

## Coleridge in Malta: Figures in the Landscape

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I want to begin with a poem not written in Malta, nor on the way there, but in Germany in May 1799, some five years before Coleridge set out for the Mediterranean. Despite the separations of time and space, I think that this poem, 'Lines Written in the Album at Elbingerode', contains some key features of Coleridge's experience of being abroad, which we will find repeated in various ways during his stay in Malta and the Mediterranean.

I stood on Brocken's sovran height, and saw  
Woods crowding upon woods, hills over hills,  
A surging scene, and only limited  
By the blue distance. Heavily my way  
Downward I dragged through fir groves evermore,  
Where bright green moss heaves in sepulchral forms  
Speckled with sunshine; and, but seldom heard,  
The sweet bird's song became a hollow sound;

...I moved on

In low and languid mood; for I had found  
That outward forms, the loftiest, still receive  
Their finer influence from the Life within; –  
Fair cyphers else: fair, but of import vague  
Or unconcerning, where the heart not finds  
History or prophecy of friend, or child,  
Or gentle maid, our first and early love,  
Or father, or the venerable name  
Of our adored country!

My native Land!

Filled with the thought of thee this heart was proud,  
Yea, mine eye swam with tears: that all the view  
From sovran Brocken, woods and woody hills,  
Floated away, like a departing dream,  
Feeble and dim! Stranger, these impulses  
Blame thou not lightly; nor will I profane,  
With hasty judgment or injurious doubt,  
That man's sublimer spirit, who can feel  
That God is everywhere! the God who framed  
Mankind to be one mighty family,  
Himself our Father, and the World our Home.

There are a couple of lines here very like those central to our reading of Dejection: '...for I had found/That outward forms, the loftiest, still receive/Their finer influence from the Life within...' are revived two years later as, 'I may not hope from outward forms to win/The passion and the life,

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whose fountains are within.' Landscapes, the forms and images of nature, however beautiful, whatever their potential for discovering the sublime, are but cyphers, of 'import vague', if not grounded in a distinct knowledge of another person, in the 'History or prophecy of friend, or child.' Consequently they are not a source of consolation at moments of homesickness or dejection—and homesickness, evident in this poem, is pretty much an unrelieved condition in Coleridge abroad, though strangely coupled with a reluctance to come home. However, Coleridge acknowledges a tension in this poem which is not present in Dejection, a tension between local attachment which graduates to love of one's country (cf. SC Bohn 110) and the universality of God's presence. His emotional condition, which prevents him from finding any significance in the German landscape—the 'woods and woody hills' float away 'like a departing dream'—he thinks of as a kind of weakness, an inadequacy of spirit: 'nor will I profane.../That man's sublimer spirit, who can feel/That God is everywhere!' That remains Coleridge's ideal; and though never completely abandoned, for the time being Omnipresence is best discovered in England.

So the life within gives significance to the landscape. But what is the life within? In Dejection it is Coleridge's love of Sara Hutchinson—and given its necessarily static nature, it becomes oppressive in the course of the poem. But when he wrote those lines in Germany, Coleridge had not met Asra—that would happen in the autumn of the same year. Nonetheless, the life within is still closely associated with love of other people, though more generalized in the earlier Elbingerode lines - 'friend, or child,/Or gentle maid, our first and early love,/Or father...' The heart finds people to love, and through those various kinds of love, the forms of the landscape gain their significance. But is all this mere associationism, a local and individualistic version of the kind of tour-guide history-making that Coleridge despised? I hope not; but if such a reading is possible both here and in Dejection, I think that we will see that this envisioning of landscape through and towards a person becomes something much more profound during the course of his stay in the Mediterranean.

And I don't think it is just homesickness or dejection that force these conjunctions into Coleridge's mind. A year before, in April 1798, at home in Nether Stowey, Coleridge had made the same kinds of link rather more loosely in 'Fears in Solitude':

But, O dear Britain! O my Mother Isle!  
Needs must thou prove a name most dear and holy  
To me, a son, a brother, and a friend,  
A husband, and a father! who revere

All bonds of natural love, and find them all  
Within the limits of thy rocky shores...  
...from thy lakes and mountain-hills,  
Thy clouds, thy quiet dales, thy rocks and seas,  
[I] Have drunk in all my intellectual life...

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There lives nor form nor feeling in my soul  
Unborrowed from my country!

And as he descends from his 'green and silent spot'—his solitude is perhaps significant in the development of these thoughts—he sees 'the shadowy main' and 'the mighty majesty/Of that huge amphitheatre of rich/And elmy fields' which seem to him like society, and 'conversing with [his] mind' give it 'A livelier impulse and a dance of thought.' It is touching to observe how Coleridge perceives in the 'elmy fields' a figuration of society, how his fears seem to dissolve at the same time, and how he feels his mind come alive as he imagines his return to human companionship: seeing is passing into feeling. And it is this kind of knowledge that informs both the *Elbingerode* lines and *Dejection*, and which will be revisited and developed during his sojourn in the Mediterranean.

