

Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric

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THERE is no accepted name for the kind of poem I want to talk about, even though it was a distinctive and widely practiced variety of the longer Romantic lyric and includes some of the greatest Romantic achievements in any form. Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp," "Frost at Midnight," "Fears in Solitude," and "Dejection: An Ode" exemplify the type, as does Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," and (with a change in initial reference from scene to painting) his "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm." Shelley's "Stanzas Written in Dejection" follows the formula exactly, and his "Ode to the West Wind" is a variant on it. Of Keats's odes, that to a nightingale is the one which approximates the pattern most closely. Only Byron, among the major poets, did not write in this mode at all.

These instances yield a paradigm for the type. Some of the poems are called odes, while the others approach the ode in having lyric magnitude and a serious subject, feelingfully meditated. They present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.

What shall we call this Romantic genre? To label these poems simply nature lyrics is not only inadequate, but radically misleading. We have not yet entirely recovered from the earlier critical stress on Wordsworth's statement that "I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject," to the neglect of his repeated warnings that accurate natural description, though a necessary, is an inadequate condition for poetry. Like Blake and Coleridge, Wordsworth manifested wariness, almost terror, at the threat of the corporeal eye and material object to tyrannize over the mind and imagination, in opposition to that normative experience in which

The mind is lord and master--outward sense
The obedient servant of her will

In the extended lyrics we are considering, the visual report is invariably the occasion for a meditation which turns out to constitute the *raison d'être* of the poem. Romantic writers, though nature poets, were humanists above all, for they dealt with the nonhuman only insofar as it is the occasion for the activity which defines man: thought, the process of intellection.

"The descriptive-meditative poem" is a possible, but a clumsy term. *Faute de mieux*, I shall call this poetic type "the greater Romantic lyric," intending to suggest, not that it is

a higher achievement than other Romantic lyrics, but that it displaced what neoclassical critics had called "the greater ode"—the elevated Pindaric, in distinction to "the lesser ode" modeled chiefly on Horace—as the favored form for the long lyric poem.

The repeated out-in-out process, in which mind confronts nature and their interplay constitutes the poem, is a remarkable phenomenon in literary history. If we don't find it strange, it is because our responses have been dulled by long familiarity with such a procedure not only in the Romantic poets, but in their many successors who played variations on the mode, from Matthew Arnold and Walt Whitman—both *Dover Beach* and *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, for example, closely follow the pattern of the greater Romantic lyric—to Wallace Stevens and W. H. Auden. But at the beginning of the nineteenth century this procedure in the lyric was part of a new and exciting poetic strategy, no less epidemic than Donne's in his day, or T. S. Eliot's in the period after the First World War. For several decades poets did not often talk about the great issues of life, death, love, joy, dejection, or God without talking at the same time about the landscape. Wordsworth's narrative of Michael emerges from a description of the scene around "the tumultuous brook of Green-head Ghyll," to which in the end it returns:

and the remains
Of the unfinished Sheep-fold may be seen
Beside the boisterous brook of Green-head Ghyll

Coleridge's great, neglected love poem, *Recollections of Love*, opens with a Quantock scene revisited after eight years have passed, and adverts suddenly to the river Greta at the close:

But when those meek eyes first did seem
To tell me, Love within you wrought—
O Greta, dear domestic stream!
Has not, since then, Love's prompture deep,
Has not Love's whisper evermore
Been ceaseless, as thy gentle roar?
Sole voice, when other voices sleep,
Dear under-song in clamor's hour.

Keats's first long poem of consequence, though it is his introduction to an *ars poetica*, represents what he saw, then what he thought, while he "stood tip-toe upon a little hill." Shelley treats the theme of permanence in change by describing the mutations of a cloud, defines the pure Idea of joy in a meditation on the flight and song of a skylark, and presents his ultimate concept of the secret and impersonal power behind all process in a description of Mont Blanc and the Vale of Chamouni. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* can be viewed as an epic expansion of the mode of *Tintern Abbey*, in both overall design and local tactics. It begins with the description of a landscape visited in maturity, evokes the entire life of the poet as a protracted meditation on things past, and presents the growth of the poet's mind as an interaction with the natural milieu by which it is fostered, from which it is tragically alienated, and to which in the resolution it is restored, with a difference attributable to the intervening experiences; the poem ends at the time of its beginning.

