

Coleridge's Dream Theory and the Dual Imagination

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One autumn evening in 1803, Coleridge and a few friends gathered at the home of physician Clement Carlyon. Dr. Carlyon recalls that '[t]he phenomena of dreams were freely discussed, and whoever is conversant with Coleridge's writings will be at no loss to imagine with what animation he would converse upon this subject'. (Carlyon *Early Years* I 199)

However much we can imagine the animated voice, we have yet been at a loss to imagine the subject because Coleridge never wrote a dream treatise. A published theory of dreams was one of his many ambitious plans that never saw fruition. But we now have his edited *Notebooks*. In his private writings, Coleridge outlines the topic on two occasions [1] and records many dreams and nightmares. He also makes insightful references to the topic in many other contexts. [2]

What is remarkable about Coleridge's collected dream talk is its comfortable, free-range mix of contemporary theory, ancient dream tradition, materialist doctrine, and idealist philosophy, not to mention his own deep thinking into the 'dream-problem'. Coleridge accepts and makes use of the commonly understood eighteenth-century dream theory, the main tenet being that both reason and volition are suspended in the dreaming state. With rationalists like Erasmus Darwin and James Mackintosh on one hand, and visionaries like Emanuel Swedenborg and George Fox on the other, Coleridge attempts to reconcile a rational, 'scientific' explanation of the dreaming mind with an equally strong metaphysical, even mystical understanding of its possibilities.

On evidence found in Coleridge's dream-theory fragments, I offer two assertions: first, that Coleridge's scattered statements on the night dreaming imagination, when collected and analyzed, cohere into a purposeful theory; and second, that Coleridge's thinking on dreams was moving towards a completion of his theoretical thinking on the 'day' imagination.

First, opposing the conclusion of Jennifer Ford's study, I maintain that Coleridge's statements on dreams cohere into a purposeful theory. This theory, however, has little to do with dream meaning and everything to do with dream method. Coleridge's recorded dreams offer rich material for a twentieth-century dream analyst (for example, his many recurring dreams of shadowy and menacing females), but Coleridge himself never actually analyzed

[81]

his own dreams from an interpretative perspective. For Coleridge, *how* we dream is a more compelling question than *what* we dream. To give us a very brief overview of method, here is a formula (with a Coleridge-like symbol meaning 'to transmute') to help summarize Coleridge's dream method:

SENSE IMPRESSIONS arrive constantly, while awake or asleep, from the external world and create BODILY SENSATIONS OF PAIN/PLEASURE which transmute into PASSIONS & EMOTIONS OF THE MIND which the night-working imagination transmutes into expressive DREAM IMAGES.

Note what is new about this dream thinking. Reason may be sleeping, as eighteenth-century dream theory firmly maintained, but Coleridge's ever-reconciling imagination is fully awake. The imagination, Coleridge insists, '*at all times, with and without our distinct consciousness*, seeks for and

assumes' some reason—'some outward Cause for every Impression from without', and converts these sense impressions into images—or in his words—'in Sleep by aid of the Imaginative Faculty converts its Judgements respecting the Cause [for these impressions] into a present Image ...'. (SC (Raysor) I 202; my italics[3]) Let us now look closely at how Coleridge envisioned sense reception transmuting into dream images.

First, the senses of the body register the external world. However, Coleridge was quick to point out that sense reception was not limited to the world outside the body. Coleridge knew firsthand how the body itself generates all sorts of experience to be sensuously apprehended. 'The body is a veritable *world*. It produces sights, sounds, smells, tastes and exhibits tactile and feeling qualities galore. A healthy person is rarely aware of this personal world of body, but in Coleridge's opium-dependent case, his 'exterior' world narrowed very early in his life to sensing the overwhelming and immediate physical pain of his own body 'house'. 'I am tied down,' he writes, 'and strait-waisted by Disease, & driven inward on my own unworthy *Self*, fighting with my own sensations, listening to my own moans & groans...'. (N50, f.35v, 21 February 1832, as qtd. in Ford, 159)

His oft repeated experience of body sensation converting to dream image marks Coleridge's dream theory with a sharp 'psychosomatic' awareness, an adjective he coins to describe the delicate permeability existing between the body's sensations and the mind's emotions and images.[4] Coleridge also develops the term 'double touch' to name this ability of the body to feel itself, to tell by means of the organ of the skin what is ME and NOT ME.[5] In the case

