

Light as a Romantic Positive in Wordsworth and Coleridge

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In this paper I propose to examine two ways, the metaphoric and the supernatural, in which light, both inner and outer, is employed by the Romantics, particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge, in some of their poems. To the list of positives of the Western past such as life, love, liberty, hope and joy, which Abrams in his *Natural Supernaturalism* considers as being held cardinal by the Romantics, I should like to add the element of light. This is because light, I feel, forms as vital a constituent of Romantic poetry as the rest of the humane values or 'inherited certainties'—the terms Abrams uses for the enlisted positives. With its pervasive reference in the Bible, in Western philosophy (in Plato and Plotinus, for example) and in literature ranging from the religious and love poetry of the late Middle Ages to the poetry of the Romantics, light could well be considered, along with the other values, as conveying a high positive value. What, however, distinguishes it from the abiding human values is its varied metaphorical employment and its distinct use in Romantic thought and literature.

The human features or values that Abrams lists in *Natural Supernaturalism*, are not much more than secular forms of the 'cardinal virtues' of Christian moral theology. 'And Light', as he stated to me in his explanatory letter of 3rd of August 1993, 'although centrally important as a philosophical and religious concept, and subject to diverse metaphorical application, is not a distinctive human feature or virtue, but belongs to a different category of entities from hope, love, freedom, life and joy.'

It may be of interest to note at this stage how Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, his monumental work on the Romantic aesthetics, focuses on the metaphoric role that light plays in connection with the expressive theories of art. He regards the as a metaphor of the mind, and compares the mind to a radiant projector contributing to the world of objects it perceives. The mind, which the Romantics considered more active than passive or receptive, contributes to the construction of the world in the very process of perceiving it; and in doing so, radically transforms it into something new by shedding over it the radiance of its inner light—the light of the visionary faculty of the imagination. As Abrams states, '... in the romantic writers, the favourite analogy of the activity of the perceiving mind is that of a lamp projecting light.'^[1] In *The Prelude* Wordsworth affirms that

An auxiliar light

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Came from my mind, which on the setting sun
Bestowed a new splendour...

(1850 II 368-70)

And Coleridge believes that

from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth—

(Dejection: An Ode: IV)

Now the values or the Romantic positives of which Abrams speaks, found their sanction in systematic theology. This background, together with Biblical exegesis, Abrams maintains, has ‘a repeated relevance to our understanding of the Romantic movement.’^[2] The reason for this is ‘that many of the most distinctive and recurrent elements in both the thought and literature of the age had their origin in theological concepts, images and plot patterns.’ (*NS*, 65). And if we remain ignorant of the degree to which these distinctive concepts of Romantic philosophy and literature act as displaced or reorganized theology, or assume a secularized form of devotional experience, it is because, says Abrams, we are still living in an essentially Biblical culture which makes itself manifest to us in forms which are more derivative than direct.

Furthermore, while the work of assimilating the theological elements to the framework of secular or pagan terms of reference began with the setting up of Christianity, it received, as Abrams aptly observes, a tremendous momentum from the Renaissance onwards through the eighteenth century. What the Romantic writer did was ‘to save . . . the cardinal values of their religious heritage by reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable as well as emotionally pertinent. (*NS*, 66) Now the fact that light also operates as a primal value in the New Testament may be established by recalling some phrases from the opening verses of St. John’s Gospel—one of Coleridge’s touchstones:

In the beginning was the Word...
 All things were made by him...
 In him was life; and the life was the light of men
 And the light shineth in darkness...
 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John...
 He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light...
 That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into this world

The first epistle of John also contains a similar message:

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God is light, and in him is no darkness at all
 (I, v.5).

And of course the first words of God in the the Old Testament are, ‘Let there be light,’ (Genesis I, 3). Thus, along with love, hope and other primary values of the Bible, light too constitutes a seminal concept that came to be exploited differently to serve different ends in the hands of the Romantics. Its interrelationship with humane values, as we shall soon note, is established as the poets deal with the basic principles of life in terms of their art. It is however interesting to note that the significance given to light in the Biblical texts, which have for Abrams a ‘repeated relevance to our understanding of the Romantic achievement’, finds its further confirmation in John Beer’s reading of Coleridge. The imagery of light, according to Beer, plays an important, though an unassuming part, in much of Coleridge’s thought and poetry. For this Beer draws upon the same two references to light as stated in this passage, and maintains that Coleridge was often drawn to reflect on these two centrally, mutually suggestive statements in the Bible.

