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Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) and Nature's Divine Participation: Reverence for the One and the Many in the Scientific and Poetic Imagination

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Abstract: This paper considers the influence of Platonism and Neoplatonism on the British Romantic poet and theologian Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) and how they informed his reverence for nature. Coleridge did not see this reverence as merely personal but sought to call an increasingly materialist and industrializing England back to a Platonic social imagination that would better revere the created world. First, I will establish the influence of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought on his philosophical system. Second, I will show how the relationship between Platonic philosophy and scientific pursuit is worked out in Coleridge's "Essays on Method", wherein he attempts to synthesize Plato with Frances Bacon and poetry with science and proposes a scientific method that reverences all of creation in its individuality and participation within a spiritual whole. Third, I will briefly explore two of Coleridge's most famous poems, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*, as both show the destructive potential of a lack of reverence for the mysterious natural order. These poems may be read as case studies, experimental worlds where refusal to recognize nature's order and participation with the divine results in the coming apart of those worlds and the self's relation to them.

Keywords: Samuel Taylor Coleridge; Platonism; nature; romanticism; participation; poetry; scientific method

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1. Introduction

The relationship between the works of British Romantic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) and environmental care has long fascinated his readers and scholars alike. In his theological reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Malcolm Guite describes the poem as one that has immediate contemporary relevance in "looking out at our present situation, at our exploitation and pollution of the world" (Guite 2017, p. 492). It offers a hope that humanity is "just beginning to see the first glimmer of a moon-rise. . . a new more chastened and humble account of our relations with nature and with the numinous" (Guite 2017, p. 429). An advertisement for a performance of *The Ancient Mariner* by The Hungry Grass Theatre Company describes the poem as encouraging "an increase in awareness of humanity's relationship to, and dependence upon, the environment".[1] The poet Ted Hughes provocatively associated Coleridge's most famous poetry with the goddess of mother nature and opposed it to the "repressed" self in Coleridge's Christian writings (Coleridge 1996). And, in a nuanced acknowledgment of Coleridge's complicated views of nature, Joanna E. Taylor describes him as uniquely positioned to speak into this present age that is tinged with disillusionment. She writes that "Coleridge's disconnection offers some hope: in Coleridge's ecopoetics, dejection becomes the impetus needed to inspire ecological care" (Taylor 2023, p. 77). Coleridge's imagination, then, speaks particularly into this current age of climate crisis that teeters on despair.

What underlying view of nature did Coleridge have that may have inspired such lasting relevance? The answer is not an easy one, especially as his way of talking about nature shifted over his life. One constant presence in his thought, however, was a metaphysic that was distinctly Platonic; it was one that he embraced over the materialism of

the early industrial age. While Platonic philosophy has a reputation for encouraging an escapist attitude toward the world, Coleridge used it as a foundation to ground the sacred interrelatedness of things in and through their unity without losing particularity. Platonic metaphysics informed a posture in Coleridge I refer to throughout this paper as reverence. Coleridge's philosophical reverence extended not only to other human beings but to all levels of the natural order.

To make this argument, I will provide an overview of the Platonic influence on Coleridge's thought. It is a contested topic in Coleridgean scholarship, so it is worth a brief look in order to determine how strong this influence was and whether it informed or worked against his interest in the natural world. Next, I will provide a closer look at Coleridge's primary exposition of how humanity should relate to the natural world. These are "The Essays on Method", found in his periodical *The Friend*. These essays show how Coleridge used Platonic thought to propose an alternate vision of nature and its study, as opposed to the more popular philosophies of empiricism and materialism that had taken hold of the British imagination. Finally, I will turn to two of Coleridge's most well-known poems, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*, each of which tells a story of rupture and violation in the natural world. In these two poems, we see Coleridge's comprehensive vision of a world that has fallen into fragmentation due to a disordered relationship with nature.

2. Coleridge's Platonism

A key phrase regarding Plato's influence on Coleridge comes from a letter he wrote to John Thelwall. In it, he summarizes various theories of the essence of life, moving through the views of physicians such as Thomas Beddoes and Erasmus Darwin to John Hunter and John Ferriar. He gives Plato the last word, however, as to what life really is, writing, "So much for Physicians & Surgeons—Now as to the Metaphysicians, Plato says, it [Life] is *Harmony*—he might as well have said, a fiddle stick's end—but I love Plato—his dear *gorgeous* Nonsense" (Coleridge 1956a, p. 296). What seems on the surface to be a good-natured dismissal belies the significance of Plato's "nonsense" for Coleridge. There is a power of affection that Plato has over the young Coleridge, bolstered by aesthetic appeal. Even as he seriously explores emerging biological explanations for life offered by contemporaneous physicians, he is pulled toward Plato's metaphysics by its beauty. As he matured, he also came to recognize the value of so-called nonsense, especially in the face of its opposite—a kind of rational certainty that reduces and ultimately dissects the world.[2]

Coleridge doggedly pursued epistemological questions throughout his lifetime, and he struggled to reconcile subjective experience with the ability to truly know the external world. Thomas McFarland argues that Coleridge came to see "only two systematic philosophies possible: that arising from our intuitive knowledge 'I am' and that arising from our intuitive knowledge 'it is.'" (McFarland 1969, p. 56). McFarland places Plato and Immanuel Kant at the head of Coleridge's understanding of the "I am" group. Aristotle and Locke are the head of the "it is" group. Then there are the pantheists, who blend the "I am" with the "it is". In this group, McFarland includes the Buddha; Plotinus; Meister Eckhart; Nicholas of Cusa; Giordano Bruno; G. W. F. Hegel; "and, most of all, Spinoza" (McFarland 1969, p. 60). This group is ultimately, according to McFarland, an "ontological extension of the 'it is' philosophy" (McFarland 1969, p. 60). His justification is that pantheism dissolves the self, leaving only the impersonal "it" of the unified world spirit. There is little difference, teleologically, between the materialist heat death of the universe and a spiritual merging into the impersonal One.