[82]

of troubled internal organs, double touch appears to operate internally, with nerve-rich tissue recognizing and registering within itself the sensation of pain. Once, to use Coleridge's own recorded dream example, he has a sensation in his stomach which his nervous system registers as pain. Faulty double touch could begin to factor in at this point – if part of the sensing nervous system is numbed by 'pressure, awkward position, & c.' (CN III 4046) If there is faulty double touch operating, then the dreaming mind can no longer recognize the body as the agent of the pain and will imagine an external cause, that is, a 'single touch' operating. Coleridge then claims the pain transmutes into the 'passion' or emotion of fear. The third conversion process takes place when the imagination finds an appropriate dream image to express this emotion, which in this particular dream, settles on the image of a ferocious, leaping pig. Coleridge writes of his dream:

I drew up my legs suddenly: for a great pig was leaping out direct against them. No!—a great pig appeared to leap out against me because by [of] a fear-engendering disease of the stomach... (CN III 4046)

Each organ, Coleridge further claims, is responsible for engendering a specific emotion. Thus, if 'Pain in the Umbilical Region becomes Terror', then Coleridge reasons, the pain of 'Heart-burn becomes intense Grief', and 'bodily pleasure [sexual desire] becomes Hope, or intense Love'. (CN IV 5360) All of these 'organ-IC' engendered emotions will seek appropriate dream imagery. This may seem a quaint idea, this organ-engendered emotion, but by commonsense standards, we know we feel anxiety in the stomach and grief in the heart. Alan Hobson, a noted dream scientist, concurs with Coleridge's basic idea that sense impressions create emotion and that emotion seeks its expression in dream images. He estimates there are 20 to 100 billion neurons in the brain alone registering sense impressions and, in turn, creating emotions. '...[T]he modulatory range of the whole system is beyond imagining,' Hobson writes, 'making infinitely rich the multiplicity of mental states of which human beings are

capable'.^[6] (Hobson 121) Such a rich bank of emotions, Hobson maintains, like Coleridge before him, must expend itself in dream imagery.

But, if both the dreamer's reason and volition are suspended in the dreaming state, what kind of will-full power controls and makes possible these kinds of complex transmutations? Coleridge theorizes that a non-rational intelligence with a *kind* of volition must exist outside the cerebral but yet must

[83]

be located in the body. 'I find no impossibility...' he writes, 'in the metastasis of the sentient power from one part of the Nervous System to the another, as from the cerebral to the pectoral or gangliac'. (CN IV 4908) This belief in a non-rational yet intelligent and volitional 'sentient power' is critical to his dream theory. It is the constant work of body 'Parts' to 'assimilate or transform the external into the personal'. (CN I 1822) How exactly does this non-rational body intelligence accomplish the cross-over of these 'organic' body sensations into the 'vital' realm of feeling? Is this 'translation' accomplished by complex chemistry? Coleridge doesn't theorize the means, but he does endow these compressed nuggets of sensations-turned-emotions with *material* substantiality and then, characteristically, gives them a name: 'analogons'. (CN III 4046)

Coleridge claims that he is so aware of how these emotion-rich 'analogons' translate into images, he can tell even before he falls to sleep what images he's likely to see for he knows what organs are in distress, and further, that he can, by an act of will or by changing body position, convert the images back into their pre-image state of emotion.

Even before I fall to sleep, I know what sort of dreams I am sentenced to suffer—by the rising up of ugly, often [?scabbed] & ulcerous faces, which, when I exorcise by an action of will or by turning around, instantly alternates with a sensation of pain...at my Stomach or below—i.e. changes for an emotion—. (N 35, f.39, dated 1827; Ford 174)

These analogons of emotions must be expressed in image language. Perhaps the emotions transmute back into the selfsame images that created them in the first place, and, if not, into equivalently expressive images. But where does the imagination—what Coleridge calls the 'true inward Creatrix' which is constantly making sense of the 'chaos of elements'—find its expressive images? (CN III 4046 and SC I 202)

A post-Freudian would quickly answer that dream images are stored in the unconscious mind, but such an idea was in its infancy during the early nineteenth century. Coleridge believed that the mind can hold stored images in *potentia* until given form by the creating imagination. This reservoir of memory Coleridge calls 'living catacombs'. They are never lost and only require the renewal of a similar or even a dimly similar emotional state or 'bodily Feeling' in which they were conceived, and instantly they are recovered. '...[T]he trains of forgotten Thought rise from their living catacombs!' This is startling dream theory in 1803. Few contemporaries had come this close or this early to the idea of an active unconscious mind informing both waking and sleeping creative energies.^[7] '[H]ow imperishable

[84]

'Thoughts seem to be!' he exclaims. in the same entry. (CN I 1575)

Clearly, Coleridge is feeling his way into new dream terrain when he insists that the great work of the imagination is never done, yet all the while holding firmly to the eighteenth-century idea that rational thought and conscious will are suspended in the dreaming state. To explain how the imagination works at night, Coleridge makes a commonplace theoretical move. He

compares and puts into opposition the day and night working imaginations. During the day what we see creates emotion. At night, the operation is reversed: emotion creates what we see.

