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Coleridge's Love Poetry

A few days before the end of the eighteenth century Coleridge sent a love poem in the manner of an old medieval ballad to the editor of a liberal paper called *The Morning Post*. To write and publish poems like that was nothing extraordinary at that time. Papers and journals were teeming with imitations of Chatterton, Goethe and Bürger and the nostalgia for the good old prerevolutionary days was often mingled with the praise of "romantic love." In these circumstances Coleridge decided to add to his poem (entitled *Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie*) a brief preface indicating his views on romantic love in relation to the sweeping changes in contemporary history, politics and culture. It is not surprising that the following lines ignore the vogue of romantic ballads and medieval clichés and anticipate criticism of more fundamental nature:

a heavier objection may be adduced against the Author, that in these times of fear and expectation, when novelties *explode* around us in all directions, he should presume to offer to the public a silly tale of old fashioned love; ... But alas! explosion has succeeded explosion so rapidly, that novelty itself ceases to appear new; and it is possible that now, even a simple story, wholly uninspired [uninspired? M.P.] with politics or personality may find some attention amid the hubbub of Revolutions, as to those who have resided a long time by the falls of Niagara, the lowest whispering becomes distinctly audible.
(CP II, 1052 - 1053)¹

Coleridge's text can be read as an attempt to reevaluate the "silly tale of old fashioned love." Referred to as "lowest whispering" the tale is contrasted with the "hubbub of Revolutions". Though the metaphor of the waterfall may induce us to compare the revolutionary tumult to a natural phenomenon, Coleridge's lines imply that this is not yet the "discourse of nature". This discourse may rather emerge from the silent serenity of evening landscape and sky, or may be heard in the whisper of old tales.

Our problem may not always be to perceive this whisper but to understand and interpret it. However, this often means to ignore the essential feature of the romantic approach to poetry and life. All understanding and interpretation is an activity of the reason which the

¹ All quotations follow *The Complete Poetical Works of S.T. Coleridge*, ed. E.H. Coleridge (Oxford, 1912). The numbers in brackets indicate volume, page and lines (in case of poems).

romantics regarded as a very imperfect, if not utterly pernicious human faculty. This of course does not mean that they could easily do without it. All of them depended on rational models of human perception and subjectivity (epitomized, for instance, by the "subject Lute" mentioned in Coleridge's *Eolian Harp*). But because they had seen and experienced the collapse of Enlightenment rationalism in the apocalypse of the revolutionary events, they often figured love as the only power working against the fragmenting forces of "selfish" rationality and contemporary history. They were, as M.H. Abrams says, "primarily poets of love"² believing that love was (to quote Shelley) "the bond which connects not only man with man but with everything which exists."³

No wonder then that Coleridge's preface reveals a desire - typical also of the poem which follows - to conjure up, in a murmur of its "simple story," a universal message of the recuperative power of love. No wonder again that instead of this message we are confronted with a complex imaginative, narrative and value paradigm in which the mythical features of the old epic clash with sentimental allegories framed by fairly recent poetic topoi, as those of the ruin and the statue of the knight. The generalizations about the unifying power of love become even more suspicious if we realize that the mythical theme, namely the unsuccessful quest for Sovereignty (that is, for the union of the ruler and the country represented since time immemorial by a sacred marriage of the ruler with "the Ladie of the Land") finds its antithesis in the strange account of the poem's effects on the potential female listener. No theory of "an implied reader," no *Rezeptionsästhetik* indeed, can account for the "bashful art" of Coleridge's verse enacting the scene of wooing. The subdued eroticism of the "meek embrace" in which the speaker can "rather feel than see/ The swelling" of his mistress's heart (CP I, 334, 90-92) does not allow us to read the poem as a mere allegory (representing the desired effects of the song on the listener) or as a symbolic motif of the poet's union with the creation of his imagination (modifying the momentary fusion of the last sunrises and early moonlight into a semblance of a beautiful maid).

Apart from this clash of erotic and aesthetic aspects of the poem's meaning, we also have to take account of quite personal and intimate undertones. The poem was written soon after Coleridge's first meeting with Sara Hutchinson in Sockburn on the banks of the Tees. Sara was the sister of Mary Hutchinson, the future wife of William Wordsworth. She was soon to become the great tragic love of Coleridge's mature age. The meeting included the visit

² M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, 1973), p. 295.