### *Landscapes*

The journey to Germany in 1798 and 99 had been in search of knowledge; the journey to Malta was in search of health. Coleridge was reluctant to leave England, and took two or three years to get himself to the point of going. But having set off, the journey offered its own excitements, particularly his discovery that many aspects of the *Mariner's* voyage were validated by his own experience.

It is my feeling that this excitement, though marvellous, was brief, and that Coleridge's homesickness returned as soon as they reached dry land on April 19<sup>th</sup>, in the form of Gibraltar, some ten days after setting out from Portsmouth. On the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> he went ashore and paints the sights he met in a series of vivid images; but, not detained, he 'passed thro' the Town, my poor Nose paying dear for the amusement of my Eyes', and thence up the hill to Europa Point—where he is first 'pleased to see the Geranium with pink flowers climbing down the walls' and higher up greets his 'old favorite, the Broom, in full flower, the size of a small Tree' seeing nearby 'a young Ass, not much larger than a Mastiff, tethered under one of them', and perhaps reminding him of his poem of that title. Among the rocks he sees 'many flowering weeds... some of them old acquaintances, and new only from the time of their Flowering, others which I wished I had the English names.' Not quite figures in the landscape of course, but greeted with the kind of pleasure with which he had looked down on the 'elmy fields' around Nether Stowey, and sensing that he would feel even more at home if he could supply English names to these old familiar faces. Certainly he seems comforted by their presence, and describes himself as walking 'calmly, slowly, happily... My brain was active, my heart very full of Love,

tender Recollections, and if possible, yet more tender Hopes and Dreams of the Future—a future which almost certainly he did not imagine taking place in the Mediterranean.

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This landscape, its familiar plants and happy associations was, however, much more companionable than the society he was about to descend to in his ‘return’—‘a noisy Dinner of 17 Sea Captains, indifferent Food, and burning Wines.’ He later has to force his ‘now very tipsy Capt’ home to the *Speedwell*, leaves him drinking with three other Masters, and goes to bed, his ‘whole Day resembling a Lover divided up the middle, a scaly obscene Monster-fish all beside—’. (CN II 2044) Which of course makes me think of Caliban: does Coleridge think of himself on the one hand as this figure, his dinner with the captains a drinking session with Stephano and Trinculo; and on the other his capacity for devoted love and his safe arrival on the island with its strange airs and graces making him a Ferdinand, his Miranda hovering around him unseen but strongly felt in his ‘tender Recollections’? What is certain is that we will find this division between these two forms of being, these two kinds of figure, at war again in Coleridge in his time in the Mediterranean. His journey may have been ostensibly for his physical health, but it would also turn out to be a battle for his moral health.

The next day Coleridge went ashore again, and again climbed the hill, writing a note which seems to have many structural echoes of his Conversation poems.

...walked up to the furthestmost Signal House... which looks over the blue Sea-lake to Africa—The Mountains around me did not any where arrange themselves strikingly...but the Sea was so blue, calm, and sunny, so majestic a Lake where it is enshored by Mountains, and where it is not, having its indefiniteness the more felt from those huge Mountain Boundaries, which yet by their greatness prepared the mind for the sublimity of unbounded Ocean/altogether it reposed in the brightness and quietness of the noon, majestic, for it was great with an inseparable character of Unity; and the more touching to me who had looked from far loftier mountains over a far far more manifold Landscape, the fields and habitations of Englishmen, children of one family, one religion, and that my own, the same language, and manners, and every Hill and every River some sweet name familiar to my ears, or if first heard remembered as soon as heard/but here on one side of me Spaniards, a degraded Race that dishonour Christianity; and on the other Moors of many Nations, wretches that dishonor human Nature—if anyone were near now and could tell me, that mountain is called so and so, and at its foot runs such and such a River, O with how blank an ear should I listen to sounds, which probably my Tongue could not repeat, and which I should be sure to forget, and take no pleasure in remembering; and the rock itself on which I stand, nearly the same in length as our Carrock, but not so high, nor one tenth part as wide, what a complex Thing!...What a multitude and almost discordant complexity of associations—the Pillars of Hercules, Calpe,

Abbila, the Realms of Massinissa, Jugurtha, Syphax—Spain, Gibraltar, the Dey of Algiers, dusky Moor and black African/and O! how quiet it is to the Eye, and to

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the Heart when it will entrance itself in the present vision, and know nothing, feel nothing, but the Abiding Things of Nature, great, calm, majestic, and one.’

