

It is a critical commonplace that Coleridge’s later poems are inferior to his classic works. Since his own lifetime, Coleridge has been saddled with the image of the failed poet, although a certain admiration ought to be given our “failed poet” for his persistent experimentation with prosody and form, his unwillingness to churn out scores of feeble imitations and parodies of his earlier works, and his relative forthrightness and humility, even during those years when he produced his best poetry. More importantly, the image of Coleridge the failed poet has precluded would-be admirers from any of his later works, yet there are a few treasures from these neglected pages of Coleridge’s canon. Indeed, even “Kubla Khan,” “The Eolian Harp,” “Frost at Midnight,” and the *Ancient Mariner* ought not merely be considered marvelously inspired productions from an astonishing year, for each one of these texts was significantly altered through various graftings and revisions. As Tilottama Rajan avers in *The Supplement of Reading* (1990), Coleridge kept even his most successful texts, along with his most dearly held beliefs, “in the space of interpretation.”^[1] Process-orientation is an element of Coleridge’s composition and methodology which has not always received adequate attention, and it has sometimes been used against him.

Similarly, Coleridge’s late poetry has frequently been dismissed by critics, and the occasional one who attempts to explain it often ends up attacking it. Thus even Rajan, characterizes the later poetry as “having approached but failed to achieve the desolate strength of irony” and is thus “more reluctantly sentimental”^[2], the constant need for an apology and self-justification, “reveal a poetry corroded by its own illusions.”^[3] For Rajan, and for Arden Reed as well, these “illusions” can be traced to a failure of secondary imagination to render a symbolic mode truly reconcilable with the disseminating nature of discourse itself. Such a theory of discontinuity between signifier and signified, between the discursive nature of language and the vision it would project, traces the roots of its more recent elaboration to Derrida and de Man. As I see it, the crux of Rajan’s argument turns in part on the distinction between allegory and symbol. Although she embarks on a deconstructive reading of Coleridge’s poetry, Rajan is unwilling to agree with de Man’s privileging of allegory as the

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truly legitimate form of romantic discourse, one that more honestly renounces the vision that truth can be fulfilled through signs. Here, for instance, she critiques de Man’s “Rhetoric of Temporality,” suggesting that “Romantic allegory, it seems, shares with other Romantic modes a tendency to both to *deconstruct* and *reconstruct* the notion of a unity between desire and its object” (emphasis mine). Rajan’s further claim that irony is inscribed with “utopianism” corresponds with her suggestion that “deconstruction” is inscribed with “reconstruction,” and the corollary of this claim appears to be that discontinuity and unity in discourse may also be so unified in the same discourse. And yet, Rajan herself inevitably privileges the symbolic over the allegoric by positing, in direct opposition to de Man’s theory of allegory and temporality, that language can signify more than one trope or quality at once. Critical orientations—not unlike discrete terms used in the elaboration of each argument—become superimposed opposites as each side struggles to critique romantic epistemology from without. Neither “side” appears wholly able to do so. Deconstruction of Romanticism, it would seem, is somehow inextricable from Romanticism itself.

Owen Barfield also attempts to move beyond Romanticism while building upon it in proposing the existence of a “final participation” between humans and nature in *Saving the Appearances*.^[4] His theory is post-romantic in its teleology, that is, in its elevating imagination beyond unconscious intuition to systematic activity, what he denominates “Romanticism come of age.” Barfield considers Romanticism a salutary “symptom of iconoclasm” away from the idolatry of Newtonian and neo-classic dualism. For Rajan, however, the Romantics’ reaction to the eighteenth-century use of a vocabulary of absence and presence as their basis for distinguishing among perception, imagination, and memory makes their “espousal of an idealist poetics a sentimental rather than a naive gesture.”^[5]

Barfield actually mirrors both Rajan’s and de Man’s focus on the intentional image of consciousness when he points out that “an ever-increasing importance came to be attached to the *invented* image and men became more and more dissatisfied with imitations of nature both in the practice and in the theory of art.”^[6] His conclusion, that we must look for divinity not merely within external nature but correspondingly within ourselves, is (quite obviously) not the conclusion deconstructists like Rajan try to make; but it is still the provocative “ideal object” toward which Coleridge strives in the famous line from “Dejection”: “Lady we receive but what we give/ And in our life alone does nature live.”