³ P. B. Shelley, "Essay on Love", *Shelley's Prose*, ed. D.L. Clark (Albuquerque, 1954), p. 170.

of the village church with a reclining statue of a medieval knight and the walk to a "Grey-Stone" said to commemorate the victory of the knight over a dragon. Therefore it is fully justified if we imagine Coleridge addressing his ballad to his new love in order to move her to the same favours as those described in the poem.

What can we do with this huge agenda? Instead of the whisper of the "simple story" we are assaulted by a bunch of disparate discourses which subvert each other. The universal message of the poem, the belief in the recuperative power of love, is subverted by its very ending, the promise of "a sister tale / Of Man's perfidious cruelty." Though this tale was never published in Coleridge's lifetime, the fragment entitled *The Ballad of the Dark Ladie* shows that it would contain the reversal of the roles and would also be much closer to German ballads and their imitations. Another discourse, the allegory of the emotional impact of the poem on a female audience, is subverted by Coleridge's excessive dwelling on the erotic aspects of the negotiations and by the distinctly rationalist, masculine and self-centered features of his rhetoric representing the maid (in the later discarded stanza) as a passive being to whom all rationality is denied, and who is prompted to her loving attentions only by the "broken light" of "fancy."⁴ Last but not least, the intimate implications of the poem, the idealized reminiscences of Coleridge's meeting with Sara Hutchinson, are also subverted by its publication in the newspaper. The intense erotic experience is thus reshaped into a string of sentimental clichés and pacified by the public, educational intention of the poem.

The last and considerably trimmed version of the poem, published under the title *Love* in the 1828 edition of Coleridge's *Sibylline Leaves*, makes already no difference between Coleridge's subjectivity and the great power of love:

All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
All are but ministers of Love,
And feed his sacred flame.

(CP I, 330, 1 - 4)

In earlier texts this stanza was not at the beginning and hence it did not frame the set of discordant discourses. There is also textual evidence that Coleridge had replaced the

⁴ The draft version of the poem contains a stanza revealing the self-centredness and complacent masculine rationality of the speaker's attitude:

While Fancy like a nuptial Torch
That bends and rises in the wind
Lit up with wild and broken lights
The tumult of her mind.

Coleridge's effort to subdue and control this erotic gesture is evident from the replacement of "nuptial" for "midnight" (CP II, 1057).

pronoun "our" in the phrase "our mortal frame" by "this" (CP II, 1054, 22) which confirmed him as the only referent of the allegory. As a result, the romantic love summoned by the magic power of imagination from the medieval ruin, could hardly become more than an attribute of the Romantic concept of the self. Instead of pulling together the humanity scattered and fragmented by war, such love proved to be just a weak prop for the shattered self-confidence of the poet. This conclusion can be partially supported by Coleridge's own love confession in his notebook entry from April 1805. Coleridge writes about his love to Sara Hutchinson:

I love her as being capable of being glorified by me & as the means & the instrument of my own glorification / In loving her thus I love two souls as one, as compleat.⁵

On the other hand, it can be argued that Sara was more than a mere instrument of Coleridge's self-affirmation. The universal nature of romantic love does not amount to a mere solipsism because it still retains the attributes of Christian love. In Coleridge's view, marriage is the ritual enactment of the unity of God with the world. And it is also understood to be the ideal form of friendship where the communion is not only based on the close similarity of minds but also stimulated by the sexual difference. The analogies to theological models (especially to the Holy Trinity) are not so interesting as Coleridge's dialectic speculations:

To make the Object one with us, we must become one with the Object - ergo, an Object. - Ergo: the Object must be itself a Subject - partially, a favorite dog - principally, a friend; wholly, God - the Friend - God is Love - i.e. an Object that is absolutely Subject...⁶

From this notebook entry we can see that Coleridge regarded self-fulfilment as a mere transitory stage on the way of his soul to the absolute subjectivity of God. But this proved to be extremely complicated. The major obstacle is indicated in Coleridge's later reflexions on love and sexual difference in the notebook of 1829:

N.B. By *feminine* qualities I mean nothing detractory - no participation of the *Effeminate*. In the best and greatest of men - and less so, yet still present in all ... there is a feminine Ingredient. There is the *Woman* in the Man - tho' not *perhaps* the Man in the Woman ... and it is the Feminine in us even now that makes every Adam love his Eve, and crave for an Eve -

Why, I have inserted the dubious "perhaps" - why, it should be less accordant with truth to say that in every good Woman there is *the Man* as an Under-song, than to say that in every true and manly Man there is a translucent Under-tint of the

⁵ *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York and Princeton, 1957-1961, 1973), vol. II, p.2530.