McFarland concludes that Coleridge pursued synthesis between these two groups by turning to Trinitarian theology, which provides a divine foundation for unity and particularity existing in simultaneous and mutual integrity. There is no room in this paper to explore the full implications of Trinitarian thought for Coleridge, but we will see in the section on Coleridge's "Essays on Method" how he saw these two philosophical categories becoming imbalanced post-Enlightenment, with the balance in favor of empiricism over Platonism.

Douglas Hedley makes a stronger argument than McFarland for the ongoing influence of Platonism in Coleridge's thought. While McFarland sees the turn to Trinitarianism as a move away from philosophy into theology, as Coleridge could not find in the Platonists alone "a suitable philosophical groundwork for his system" (McFarland 1969, p. 212), Hedley views Trinitarianism as an important continuation of Platonic philosophy within Christianity (Hedley 2000, pp. 36–40). For Coleridge in particular, Hedley writes that "the mature Coleridge believed that the decline in English thought from 1688 coincided with the decline in Trinitarian theology and Platonic metaphysics and the increasing influence of John Locke's thought" (Hedley 2000, p. 46). This places Coleridge within "a Christian Platonic tradition which stretches from John Scot Eriugena to Hegel, which sees Jerusalem and Athens in harmony" (Hedley 2000, p. 4). The Platonic metaphysic referred to here is Coleridge's assertion that the many only exist by their participation in the one, even as the one is distinct from the many and transcendent in relation to them.

James Vigus cites Hedley's work as greatly important to his own *Platonic Coleridge*, in which Vigus examines the ways that Coleridge read and interacted with Plato (Vigus 2009, p. 9). Vigus acknowledges the complicated nature of this question. Like Hedley, he sees a clear influence of Platonism on Coleridge's thought. This influence, however, was not uncritical. Vigus maintains that Coleridge is "philosophically interesting" and no mere plagiarizer or sponge of better thinkers, but neither is his word to be taken as canon. In Vigus's words, one must avoid the extremes of "dismissing Coleridge as unoriginal or 'not a philosopher'" and of "maintaining his rigour at every point" (Vigus 2009, p. 3). What we observe instead, where Coleridge and Plato meet, is a productive tension. Coleridge intuits the rightness of Platonic philosophy as a necessary antidote to rising materialism but must adapt, critique, and modify both where he finds Plato insufficient and where he is too esoteric for Coleridge's audience.

Even as it is clear that Platonic metaphysics was vital to Coleridge's philosophical project, there is a lingering question of whether it was at odds with his appreciation of the material world. He was a thinker willing to question and even contradict himself. Ronald C. Wendling, for example, writes that Coleridge "distrusted a concentration on the inward so exclusive of nature and history that it leaves the mind falsely separated from them". Coleridge's distrust is, for Wendling, strong enough to "call into question the extent of his Platonism" (Wendling 2000, pp. 115–22). Vigus recognizes the same tension in the old—and recurring—argument that "Coleridge inhabits two worlds: the lively, green world of poetry; and the static, grey world of metaphysics, the latter presided over by Plato" (Vigus 2009, p. 7). This tension between inner-contemplation and reverence for the natural world is addressed by Coleridge himself in "The Essays on Method", though, in that, he seeks to bring the Platonic notion of the Idea to bear on the study of the world and systems that exist around us. As Vigus writes, Coleridge recognized the Plato who was a poet, "(artistic, open, dialogue-writing, hero)", and the Plato who was a metaphysician, "(logical, closed, system-building, villain)" (Vigus 2009, p. 8). But while "the two are admittedly distinct in Coleridge's presentation", they nevertheless "co-exist" (Vigus 2009, p. 8). "The Essays of Method" is one location in Coleridge that brings both Platos to bear on the epistemological anxieties of his age.[3]

3. The Poetic and Scientific Imaginations of "The Essays on Method"

Coleridge published the "The Essays on Method" in *The Friend* from 1809–1810 and then again in a re-issue in 1818. His object was to reimagine how human persons come to know the world around them and their relationship to it. As with many of his prose works, the foundation of his argument is an attempt to hold together the one and the many, or what he calls unity and multëity. It is a critique of Lockean empiricism and other methodologies that focus on the collection of data as an end to itself, but it also is an implicit argument against Cartesian dualism, which separates body and mind.[4] For Coleridge, metaphysical unity does not erase particularity but is the only means of fulfilling it and recognizing its full being.