(CN II 2045)

Much of Coleridge’s early poetry involves climbing a hill or a mountain, and reflecting on the landscape when he reaches the top—a process perhaps endemic to his nature—and which frustrated by ten days on board ship he indulges for two consecutive days in Gibraltar. His initial reaction to the view before him is perhaps a little eighteenth century—‘The Mountains around me did not any where arrange themselves strikingly’, as if it were the business of mountains to prepare themselves for the arrival of the English aesthete. But he soon moves from this slightly dismissive attitude to an appreciation of how the landscape before him betrays the idea of sublimity. The idea of vastness—critical, as we know from his autobiographical letters, to his appreciation of the one and the whole—is embodied in ‘those huge Mountain Boundaries, which...by their greatness prepared the mind for the sublimity of the unbounded Ocean.’ Equally important seems to be the quality variously described as stillness, quietness and calmness, coupled with the idea of the majestic, itself associated with hugeness or vastness; ‘majestic’ is used twice in the opening section, of the lake apparently created by the encircling mountains, and of the landscape as a whole, reposing ‘in the brightness and quietness of the noon, majestic, for it was great with an inseparable character of Unity...’ The opening lines of ‘Fears...’ also emphasizes stillness, and an association between enclosure and majesty is made towards the end of that poem:

‘This burst of prospect, here the shadowy main,  
Dim tinted, there the mighty majesty  
Of that huge amphitheatre of rich  
And elmy fields...’

As we have seen, this line continues, ‘...seems like society’ and is the prelude to Coleridge’s return to his ‘beloved Stowey’, and ‘thoughts that yearn for human kind.’ In Gibraltar, no such return is possible of course; but just where we might have expected it to occur structurally, the pure contemplation of sublimity is indeed interrupted by thoughts yearning for the society he has left behind. The landscape before him is wonderful, but it is not English, and that is an irremediable fault. Not only are English mountains loftier, English landscapes ‘far far more manifold’, and named with sounds sweet to English ears, but this landscape is on one side inhabited by a degraded race dishonoring Christianity, and on the other, worse still, by a plurality of races altogether dishonoring human nature. If this sounds like a rather

unreasonable xenophobia to us, who often zip abroad without really leaving home, we should remember just how isolated, even alienated, Coleridge felt

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himself to be. He is, as he says in a note, ‘a Traveller with his Heart at Home.’ (CN II 2064) And in a letter he was to write to the Beaumonts from Malta—and they had been particularly kind to him around the time of his departure—Coleridge commented, ‘I am as comfortable here as a man can be: and as happy as *I* can be absent from England, and from all that make England so dear to me.’ The syntax, ‘all...make’, not ‘all makes’, implies persons not things—that people not comforts make England dear to him. And in this Gibraltar landscape that lies before him, there are no figures dear to Coleridge.

It may be said that Coleridge sees, but does not feel, the sublimity of this landscape. No figure is present to mediate the process from seeing to feeling. He would therefore take no pleasure in learning the names of its features, and so ‘O with how blank an ear should I listen to sounds, which my Tongue could not repeat’—another characteristically English comment on foreign languages. But that first phrase cannot help but remind us of ‘And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!’ of ‘Dejection...’ Nor I think could Coleridge have been unaware of this parallel, even if it had arisen spontaneously in his writing. His dejection at Elbingerode, in Keswick, and here in Gibraltar have all the one and the same cause—his alienation from the presence of those he loves.

Although I have shortened this note considerably, leaving out a description of various features of the Rock, there is nonetheless a kind of rondo which is characteristic of the Conversation poems. We have seen that Coleridge began with a search for sublimity, which moved into a sense of disappointment caused by the absence of social or domestic association. Having described the features of the Rock, he then thinks of its complex historical associations, perhaps trying to make the landscape significant through that process. But that method is alien to his method of historical thinking: he called such associations ‘contingent and transitory’ which interfered with ‘the nameless silent forms of nature’ that might work ‘like a tender Thought on a man, who is hailed merrily by some acquaintance in his work, and answers it in the same Tone.’ Note again the probably unconscious link between social ties and the successful workings of nature. (CN II 2026). So instead of historical happenings he returns to the thing itself, the landscape as it lies before him, hoping that his ‘Heart...will entrance itself to the present vision’, knowing and feeling nothing else, ‘but the Abiding Things of Nature, great, calm, majestic and one.’ Here perhaps he is trying to achieve what he proclaimed as ideal in the last of the Elbingerode lines, finding that ‘God is everywhere’ and that ‘the World [is] our Home’, something he had failed to achieve in the first section of this note. The key word to this reading is ‘abiding’. Kathleen Coburn notes that Coleridge does not frequently capitalize adjectives, and ‘abiding’ is capitalized here. In the Verse Letter ‘abiding’ is both capitalized and italicized in the lines Coleridge writes of Sara