⁶ Quoted according to J.Robert Barth, S.J. ("Coleridge's Ideal of Love", *Studies in Romanticism* 24 [Spring 1985], p. 121. The source is Notebook 21 1/2, f. 50 from the British Museum.

Woman ... At present it is enough to say, that the Woman is to look up to the Man, not in herself but out of herself. The Man looks out of himself for the realization and totalization of that in himself, which in himself dare not to be totalized ...⁷

Though Coleridge here seems to affirm the fact accepted by modern psychology that the male and female sexual traits are mingled in individuals of opposite sexes, he also takes great care not to subvert the traditional hierarchies established by the authority of the Scripture. In this aspect he is even more conservative than Goethe who concludes the Second Part of his *Faust* by the ascension of the hero towards the mystical ideal of "*das ewig Weibliche*." The most interesting formulations of subservience of women to men can be found in the second paragraph of his notebook entry. Whereas the masculine in the Woman is described as "an Under-song" of Man, which can be identified with the dynamic progression of the personality towards God, the feminine in Man is described as an "Under-tint," i.e., a mere colouring, or modification of character, stimulating the sexual attraction. Accordingly, the whole business of self-fulfilment is also ordered hierarchically. The woman, in her desire, "looks up" to the man and identifies herself with him. But the Man cannot find his fulfilment in the Woman only, he looks up to God for a true communion, to which the erotic love seems to provide an allegorical analogue or passage.

The dilemma implicit in this hierarchical patterning becomes one of the major themes of *Christabel*. This poem is contemporary with *The Dark Ladie* and *Love* and resembles them also because of its Gothic setting and the theme of romantic love. In contrast to the shorter poems, *Christabel* is characterized by a much more sophisticated narrative technique and style. Their major purpose is also similar to the didactic orientation of the two shorter poems: it is aimed at the female reader of Gothic romances with the purpose to educate her sensibility.

One of the most important features of the Gothic romances was that they invited the identification of the reader with the beautiful and suffering heroine. With respect to that, *Christabel* can be read as a meta-discourse on the problems and perils of such an identification. The medium of this identification is Christabel herself who, at first sight, resembles the conventional ("blonde") heroine of romances. The object whom the reader is supposed to desire is the mysterious stranger, the dark, dazzlingly beautiful Geraldine.

At first Geraldine necessarily evokes feelings of pity. It is difficult not to trust the narrative of her abduction which might also include rape. But Geraldine's vague account of the violence she was exposed to is combined with the dreamy nature of her appearance. In

⁷ *Ibid.* (Notebook 42, ff. 63 - 63^v).

other words, she is difficult to distinguish from Christabel's indecent and subdued desires and may therefore even be her own rape fantasy. This reading problematizes the otherwise straightforward and hierarchized view of the relations between the sexes expressed in Coleridge's notebooks.

Another complication is introduced when Christabel recognizes the otherness of Geraldine's body. The whole scene again has the dreamy quality of the moment of Geraldine's appearance. What Coleridge does here is not a mere exercise in the technique of suspense characteristic of the Gothic fiction. The text seems to imply that the difference, whatever it was (even if Geraldine were a transvestite), can be neither conceptualized nor imagined. Both the text and the Conclusion to Part I seem to represent Geraldine as the *other side* of Nature: she appears on the other side of the oak, she is connected with the other world of Christabel's dreams and fantasies. Though Geraldine may be said to impersonate the other, wilful and violent aspect of the otherwise beneficent energy of Nature, she cannot apparently harm Christabel's innocence. In this framework, that is within the limits of idealized romantic "Mother" Nature, even the forces represented by Geraldine may prove beneficent as appears from the Conclusion to Part I. The demonic in Geraldine's character is not given a chance, save in the form of the rhetoric of suspense: Christabel is

