**Reading 2 – Imagination, Inspiration, Individuality**

**“The Eolian Harp”** (1795)

The poem was preserved in several manuscripts from August to October 1795 and from the beginning of 1796. The simple description of the harp at sunset was significantly expanded to include different emotions (sometimes downright erotic) and thoughts. In this way, the symbolic meaning of the harp was substantially enhanced. Before the 1817 edition of his poems, Coleridge meditated censoring it, but he abandoned this intention and the poem passed almost unchanged through the development of his œuvre. “Aeolian Harp” was a fashionable topic at that time, explored already in James Thomson’s *Seasons* (1726-30), *Liberty* (1734) and *Castle of Indolence* (1748). In 1808, an anthology of poetry on Aeolian Harps was published by Robert Bloomfield.

**The poem reveals Coleridge’s ambivalent relationship to Pantheism.** His remark on the margin of Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* expresses his distrust: “The mind does not resemble an Eolian harp …, but rather … a violin, or other instrument of few strings yet vast compass, played on by **a musician of Genius**”. This implies that **Coleridge valued more the conscious artist** **who is in command of artistic techniques and creative process** than art as a mere product of natural inspiration and energies. Later, Coleridge valued the spontaneity of the poem but made several attempts to extract from the poem passages referring to sexual joy and wild “melodies” of Nature “like Birds of Paradise”, as well as the references to the land of elves.

In the poem, **the power of life** **is METAPHORIZED as “ONE INTELLECTUAL BREEZE**” and the union of “soul” and “God” (soul for each – God for all). It is of a “plastic” – shaping, formative, creative – nature, Coleridge calls imagination (“esemplastic power” – shaping everything into a living wholeness). The metaphors of breeze and harp are connected with those of **seduction** and pre-marital sex “coy maid half-willing to be woo’d.” This power of metaphors is intensified in “Effusion 36” (a title of one of the manuscripts), where the “evening gale” caresses the girl under her clothing. While these erotic, seductive connotations are qualified as “wrong” in the first draft of the poem, **in the second draft they are constructed as aspects of DIVINE PERSONALITY** (input of romantic Pantheism) – “the great consent” – the harmonious whole of the universe. **In the later versions the emphasis shifted from “consent” to “JOY”**. In Coleridge’s late reflections (*Theory of Life*, 1816) “life” and “joy” or “joyance” are synonymous.

The individual versions reveal **the shift in the orientation of the poem**: it ceases to be private love poetry and **emphasizes the public mission (“life and role”) of the poet**. The most important part of the argument is **the confrontation of “the freedom of individuals” and the all-pervasive power of “animated Life”**. **God** is not seen as a spiritual principle (Fichte, Hegel), but **the cumulative power of individual differences**. In the second draft of the poem we can read: “Mechaniz’d matter as th’organic harps / And each one’s Tunes be that”. In other words, **the metaphor of “intellectual breeze” can be read both in a sensual, affective way and on the basis of rationalist model (“mechanic” vs. “organic”)** **and none of the readings results in a privileged meaning.** Especially the nature of the central metaphor, the Aeolian harp (or lyre) becomes unclear: is it an analogy of poetic mind? or an object of poetic representation? (M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*). Shelley uses the metaphor in the following way: “harmony of the sounds and …. the impressions exciting them”. But **the poem also implies the otherness of the girl** (Coleridge’s later wife Sara Fricker) – “faith that inly feels” able to overcome the skepticism of reason. An important revision of this theme occurs in “Dejection: an Ode” (1802).

**This Lime-tree Bower my Prison (1797)**

The poem is addressed to Coleridge’s schoolmate from the London boarding school Christ’s Hospital, Charles Lamb (an important essayist, the author of *Essays of Elia* and one of the “London Romantics”, including William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt) and his wife Mary (also a writer, a co-author of the *Tales from Shakespeare*), who visited Coleridge together with William and Dorothy Wordsworth at Nether Stowey in the second week of July 1797. It is related to Wordsworth’s poems, an early descriptive poem “The Evening Walk” and is sometimes interpreted as an answer to Wordsworth’s “Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree” from *Lyrical Ballads*,. There are also some parallels with the poetry of the radical John Thelwall, who visited Coleridge after Lamb, especially to Thelwall’s sonnet on his stay in the Newgate prison. Coleridge refers to the Lambs (especially to Charles) in the poem and also to his wife, whom he calls “sister”, in the fashion of the utopian project of “Pantisocracy”, which he meditated with Robert Southey. The natural descriptions, especially the final passage on birds are partially influenced by William Bartram’s *Travels through the North and South Carolina, Georgia and Florida* (1791, Bartram was an American naturalist and his work was world-famous at that time). The poem is one of the “Conversation Poems” (e.g., “The Nightingale”), written to represent a dialogue or a debate between Coleridge and his friends. The reason of Coleridge’s “imprisonment” at their cottage was trivial, his wife scalded his foot and he could not walk for some time.