That Coleridge uttered those lines “in dejection” suggests, among other things, that he had difficulty *experiencing* them as truth: he, too, stopped well short of final participation. In his later prose, however, Coleridge never

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wavers far from his espoused beliefs in organic unity—not just as a literary metaphor but also as a fact of the universe, and as a relationship established (if not always felt) between God and humanity. The Romantic Movement as a whole, however, failed to mature, according to Barfield, because it could not lift nature and humanity to a higher level of spiritual connection: if the universe is a representation, what then does it represent? Barfield, too, has not fully escaped romanticism: as with deconstruction, his theory of “final participation” cannot be fully disentangled from its sources in Coleridgean romanticism. The difference from deconstruction, however, is that Barfield embraces our connection with Romanticism, for he holds that final participation is, also, romanticism come of age. Earlier, in *Poetic Diction* he privileges the imaginative and poetic faculties, concluding that consciousness itself is “the momentary apprehension of the poetic by the rational, into which the former is forever transmuting itself— which it is itself for ever in process of becoming. This is what I would call pure poetry.”^[7]

Theoretically if both Barfieldian theory and Derridian deconstruction are inseparable from romanticism, they are themselves inter-connected. Indeed, among Barfield’s conclusions in *Poetic Diction* is his explanation that “living poetry...lights up only when the normal continuum of [our movement toward rationality] is interrupted in such a manner that a kind of gap is created.”^[8] Barfield’s glimpses of vision are inevitably fragmentary, not unlike the visionary moments in Coleridge’s prose. Coleridge’s finest poetry, however, is generally more continuous in its structure, while his most remarkable poetic quality is that he advances a visionary moment or claim and, simultaneously, delineates the immense difficulty in fully grasping—or completely participating in—the self-same vision.

One work that illustrates this general tendency, perhaps more so than any other, is “Constancy to an Ideal Object.” Indeed, it is my contention that this poem is among the finest Coleridge ever wrote and should be included among his so-called “masterpieces.” “Constancy” builds upon a conceit from Coleridge’s early poetic work “Religious Musing”:

As when a Shepherd on the vernal morn
Through some thick fog creeps tim’rous with slow foot,

Darkling he fixes on th' immediate road
 His downward eye: all else of fairest kind
 Hid or deform'd. But lo, the bursting Sun!
 Touched by th' enchantment of that sudden beam
 Straight the black vapour melteth, and in globes
 Of dewy glitter gems each plant and tree:
 On every leaf, on every blade it hangs!
 Dance glad the new-born intermingling rays,

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And wide around the landscape streams with glory! [\[9\]](#)

The obvious optimism of this scene stands in opposition to the general mood of “Constancy,” yet, as Arden Reed aptly points out, this scene “is the essential story Coleridge never ceased trying to tell: passion redirected in the service of religion, a movement from low to high, from darkness to light, from coldness to warmth, from isolation to community.”[\[10\]](#) In addressing “Constancy,” Reed believes “there is not even an attempt at synthesis”[\[11\]](#) since the final stanza, which presents a spectral projection in the mist of the wintery dawn, is “a shadow rather than a substance, a signifier without a signified (or perhaps a confusion of those categories).”[\[12\]](#)

Although I agree with these contentions, I do not think they tell the whole story, for they are focused on one pole of Coleridge’s dynamic. What is most arresting about “Constancy” is its conduciveness to a starkly existentialist perspective; thus, I find it more interesting and moving than “Religious Musings.” And yet, as Rajan explains, existential epistemology and romantic vision are intrinsically linked: Indeed, they are clarified by each other. If I were to adapt Rajan to a Barfieldian view, I would propose that these two modes of thought—existentialism and romantic vision—could be viewed as two poles of a fundamental epistemological crisis. In a Derridian perspective, the language used to describe either (or any) ontological state must be inscribed with its opposite perspective. A deconstructive reading such as Reed’s will inevitably find even Coleridge’s most integrated poetry somehow un-reconciled, and this bias is not finally unfortunate or unproductive. Among the chief advances of recent theory is that we have become less oblivious to the marginal elements of texts which complicate theme, that we are better able to understand that any theme can only be expressed in language, and that the differential structure of language is itself subject to dissemination and unravelling. Yet to claim, as Reed does of “Constancy,” that there is no attempt whatsoever at synthesis tells us, perhaps, as much about the critic as about the literature.