Asleep and dreaming fearfully,
Fearfully dreaming, yet, I wis,
Dreaming that alone, which is -
O sorrow and shame! Can this be she,
The lady, who knelt at the oak tree?
And lo! The worker of these harms,
That holds the maiden in her arms,
Seems to slumber still and mild,
As a mother with her child. (CP I, 225 - 226, 293 - 301)

In this way, the spell of the Gothic romances is broken and transformed into an empty rhetorical gesture. The readers invited to identify themselves with Christabel and to long for the mysterious and demonic Geraldine are eventually baffled when they see her dark powers compared to maternal love. This also implies that Christabel can be glorified in her essential *otherness*, childlike innocence and simplicity, features that are not determined by her symbolical identification with the power of Nature. Rather, they are defined negatively by the references to the absence of Christabel's social and spiritual links with other people

Like a youthful hermitess,
Beauteous in wilderness,
Who, praying always, prays in sleep,
And, if she move unquietly,

Perchance, 'tis but the blood so free
Comes back and tingles in her feet. (CP I, 226, 320 - 325)

Here, the socially and religiously accepted meanings of "the hermit" and "the prayer" are subverted: while the former is identified with youth and beauty, the latter is compared to the excitement produced by rapid blood circulation. In this way, the otherness of Christabel seems to be absolute. She prefigures the child in the conclusion to the Second Part of the poem, the "limber elf, singing and dancing to itself." "The giddiness of heart and brain" characterizing this child can only produce aggressive responses of all who maintain the male power and authority in the world of the poem.

What happens in the second part of *Christabel*? The male power and authority is disputed. The second part shows the corruption of manliness and the values established by patriarchal authority. This can also be said about Coleridgean norm of love represented by the manly friendship which once existed between the fathers of the two heroines, Sir Leoline and Sir Rowland of Triermaine. Paternal love with which Sir Leoline wants to receive Geraldine, to amend for the long-lasting grudge, is no longer here, and the traits of lust appear in Sir Leoline's embrace as well as in Geraldine's "joyous look". This only confirms the deadly nature of the fragmented social being represented by the daylife of Sir Leoline's court. The dreams and imagination are distrusted, Bard Bracy is no longer listened to, and therefore the only solution seems to be contained in the unpredictable mobility of the child who is the only being in communion with nature.

This conclusion which explicitly denies the hierarchies typical for Coleridge's speculations of love seems to be confirmed also by other poems, especially by the *Frost at Midnight* and the *Nightingale*. The child in the former one is the allegory of both the harmony and the inarticulate wilfulness of Nature. Both poems displace the traditional role of the child in the social hierarchy as the lowest degree of *homo sapiens* and as the being who has to be educated in order to become a functioning part of the social machine. They leave the education to God, the "Great universal Teacher" (*Frost at Midnight*, CP I, 242, 63) instructing by the signs and phenomena of nature. Moreover, the child is no longer forced to accept these signs and phenomena as representations of social authority, but has to get used to their random and arbitrary nature. In other words, it has to become "Nature's play-mate" (*The Nightingale*, CP I, 267, 97).

In this way, the last-mentioned poems, as well as *Christabel*, renounce the patriarchal authority which, coupled with the self-centred sexual desire, seems to have been

the major encumbrance of the self-liberating gestures in Coleridge's poetry of erotic love. This renunciation paves the way for the recognition of the ecstatic Joy present in the life of nature which is the main force moulding it into a harmonious unity. A unity of a different kind than that created by Christian *virtus unitiva*, based, as in *The Nightingale*, on no hierarchy, but on the fluxes and refluxes or reciprocations of energy, metaphorized by the voices of the birds that "answer and provoke each other's song" (CP I, 265, 58).

Consequently, in some poems by Coleridge love becomes, in spite of all religious and spiritual associations, what Michel Foucault called "the politics of life" or the management of "bio-power." Transferred from the Heaven to the Earth this power and its creative, poetical management are conceived as a utopian alternative to the existing "technologies of power" whose massive collapse is symptomatic of the time of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars.

In one of his last essays about the nature of power in modern societies Michel Foucault wrote:

The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners ... it is a way in which certain actions modify others. ... Power exists only when it is put to action, even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear upon permanent structures. This also means that power is not a function of consent. In itself it is not a renunciation of freedom, a transference of rights, the power of each and all delegated to the few ...; the relationship of power ... is not by nature the manifestation of a consensus.