Thus, my second assertion is that Coleridge's theory of the night-dreaming mind complements and completes his theory of the 'day' imagination as we have understood it. We know that Coleridge's theory-making generally begins by positing two opposing forces which seek reconciliation: '...[A]ll power manifests itself in opposite yet interdependent forces'. (F I 511) Most of his contemporary dream theorists compared the day-mind with the night-mind in order to theorize about the dreaming state, but only Coleridge theorized a balanced but oppositional interdependence of the two. Coleridge's theory is of a dual imagination at work night and day, both periods of mind-activity confluent with and influent upon the other.

In his first major dream outline of 1818, Coleridge signals his intention to develop his dream treatise by using contrast. He begins by differentiating between night and day languages, creating out of opposed but significantly connected parentheses the symbol to signify 'opposite to':

The language of the Dream = Night is that of Waking = the Day. It is a language of Images and Sensations, the various dialects of which are far less different from each other, than the various <Day-> Languages of Nations. (CN III 4409)

Coleridge's use of precise mathematical and quasi-mathematical symbols underscores his intention that these two worlds be conceived in perfectly balanced opposition. Coleridge's formula implies that the language of the day is not one of 'Images and Sensations' but of spoken representational words. Anxiety might well be 'gotten off the chest' by talking to a friend during the day, but a dream persona would wander out in public dressed only in underwear. We are compelled, Coleridge theorizes, to both to word-making and image-making as a way to organize this tremendous 'chaos of elements' that rains down upon us from the external world.

[85]

The idea of the unending work of the imagination is given metaphorical shape in an enigmatic notebook entry on falling asleep. Coleridge first asks himself if he should try to image the day/night dual nature of imagination as 'an animant self-conscious pendulum, continuing for ever its arc of motion by the for ever anticipation of it?' (CN II 2999) Coleridge carefully chooses the adjectives 'self-conscious' and 'animant' to signal his belief that the imagination is a vital operating entity, even during unconscious sleep. 'Pendulum' perfectly captures the swings between rational and non-rational power modes, between consciously-willed to body-willed activity. However, Coleridge knows that there is only a lessening (not a disappearance) of one kind of power when the other ascends to control the activity of the mind. Considering this, he wonders, would it be more accurate to image the imagination 'like some fairer Blossom-life in the centre of the Flower-polypus, a life within Life, & constituting a part of the Life, [...that] includes it?' Coleridge's flower-within-a-flower image captures the idea that the major manifestation of the night imagination must still retain—as its heart-center—the day imaginative activity, and conversely, that its major manifestation during the day must retain—as its heart center—the night imaginative activity. Thus, both day and night minds are 'mutually penetrated, each possessing both itself & the other.' (CN II 2999)

Coleridge has, in fact, conceived a set of images for a phenomenon that has a chemical basis. Dream scientists Alan Hobson and Robert McCarley have isolated chemicals which, while interacting with one another, actually exchange places during the waking and sleeping states. The chemicals, norepinephrine and serotonin, are dominant during waking states, whereas acetylcholine dominates the brain when asleep. At night, when the general level of brain activity decreases, the norepinephrine-serotonin neurons become sluggish, and then the acetylcholine generators begin work. Acetylcholine activates the visual but mostly the

emotional centers of the brain. According to Hobson, dream emotion—that all important Coleridgean dream trigger—has its neurobiological roots in the amygdala, an almond-shaped body in the brain which stores (in the order of the emotions most often reported by dream subjects) anxiety, elation, anger, shame, guilt, affection, and erotic feelings.

This is a concise summary of this oppositional, yet interrelational, process of brain/mind activity from the chemical point of view. Hobson and McCarley call their theory the ‘reciprocal interaction hypothesis’, a far cry from a ‘self-conscious animant pendulum’ or a ‘fairer Blossom-life in the centre of the Flower-polypus’. But though the language for these conceptions comes from different vocabularies, the imaginative idea is remarkably similar. Even without the support of chemical research, Coleridge theorizes about the oppositional yet interdependent operations of the night/day imagination with remarkable insight. He believes the imagination is constantly reconciling, though the operations reverse themselves during waking and sleeping. The sleeping and waking states use different languages, and although different

[86]

faculties of the mind operate, there is a permeability between them.