For instance, Coleridge pays a great deal of attention to individuals throughout the "Essays", particularly the many thinkers upon whom he builds his argument. He does not see himself as a philosophical innovator, nor does he see his intellectual opponents as such. Rather, his "Essays" are in the business of recovery, both to debunk and rebuild, as he writes that "I can conceive no better remedy for the overweening self-complacency of modern philosophy, than the annulment of its pretended originality" (Coleridge 1969, 462n). Here, he sets himself apart from Descartes, who sought to demolish the old committee-built town and reconstruct it from the singular rational mind. Coleridge, in contrast, sees philosophy as a group project stretching throughout history and invites to his "Essays" not just other philosophers but also botanists, chemists, astronomers, hymn writers, dramatists, and poets.[5] The pursuit of knowledge relies on a community of persons and all of the complications that entails.

Early in the "Essays", Coleridge finds an ally in Plato and indeed places himself within the Platonic tradition over and against the Sophists. The Sophists, writes Coleridge, sought "to shape, to dye, to paint over, and to mechanize the mind" (Coleridge 1969, p. 473). Mind was only a storage room to them, "a mere repository or banqueting room" (Coleridge 1969, p. 473). Although Locke is not mentioned, the allusion to his metaphor of the empty cabinet is clear, and so Coleridge undercuts any claim to innovation in Locke's system. The empiricists are merely repeating a philosophical debate that is millennia old—an argument that, in Coleridge's estimation, Plato had already won. The mind, he argues, is not an empty room to be filled. It is soil in which a seed is planted to await cultivation.

That said, Coleridge did not believe that the Greeks possessed a perfect vision of nature. They emphasized the ideal forms, but matter for them was a hollow thing. In the "Essays", Coleridge addresses this inadequacy by balancing Plato with Frances Bacon. In spite of Bacon's disavowal of the Greeks, Coleridge argues that the methods of Plato and Bacon were part of the same pursuit but at opposite ends from one another:

> Philosophy being necessarily bi-polar, Plato treats principally of the truth, as it manifests itself at the *ideal* pole, as the science of intellect. . . while Bacon confines himself, for the most part, to the same truth, as it is manifested at the other, or material pole, as the science of nature (Coleridge 1969, p. 492).

The object of both Plato and Bacon, in Coleridge's argument, was to clear away distractions, or the idols of the mind, and to make way for the "guiding Light" (Coleridge 1969, p. 493). and "master-light" (Coleridge 1969, p. 495). They differed in that Plato emphasized the intellect's self-reflective power to perform this work, whereas Bacon advocated a method of experimentation and observation. Coleridge allows for both as valid approaches, so that "meditative, contemplative, or experimental" methods are all means by which one may become open to the light of knowledge (Coleridge 1969, p. 491). But it is only when all three methods are used together that the sciences are brought "to their full evolution, as the organs of one vital and harmonious body" (Coleridge 1969, p. 493).

Neither Plato nor Bacon, Coleridge continues, recognized their positions as in a polar relationship. Each advocated their particular method, intellectual or experimental, but they did not see the opposite end of their own pole. This is where Coleridge turns to what he calls polar logic as the key method in bringing together various philosophical strands into one system. Coleridge was not alone among his contemporaries in this approach. Thomas McFarland notes in his introduction to Coleridge's *Opus Maximum* that polar logic is an idea that is central to Schelling and German *naturphilosophie*. In the Romantic era polarity "is everywhere; it participates in the structure of what can only be called the spirit of the age" (Coleridge 2002, p. lxxxvi). One finds its logic in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Hegel, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, among many others. It develops out of Kant and Johann Gottlieb Fichte's philosophical systems. What sets Coleridge apart is his insistence on the Trinity, with God's Absolute Will acting in complete freedom as the basis for polar logic. Polarity is not the essence of divinity itself but how divine law expresses itself in finite creation. It is distinct from God as light is distinct from its source.

Polar logic features throughout "the "Essays", but Coleridge gives his most clear definition of it in his lecture series on the history of philosophy, given over 1818–1819:

> In order to manifest itself every power must appear in two opposites, but these two opposites having a ground of identity were constantly striving to reunite, but not being permitted to pass back to their original state which would amount to annihilation they pressed forward and the two formed a third something (Coleridge 2000, p. 477).

It is an ontological definition, one that appears explicitly and implicitly throughout Coleridge's notebooks, lectures, essays, and longer published works. The ground of identity is usually referred to as the *prothesis*, which makes itself known in the natural world as opposing powers, the familiar dialectic of *thesis* and *antithesis*. When these opposites are held in continual tension, there is a mid-point between them, a *mesothesis*. Yet they may also join together with the help of a mediating agent and form something new. This *synthesis* is a step forward that also retains the qualities of the original opposites. As noted in the definition above, what cannot happen is a regression, a return from thesis and antithesis back to prothesis. This would result in the annihilation of creation rather than its fulfillment.