...
When one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the action of others, ... one includes an important element: freedom. Power is exercised only over free subjects ... Consequently there is no face to face confrontation of power and freedom which is mutually exclusive (freedom disappears everywhere power is exercised), but a much more complicated interplay. In this game freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power ...⁵

Along these lines we can read Coleridge's love poetry and especially his first significant love poem, *The Eolian Harp* (1795), as meditations on freedom and power. The analysis of the text will prove that this displacement is by no means an arbitrary act. Some years ago Paul Magnusson showed that the poem is chiefly about the power of life and not the power of love. Before reproducing a significant part of his argument let me quote several passages from Coleridge's poem and its drafts.

Both the drafts and the later versions of the text agree that there is a certain power, "One infinite and intellectual Breeze" ("Second Draft" CP II, 1022, 39) or "Plastic and vast,

⁵ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in: Hubert L. Dreyfus, Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, second edition (Chicago, 1983), pp. 219-221.

one intellectual breeze, / At once the soul of each and God of all" (CP I, 101, 47 - 48) regulating the workings of the imagination as well as the intercourse of the pair of lovers. Whereas the second draft emphasizes the infinity and intellectual nature of the power, the final text of the poem seems to dwell on its "plastic," that is, shaping, or formative, nature. This indicates the link with Coleridge's later concept of the imagination, called in his *Biographia Literaria* an "esemplastic power," i.e. the power shaping our very being.

How can the workings of this power be described? The first and obvious model is the wooing and caresses of love. Coleridge's first draft even names the action in this way:

... by the desultory Breeze caress'd,
Like some coy maid half willing to be woo'd,
Utters such sweet upbraidings as, perforce,
Tempt to repeat the wrong! (CP II, 1021, 14 - 17)

The Eolian Harp deals with wooing and refers to pre-marital sex (the first draft was written in August 1795, less than two months before Coleridge wedded Sara Fricker whom he apostrophizes in the poem). Therefore the bio-power active in the relationship of two lovers can still be described in terms of temptation, seduction or sin. This aspect is more emphasized in the second draft:

... by the desultory Breeze caress'd
(Like some coy Maid half-yielding to her Lover)
It pours such sweet Upbraidings, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong. ... (CP II, 1022, 14 - 17)

The erotic meaning of the metaphors is even more apparent in comparison with the following poem published in Coleridge's 1796 volume entitled *Poems on Various Subjects* as "Effusion 36":

To fan my Love I'd be the EVENING GALE;
Mourn in the soft folds of her swelling vest,
And flutter my faint pinions on her breast!⁹

Whereas in both drafts of *The Eolian Harp* the bio-power is demonized in the traditional way (its randomness is interpreted as "the wrong"), in the second draft attempts can be seen to construct it as an aspect of the divine personality. However this personality is not the "divine I am," that is, Coleridge's primary imagination, the creative force shaping the being of the universe and invoked in the famous thirteenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria*. Rather, it is produced by the harmony of creation, the "vast concent" [sic] or "great concent"

⁹ Quoted according to Paul Magnusson, "'The Eolian Harp' in Context", *Studies in Romanticism* 24 (Spring 1985), p. 7.

of individuals, represented by single tunes. As a formative component of the divine existence, of the pantheist God dispersed in the nature and reproducing itself in the harmony of individuals, the "desultory Breeze" loses its quasi-demonic nature and becomes a positive, creative element working upon individuals and leading them to produce a harmonious whole, "the great concent."

In Coleridge's final version, however, there is no mention of this consent. Instead, the marvelous quality of the Breeze and its effects are emphasized. The music produced by the harp is compared to the sweet tunes from the Fairy Land and to the songs of the "Birds of Paradise." And in latter versions of the poem the power achieves distinct characteristics of Coleridge's notion of life, whose major attribute is "joyance" or "joy":

O! The one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound like power-in light,
Rhythm in all thought and joyance every where - (CP I, 101, 26 - 29)

As I have already indicated, these lines are an addition, published first in the *Errata* of the 1817 edition of *Sibylline Leaves* and incorporated into the text of Coleridge's poem much later, in the 1828 edition, when Coleridge was working on his *Theory of Life*. Though it is well-known that for Coleridge the words "life", "love" and "joyance" were almost synonymous, the recapitulation of Coleridge's contemporary opinions of the power of life recently examined by Paul Magnusson may be quite useful.