Considering the interrelationship between human virtues and light, I should like to focus on the concept of liberty as it operates in Romantic poetry. It signifies for Abrams the liberation of mind and imagination from the slavery of the sense, an essentially Wordsworthian concept. Once the mind is liberated from the dominion of the outer senses—especially the sense of sight—one begins to realise the power of imagination, the inner faculty that has lain

asleep, rising within oneself and taking complete possession of the self. Little wonder that for a poet like Wordsworth, 'sight is... but a sad enemy to imagination'[\[3\]](#), which enables one to perceive something unseen before. It is a power which blesses the poet with all the endowments it commands. Wordsworth recognizes the glory of the self appropriated by the imagination, when

in such strength
Of usurpation, ... the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed,
The invisible world,... .

(*The Prelude*, 1850 VI, 599-602)

The invisible world that Wordsworth refers to here is the World that is realized when the light of sense goes out, and is replaced by a sense of inner light that transcends it. Such sense of light is what enables one to hold communion or establish instinctive fellowship with that which lies beyond the sense. It is only then that we know that

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Our destiny, hope that can never die,
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die, .

(Ibid, 604-06)

Thus hope, the value that is regarded by Abrams as playing a pivotal role in Romantic poetry, follows here only when one's mind is fully possessed by that great liberator, Imagination, with its 'visitings of awful promise'. Besides, it is this freedom of mind or imagination from the thralldom of the external sense which, according to Abrams, enables a man to transform a lifeless world into a new one, which 'instinct with life and joy... reciprocates with the perceiving mind' (*NS*, 431). And imagination is that glorious faculty

Which higher minds bear with them as their own
This is the very spirit in which they deal
With all the objects of the universe:
They from them native souls can send abroad
Like transformations; for themselves create
A like existence, and whene'er it is
Created for them; catch it by an instinct.'

(*The Prelude*, 1805 XIII, 90-96)

In sum, nothing of any significance can be achieved until the mind is allowed to be the lord and master of the outward sense. How dangerous could be the subjugation of mind and imagination is well brought out in Blake's memorable adage: 'Imagination fettered, fetters the human race.'

Likewise, the principle of joy is associated with light in both Wordsworth and Coleridge. So long as Wordsworth's mind is possessed by the power of visionary gleam, the whole world of nature appears to him to be full of joy as is borne out by the ode on the 'Intimations of Immortality'. The poem abounds in such terms and references connoting joy—such as a 'joyous song'; the gay earth; land and sea that 'give themselves upto jollity'; 'Child of Joy'; 'happy

Shepherd-boy'; and 'the gladness of the May'. It is also rich in both aural and visual images associated with the festive spring months:

Ye blessed creatures, I have heard the call
Ye to each other make; I see
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;
My heart is at your festival,
My head hath its coronal,
The fullness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all.
Oh evil day! if I were sullen
While Earth herself is adorning,
This sweet May-morning,
And the children are culling,
On every side,

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In a thousand valleys far and wide,
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm;
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!

(36-50)

The repetition of the words 'I feel—I feel it all' (1.41), and of 'I Hear, I hear', only emphasize the intensity of joy with which the poet responds to his blissful surroundings.

Coleridge, while addressing Sara Hutchinson in his 'Dejection' ode, realizes that she knows much better than he does

What this strong music in the soul may be!
What, and wherein it doth exist,
This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,
This beautiful and beauty-making power.

(ll. 60-3)

And he recognizes that this light or joy 'ne'er was given,/Save to the pure, and in their purest hour...'

Coleridge clearly seems to be hinting here at a moral taint, since nature does not bestow joy on any one save those who are pure of heart. It is only during the undefiled moments of life that joy or light may issue forth from within. Thus it is this precious gift—denied to the sensual and the proud which acts as the source of glory—which makes the external world appear so beautiful as to transform it into 'A new Earth and a new Heaven'.

These interrelated values interact in Wordsworth and Coleridge. While it is light (the metaphorical light of imagination) that leads to joy in Wordsworth, in Coleridge it is joy that serves as the fountainhead of all-radiating light. Similarly, liberty of the self paves the way for the ascendancy of inner light, without which the mind continues to be dominated by the slavery of the senses on the one hand (Wordsworth), and the darkness of despair on the other (Coleridge). And while for Wordsworth our destiny is with infinitude, it is equally true that without hope nothing of this sort can ever be achieved, and that something evermore about to be can also elude one. Without hope, adds Abrams, even the possibility of sustaining the

triumph of life, liberty and love cannot be kept alive (*NS*, 431). And life, the ground concept of all these values, like work drained of all hope, 'draws nectar in a sieve' (Coleridge, 'Work without Hope').