Coleridge saw polarity as something that permeates all spheres of knowledge. It is how human persons truly understand the working of the world, even when the opposite poles seem at odds. Seamus Perry calls this Coleridgean form of knowing the state of being caught in "a reputable muddle" (Perry 1999, p. 10), where one is caught between plausible possibilities or "rival claimants", and Madeliene Callaghan refers to it as "a ceaseless cavillation between ideas, possibilities, and ways of perceiving eternity" (Callaghan 2022, p. 97). The same powers that govern the ordering of biological evolution are also found in the work of creative genius or the ideal form of government. As McFarland points out, polarity is not just a theory to Coleridge. It is "more like the whole ramified system of arteries, veins, and capillaries that, hidden from external view, sustains the organism as a whole" (Coleridge 2002, p. xc). But polar logic is not only the foundation of knowing the world but of authentic human expression as well. Owen Barfield wrote, regarding Coleridge's thought, that "the apprehension of polarity is itself *the basic act of imagination*" (Barfield 1971, p. 36). Coleridge himself called the imagination *esemplastic* (Coleridge 1983, p. 295). That is, the imagination has the power to take seemingly disparate particularities, to recognize their underlying commonality, and to subsequently use language and art to unveil this unity. Coleridge at first used "coadunate", or "to make one with", to describe this power. He was attracted to the German *In-Eins-Bildung*, a borrowing from Schelling, as it better captured "the organic interpenetration of parts, and the formative union of shaping and being shaped" (Coleridge 1983, p. 168n2). In other words, Coleridge corrected his vocabulary from "coadunate" to "esemplastic", as polar logic via the imagination does not merely make the many into one. It upholds the integrity of the parts even as they are dynamically evolving.

Although "The Essays on Method" focus much of their attention on the sciences, Coleridge first turns to William Shakespeare to demonstrate polar logic. He observes how "it is Shakespeare's peculiar excellence, that throughout the whole of his splendid picture gallery... we find individuality every where, mere portrait no where" (Coleridge 1969, p. 457). As Shakespeare's ability to draw complex individual characters increases, so does the unity of his plays. Greater individuation reinforces a greater and more complex unity. Characters in Shakespeare's best plays are richly drawn, each one a world unto him or herself. Every character is also essential to the play's whole. Shakespeare's brilliance, for Coleridge, is that everywhere there is "just proportion, that union and interpenetration of the universal and the particular, which must ever pervade all works of decided genius and true science" (Coleridge 1969, p. 469).

Once the argument for the interpenetration of the one and the many is established through imagination via Shakespeare, Coleridge spends the majority of the "Essays" on a critique of the nineteenth-century understanding of the scientific method. Contemporary botany, he complains in one example, has been reduced to a mere cataloging system, "little

more than an enormous nomenclature" (Coleridge 1969, p. 485). Scientific pursuit has become endless, purposeless list-making. It must recognize that its end is to pursue the underlying laws that grant coherence to the world. These laws, for Coleridge, go beyond a formula for cause and effect; they are the divine Laws that give meaning to all of life.

This is where Bacon goes astray, in Coleridge's view. He needs Plato's balancing vision of unity. The scientist's accumulation of facts is unproductive as an end to itself. Bacon gathered a collection of particulars that was "so immense" and "so various and almost endless" that "the life of an ante-diluvian patriarch would be expended. . . before he could commence the process of simplification, or have arrived in sight of the law which was to reward the toils of the over-tasked PSYCHE" (Coleridge 1969, p. 470). Instead, the laboratory should be the setting of "the striving after a unity of principle through all the diversity of forms, with a feeling resembling that which accompanies our endeavours to recollect a forgotten name" (Coleridge 1969, p. 471). Science should not be primarily concerned with the discovery of new knowledge, he argues. Its business is the recovery of what has been forgotten—namely, the nature of laws and, most importantly, the law-giver. Coleridge links the pursuit of science and literature explicitly: "In Shakespeare we find nature idealized into poetry" and in the chemists and physicists Humphrey Davy, William Hyde Wollaston, and Charles Hatchett, "we find poetry, as it were, substantiated and realized in nature" (Coleridge 1969, p. 490).

But what of human error? Is the scientific method not in place to collect as many results as possible in order to guard against subjective bias? Coleridge acknowledges this, and therein lies his appreciation for science as a general pursuit. It guards conclusions from

> the limits, the passions, the prejudices, the peculiar habits of the human understanding, natural or acquired; but above all, pure from the arrogance, which leads man to take the forms and mechanism of his own mere reflective faculty, as the measure of nature and of Deity (Coleridge 1969, p. 479).

The aim of this method should not be to produce an endless collection of facts, however, nor is it to build particular theories out of these facts. One example of this is how Coleridge finds himself disappointed with scientific inquiries into magnetism. What, for him, should have led to a revelation of polar logic as manifested in physical forces has only resulted in the improvement of compasses and theories of earthly magnetic fields: "it led to no idea, to no law, and consequently to no Method" (Coleridge 1969, p. 491). Science must aim higher, he writes, to recall a forgotten name, and cultivate "potentially, if not actually. . . the pure reason, the spirit, lumen siccum" (Coleridge 1969, p. 473).

Coleridge's concern was England's growing blindness to this light. The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake had become the rule. This led to educational systems that focused on efficiency, productivity, and the growth of wealth rather than the cultivation of minds. Blindness can infect the individual, but it may also be a communal blight, to the detriment of entire civilizations. The occasion of much of Coleridge's prose was to call England back to the light of true reason, or back to the *logos*.

The purpose of education, he writes in the "Essays", was not to furnish the mind with a list of facts, just as this should not be the end of science. Rather, the purpose of education was "to place [the mind] in such relations of circumstance as should gradually excite the germinal power that craves no knowledge but what it can take up into itself" (Coleridge 1969, p. 479). The first step of this realization is to "at once identify our being with that of the world without us, and yet place ourselves in contra-distinction to the world" (Coleridge 1969, p. 479). Even the self, then, exists in continuous polar tension, being continuously formed by both inner reflection and the recognition of the not-self, or the world.