Hutchinson's ideal future, when she will dwell together with all those she loves best  
'in one happy Home,/One House, the dear *Abiding* Home of All.' ' "

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Abiding' is therefore closely connected with the idea of home, and of course by its meaning with the idea of permanence—only a few lines later in the Verse Letter, Coleridge writes, 'To all things I prefer the Permanent'—capitalized this time, as an adjectival noun. What makes no home for Coleridge in this note is the historical associations we can forge with a landscape—these are quickly dismissed, and 'the Abiding Things of Nature' set in their stead. His return to society thwarted, he has tried to rediscover the sublimity present in nature itself; he has tried, perhaps, to make the World his Home.

### *Figures*

So there is in Coleridge some sort of tension, perhaps even something we might call a dialectic, between the figures of those he loves, and the landscapes he chooses to look upon. It would be inaccurate though to suggest that Coleridge *only* saw, and felt, a landscape through the mediatory presence of a beloved figure. It may often seem that way to us, but the general truth, that Coleridge struggled to find the reality that lay behind the phenomenal, should be considered in respect of both landscapes and persons. However, it is not clear to me whether he knew that he was, in these two separate activities, working towards a common end. But his separation from English landscapes, and his removal from all those who composed his 'ego contemplan's'—especially Sara Hutchinson—did I think intensify his search for the unifying reality which would underpin phenomenal variety.

The absence of Asra certainly hit him hard, and there are many poem-like entries in the notebooks, often ideas for the Soother of Absence. Here is one:

What change of place, Country, climate, company, situation, health, of Shrubs,  
Flowers, Trees/... and ever is that one Feeling at my Heart/felt like a faint Pain,  
a spot which it seems I could lay my finger on/... I laugh, jest, tell tales of  
mirth/[Caliban-like, we might say] and ever as it were, within and behind I think,  
and image you/and while I am talking of Government or War or Chemistry, there  
comes ever into my bodily eye some Tree, beneath which we have rested, some  
Rock where we have walked together or on the perilous road edging, *high above* the  
Crummock Lake/where we sate beneath the rock, and those dear Lips pressed  
my forehead/or that Scale Force in its pride, as we saw it—when they laughed at  
us for two lovers.

(CN II 2033)

We can see here what we might call the obverse or mirror-image of the process I have attempted to outline so far—that of landscape reviving love or close social ties: here love is reviving the memory of a landscape—but not the landscape immediately in front of him.

That he desired and missed Asra's physical presence is evident in many notebook entries. But he was also conscious, or struggled to make himself

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conscious, of her as a non-material being, of her reality or permanence, we might say. And this struggle produced some curious side-effects. At breakfast one morning in July 1804, he 'saw a Lady with Hair, Complexion, and certain cast of Countenance that on the first glance of her troubled me inconceivably—after a while I perceived the likeness to S.H. and was near fainting...' After he had got over this shock, and had, we hope, managed to have some breakfast, he 'seemed to see clearly the possibility of loving and A and B, A being dead, and B strikingly like, as truly one soul in two resembling Bodies.' (CN II 2137) Reading a note of this kind, though, one does wonder whether Coleridge's consciousness is not focused more on a physical than a spiritual resemblance, and whether the imagined metempsychosis isn't being used to justify a serial attraction to successive women. Coleridge may not have managed to maintain the simultaneous devotion of so many women as Wordsworth, but in the course of his life he probably attracted quite as many equally devoted and attentive.

However, the reality of the soul was an article of Coleridge's faith, and he sought confirmation of that doctrine through experience. There is one poem probably written a little before this time but which he refers to both in April 1804 and February 1805, recording a moment in which he felt he glimpsed this reality:

All Look or Likeness caught from Earth,  
All accident of Kin or Birth,  
Had pass'd Away: there seem'd no Trace  
Of Aught upon her brighten'd Face  
Uprais'd beneath the rifted Stone,  
Save of one Spirit, all her own.  
She, she herself, and only she  
Shone in her body visibly.