What I have called "the greater lyric," then, is only a special instance of a very widespread manner of proceeding in Romantic poetry; but it is of great interest because it was the earliest Romantic formal invention, and at once demonstrated the stability of organization and the capacity to engender successors which define a distinct lyric species. New lyric forms are not as plentiful as blackberries, and when one turns up, it is worth critical attention. Suppose, therefore, that we ask some questions about this one: about its genesis, its nearest literary antecedents; and the reasons why this way of proceeding, out of the alternatives in common lyric practice, should have appealed so powerfully to the Romantic sensibility. Inquiry into some probable causes of the structure and style of the greater lyric will take us not only to the evolution of certain descriptive genres in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also to contemporary developments in philosophy and in theology, and to the spiritual posture in which many poets, as well as philosophers, found themselves at the end of the Enlightenment.

I. COLERIDGE AND WORDSWORTH

In this investigation Coleridge must be our central reference, not only because he had the most to say about these matters in prose, but because it was he, not Wordsworth, who inaugurated the greater Romantic lyric, firmly established its pattern, and wrote the largest number of instances. Wordsworth's first trial in the extended lyric was *Tintern Abbey*, which he composed in July 1798. Up to that time his only efforts in the long descriptive and reflective mode were the schoolboy effort, *The Vale of Esthwaite*, and the two tour-poems of 1793, *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*. The first of these was written in octosyllabic and the latter two in heroic couplets, and all differ in little but merit and the detail of single passages from hundreds of eighteenth-century predecessors.[2] Coleridge, however, as early as 20 August 1795, composed a short first version of *The Eolian Harp*, and in 1796—two years before *Tintern Abbey*—expanded it to fifty-six lines which established, in epitome, the ordonnance, materials, and style of the greater Lyric. It is in the dramatic mode of intimate talk to an unanswering auditor in easy blank-verse paragraphs. It begins with a description of the peaceful outer scene; this, in parallel with the vagrant sounds evoked from a wind-harp, calls forth a recollection in tranquility of earlier experiences in the same setting and leads to a sequence of reflections which are suggested by, and also incorporate, perceptual qualities of the scene. The poem closes with a summary reprise of the opening description of "Peace, and this Cot, and Thee, heart-honour'd Maid!"

Between the autumn of 1796 and the spring of 1798 Coleridge composed a number of variations on this lyric type, including *Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement*, *This Lime-Tree Bower*, *Fears in Solitude*, and *The Nightingale*. To these writings G. M. Harper applied the term which Coleridge himself used for *The Nightingale*, "conversation poems"; very aptly, because they are written (though some of them only intermittently) in a blank verse which at its best captures remarkably the qualities of the intimate speaking voice, yet remains capable of adapting without strain to the varying levels of the subject-matter and feeling. And within this period, in February of 1798, Coleridge produced one of the masterpieces of the greater lyric, perfectly modulated and proportioned, but so successful in the quiet, way that it hides its art that it has only recently attracted its meed of critical admiration. The poem is *Frost at Midnight*, and it follows, but greatly enlarges and subtilizes, the pattern of *The Eolian Harp*. What seems

at first impression to be the free association of its central meditation turns out to have been called forth, qualified, and controlled by the opening description, which evokes the strangeness in the familiar surroundings of the solitary and wakeful speaker: the "secret ministry" of the frost, the "strange / And extreme silentness" of "sea, and hill, and wood," the life of the sleeping village "inaudible as dreams," and the film that flutters on the grate "the sole unquiet thing." In consonance with these elements, and directed especially by the rhythm of the seemingly unnoticed breathing of a sleeping infant, the meditative mind disengages itself from the physical locale, moves back in time to the speaker's childhood, still farther back, to his own infancy, then forward to express, in the intonation of a blessing, the hope that his son shall have the life in nature that his father lacked; until, in anticipating the future, it incorporates both the present scene and the results of the remembered past in the enchanting close—

whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

In the original version this concluding sentence trailed off in six more verse-lines, which Coleridge, in order to emphasize the lyric rondure, later excised. Plainly, Coleridge worked out the lyric device of the return-upon-itself-which he used in *Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement and Fears in Solitude*, as well as in *The Eolian Harp* and *Frost at Midnight*—in a deliberate endeavor to transform a segment of experience broken out of time into a sufficient aesthetic whole. "The common end of all narrative, nay, of all, Poems," he wrote to Joseph Cottle in 1815, "is to convert a series into a Whole: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a strait Line, assume to our Understandings a circular motion—the snake with its Tail in its Mouth."^[4] From the time of the early Greek philosophers, the circle had been the shape of perfection; and in occult philosophy the ouroboros, the tail-eating snake, had become the symbol for eternity and for the divine process of creation, since it is complete, self-sufficient, and endless. For Coleridge the perfect shape for the descriptive-meditative-descriptive poem was precisely the one described and exemplified in T. S. Eliot's *East Coker*, which begins, "In my beginning is my end," and ends, "In my end is my beginning"; another modern writer who knew esoteric lore designed *Finnegans Wake* so that the headless sentence which begins the book completes the tailless sentence with which it ends.

Five months after the composition of *Frost at Midnight*, Wordsworth set out on a walking tour with his sister. Reposing on a high bank of the River Wye, he remembered this among others of Coleridge's conversation poems—the dramatic mode of address to an unanswering listener in flexible blank verse; the opening description which evolves into a sustained meditation assimilating perceptual, personal, and philosophical elements; the free movement of thought from the present scene to recollection in tranquility, to prayer-like prediction, and back to the scene; even some of Coleridge's specific concepts and phrases—and in the next four or five days' walk, worked out *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* and appended it forthwith to *Lyrical Ballads*, which was already in press.

To claim that it was Coleridge who deflected Wordsworth's poetry into a channel so entirely congenial to him is in no way to derogate Wordsworth's achievement, nor his powers of invention. Tintern Abbey has greater dimension and intricacy and a more various verbal orchestration than Frost at Midnight. In its conclusion Wordsworth managed Coleridge's specialty, the return-upon-itself, with a mastery of involuted reference without match in the poems of its begetter. Tintern Abbey also inaugurated the wonderfully functional device Wordsworth later called the "two consciousnesses": a scene is revisited, and the remembered landscape ("the picture of the mind") is superimposed on the picture before the eye; the two landscapes fail to match, and so set a problem ("a sad perplexity") which compels the meditation. Wordsworth played variations on this stratagem in all his later trials in the greater lyric, and in *The Prelude* he expanded it into a persisting double awareness of things as they are and as they were, and so anticipated the structural principle of the most influential masterpiece of our own century, Proust's *la recherche du temps perdu*.

II. THE LOCAL POEM

What was the closest poetic antecedent of this controlled and shapely lyric genre? It was not the ancient lyric formula, going back to the spring-songs of the troubadours, which set forth, an ideal spring scene (the Natureingang) and then presented a human experience in harmony or contrast—a formula which survived in Burns's

Ye flowery banks o' bonnie Doon,
How can ye blume sae fair?
How can ye chant, ye little birds,
And I sae fu' o' care?