The properly forming self must recognize its place both in the world and as something distinct from it. At this point, one becomes able to perceive, reflect upon, and shape both their inner and outer worlds. Here, Coleridge once again quotes from Shakespeare, writing that in nature we "find tongues in trees; books in the running streams; sermons in stones; and good (*that is, some useful end answering to some good purpose*) in every thing" (Coleridge 1969, p. 500). Language is built upon human perception and knowledge of the world.

Moving again from the arts to science, Coleridge appeals to the reader to "Look back on the history of the Sciences", where "the aim, the method throughout was, in the first place, to awaken, to cultivate, and to mature the truly *human* in human nature" (Coleridge 1969, p. 516). Attention to the natural world fosters the growth of the world within the human individual, which returns to a greater understanding of the natural world, and continually in a cycle of growth.

Attentiveness is not solely for self-improvement, however. A person, argues Coleridge, also bears responsibility for nature. He writes that "the material world must have been made for the sake of man, at once the high-priest and representative of the Creator" (Coleridge 1969, p. 450). There is a bi-directional role here. The human person is a priest, serving as the primary mediator of the world *up* toward God. But a person is also a divine representative, sent *down* to image God to creation. Although one may balk at the language of the world being made for the sake of humankind as being too anthropocentric, it recenters the human telos from being the pursuit of knowledge, or progression, or wealth to one of responsibility for this world and its caretaking.

Coleridge goes further. He extends human responsibility beyond even what we often think of as the living part of nature, of flora and fauna and their corresponding ecosystems. In an evocative passage that is near the beginning of the "Essays", he argues that humans are responsible for caretaking time. A person who is methodical in their work, he writes, may be said to operate "like clock-work". Coleridge says the mechanical metaphor is insufficient. Rather, when a person uses time in "honorable pursuits" he "gives a character and individuality to its moments". Misusing time murders it, as the common saying of "killing time" goes. Using time well is the opposite, as it is "to call it into life and moral being" (Coleridge 1969, p. 450). The person who uses their limited time on Earth to fulfill their common vocation as mediator between God and creation

> organizes the hours, and gives them a soul: and that, the very essence of which is to fleet away, and evermore *to have been*, he takes up into his own permanence, and communicates the imperishableness of a spiritual nature. Of the good and faithful servant, whose energies, thus directed, are thus methodized, it is less truly affirmed, that He lives in time, than that Time lives in him. His days, months, and years, as the stops and punctual marks of the record of duties performed, will survive the wreck of worlds, and remain extant when time itself shall be no more (Coleridge 1969, pp. 505–6).

In other words, humans have a responsibility to be time's caretakers and are able to take its fleeting moments into their souls and, therefore, into eternity.

So far, we have seen how cultivation, for Coleridge, applies to the education of the self, which, in turn, makes the person aware of one's responsibility within the created order. He identifies this as humanity's priestly vocation. Yet this is not merely an individual task. Human communities must collectively do the same. Coleridge applies this principle to history in the "Essays", as he diagrams four significant Western civilizations onto polar logic. In this case, the thesis is intellectual culture, the antithesis is materialistic culture, indifference is the culture that holds these in balance, and synthesis is the progression forward into an ideal state (Coleridge 1969, p. 501). His purpose is not a historical analysis in the modern sense but to show how a culture is brought toward its proper end or may fall into imbalance and become what Coleridge pejoratively calls a mere "civilization".

England's failures as a so-called Christian nation, particularly its complicity in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, workhouses, and wars across Europe, are at the top of Coleridge's mind in much of his writing. A civilization without cultivation, he writes, is the collective "exclusive observation of outward and sensible things as the only realities" (Coleridge 1969, p. 501). This leads to an illusion of progress, of seemingly great peoples who "built cities, invented musical instruments, were artificers in brass and in iron" but also "fraternized readily with cruelty and rapacity" (Coleridge 1969, p. 507). Eventually, with no inward reflection, no guiding light, no *cultivation*, Coleridge declares that a civilization will always collapse.

The "Essays on Method", then, culminate in a spiritual vision. Polarity manifests in humanity's physical activities, particularly in trade and literature. Together, these pursuits form an individual nation's identity, just as science and trade create a bond between nations. All of these activities are found in "the wants of the mind, the gratification of which is a natural and necessary condition of *its* growth and sanity" (Coleridge 1969, p. 508). The person, body and soul, seeks to be active, to exist in the community, to learn about the world, and to create.

Such activities are secondary goods, according to Coleridge. They are subordinate to humanity's final end, which is found in,

> a general tendency toward, an earnest seeking after, some ground common to the world and to man, therein to find the one principle of permanence and identity, the rock of strength and refuge, to which the soul may cling amid the fleeting surge-like objects of the sense (Coleridge 1969, p. 514).

Here, Coleridge's attention turns toward a sense of yearning. The forgotten name he mentions earlier in the essays, in which science aims to recall to human knowledge, has become "the rock of strength and refuge". The answer to what this name is may also be the key to the dilemma of soul and body, serving as a common ground between humanity and the world.

