even as the Present mood works *on* us!' (CN III 4088).

Tim Fulford delivered the weekend's final lecture: 'Spinoza takes to the Hills, or, Did Coleridge Invent Geology in Britain?' Tim offered an account of how Coleridge's geological understanding was sustained by theoretical speculation, practical exploration and lasting friendships with George Greenough, Clement Carlyon and Humphrey Davy. During his stay in Göttingen in 1799, Coleridge attended Johann Freidrich Blumenbach's lectures on natural history and the origins of the earth. Then, at the end of term, in the company of Greenough and Carlyon, he went on a geological tour of the Hartz mountains, visiting caves, mines and cliff faces with Georg Blumenbach, the lecturer's son, as guide. His German geological experience encouraged his interest in Spinoza, particularly the principle of conatus ('joint birth') which holds that each thing individuating itself brings other things into their individuality. Blumenbach senior was an advocate of Jean-André Deluc's theories. Deluc believed that the six days of creation in Genesis refer to six epochs, each divided from the next by a catastrophe. This account served as a kind of geological Spinozism as it maintained that the earth took its form from a remaking power inherent in nature. Humphrey Davy's poem 'The Spinozist' affirmed this link. Written in effusive Coleridgean blank verse, and shared with Coleridge, Carlyon and Greenough, Davy's lines celebrate nature as a self-renewing cycle. Like Coleridge, Davy was committed to knowledge by participation, as his experiments with laughing gas had demonstrated. He also pursued geological fieldwork and made explorations of Cornwall (with Carlyon and Greenough), North Wales and Ireland. Coleridge too sought direct knowledge of geological phenomena and in 1805, he followed Greenough's example, by visiting Mount Etna. Davy and Coleridge shared a belief that what is said and thought alters what is seen. They were committed to geology as a hands on, haptic science which opened the earth to hammer, view and speculation. The Romantic, Spinozistic model of inquiry they shared had earlier found expression in enthusiastic poetry; it culminated in Davy's 1828 *Consolations in Travel*: an imaginary dialogue rendered in neutral, dispassionate, empiricist prose.

After Tim's lecture had suggested the interdependency of friendship, inquiry and imagination, the weekend came to an end. Intellectually, it was a great success and as usual we enjoyed the warm hospitality of the staff at Halsway Manor. But perhaps, best of all, the gathering proved once again that the Friends of Coleridge provide relaxed, invigorating, and, in every sense, thoughtful company.