When Coleridge was rearranging the sequence of his poems published in the 1796 volume, *The Eolian Harp* was placed in a different context. It ceased to be a private love poem and became integrated into the part of the collection "with the explicit theme of the choice of a public life and the public role of the poet over a private and secluded life of contemplative luxury."¹⁰ This change is apparent even in the second draft of the poem where the word "consent" is used for the harmony of living things (in a similar way Wordsworth uses the political term "enfranchised" for the individual freedom at the beginning of the first book of *The Prelude*). Now the most important point in this argument is neither the "infinity" of the "intellectual Breeze" nor the "vast concent" it produces but the freedom of individuals vis-a-vis the all pervasive power of "animated Life." As Magnusson pointed out, Coleridge's poetic meditations can be read in the context of his debate with John Thelwall, a revolutionary materialist who used to say that the power of life was a mere "*capability* of being stimulated

¹⁰ Magnusson, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

into sensation." In one of his letters to Thelwall¹¹ Coleridge seems inclined to believe in this materialist definition. He certainly refuses the arguments of contemporary physicians Monro and Hunter that there is some "plastic immaterial Nature" and that the "vital principle" is identical with blood. He even ridicules the philosophers, the "metaphysicians" including Plato, who identified the life principle with Harmony. As Magnusson (and John Beer before him) tried to prove, Coleridge might have gathered his information on the power of life from the "Observations concerning the Vital Principle," an article by Dr. John Ferriar, published by the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester.¹² Though Coleridge seems to have been influenced both by Thelwall's radicalism and by Ferriar's scientific scepticism (the latter of whom replaced the "vital principle" by an assumption of "nervous energy") he is probably aware that this wavering stance would not avail if poetry and love were concerned. Therefore *The Eolian Harp* can be characterized as a debate of love with scientific scepticism and an assertion of utopian, creative freedom of an individual against the mechanically administered, technologically managed power. This solution is most evident from the second draft which paraphrases the already mentioned letter to John Thelwall:

And what if All of animated Life
Be but as Instruments diversly fram'd
That tremble into thought, while thro' them breathes
One infinite and intellectual Breeze,

...
Thus God would be the universal Soul,
Mechaniz'd matter as th' organic harps
And each one's Tunes be that, which each calls I.

(CP II, 1022 - 23, 36 - 46)

The rhetoric of this passage is paradoxical as it posits the image of "universal Soul" as "Mechaniz'd matter." It almost seems as if the idea of God as the spirit of life had been here radically debunked and desecrated like in some pamphlet of a contemporary atheist. Nevertheless the debate between love and scientific scepticism is finally decided in favour of love and Christian spirituality, as it is evident from the earlier parts of this interpretation.

What remains unresolved, however, is the nature of the central figure, the Eolian harp. According to Abrams, this instrument was invented by Athanasius Kircher in 1650:

In the course of next years it became a popular piece of household furniture, and its ... insubstantial and fairy sounds, and ... the fact that its music could literally be attributed to nature rather than art, made it a favorite subject for poets after the mid-eighteenth century...¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, the letter quoting an abstract from the poem was written towards the end of 1796.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 13n.

¹³ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York, 1953), p. 51.

In Coleridge's poem the wind-harp becomes "an analogy for the poetic mind as well as the subject for poetic description."¹⁴ For only the harp, and not the breeze, can produce (in Shelley's words) "harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them."¹⁵ In *The Eolian Harp* the passivity of the beloved and the dependence of the poet on the everchanging world of natural phenomena are somewhat redeemed by the creativity of the poet's mind which is the analogue of the harmony produced by the instrument. In contrast to Shelley's reflection, this creative power is finally tamed and subordinated to Sara's Christian love and humility.

Read in a less traditional way, the conclusion of the poem may also imply that Sara's otherness, constructed as a contrast between Christian faith and scientific scepticism, has been assimilated into the poet's self by the operations of his "faith that inly feels" (CP I, 102, 60), which becomes an important figure of Coleridge's love poetry. In this way, the utopian projections of the "bio-power" as a political entity, namely as an alternative to the existing scientific technologies and ideologies of domination, are finally discarded in favour of the mystical and incomprehensible nature of Life.