The poem is traditionally entitled 'Phantom'. But Coleridge himself never gave the poem a title, never published it, and never even set it out as verse, though verse it clearly is. We should therefore be very wary of attributing to the experience the unreality implied in that editorial title. Coleridge associates these lines with Sara Hutchinson in the 1804 note, where he says that his 'Dreams *now* always connected in some way or other' with her, 'and in one or two sweet Sleeps the Feeling has grown distinct and true, and at length has created its appropriate form, the very Isulia [Asra]/or as I well described it in those Lines, "All Look" &c.' (CN II 2055)

'...as I well described it...'—there is no unreality there, and indeed the single specific observation, 'the rifted Stone', implies a particular place for this experience. The note of 1805, which again refers to these lines, begins, '...my feeling, in sleep, of exceeding great Love for my Infant/seen by me in the Dream/yet so as

that it might be Sara, Derwent or Berkley/(What has happened to Hartley?) and still *it was an individual Babe and mine.*' Coleridge

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italicized that last phrase, emphasizing his recognition of the paradox that generality and individuality do not seem mutually exclusive in dreams. This process is undoubtedly a positive thing for Coleridge—it is not what we might perceive it as, a loss of the sense of the person's individuality. But because the person in their actual presence commands the senses, absence seems to be a necessary condition of this experience; so the note goes on:

Of Love in Sleep, the seldomness of the Feeling, scarcely ever in short absences, or except after very long Absence/a certain indistinctness, a sort of *universal-in-particularness* of Form, seems necessary—vide...my Lines [which he then quotes in full]...This abstract Self is indeed in its nature a Universal personified...'

(CN II 2441)

It is therefore not surprising that this kind of consciousness, the belief that we can discover the 'Universal personified', became more highly developed in Coleridge during his long absence in the Mediterranean.

However, he was a young man of 31 or 32, a man whose company was sought, a successful and perhaps even influential first secretary, and clearly an attractive figure. His loneliness, the ordinary desires of a man of his age, and his natural flirtatiousness created an entanglement with another figure in the Mediterranean landscape, Cecilia Bertozzoli, the prima donna at the Opera House in Syracuse. We get a glimpse of this event through a note written in 1808, and although there are hints and allusions in the notebooks of the time, they would be uninterpretable without this later confession. He is considering the 'astonishing effect of an unbecoming cap of Sara Hutchinson...' and is clearly annoyed that she seems to be playing 'tricks with her angel countenance.' He thinks back to 1805, remembering how this countenance had 'saved' him:

Gracious Heaven! When I call to mind the heavenly vision of her face which came to me as the Guardian Angel of my innocence and peace of mind at Syracuse, at the bedside of the too fascinating Siren against whose witcheries Ulysses's wax would have proved but half-protection—poor Cecilia Bertozzoli! Yet neither her beauty, with all her power of employing it, neither heavenly song, were as dangerous as her sincere vehemence of attachment to me—vehemence, for I trust it was not depth, and *attachment*, for it was not mere *passion*, and yet, Heaven forbid that I should call it *love*. But despondent, spiritless, uncertain of the state of [Asra's heart] and the outworks of my nature already carried by the sweetness of her temper, the childish simplicity of her smiles, and the very great relief to my depression and to the deathly weighing-down of my heart—from her singing and playing so that I had begun to crave after her society—I tremble to

think what I was at that moment on the very brink of being surprised into by the prejudices of the shame of sex as much as by the force of its ordinary impulses. And I was saved by

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that vision, wholly and exclusively by it, and sure I am that nothing on earth but it could at that time have saved me. I may well say saved, for earth could not have contained a more utter wretch than myself. Remorse and the total loss of self-esteem would have been among the strongest knots of the *CORDS* by which I should have been held! For O! the incalculable importance to the self-dissatisfied spirit to have some one spot of cloudless and fixed sunshine in the memory of conscience.'

(CN III 3404)

Richard Holmes laments that Coleridge did not fall 'into the arms of the warm South' and thus release himself from 'the ghost of Asra'. So he doubts that Coleridge was really 'saved' by his vision of her. He fears that Coleridge no longer wanted real women at all, and that the ordinary impulses of sex were being destroyed in him. (DR 23-5) Which is perhaps to argue the ordinary instincts of ordinary men. But if there is one thing that makes Coleridge Coleridge, it is the belief, the faith, that a unifying transcendental truth supports all the phenomena of life. Coleridge's great quest was to discern the forms of transcendental reality in the substance of experience; and the ineptly titled 'Phantom' is a record of such an encounter. So had he given in to Cecilia, it would have been tantamount to accepting a person as something not graced with any kind of permanent life, but the mere subject of time and place. Holmes imagines Coleridge staying on in the Mediterranean, as he might have done, with a dusky maiden for a muse—less likely: he 'who detests all serious thought of permanent Things, abhors all poetry', he declared. (CN II 2218) And what would Coleridge thus have become? A lesser Byron, once the intense Romantic, then sublimity succumbing to desire, lapsing into a writer of mock-heroics, suffering the kind of ennui the twentieth century would know well, but lacking the faith to drag himself out of that swamp? As Coleridge recognises, this is a key moment in his life, and if the rest of it was but the singing of the aria 'Amo te solo...' it is because he knows that taking any other route would have destroyed something much more significant than the ordinary impulses of sex. 'Man without the absolute, a wen', he wrote cryptically in a notebook.