“Constancy to an Ideal Object” is a sort of allegorical existential illusion—I do not deny for one moment that this is its most obvious surface tenor. It is also, surprisingly, one of the most compact expressions of Coleridge’s cosmological scheme and epistemological dilemma in all his collected works. On the surface “Constancy” appears to be an expression of despair; thus at first it reads more like “Dejection” than as Coleridge’s re-affirmation of his cosmology. My following analysis, therefore, involves somewhat more than seems present in the highly compressed poem, yet is “there” by virtue of the atmospheric conditions that Coleridge renders in the second stanza, as well as

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by the symbolic scheme that runs throughout the poem.

In “Constancy,” first of all, Coleridge constructs an ambiguous introductory stanza in which he contrasts the love of nature, woman, domesticity, and tranquility with the fear of mutability

and of death. The poem's title, an adaptation of Platonic ontology, suggests a steadfast relationship between the subject and the phenomenal world. Conversely, the poetic diction and imagery manifest an instability between personal constancy and objective transitoriness, which in turn insinuates a view of language advanced by Derrida and de Man in which the imaginary signifier struggles unsuccessfully to become the object it seeks to evoke. The poem begins: "Since all that beat about in Nature's range, / Or veer or vanish, why should'st thou remain / The only constant in a world of change, / O yearning thought! that liv'st but in the brain? (1-4)[13] In contrast to positivistic presupposition, Coleridge conceives of physical nature as always fleeting and ever mutable, so that the only constant is the "yearning thought," the "idea" of the subject. And yet, as Owen Barfield points out time and again in *What Coleridge Thought*, Coleridge held that human ideas and the universe of things are interpenetrating and consubstantial.[14] For example, in Chapter twelve of the *Biographia*, he explains that those who possess the philosophical imagination grasp the essence of reason in nature, and not merely as a metaphorical construct, for "they know and feel the *potential* works *in* them, even as the *actual* works *on* them" (I, 164).[15] Barfield's explanation applies in the present context:

It is because reason is present in nature, and *not* merely because of repressed appetites, or of physically "inherited" memories, that we can speak fruitfully of a "*consciousness*" which lies beneath or (as it were) behind the spontaneous consciousness natural to all reflecting beings.[16]

This observation should be the occasion for the sort of "joyance" one finds in the famous grafted addition to "The Eolian Harp," yet in "Constancy" the tone of the opening lines is obviously melancholic. The scene images the speaker whose thoughts, in contrast to the comment from the *Biographia*, are *alone* perceived as finally constant and ultimately knowable in a solipsistic existence. Reed's interpretation mirrors my own in this regard: "Despite its lack of... 'outness,' however, the mental image affects [the poet—speaker] as powerfully as the actual presence of the beloved would—more powerfully, in fact, since it is more constant." [17] Perhaps the intensity of absence is

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moderated somewhat by Coleridge's posing of these lines as a question asked of the ideal object itself, an interpretive emphasis that does not conflict with Coleridge's philosophy of organic unity, in which the brain itself could be thought of as one part of nature's vast interpenetrating system.

"Constancy" continues with an imagined image of future bliss which then turns more ambiguous and frightening:

Call to the Hours, that in the distance play,
The faery people of the future day —
Fond Thought! not one of all that shining swarm
Will breathe on thee with life-enkindling breath,
Till when, like strangers shelt'ring from a storm,
Hope and Despair meet in the porch of Death! (5-10)