Before explaining himself, Coleridge appeals to the reader's experience. He heightens his prose, asking "Hast thou ever said to thyself thoughtfully, IT IS! heedless in that moment, whether it were a man before thee, or a flower, or a grain of sand"? If a person has been caught in such a moment, they are closer to the truth than any scientist's innumerable catalog of facts. As Coleridge goes on to declare, "If thou hast indeed attained to this, thou wilt have felt the presence of a mystery, which must have fixed thy spirit in awe and wonder" (Coleridge 1969, p. 517). Wonder, then, is potentially found in any particularity since each one participates in the universal whole while not losing its own integrity. Nature's fecundity provides a nearly infinite number of opportunities for these moments:

> In all inferior things from the grass on the house top to the giant tree of the forest, to the eagle which builds in its summit, and the elephant which browses on its branches, we behold—first a subjection to universal laws by which each thing belongs to the Whole, as interpenetrated by the powers of the Whole; and, secondly, the intervention of particular laws by which the universal laws are suspended or tempered for the weal and sustenance of each particular class, and by which each species, and each individual of every species, becomes a system in and for itself, a world of its own (Coleridge 1969, p. 516).

In this paragraph Coleridge summarizes his entire argument as it affects the lowest creaturely form, the grass on the housetop, to the person, who is "at once the high-priest and representative of the Creator" (Coleridge 1969, p. 518). Without attending to the law that all things participate in the "divine idea" in and of themselves, humanity will "break and scatter the one divine and invisible life of nature into countless idols of the sense" (Coleridge 1969, p. 419). The end of this breaking is the exploitation of nature as a resource rather than reverence for it.

4. Worlds of Death and Life-in-Death

Two of Coleridge's most well-known poems could be read as demonstrations of this "break and scatter" of nature. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel* are narratives wherein the protagonists have a mysterious encounter in the natural world and have their worlds upended. As background to my reading, especially in regard to Coleridge's view of nature, it is helpful to consider an essay fragment he wrote much later, in 1821, called "Note on Individuality". The occasion of this note was a disagreement between two friends of his, Eliza Aders and Ann Gillman, wherein he is encouraging them to consider the deeper, unknown reasons humans may behave as they do.

First, Coleridge asserts that while Reason is found throughout the natural world, the Will is a force that is deeper and stronger. The Will is the source of Reason, akin to "the Tap-root of an Oak" (Coleridge 1995, p. 1335). There is, therefore, always something that goes beyond human reason, a force that is more essential and difficult to parse. Although Coleridge is applying his argument foremost to his friends, he extends it to all of the created world:

> Hence it is, that in every product of Nature from Conch and Coral up to Man and Woman there is that which can be understood, and a somewhat that cannot be understood—some things, and arrangements, relations, that can be reduced to a Law, accounted for and on which we may calculate, and a somewhat that cannot be accounted or even described intelligibly, because it has its source in that which is deeper than Intelligence, and which lies underneath all assignable Reasons and Cause, as their common Ground (Coleridge 1995, p. 1336).

This principle of something that is deeper than what can be "described intelligibly", which goes beyond cause and effect as humans understand it, is important for understanding the events in both *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*. For, when the mysterious "somewhat" that links each particular being to the common ground of all things is violated, things fall apart in extreme and peculiar ways.

The violation in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a clear event. The Mariner, for no given reason, kills an albatross that has only provided good fortune and guidance to his ship and its crew. The results are deadly, although not the logical results of murdering a bird. The ship is becalmed. The crew dies, although the Mariner is preserved in his misery. A ghost ship carrying Death and Life-in-Death gamble for his life. He is repulsed by visions of sea snakes roiling around the ship. The Mariner then has an epiphany of the world's beauty and is freed of the albatross tied around his neck, is given back his ability to pray, and the crew reanimates to sail the ship home. Even so, the Mariner is pursued by a spirit from the Southern Pole. It is here that we get a glimpse of the possible reason for all that has occurred. Two voices break into the narration, questioning what has been happening and why the ship is suddenly moving so quickly. As one of these voices explains,

> "The spirit who bideth by himself
> In the land of mist and snow,
> He loved the bird that loved the man
> Who shot him with his bow". (Coleridge 2001, p. 403)

The Mariner has violated some invisible, unknown to him, network of love. He killed the bird who loved him and so has raised a vengeful nature spirit who in turn loved the bird.

The *Ancient Mariner* has often been interpreted as an ecological poem in the critical literature. The inciting act is one of violence against nature, and nature responds with vehemence. Thomas Pfau sums things up well when he writes that it is "a parable for the hubris that is modernity, specifically its founding, purely volitional act whereby the solitary individual shatters the cosmos by turning it into an inventory of disaggregated objects to be subject to (inherently skeptical) analysis and experimentation" (Pfau 2013, p. 455). Stephen Prickett is even more succinct: "The shooting of the Albatross is 'a crime against nature'; the blessing of the water-snakes is a re-affirmation of the unity between the Mariner and the natural world" (Prickett 1970, p. 111). Tim Fulford reads the resulting chaos in the poem "as an all too prescient parable of the destruction of both society and nature by extreme weather events caused by human exploitation of the planet" (Fulford 2023, p. 2). Guite provides an explicitly Christian–ecological interpretation when he argues that underlying the poem is a belief that "*everything* is to be brought on board, *every* creature is to be salvaged. All living things, not just human beings, are loved by God" (Guite 2017, p. 388). More ambiguous readings do appear, such as Gregory Leadbetter's argument that "the bird's shooting is a spontaneous iconoclasm, it is not necessarily *evil*" (Leadbetter 2011,

p. 169). Even though it brings about a deeper vision of the world for the Mariner, it is still a fall, a source of shame and alienation.