The poem describes two contrasting landscape sceneries typical of traditional landscape descriptions and used in contemporary landscape gardens: a commanding view from the top of a hill and a “roaring dell” considered as a highlight of “picturesque” scenery (an “Ash” forming a “bridge” across the roaring stream). Common with contemporary landscape gardening is the interest in species of trees and plants linking the poem with the travelogue of William Bartram, describing the luscious vegetation in the American South. The allusions to Bartram may be said to work as the means connecting the familiar forms of life with exotic ones and providing the poem with a “universal” dimension. In this way, the power of imagination is represented, dissolving and transforming the perception of empirical reality.

The poem assumes a form of **poetic vision, integrating different dimensions of time: the past, the present and the future** (cf. Blake: “the Ancient Bard, who the Past, Present and Future sees” – *The Songs of Experience*). **These dimensions are unified only by the creative “Almighty Spirit”** (line 43) and all the beauties of the landscape are explained as the attributes of this divine being, who “makes / Spirits perceive his presence” (lines 43-44). Coleridge assumes, that **this vision of nature** as a symbol of the unity of the Absolute Spirit, **will be granted also to his “Friend”** (line 37), who may be both William Wordsworth, who in “Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree” described a case of failure to see such a vision, and, first and foremost, **Charles Lamb, who had serious mental problems** and was confined in an asylum in 1795. In the poem, the Lambs are seen as victims **of the destructive influence of the city life** (lines 28-32; “strange calamity” is Lamb’s mental disease).

Towards the end of the poem, **the images typical of descriptive nature poetry almost disappear** and are substituted by **symbolic signs** (the “straight path” of the “last Rook” “along the dusky air” and its “wing”, is “now a dim speck, now vanishing in light” of the setting sun; lines 69-72), **indicative of a correspondence between natural rhythms and the beating of human heart**. This correspondence is **uplifting to “the Soul”** and cannot be disrupted even by the “creaking” (line 75) of the rook. The final message is **that this unity of the “Almighty Spirit” is not an abstract philosophical concept**, like in contemporary German thought, but **the unity of Life, which can incorporate even “dissonant” sounds.**

**The problem of Coleridge’s symbols of the heartbeat and natural pulsation is their anthropomorphic nature.** Everything achieves meaning only in relation to the beating of the human heart. The strange ending of the poem, accompanied by a footnote quoting Bartram, who describes sounds made by the wings of savannah cranes, is an attempt to **open up the symbolic structure of the poem by a disharmonious detail**, introducing **a completely different theme of uncertainty and peril**, the sounds made by the rigging of the ship tossed by the tempest. And this evidently refers to Coleridge’s preparations for **“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”**.

As a result, one may ask, whether the unity of Being created by natural symbols in the poem is **rather a dream than a vision**, a problem tackled in “Kubla Khan”.

**“Dejection” (1802)**

Responding to the love crisis between Coleridge and Sara Hutchinson, the poem evokes a similar situation to that “Eolian Harp”: **a poem of love is converted into a poem of imagination**.

The **source text** is “A Letter to----”, was written in the same year but never intended for publication (“discovered” in 1937). “A … man disappointed in marriage, and endeavouring to make a **compensation** in himself by virtuous and tender and brotherly friendship with an amiable woman … the impossibility of it. Best advice that he should … withdraw himself from it and devote himself to abstract sciences.” (Notebook entry, Dec. 1801). Coleridge’s Notebook entry reveals the poem’s background in a selfish notion of the “compensation” for the frustration with marriage.