The treatment of light in the shorter poems of Wordsworth is best illustrated by the 'Intimations of Immortality' (1802-04). The ode traces the systematic and gradual loss of the visionary gleam with the passage of time: as the child begins to move from boyhood to youth to manhood, the vision declines. Wordsworth finds the child—now a growing boy—as being capable of perceiving the light of his infant vision 'in his joy' and in the heavenly source 'whence it flows'. And though the youth still retains something of this

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splendid vision, as a fully grown man of the world, he perceives the childhood vision fading out into 'the light of common day', a light obscured by the customary weight of life's everyday realities. And then,

...nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;

However, all is not lost as much remains behind to compensate one's adulthood. Since the greatest blessing of childhood consists in its intimations of an invisible world, the grown-up man for whom the childhood vision was once a daily reality, still retains, among other consolations, something of the memory of this vision; and as he remembers it, he comes closest to such vision without the power to repossess it. Wordsworth therefore praises childhood and is thankful for those early affections and shadowy recollections of the pre-natal life—the celestial state before birth and our heavenly home—which, whatever their nature,

Are yet the Fountain-light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all are seeing, ...

In his 'Elegiac Stanzas' (1807) Wordsworth speaks of light that never was on sea or land. His visit to Peel Castle had been in a season of calm weather. The castle had then (in 1794) appeared to the poet to be asleep and the sea quite tranquil. Wordsworth maintains that had he been a painter at the time, he would not have painted, as did Beaumont, the picture of a stormy sea. Instead, his picture would have been full of tranquillity, and he would have then added the light that never was—the poet's visionary gleam. Aesthetically viewed, such visionary gleam perhaps suggests the strange glimmer of light wherein things both begin to recede and reveal themselves at the same time in all their impalpability. It would then have been a picture of pure imagination, operating at its most intense; for, as Pottle says, 'You will know you are dealing with imagination when the edges of things begin to wave and fade out'.^[4] Turner was the one who, observes Rosenberg, was able to see 'the subtle light which was on land and sea but which had never been caught on canvas'.^[5] Wordsworth was another; whereas Turner dares to expose the Being of light, Wordsworth succeeds in revealing the light of Being.

The important role that every variety of light, specially the moonlight, plays in a number of Coleridge's poems is so evident that it is needless to labour the point; suffice it to say that several critics have taken note of the pervasive presence of moonlight in his work. In both *Christabel* and *The Ancient Mariner* ^[6]

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sunlight, as well as moonlight, is so ubiquitous that one cannot but regard it as constituting the principal quality of the poems. While *Christabel* is a poem of 'daylight witchery' and 'moonlight horror', *The Ancient Mariner* too, concerned as it is with both sorts of light, shows their varied effect on the behaviour of the Mariner and his companions throughout their weird voyage across the strange sea. The poems bear an ample testimony to what Coleridge says in the opening passage of Chapter XIV of *Biographia Literaria* concerning his belief in the feasibility of combining the different kinds of light, and their power in transforming a given landscape into something poetically haunting: '... The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature.'

Part I of *Christabel* comprises, among others, an event associated with a distinct sort of light which serves, along with the angry howls of the sleeping mastiff, as a note of warning to Christabel. This is quite different from the moonlight which is shown as presenting evil in its visible form, personified by Geraldine, as well as the invisible form - represented by the sense of the sinister lurking in the atmosphere. It takes place when Geraldine, led by Christabel, is crossing the castle hall. The dying embers suddenly leap into a tongue of flame to produce a momentary blaze of light at the approach of Geraldine. Such flaring of the flame and its immediate dying down, though a sign of ill-omen in the Middle Ages, still warns the innocent Christabel of the portending evil, as well as its immediate. Such light, while adding to the horror of the atmosphere, can still act as a blessing in disguise; and if it fails to act here, it is because Christabel is too pure of heart to grasp the sense of danger indicated by such portentous signals. None the less, it has served its purpose here by giving a fair warning about something ominous to follow; a warning which unfortunately goes unnoticed. The negative aspects of moonlight find their counterpart in this warning light emitted by the dying brands.