And he is himself quite clear about the conflict between these two modes of being. On October 11<sup>th</sup> 1805, in Syracuse, he writes, 'Midnight— O young man (*here the voice of Conscience whispered to me, concerning myself and my intent of visiting la P[rima] D[onna] tomorrow*) O young man, who has seen, felt, and know the Truth, to whom reality is a phantom, and virtue the sole actual and permanent Being, ('A sweet and virtuous soul' believed George Herbert, 'chiefly lives' when 'the whole world turns to coal.') do not degrade the Truth in thee by disputing—avoid it!—do not by any persuasion be tempted to it—surely not, by vanity or the weakness of the pleasure of

communicating thy Thoughts and awaking Sympathy...' (CN II 2196) Seeking sympathy may seem a relatively innocuous reason for visiting a *prima donna*, but in a much later note he sees it as the symptom of a diseased will:

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...take the yearning to be beloved, the craving for sympathy... the self is not only the starting-point *from*, but the Goal, to—which the Soul is working during such moments...The whole procedure therefore is anti-redemptive...It has the true mark of the Hades, contradiction, falsehood...

(N.46 f.21v-22)

But he might also have had in mind another kind of dispute, jotted down in a note which runs:

Look in mine eyeballs where thy beauty lies:  
Then, why not Lips on Lips, since Eyes on Eyes?

(CN II 2273)

an argument he would no doubt have thought of as specious, though appealing to his divided state of mind at the time. It is true that each person has a spark of divinity, he remarks, but also 'a whole fire-grate of Humanity', and the difficulty is keeping that spark working as the principal ordering power: 'Each man will universalize his notions, and yet each is variously finite. To *reconcile* therefore is truly the work of the Inspired! This the true *Atonement*—i.e. to reconcile the struggles of the infinitely various Finite with the *Permanent*.' (CN II 2208)

So establishing an epistemology of the permanent and experiencing the sublime were closely connected in Coleridge's mind—there were no easy amoral epiphanies of surprise for him. When he had asserted, some seven or eight years earlier, that all things counterfeit infinity, he also added the caveat that this only happened when his mind 'ached to behold...something *one and indivisible*', which he saw itself as an act of faith—the same idea is expressed twice in a short passage; and then he adds, 'It is but seldom that I raise and spiritualize my intellect to this height.' (CL I 350) The will, and the condition of the will, is here tacitly understood as preparing the way for an experience of sublimity. And what Coleridge was seeking in the sublime is evident in another note written in Malta, which recalls the letter to Tom Poole about fairy tales habituating the mind to the idea of the vast. (CL I 354)

Saw in early youth as in a Dream the Birth of the Planets; and my eyes beheld as *one* what the Understanding afterwards divided... all the deviations too were *seen* in one intuition of one, the self-same, necessity—and this necessity was a Law of Spirit—and all was Spirit...in this unity I worshipped in the depth of knowlege that passes all understanding the Being of all things—and in Being their sole Goodness—and I saw that God is the one, *the Good*—possesses it not, but is it.' (CN II 2151)

One wonders why Coleridge should recall this dream of his youth at this time in Malta: was there in it some purity of feeling that his hectic and confused life in England had obscured, but which was resurfacing in his isolation? Immediately after this note he later inserted 'For my own Life—written as an inspired Prophet,—*throughout*.' Did he feel a prophet-like power coming back to him? It would be good to think so.

At first glance Malta was an unlikely place for Coleridge to have experienced a revival of this power, or the sublimity of a landscape. He declared in a letter that 'Malta furnishes little indeed to write about—the dreariest of dreary little islands' (CL II 1143) although he called the climate 'heavenly' on more than one occasion. But his notebooks don't tell precisely the same story. Quite often he comments on the blueness of the ocean and depth of the sky:

What a sky, the not yet orb'd moon... blue at one edge from the deep utter Blue of the Sky, a *mass* of *pearl*-white Cloud below, distant, and travelling to the Horizon, but all the upper part of the Ascent, and all the Height, such *profound* Blue, *deep* as a deep river, and deep in color, and those two depths so entirely *one*,... Unconsciously I stretched forth my arms to embrace the Sky, and in a trance I had worshipped God in the Moon/the Spirit not the Form/...O not only the Moon, but the depth of Sky!—the Moon was the *Idea*; but deep Sky is of all visual impressions the nearest akin to a Feeling/it is more a Feeling than a Sight/or rather it is the melting away and entire union of Feeling and Sight/And did I not groan at my unworthiness, and be miserable at my state of Health, its effects, and effect-trebling Causes? O yes!—Me miserable! [cf. *Paradise Lost* IV 73] O yes!—Have Mercy on me, O something *out* of me! For there is no *power*, (and if that *can* be, less *strength*) in aught *within*! Mercy! Mercy! (CN II 2543—Feb 1805)