The poem includes an **erotic fantasy** developed later – in a distinctly **Oedipal** way - in a poem “The Day Dream” where the speaker imagines his sleeping wife wanting to kiss a baby which, in fact, is he himself (“an obscure presence of it’s darling Father”; for earlier occurrences of this theme, see Shakespeare’s Sonnet 143). The poem is also related to “The Picture” and the preface to “Kubla Khan” and was, in its later version (1826-8) explicitly connected with Sara Hutchinson (“Asra”).

Although the “Letter” is addressed to Sara Hutchinson, it was never shown to her. In fact, it is linked with Coleridge’s effort to persuade Wordsworth to propose to Mary Hutchinson and break definitely with Annette Valon, a girl with whom Wordsworth fell in love during his second stay in revolutionary France and had an illegitimate child. Both Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy were deeply moved by the poem which resounds in several Wordsworth’s texts, especially in “The Leech Gatherer”.

“A Letter to---“ describes, more vividly than “Dejection,” the **loss of the power of imagination**: “These lifeless Shapes, around, below, Above / O what can they impart?” and connects it with the **waning power of love**: “Sweet Thought it is—yet feebly stirs my Heart” but also with **mystical ecstasy** (Miltonic reference to the “ecstatic fit” – prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot of God, from Milton’s poem “The Passion”; see also *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by Blake). **Imagination** is equal to **erotic love** andto **mystical ecstasy,** since it creates a **unity of the symbol and of the VISION** (“linking on sweet dreams by dim Connections / To Moon, or Evening Star, or glorious western Skies-- / While yet a Boy this Thought would so pursue me / That often it became a kind of Vision to me!”)**: “JOY”** in “Dejection” (vs. “Sweet Thought” or “Vision” in the “Letter”).

However **the symbol of joy** has been already developed in the conclusion of “ A Letter to---”: the lines “Joy … is the Spirit and the Power / That wedding Nature to us gives in Dower / A new Earth and new Heaven” repeated in “Dejection” refer to **the mystical notion of apocalyptic marriage** developed in Wordsworth’s Prologue to the “Recluse”:

the discerning intellect of Man,

When wedded to this goodly universe

In love and holy passion, shall find these

A simple produce of the common day.

I, long before the blissful hour arrives,

Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse

Of this great consummation:--, and, by words

Which speak of nothing more than what we are,

Would I arouse the sensual from their sleep

Of Death, and the vain

To noble raptures; while my voice proclaims

How exquisitely the individual Mind

[...] to the external World

Is fitted: - and how exquisitely, too—

[...] The external world is fitted to the Mind

In contrast to the **doctrinary, moralizing and cosmological** features of Wordsworth’s poem, the vision in “A Letter to---” is both the **means of contact** with Sara (“Sister, Beloved”) and the **prayer for her: intense emotional communication** and the source of “living power”.

However, it also expresses the feelings of **guilt**: “thou are weak and pale with Sickness, Grief and Pain-- / And *I* – *I* made thee so!”

Contrary to “Eolian Harp,” using the motif as a metaphor, “A Letter to---“ **identifies** the poet’s psyche with the “Eolian Lute”: “What a scream / Of agony by Torture lengthen’d out / That Lute sent forth!” **Lute is the symbol of the poet’s soul**. But the metaphorical meaningof the word is still preserved: God, embodying the tumultuous Universe is called “**Mad Lutanist**”.

In **“Dejection”**, there is a similar metaphor of the Harp / Lute (as in “Eolian Harp”), but here it is converted into a symbol of the state of individual mind which is further transformed into a means of **emotional and visionary communication**. This happens not only among lovers but among **humans and nature:** “in our life alone does nature live”. The **metaphor of the soul** is **“Joy”,** both as a **lamp** imparting spiritual light to the otherwise lifeless universe (M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*)and as a **voice, “music of the soul”** (cf. “Kubla Khan”). The **notion of soul is a** **development of the Pantheist God** of “Eolian Harp”. It is represented as a **synthetic power:** love + vision + spirituality/ecstasy, which **connects the self of the poet and the other**.

**The poem makes a general proposition about life**: Coleridge even attempted to replace the “Lady” (or Sara Hutchinson) with “William”. As seen already in “A Letter to---,” **“Joy” is no longer self-centered** (“my dreams of happiness”) but **refers to the other in various forms**: lost orphan, the “sleeping Earth” and the poet’s beloved. However, there is still an attempt to hierarchize and **see the other as a moment of the same**: “O simple spirit, guided from above”.