Nor was it Thomson's Seasons, that omnibus of unlocalized description, episodic narration, and general reflection, in which the pious observer moves from Nature to Nature's God with the help of Isaac Newton's Principia. And certainly it was not the formal descriptive poem such as Collins' Ode to Evening, which adapted Pindar's ceremonial panegyric to landscape mainly by the device of transforming descriptive and meditative propositions into a sequence of tableaux and brief allegories—a mode which Keats revitalized in his ode To Autumn.[5] The clue to the provenience of the greater Romantic lyric is to be found in the attributes of the opening description. This landscape is not only particularized; it is in most cases precisely localized, in place, and sometimes in time as well. Critics have often remarked on Wordsworth's scrupulosity about specifying the circumstances for his poems, but his fellow poets were often no less meticulous in giving their greater lyrics an exact locality. We have "The Eolian Harp, Composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire" (the first versions also appended to the title a date, 20 August 1795); "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," with the headnote: "In the June of 1797 . . . the author's cottage. . . composed. . . in the garden-bower"; "Fears in Solitude written April, 1798. . . The Scene, the Hills near Stowey";[6] "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey. . . July 13, 1798"; "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm"; "Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples." Even when its setting is not named in the title, the poem usually has an identifiable local habitation, such as the milieu of Coleridge's cottage at Nether Stowey for Frost at Midnight, or the view from Coleridge's study at Keswick in Dejection: An Ode. To his Ode to the West Wind, Shelley was careful to add the note: "Written in a wood that

skirts the Arno, near Florence. . . ."

There existed in the eighteenth century a well defined and immensely popular poetic type, in which the title named a geographical location, and which combined a description of that scene with the thoughts that the scene suggested. This was known as the "local" or "loco-descriptive" poem; Robert A. Aubin, in his compendious and amusing survey of Topographical Poets in XVIII-Century England, lists almost two thousand instances of the form. "Local poetry," as Dr. Johnson concisely defined it in his life of John Denham, was

a species of composition. . . of which the fundamental subject is some particular landscape to be poetically described, with the addition of such embellishments as may be supplied by historical retrospection or incidental meditation.[7]

The evidence, I think, makes it clear that the most characteristic Romantic lyric developed directly out of one of the most stable and widely employed of all the neoclassic kinds.

By general consent Denham, as Dr. Johnson said, was the "author" of the genre, in that excellent poem Cooper's Hill, of which the first version was written in 1642. In it the poet inventories the prospect of the Thames valley visible from the hilltop, with distant London on one side and Windsor Castle on the other. As Earl Wasserman has shown, the poem is a complex construction, in which the topographical elements are selected and managed so as to yield concepts which support a Royalist viewpoint on the eve of the civil wars.[8] But if, like Dr. Johnson, we abstract and classify Denham's incidental meditations, we find that some are historical and political, but that others are broadly sententious, and are achieved by the device of adducing to a natural object a correspondent moral idea. Thus the "aery Mountain" (lines 217-22), forced to endure the onslaught of winds and storms, instances "the common fate of all that's high or great," while the Thames (lines 163-64) hastens "to pay tribute to the Sea, / Like mortal life to meet Eternity."

This latter procedure is worth dwelling on for a moment, because for many of Denham's successors it displaced history and politics to become the sole meditative component in local poems, and it later evolved into the extended meditation of the Romantic lyric. The *paysage moralise* was not invented as a rhetorical device by poets, but was grounded on two collateral and pervasive concepts in medieval and Renaissance philosophy. One of these was the doctrine that God has supplemented the Holy Scriptures with the *liber creaturarum*, so that objects of nature, as Sir Thomas Browne said, carry "in Stenography and short Characters, something of Divinity"[9] and show forth the attributes and providence of their Author. The second concept, of independent philosophic origin but often fused with the first, is that the divine Architect has designed the universe analogically, relating the physical, moral, and spiritual realms by an elaborate system of correspondences. A landscape, accordingly, consists of *verba visibilia* which enable pious interpreters such as Shakespeare's Duke in *As You Like It* to find "books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything."