Here in a sentiment not unlike Shelley's famous closing remarks from "A Defense of Poetry," Coleridge begins to imagine a more pleasant future somehow resulting from the spirit of *his* age; and yet, the speaker immediately corrects himself and expresses apprehension that "not one" will provide such inspiring renewal—that is, the initial thought was "fond" (i.e. foolish). So once again, it appears that the hope for personal and collective futurity is, for the

solipsist, yet another illusion that “liv’st but in the brain.” Here, in a poetic diction rather like Shelley’s later verse, Coleridge’s lines of “Hope” even recollect Shelley’s double-edged proclamation in the closing lines of the “Defence”: “Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not...”^[18] Like Shelley, that is, Coleridge’s conception is alternately illuminating and obscure, idealistic and skeptical. While these abstract qualities are opposites, as opposites they can also be said to interpenetrate and inform one another’s meaning. Furthermore, though the lines cannot be said to be seamlessly synthesized, the rhythmic and semantic movement is clearly between one pole and another. To refer to hope and despair as “strangers,” to take the most arresting example, seems natural enough: they are reconciled—and suggest polarity in ways too numerous to list—inasmuch as they meet “in the porch of Death.”

The next lines of the poem introduce the suggestion that Coleridge’s problem may in fact be rooted in sexual frustration centered around his need for a woman’s love and for domestic affection; certainly this expressed desire is a part of Coleridge’s conscious design. The following series of lines exhibit his need for domestic tranquility:

Yet still thou haunt’st me; and though well I see,
She is not thou, and only thou art she,

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Still, still as though some dear embodied Good,
Some living Love before my eyes there stood
With answering look a ready ear to lend,
I mourn to thee and say—‘Ah! loveliest friend!
That this the meed of all my toils might be,
To have a home, an English home, and thee!’
Vain repetition! Home and thou art one.
The peaceful’st cot the moon shall shine upon,
Lulled by the thrush and wakened by the lark,
Without thee were but a becalmed bark,
Whose Helmsman on an ocean waste and wide
Sits mute and pale his mouldering helm beside. (11-24)

The simplest explanation here is that Coleridge yearns for the sort of domesticity pictured in “Frost at Midnight”; one may observe, however, that even the rare beauty and circularity of that poetic landscape was marked by subtle instability, its unity and reconciliation supplemented by a differential separation and psychic doubling. But this later poem is further deepened by ambiguity: the feminization of the landscape, that is, the marked intermingling of nature and woman, goes beyond the usual archetypal association and points toward a special “feminine” structure within Coleridge’s psyche, one which continually reflects on its own reflection. Nevertheless, it is too easy to assume that the “yearning Thought” is *merely* the subject’s conscious yearning for a woman; we must remember the poem’s title is far more philosophical and formal, expressing a desire for continuity in a world governed by change. Even so, thoughts which are solely ideal will not alone reanimate nature with “life-enkindling breath”, for Coleridge’s Shelley-like skepticism is still evident in this poem. Indeed, one could even argue the *Ancient Mariner* exhibits (in narrative form) a similar progression of mind, a movement from optimism to solipsism to limited re-integration. And yet, even in the darkest moment of “Constancy”—as the speaker braves the storm of life alone—his psyche is divided and even guardedly optimistic: both despair *and* hope coexist in Coleridge’s

contemplation of death. Therefore in this section of the poem he insinuates a tension, and something of a balance, between solipsistic skepticism and organic optimism.

These lines, once again, do appear to address a woman, though the ambiguous syntax of the second line—"She is not thou, and only thou art she"—complicates this section, making it appear additionally paradoxical. My interpretative paraphrase of these difficult verses is as follows: Yet still, in spite of my understanding of my mind's division, the yearning thoughts still haunt me, and I see that my ideal woman and her attendant domestic affections are *not* my thoughts, though my conception of this ideal figure is an integral part of my imaginative thinking process, and is perhaps the only conception of which I am capable. If the "she" is not a woman per se but rather external nature, a similar interpretation (based on "primary imagination") would suffice. Coleridge, I think, simultaneously implies both meanings. His

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duality—through unity—is evidenced by such lines as, "home and thou art one," and "She is not thou, and only thou is she." In the lines which continue, the emphasis is primarily on natural imagery rather than on the domestic. Thus, even the "peacefullest cot" shined upon by the moon, is likewise reminiscent of "Frost at Midnight." John Beer's analysis of Coleridge's earlier poem (from his essay "Ice and Spring") may enlighten the present context:

Somewhere between [the sun and ice], occupying a mediant position, is the moon, which...while giving out light, gives it (unlike the sun) in a form immediately apprehensible to the human eye. And this universe becomes a universe to which the human heart may fully respond." [\[19\]](#)

However, just as with the previous section, Coleridge ends his long stanza with a negative image and condition of aloneness on "an ocean waste and wide"—like the mariner "alone on a wide wide sea." These lines hint at the speaker's potential state of paralyzing solipsism. Even so, the subordination of this negative image to the phrase "without thee" implies that the "yearning thoughts" of constancy toward love and toward nature just may prevent, or at least assuage, these menacing pains of solipsism.

The final stanza of "Constancy" imaginatively "recreates" the entire thematic matrix by presenting the poem's most striking figuration, arguably among the most brilliant and complex in the entire Coleridgean canon:

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;
The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues,
Nor knows he makes the shadow he pursues! (25-32)

The perceived natural phenomenon Coleridge depicts is extraordinarily arresting. Apparently it occurs in the atmospheric conditions of the mountains of certain locales. When there is a fog in these mountains, the rising sun will project a remarkably realistic, shadowy human form in the air ahead of the observer; the shadow is literally resolved in the translucent "screen" of water particles. Therefore the image will, like a rainbow, ever recede from the oncoming observer. Furthermore, as the corona of the sun shines over the subject's head, that person will see a strikingly beautiful halo around the head of the shadow.

The theological possibility for this image is evident enough; understanding

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the physical phenomenon, however, is very important to the present discussion, which examines this scene from the poet's theological perspective. Coleridge's use of the "image with the glory round its head" resembles Beer's discussion of Coleridge's discussion of Coleridge's moon symbolism. Metaphorically, the darkness of the person and the brightness of the "unapprehensible" sun are both manifested in external nature, here the fog. Man, nature, and "God" (i.e. the illumination of the sun) are all consubstantial: they all appear to exist simultaneously in the same substance. Hence, the image very compactly symbolizes organic unity, and it calls vividly to mind Coleridge's definition of symbol: "a symbol is characterized...above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal".

However, this image also continues to symbolize the illusory status of the vision itself: it is a momentary optical illusion, and Coleridge enhances the element of skepticism by having the subject chasing in awe this glory, while not realizing it is his own shadow! In Freudian terms, I suppose, this image suggests the psychological propensity for a subject's projection of personality on others, particularly of men upon women (the yearning thought for the "ideal object"). The image could even be said to be hallucinatory, the phenomenological vision of delusion manifested poetically. It is therefore one of the most compressed and substantial images in all Coleridge's work. Together with the poem in which it is embedded, Coleridge's image offers the reader a powerful case of "deconstructive" allegory in polarity with "Barfieldian" symbolic teleology—for the translucent shadow, after all, is ultimately "made" from within as with final participation. The same poem therefore confirms what Coleridge's later poetic additions to his classic works have shown us many other times, that the later Coleridge was frequently possessed by—and in possession of—the secondary imagination.

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[1] Tilotoma Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 1990) page 109

[2] Tilotoma Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 1980) page 236.

[3] Ibid, page 238.

[4] Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (London: Faber and Faber 1957).

[5] Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading*, p.205.

[6] Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p.129.

[7] Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (New York: McGraw Hill 1928, 1964) page 178.

[8] Ibid

[9] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Religious Musings," *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1981) pp.94-104

[10] Arden Reed, *Romantic Weather: The Climates of Coleridge and Baudelaire* (Hanover: Brown UP 1983) page 91.

[11] Ibid, page 93.

[12] Ibid, page 97.

- [13] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Constancy to an Ideal Object" *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1981).
- [14] Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP 1971).
- [15] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1981).
- [16] Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought*, page 95.
- [17] Reed, *Romantic Weather*, page 94.
- [18] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Defense of Poetry," *English Romantic Writers* Ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt 1967) page 1087.
- [19] John Beer, "Ice and Spring: Coleridge's Imaginative Education," *Coleridge's Variety: Bicentenary Studies*, ed. John Beer (London: MacMillan 1974), page 71.