If we interpret the shooting of the albatross as an act of alienation between the Mariner and nature, then a reversal occurs when he blesses the previously repulsive sea snakes, seeing the natural world with new eyes:

> O happy living things! no tongue
> Their beauty might declaire:
> A spring of love gushed from my heart,
> And I blessed them unaware. (Coleridge 2001, p. 393)

Bringing the point home without subtlety is the famous stanza near the end of the poem,

> He prayeth best, who loveth best
> All things both great and small;
> For the dear God who loveth us,
> He made and loveth all. (Coleridge 2001, p. 419)

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is often read as depicting the horrifying consequences of treating the natural world as a series of lifeless things. The irreverence is in not recognizing the common being underlying all of life and relegating the other as a thing to be used. This recalls the note Coleridge wrote to Aders and Gillman, to be mindful of the sacred unknown "somewhat" that underlies all of creation.

The breaking moment in *Christabel* is ambiguous and is strongly contested across its varying interpretations. Some would say there is no breaking moment at all. The titular character is a young girl, likely a teenager, living in a castle with her father and his court. Her mother died in childbirth. One night, she sneaks out of her home to the woods in order to pray at an oak tree for a man she loves who is fighting a far-off war. At the tree, she is startled by a beautiful woman named Geraldine, who claims she has been kidnapped by bandits. Christabel takes Geraldine back to the castle, where the encounter grows increasingly unsettling. Geraldine seems to be unable to pass the castle's threshold without Christabel's help. The flames leap up as she passes, and the dog growls at her. Nevertheless, Christabel takes Geraldine to her room and gives her some reviving cordial. There seems to be a moment of conflict between Geraldine and the ghost of Christabel's mother, but it passes and the two undress to lie together at night, in what is commonly agreed to be a sexual encounter. The following day, Christabel's voice is gone. Geraldine seems more revived. The castle bard has had a terrifying vision of a snake squeezing the life out of a dove. And Christabel's father, Lord Lionel, seems quite taken with their new guest while treating his own daughter harshly. Coleridge never completed the poem, and this is where it ends.

A common interpretation of the poem's encounter between Christabel and Geraldine is that Geraldine is a witch, vampire, or demon who has tricked the innocent maiden.[6] There is ample evidence for this reading: Geraldine's inability to cross the castle's threshold without invitation, the dog's reaction to her, the narrator's occasional exclamatory prayers for Christabel's protection such as "Jeus Maria, shield her well!" (Coleridge 2001, p. 485), and the bard's vision of the snake killing the dove. Still, others read the union of Christabel and Geraldine as a sexual and spiritual awakening. It is a liberating, if transgressive, event. Gregory Leadbetter, for instance, calls the poem a depiction of "the drama of daemonic becoming" (Leadbetter 2011, p. 201). Christabel is silenced not because of the event herself but because she has gained secret knowledge and no longer belongs in her father's orthodox and patriarchal world. Jeannie Watson calls Geraldine a Marian figure who gives Christabel a vision of a prelapsarian world of bliss (Watson 1990, p. 186). For Watson, as with Leadbetter, it is the return to the lesser-world of her father's castle that is the issue.

I am in most agreement with Anya Taylor's interpretation of *Christabel*, who reads the central encounter as a harmful event. As Taylor argues,

> In my view the descriptions point to a sinister overtaking: the resigned obedience ("So let it be!") as she strips down to "her loveliness"; the agitated features that give no hint of the "many thoughts mov[ing] to and fro" within her mind; the silent watching of the woman dropping her dress to the floor, revealing a bosom so horrific as to be beyond words; the silence as her naked body is "taken" by Geraldine's naked body, pressing her side (is it scaley, withered, prematurely old?) against her own side; the stillness as the spell is uttered and takes effect word by word (Taylor 2005, p. 65).

Yet Taylor does not see this as a straightforward vampire story. Rather, she places the violation first of all at the feet of Christabel, even though it is unwitting. To support this, she points to Coleridge's fascination throughout his writing, "that persons are not always coherent to others or to themselves, that persons fragment and lose control, and that persons allow themselves to be used as things as their dependencies require" (Taylor 2005, p. 60).

Christabel, for Taylor, is a poem about grief and a young girl's yearning to fill the hole of that grief—and the disastrous consequences when that yearning goes awry. Further supporting Taylor's reading is Coleridge's own assertion, recorded in a marginal note he wrote in an 1819 copy of the poem, that "Geraldine, [is] no witch or goblin, or malignant being of any kind, but a spirit, executing her appointed task with the best good will" (Watson 1990, p. 179). Geraldine herself makes this promise to Christabel before they lie together:

> "All they, who live in th' upper Sky,
> Do love you, Holy Christabel!
> And you love them, and for their sake
> And for the Good which me befell,
> Even I in my Degree will try,
> Fair Maiden, to requite you well". (Coleridge 2001, p. 490)