The skyscape before him moves Coleridge to an act of devotion—a mistaken act, he acknowledges. But it is interesting that this act is expressed in the form of an embrace, almost as if there were someone out there to be embraced—the moon he says was the idea of this vision, perhaps something of a universal personified, and reminding us of Hartley's similar act in the Somerset countryside. And characteristically of Coleridge's experience of the sublime, sight passes into feeling, 'the melting away and entire union of Feeling and Sight', which reminds me of the lines from *This Lime-Tree Bower*... quoted by Coleridge in his letter describing how things counterfeit infinity:

So my friend  
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,  
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round  
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem  
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues

As veil the almighty Spirit, when yet he makes  
Spirits perceive his presence.'

(PW 149)

And at the very same moment that Coleridge seems to experience sublimity, the joy is alloyed with his own sense of weakness and unworthiness, of his moral and spiritual condition. 'Have Mercy on me, O something *out* of me!' is a curious invocation, given Coleridge's acknowledged Christianity. But it is entirely characteristic of him to put experience before doctrine: he feels the need of some external force to have mercy on his condition, but he has not yet felt this force as a person. He knew he was struggling with his moral as well as with his physical health.

Coleridge certainly rediscovered *The Ancient Mariner* journeying to Malta; but we can also see that many other features of his poetry recur in his notes, so that the basic pattern of his thinking was deepened rather than changed. And in later years he looked back on his time in Malta to discover truths then not quite clear to him, but which we have seen incipient in his thinking. So in September 1807, he remembers the Maltese skyline:

The Sky, or rather say, the Æther, at Malta, with the Sun apparently suspended in it, the Eye seeming to pierce beyond, & as it were, behind it—and below the ætherial Sea, so blue, so a [suffused oneness] the substantial Image, and fixed real Reflection of the Sky—O I could annihilate in a deep moment all possibility of the needlepoint pinshead System of the *Atomists* by one submissive Gaze! Logos ab *Ente*—at once the existent Reflexion, and the Reflex Act—at once actual and real & therefore, filiation not creation/'Thought *formed not fixed*—the molten *Being* never cooled into a *Thing*, tho' begotten into the vast adequate Thought..(i.e. the Coadunation of the Individual with the Universal through Love)—the process of ideation or of the holy spirit, by which we are mystically united with the *Am*—I am—. (CN II 3159—1807)

I have simplified and translated some of this, with the aid of Kathleen Coburn's notes, to try and make it a little more comprehensible at first reading: the key phrase lies right in the middle of the passage—'Logos ab *Ente*'—the Word from being: Coleridge is trying to discern the source or fount of life beginning with a phenomena observed—and the sublime remembered. Co-ordinate with that process is the movement from image to person, from the sky with the sun suspended in it, to the 'I am' of God. Various points may be made about his progress.. To start with, the images used, the sky and sea and sun, are already partly dematerialized, partly spiritualized—the sky is the æther, the sea is ætherial—they have become 'less gross than bodily'; the picture Coleridge was remembering seems to me rather like a late Turner. The image is not the reality - the eye is piercing beyond that image to what

substantiates it - though the image itself might be described as 'of such hues/As veil  
the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes/Spirits perceive

[89]

his presence.' Indeed, in the union of the initially three distinct images, what Coleridge calls their 'suffused oneness' we can see that his senses have begun to swim. And perhaps as important as anything is the nature of his gazing - it is 'submissive', devotional, a recognition that what is there is greater and more powerful than anything he knows in and of himself. Such a devotional gaze would annihilate the Atomists, or what he elsewhere calls the Littleists - those to whom 'the Universe... is but a mass of *little things*' and who call 'the want of imagination Judgement, and the never being moved to Rapture Philosophy!' (CL I 354) And in Coleridge's idea of this process there is a deep resistance to reification, or the making of things. The molten being, that suffused oneness, is never cooled into a thing, and so he says it is not a process of creation but filiation—or son-making; the pun may be intentional. It is, to put it another way, a begetting, and this begetting is of 'the vast adequate Thought' which is synonymous with the Logos or the Word; and so Coleridge has finally answered the doubts he raised in *Constancy* to an Ideal Object, possibly written in Malta: thought is not just a projection of ourselves writ large: it is truly other and at one with the being of the universe. And the whole process of filiation is underwritten by a devotional love, which Coleridge made the focus of prayer in *The Pains of Sleep*—'My spirit I to love compose'—and which is grounded in the holy spirit, uniting the individual with the universal—the universal personified in the 'I am'.