The metaphysic of a symbolic and analogical universe underlay the figurative tactics of

the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets who were John Denham's predecessors and contemporaries. The secular and amatory poems exploited unexpected correspondences mainly as display rhetoric, positing the analogue in order to show the author's wit in supporting an argument and to evoke in the reader the shock of delightful discovery. In their devotional poems, however, the poets put forward their figures as grounded in the divine plan underlying the universe. Thus Henry Vaughan, musing over a waterfall, was enabled by the guidance of its Creator to discover its built-in correspondences with the life and destiny of man:

What sublime truths and wholesome themes,
Lodge in thy mystical deep streams!
Such as dull man can never find
Unless that spirit lead his mind
Which first upon thy face did move,
And hatched all with his quick'ning love.

In 1655, the year in which Vaughan published *The Waterfall*, Denham added to his enlarged edition of *Cooper's Hill* the famous pair of couplets on the Thames which link description to concepts by a sustained parallel between the flow of the stream and the ideal conduct of life and art:

O could I flow like thee, and make thy stream
My great example, as it is my theme!
Though deep, yet clear, though gentle, yet not dull,
Strong without rage, without o'erflowing, full

The metaphysical device and ingenuity are still apparent, but we can see why this became the best known and most influential passage in the poetry of neoclassicism—a model not only for its versification, but also for some of its most characteristic ideas and rhetorical devices. In these lines the metaphysical wit has been tamed and ordered into the "true wit" which became the eighteenth-century ideal; Denham's "strength" (which Dr. Johnson defined as "much meaning in few words"), so universally admired, has replaced the "strong lines" (the compressed and hyperbolic ingeniousness) of John Donne; while the startling revelation of *discordia concors* between object and idea has been smoothed to a neoclassic decency, moulded to the deft play of antitheses around the caesura, and adapted to the presentation of the cardinal neoclassic ideal of a mean between extremes.[10]

In the enormous number of eighteenth-century local poems the organization of *Cooper's Hill* around a controlling political motif was soon reduced mainly to the procedure of setting up parallels between landscape and moral commonplaces. The subtitle of Richard Jago's long *Edge Hill* (1767) neatly defines the double function: "The Rural Prospect Delineated and Moralized"; while the title of an anonymous poem of 1790 reveals how monstrous this development could be: *An Evening's Reflection on the Universe, in a Walk on the Seashore*. The literal belief in a universe of divine types and correspondences, which had originally supported this structural trope, faded, [11] and the coupling of sensuous phenomena with moral statements came to be regarded as a rhetorical device particularly apt to the descriptive poet's double aim of combining instruction with delight.

John Dyer's *Crongar Hill* (1726) was justly esteemed as one of the most deft and agreeable of prospect-poems. Mounting the hill, the poet describes the widening prospect with a particularity beyond the call of the moralist's duty. Yet the details of the scene are duly equated with *sententiae*; and when he comes to moralize the river (always, after Denham's passage on the Thames, the favorite item in the topographic inventory), Dyer echoes the great theological concept of a typological universe lightly, as a pleasant conceit:

And see the rivers how they run . . .
Wave succeeding wave, they go
A various journey to the deep,
Like human life to endless sleep!
Thus is nature's vesture wrought,
To instruct our wand'ring thought;
Thus she dresses green and gay,
To disperse our cares away.

Thomas Gray's *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* (1747) provides significant evidence that the local poem evolved into the greater Romantic lyric. It is a hill-poem, and its setting—Windsor heights and the Thames valley—is part of the very prospect which Denham had described. The topographical form, however, has been adapted to the Horatian ode, so that the focus of interest is no longer in the analogical inventory of scenic detail, but in the mental and emotional experience of a specific lyric speaker. The meditation becomes a coherent and dramatic sequence of thought, triggered by what was to become Wordsworth's favorite device of *déjà vu*: the scene is a scene revisited, and it evokes in memory the lost self of the speaker's youth:

I feel the gales that from ye blow
A momentary bliss bestow,
As, waving fresh their gladsome wing,
My weary soul they seem to soothe,
And, redolent of joy and youth,
To breathe a second spring.