If Part I of *Christabel* is moon-dominated, Part II is sun-dominated, as all the events in it occur during the daytime. And since Coleridge, according to Beer, contrives to create a landscape correlating to the type of evil he depicts: we find the clouded landscape pointing to the deceptive charm of the enchantress. Similarly, it is the hard, dry light of common day which serves as a means to convey the lack of imagination and insight on the part of Sir Leoline; it is this lack which makes him side, as Beer states, with the forces represented by Geraldine, thus enabling them to carry out their evil design. This clearly indicates two things: firstly, it shows Coleridge's success in achieving the desired effect of light on landscape and the correspondence he finds between the landscape and the pervading wickedness. As Beer remarks, 'The success is more marked in the first section, where landscape and atmosphere both contribute to the sense of obscure evil, always just out of

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sight. In the second part Coleridge has set himself the more difficult task of representing 'witchery by daylight'. Yet here he contrives to create a landscape corresponding to the type of evil being described'^[7] Secondly, as Warren has ably demonstrated in connection with *The Ancient Mariner* in his remarkable essay 'A Poem of Pure Imagination', it shows the havoc a man is capable of perpetrating, not deliberately, on the innocent. The denial or lack of imagination on the part of the Mariner results in his impulsive and motiveless killing of the innocent Albatross; likewise, the lack of imagination on the part of an enraged Sir Leoline leads, in a manner most imperceptible to him, to the suffering of Christabel, who, as a result of this, becomes alienated or distanced, however, temporarily, from her father's sympathy.

Both these events happen against the background of a sun that is hidden behind mist and cloud in each case. In *The Ancient Mariner*, though it is day, we have only 'mist or cloud', as the sun is kept entirely out of sight. In *Christabel*, when Geraldine rises in the morning and wakes up Christabel,

The air is still! through mist and cloud
That merry peal comes ringing loud...

Thus it is the light of common day, however obscure, which makes for the hard-headed decision of Sir Leoline by depriving him of his power of imaginative sympathy. In similar conditions, the unimaginative Mariner kills the Albatross, though the sun immediately rises upon the right. The crime, says Warren, brings out the sun in an instant. It can be safely presumed that by the time Christabel and Geraldine enter the Baron's drawing room, after 'pacing both into the hall/And pacing on through page and groom', the morning has already advanced and the sun is out.

Coleridge, as Beer observes, was greatly interested in incantatory devices of all kinds and their effect upon the emotions of an audience. All through his life, says Beer, Coleridge never ceased to wonder at the astonishing processes by which the power of language could turn the immaterial (thoughts) into the material (things) and the tangible (things) into something impalpable (thoughts). The same reason induced Coleridge to be fascinated by the various processes of light. What he set down in *Biographia Literaria* with regard to 'the sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape', is, according to Beer, one of the phenomena to which both Coleridge and Wordsworth devoted their attention; and the fruits of such discussion, as Beer further states, may be observed in Coleridge's poems concerning the supernatural. In fact, as Beer observes, 'Light became for Coleridge a central symbol, second only to love in its power in binding together disparate threads of his thinking... wherever he sees light... he sees potential symbolism'.^[8] The imagery of light thus plays for Beer

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a very substantial, though unobtrusive, part in much of Coleridge's thought and poetry. According to Warren, it is such moonlight, or the dimming light of the sunset, which 'changes the familiar world to make poetry', while the moonlight equates to the 'modifying colours of the imagination'.^[9] Indeed, Coleridge finds such a close affinity between imagery of outer physical light and the inner light of imagination that we often find the former being represented in his poetry as transformed by the power of imagination into something both bewitched and bewitching.

In conclusion, one might say that the different ways in which light is thus employed by Wordsworth and Coleridge, help emphasize its innovative value in the making of romantic poetry.

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^[1] M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and The Lamp*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1953), p. 60. 2.

^[2] M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, (W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1973), p. 65. All subsequent quotations from *Natural Supernaturalism* hereafter cited as NS, are shown in parenthesis with page number. 3.

^[3] Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, ed. A.B. Grosart, (London, 1976), III, 89. 4.

^[4] Frederick, A. Pottle, 'Eye and Object in the Poetry of Wordsworth', *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom, (W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1970), p. 284. 5.

[5] John D. Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1965), p.14. 6.

[6] I have confined myself here to the treatment of light in *Christabel* only; for a better appreciation of its treatment in *The Ancient Mariner*, one is referred to Robert Penn Warren's excellent essay on the subject, 'A Poem of Pure Imagination', *Selected Essays* (Random House, New York, 1958). However, I have referred to *The Ancient Mariner* wherever I have found it possible to draw parallels between it and *Christabel*.

[7] John Beer, ed., Coleridge: *Poems* (Dent, London, 1975) p. 194.

[8] John Beer, *Coleridge! The Visionary*, (Chatto & Windus, London, 1959).

[9] Robert Penn Warren, 'A Poem of Pure Imagination'. *Selected Essays* (Random House, New York, 1958), p. 235.