That devotional love re-appears in a note written not many months later, about himself and Sara Hutchinson, and which has some resemblance both in image and structure to his meditation on the Maltese seascape:

Rais'd by her love the Earthly of my nature rose, like an exhalation that springs aloft, a pillared form, at the first full face of the rising Sun, & intercepting full his slant rays burns like a self-fed fire, & wide around on the open Plain spreads its own splendor & now I sink at once into the depths as of a Sea of life intense—pure, perfect, as an element unmixed, a sky beneath the sky—yet with the sense of weight of water, pressing me all around, and with its pressure keeps compact my being & my sense of being, presses & supports—what else diffusing seemed—  
(CN II 3222)

The earthly becomes ætherial through the power of love, but the figure of a person remains, 'a pillared form', and that form finds in 'a sky beneath the sky', in 'the ætherial Sea... the substantial Image, and fixed real Reflection' of the suffused oneness of sky and sun. Coleridge's sense of immersion in pure being, perfect life, is conveyed in the wonderfully physical image (did he go sea-bathing in Malta?) of the weight of water pressing in around him, so that a very unusual feeling or idea is conveyed in a very simple concept. Notebook entries like these are poems in all but form.

*Conclusion*

In what I hope I will always consider one of the most astonishing passages of English poetry, Wordsworth proclaims that ‘our home is with infinity, and only there.’ Coleridge, I’m sure, agreed with him in the spirit in which it was said; but home for him was something of a loaded word: not until some eleven years after returning from Malta was he to find a place he could finally call home. And it was a word he always connected with people, his wife initially, his children—thinking of whom was emotionally devastating while he was in Malta—Sara Hutchinson, and probably more important than has so far been fully recognized, Ann Gillman. Allan Clayson told me at Cannington that rumours abounded in Ramsgate that she and Coleridge were living in open sin—which if it speaks nothing of the truth, says something of their intimacy. Home was no home to Coleridge without the presence of a sympathetic woman.

But equally characteristic was Coleridge’s not resting content with immediate and phenomenal knowledge. Particularly through his love of Sara Hutchinson, he sought what we might call the permanence of her person. The process took him many years: not until after the break-up with Wordsworth did he begin to shape that idea of permanence into the figure of Christ. And we have seen that to experience the sublimity of a landscape required or returned Coleridge to the presence of a person—which in the note of 1807 he recognizes as the Logos.

These twin motions of Coleridge’s heart and mind were I think stimulated by his alienation from the landscapes and the people he loved. The faith necessary to experience the sublimity of a landscape becomes linked to the faith focussed in fidelity to a person, to what is the permanence of a person. Whether Coleridge recognized these connections during his trip to the Med, I’m not sure, but it is possible to see the voyage to Malta as the beginning of the long and stormy voyage towards this feature of his intellectual maturity.

And to end on a slightly lighter note, we may remember that whereas Coleridge had gone to Germany in search of knowledge, he had gone to Malta, reluctantly, in search of health. The passage out had done him little good—homesickness and constipation had taken their toll. (Being away from home always causes irregularity.) But that was as nothing compared to the 55 days it took to sail home. ‘So obstinate was my costiveness’, he writes, that the Captain (not named in his letters) the strongest man on board, who administered several enemas, ‘used to take all the force of his arm, and bring the blood up in his face before he could finish/once I brought off more than a pint of blood—and three times he clearly saved my Life.’ So he landed in England a sick, white-haired man, old before his time.

But having ‘leaped on land’ at Lower Halstow, ‘a few hundred yards from a curious little Chapel’ where he offered ‘as deep a prayer as ever without words or thoughts was sent up by a human Being’, he immediately felt that ‘health seemed to flow in upon me like mountain waters, upon the dusty

pebbles of a Vale-stream after long-wanted Rains’—an image neatly combining the two landscapes of Malta and Cumbria. So quickly did his health improve that the Captain who saw him a few days later ‘could scarcely believe his eyes.’ Exile was a disease far worse than any of the ailments it was designed to cure. (CL II 1174-78)

But if he came back in a poorer state of health than he left, he also returned enriched with new kinds of knowledge—which would stand him in good stead in his future aesthetic and political writings:

‘tho’ no emolument could ever force me again to the business, intrigue, form and pomp of a public situation, yet beyond all doubt I have acquired a great variety of useful knowledge, quickness in discovering men’s characters, and adroitness in dealing with them/I have learnt the *inside* character of many eminent living men/& know by heart the awkward and wicked machinery, by which all our affairs *abroad* are carried on... [and] by my regular attention to the best of the good things in Rome, and associating almost wholly with the Artists of acknowledged highest reputation I acquired more insight into the fine arts in the three months, than I could have done in England in 20 years.’ (CL II 1178)

Perhaps this is a good point at which to end an account of Coleridge’s longest journey—looking forward to the writing of *The Friend* and the *Biographia*.