Thus, not only do Coleridge’s scattered statements on the night dreaming imagination cohere into a purposeful theory, Coleridge’s dream ideas on the oppositional yet interrelational dreaming imagination complete his thinking on the ‘day’ imagination as we have understood it and actually pre-figure dream research findings of the twentieth century. There are other interesting parallels between the dream theories of Coleridge and Hobson. Hobson, for example, believes that many of the strange phenomena in dreams result from the brain’s efforts to make sense of irregular sensorimotor signals, a statement that recalls Coleridge’s insistence on the single/double touch theory. But Hobson sounds most like Coleridge when he insists on the mind as an entity driven towards reconciliation. ‘The brain is always trying to make a whole story out of whatever facts are presented,’ explains Hobson. ‘That’s the brain’s job’. (Leonard 67) [8] As Coleridge phrases the thought, ‘The mind, therefore, which at all times, with and without our distinct consciousness, seeks for and assumes some outward Cause for every Impression from without’. (SC I 202)

However, Coleridge’s theory differs significantly from Hobson’s, a theory that Hobson himself admits needs ‘something more humanistic and all embracing than neurobiology’. (Leonard 66) To remedy such an inadequacy, Coleridge would suggest metaphysical inquiry into the second consciousness, because the scientist can only describe the universe from fixed physical principles, as though intelligence were something ‘already existing and complete’. (BL I 297) Coleridge’s dream theory differs from Hobson’s because he considers the soul, anchored in the body and tied by senses to the phenomenal world, an important agent in the dreaming process. He considers the dreaming moment as one outside the fixities of time and space. He also philosophically explains why a rage for order exists in both the waking and sleeping mind: the finite world of division naturally and continually seeks its necessary and needy opposite—the holistic order of Oneness at the center of consciousness.

Dream theory mattered to Coleridge. He was a man deeply engaged in understanding the complexities of the mind. Perhaps he thought that knowledge of the process could alleviate some of his nightmare misery. Or perhaps he hoped understanding the creative mind could stimulate his own beleaguered creative output. It also mattered because he wanted a soul open to the unseen Reality, and dreams were the classic means to enter the immaterial spaces of the mind. It mattered because the dreaming mind was his only escape from a difficult life. It matters to us, perhaps for some of those same reasons.

[1] CN III 4409 (May 1818) and CN IV 5360 (April 1826).

[2] See Jennifer Ford, *Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998) for the most complete collection of Coleridge's dream material.

[3] The idea of the constantly reconciling imagination is repeated in CN III 4046.

[4] See *SWF* II 1444 for first use of 'psychosomatic'.

[5] Despite several scholarly discussions attempting to elucidate the topic of double touch, we find the clearest definition from Coleridge himself in his notes on dramatic illusion and nightmare phantasms. Double touch, he explains, occurs 'when my own hand touches my side or breast'; single touch—'when another person's hand touches me'. (*SC* I 202) I would assume from this statement that single touch also occurs when one's own hand touches external objects, the NOT ME. This simple act of distinguishing self from external world has wide application for Coleridge, including its significance to subjects as varied as Free Will, the Sublime, and Historic Faith. As far as his dream theory goes, Coleridge believes that many nightmare events and phantasms are traceable to the lack of effective 'double touch' operating in the nervous system, for example, when a part of the body is numbed from poor sleeping posture or possibly from drugs or disease, thus disrupting the proper dream transmutation from sensation to emotion to image.

[6] See Alan Hobson, *The Dreaming Brain* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988).

[7] The words *subconscious* and *subconsciously* are attributed to De Quincey in the OED as usages appearing in 1832 and 1823, but these concepts appear much earlier in the writing of Coleridge. For example, in 1806 Coleridge uses 'subconsciousness' in a phrase noting the influence on vision of unconscious sense memory (in this case—the sense memory of touch; seeing velvet, for example, is enriched by the subconscious mind holding in its sense memory the *feeling* of velvet): 'i.e. the vision enriched by subconsciousness of palpability by influent recollections of Touch'. (*CN* II 2915) Long before Freud, Coleridge knew and articulated the dangers of repression. In 1811, he describes the state of 'under-consciousness' in a letter to Matilda Betham as a place where he can 'keep down' his inward distress for a while, but then it is sure 'to act meanwhile with its whole power of poison on my body'. (See Matilda Betham, *A House of Letters*. Ed. Ernest Betham. 2nd ed. London: Jarrold & Sons, n.d., 132.) Kathleen Coburn surmises that Coleridge invents such coinages to denote his growing awareness of gradations of consciousness, perhaps using them in conversation with De Quincey himself, in trying to dissuade him from opium taking. (*SCImagination* Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1974, 21)

[8] Johnathan Leonard usefully summarizes the 'reciprocal interaction hypothesis' and makes good use of his interview with Alan Hobson in 'Dream Catchers' in *Harvard Magazine*, May- June 1998, 58-68.