The last important love poem written by Coleridge is *Dejection: An Ode* composed in 1802 and addressed to Sara Hutchinson. Compared with *The Eolian Harp* it seems to be its very opposite. This is evident especially on the level of motifs: instead of the Harp sounded by the intellectual Breeze, the poet's mind is compared to a lute, played by a raving Wind apostrophized as a "Mad Lutanist." This weird phantasm evidently becomes the counterpart of the serene God of *The Eolian Harp*. In *Dejection* there are constant references to the sinfulness of the poet which is contrasted with the purity and joy of his beloved. Love then is conceived as the wish for her joyful communion with Nature. From this communion the poet is excluded because he has lost his inward life, the source of creativity:

I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

(CP I, 365, 45 - 46)

An important thing is that love in the poem acquires the nature of the responsibility towards another, that is towards the lover and all living things. This responsibility is the major moral function of poetic imagination which recreates reality in the reciprocal exchange with nature. Quite predictably, this exchange is likened to the communion of lovers:

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ P.B. Shelley, "Defence of Poetry", in: *Shelley's Literary Criticism*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford, 1909), p. 121.

O Lady! We receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live: (CP I, 365, 47 - 48)

While in *The Eolian Harp* this exchange is the product of the power of nature, in *Dejection* it proceeds from the individual soul:

And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element! (CP I, 365, 56 - 57)

Whereas for the pure and the innocent this power is a self-evident fact and spontaneous impulse, for the poet conscious of his subjectivity it can never be taken for granted. The wishes addressed to his beloved in the last stanza of the ode are products of an intense suffering comparable to the agony of nature. This suffering is converted into a textual gesture, displacing the poet's self from the centre of the created universe and placing there his closest other, his beloved:

To her may all things live, from pole to pole,
Their life the eddying of her living soul! (CP I, 365, 135 - 136)

In this way Coleridge accomplishes a difficult journey from the love as self-fulfilment to the responsible feeling for the other respecting her alterity. This journey necessarily includes the passage through the stage of dejection. Only in this stage the romantics may become aware of their own subjectivity as the responsibility towards another and of the narrow connection between romantic love, their hopes, and optimism. As M.H.Abrams shows, Coleridge spoke of hope as "the vitality and cohesion of our being" and maintained that to commit oneself to hope was "a moral obligation, without which we are indeed doomed."¹⁶ Shall we simply take this for granted?

In 1819, some weeks before he started to write the fourth act of his *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley commented on Coleridge's reflections upon hope:

Let us believe in a kind of optimism in which we are our own gods. It is best we should think all this for the best, even though it be not, because Hope, as Coleridge says, is a solemn duty which we owe alike to ourselves & to the world, a worship to the spirit of good within, which requires before it sends that inspiration forth, which impresses its likeness upon all it creates, devoted & disinterested homage.¹⁷

¹⁶ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 447.

¹⁷ P.B.Shelley, letter to Maria Gisborne (13 or 15 October 1819), in: *The Letters of P.B.Shelley*, ed. F.L.Jones (Oxford, 1964), vol. II, p. 125.

"Hope ... by holding open a possibility, releases man's powers of imagination and action..."¹⁸ - this is M.H.Abrams's interpretation of the message of Shelley's rather tortuous prose. Strangely enough, Abrams does not mention the essential difference between Coleridge's and Shelley's *politics of hope*. While the latter can be summed up in the opening sentence of the quoted passage ("Let us believe in a kind of optimism in which we are our own gods."), the former is more authentic because of its connection with the intense experience of love in its dimensions of spirituality and eroticism.

Both in Shelley's dramatic poem and in Coleridge's love poetry the subject as a source of creativity is displaced, moved aside to vacate the centre of the universe to the other. But there is a significant difference: while Coleridge's other is an authentic link between the private love experience and the public text, Shelley's other is a new construction of the public as well as the private sphere of life. The business of constructing these spheres, "the Promethean work" of human imagination, is conceived as the outburst of spontaneous energy which does not require any responsibility or authenticity. This comparison reveals an important value of Coleridge's love poetry. While Shelley too readily transcends the experience towards utopian visions, Coleridge, as we saw in *Dejection*, can overcome it in an authentic way in which writing becomes the gesture towards the other, a prayer for the preservation and happiness of her life.

¹⁸ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 447.