Geraldine, then, seems to be acting according to the Will that is deeper than Reason, to use Coleridge's terminology in the "Note on Individuality". She is not evil, but neither is she safe. She is acting according to some purpose beyond human reason, perhaps even with results that harm the human, much like the polar spirit in *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Taylor's reading of *Christabel* also depicts the disordered use of the other. Christabel, she writes, "actively courts Geraldine and invites, leads, and even carries her over the threshold as if she were her bride" (Taylor 2005, p. 64). But this agency gives way to passivity, and soon, the girl loses her will and her voice. Everyone in the poem is using the other, whether it is Christabel seeking fulfillment in Geraldine, Geraldine using Christabel to get to her father, or Sir Leoline using Geraldine to "recapture his past life" and discarding "his daughter as now useless" (Taylor 2005, p. 72). The cosmos does not shatter, but this household seems about to. Geraldine, at first a beautiful but ambiguous force of nature, seems to grow in power and possible malignancy. Where *The Ancient Mariner* depicts a violent rejection of the other, *Christabel* is the consuming and absorption of that same other. Returning to the "Note on Individuality", Coleridge speaks of each individual as having a "Treasure-vault. . . sunk into the foundation of the House" (Coleridge 1995, p. 1336). Violating this center of oneself is "aggravated Burglary" (Coleridge 1995, p. 1336). And so he urges his readers, "Reverence the Individuality of your friend"! (Coleridge 1995, p. 1337). To reverence is to love without absorbing, to be alongside one another in mutuality rather than consuming.

An ecological reading of *Christabel* could be one where every character places their own desires and yearning on the nature spirit of Geraldine, forcing her into their mold. She, in turn, becomes an approximation of what they desire and begins to absorb them in return. This echoes a concern Coleridge expresses with more humor in his conversation poem "The Nightengale", wherein he writes,

> "Most musical, most melancholy" Bird!
> A melancholy Bird? Oh! idle thought!
> In nature there is nothing melancholy,
> But some night-wandering man
> . . .
> (And so poor Wretch! fill'd all things with himself
> And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
> Of his own sorrow). (Coleridge 2001, p. 517)

We can recognize the destruction apparent in *The Ancient Mariner's* story. Forcing nature into being what it is not so it can fulfill the deepest human desires and yearnings is a more subtle violation, although potentially just as destructive. The world, the not-self, must be allowed to be what it is, participating in the divine on its own terms. This does not preclude the shaping power of the imagination that Coleridge extolled, but the end of this shaping was not control or mastery over creation.

If one reads these poems with Coleridge's Platonic metaphysic in mind, as described in "The Essays on Method", then *The Ancient Mariner* may be said to be at one end of a pole while *Christabel* is at the other. *The Ancient Mariner* describes a nature that is rejected, fragmented into a series of lifeless things by an act of senseless violence. The protagonist is cursed to talk endlessly, never finding rest. *Christabel* describes a misdirected desire, using nature to satiate a yearning that should be directed toward the divine. The result is an imbalance of wills, where one strangles the other, and a diminishing of individuality and distinction. The protagonist is cursed with silence and strangling passivity. In both poems, nature becomes precarious and violent, and the human self is cast into a state of suffering, silence, and perhaps even death.

Coleridge provides an alternative vision in "The Essays on Method". These essays are a call for England to overthrow Lockean philosophy, a school he referred to as a "dehumanizing race of fashionable Metaphysicians" (Coleridge 1973, entry 3281), a "party of the *Little-ists*" (Coleridge 1956b, p. 388), with a Platonic and Trinitarian metaphysic where the many participate in the one. For individual flourishing and a collective cultural thriving to happen, there must be a simultaneous recognition of "universal laws by which each thing belongs to the Whole" and a reverence for "the weal and sustenance of each particular class. . . and each individual of every species" since each one is "a world of its own" (Coleridge 1969, p. 517). For Coleridge, reverence for the natural world is not only a matter of policy or technique—it is an act of imagination. It is a recognition of a "somewhat" that goes deeper than human understanding. When this mysterious underlying reality is violated, and this vision is lost, the world itself will come apart.

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Notes

1 DorchesterArts, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (The Hungry Grass Theatre Co n.d.)", https://www.dorchesterarts.org.uk/2023/11/28/sun-3-march-the-rime-of-the-ancient-mariner-the-hungry-grass-theatre-co/ (accessed on 28 November 2023).

2 For further on the topic of Coleridge, nonsense, and the Romantic sense of the ridiculous in the face of epistemological certainties, see the following project led by McInnes (2004).

3 For the sake of space, I have not explicitly dealt with Coleridge's interaction with Neoplatonic philosophy, although it is always alongside discussions of Coleridge and his Platonism. For a compelling discussion of how Coleridge brought Neoplatonic ideas into his poetry and religious thought, see (Harries 2021).

4 See, for example, where Coleridge calls the separation between body and soul "the peccatum originale of the Cartesian system" (Coleridge 1984, p. 171).

[5] For example, the references to botanists such as Carl von Linné and chemists such as Humphrey Davy (Coleridge 1969, pp. 466–71); to astronomers such as Johann Kepler and Tycho Brahe (Coleridge 1969, p. 485); to the hymn-writer Isaac Watts (Coleridge 1969, p. 484); to Shakespeare throughout "The Essays on Method"; and poetic references to himself and William Wordsworth throughout as well.

[6] For one example, see (Guite 2017, p. 226).

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