As he watches the heedless schoolboys at their games, the speaker's first impulse is to warn them of the ambushes which the "ministers of human fate" are even now laying for them: "Ah, tell them they are men!" But a new thought leads to a reversal of intention, for he suddenly realizes that since life's horrors are inescapable, forewarning is a needless cruelty.

We are a long way, however, from the free flow of consciousness, the interweaving of thought, feeling, and perceptual detail, and the easy naturalness of the speaking voice which characterize the Romantic lyric. Gray deliberately rendered both his observations and reflections in the hieratic style of a formal *odica oratio*. The poet's recollection of times past, for example, is managed through an invocation to Father Thames to tell him "who foremost now delight to cleave / With pliant arm thy glassy wave," and the language throughout is heightened and stylized by the apostrophe, exclamation, rhetorical question, and studied periphrasis which Wordsworth decried in Gray—"more than any

other man curiously elaborate in the structure of his . . . poetic diction.”[12] Both reminiscence and reflection are depersonalized, and occur mainly as general propositions which are some times expressed as sententiae ("where ignorance is bliss / 'Tis folly to be wise"), and at other times as propositions which, in the standard artifice of the contemporary ode, are converted into the tableau-and-allegory form that Coleridge derogated as Gray's "translations of prose thoughts into poetic language." [13] Gray's poem is structurally inventive, and excellent in its kind, but it remains distinctly a mid-century period piece. We need to look elsewhere for the immediate occasion of Coleridge's invention of the greater Romantic lyric.

III. COLERIDGE AND BOWLES

I have quoted Coleridge's derogation of Gray from the first chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*, in which Coleridge reviewed his own early development as a poet. To Gray's style he opposed that of three poems, the only contemporary models he mentioned with approval; and all three, it is important to note, were of a type which combines local description with associated meditation. One was William Crowe's conventional prospect-poem *Lewesdon Hill* (1788) and another was Cowper's *The Task*, which incorporates a number of episodic meditations evoked by the environs of the river Ouse. Both these poems, however, he read later—*The Task*, he says, "many years" later—than a publication which at once seized irresistibly upon his sensibility, William Lisle Bowles's *Sonnets* of 1789. By these poems he was "year after year. . . enthusiastically delighted and inspired," and he worked zealously to win "proselytes" to his poetic divinity by buttonholing strangers and friends alike, and by sending out as gifts more than forty copies of Bowles's volume, which he had himself transcribed. [14]

Coleridge mentioned also Bowles's *Monody Written at Witlock* (1791), which is a long prospect-poem written in blank verse. But most of Bowles's poems of 1789 are obvious adaptations of this local-meditative formula to the sonnet form. As in both the local poems and the Romantic lyric, a number of Bowles's titles specify the place, and even the time: "To the River Wensbeck"; "To the River Itchin, near Winton"; "On Dover Cliffs. July 20, 1787"; "Written at Ostend. July 22, 1787." The whole was "Written," as the title of 1789 points out, "Chiefly on Picturesque Spots, during a Tour," and constitutes a sonnet-sequence uttered by a latter-day wandering pensive who, as the light fades from the literal day, images his life as a metaphoric tour from its bright morning through deepening shadow to enduring night. Within this overarching equation, the typical single poem begins with a rapid sketch of the external scene—frequently, as in so many of Denham's progeny, a river scene—then moves on to reminiscence and moral reflection. The transition is often managed by a connecting phrase which signals the shift from objects to concepts and indicates the nature of the relation between them: "So fares it with the children of the earth"; "ev'n thus on sorrow's breath / A kindred stillness steals"; "Bidding me many a tender thought recall / Of summer days"; "I meditate / On this world's passing pageant."

Bowles wrote in a Preface of 1805, when his poems had already achieved a ninth edition, that his sonnets "describe his personal feelings" during excursions taken to relieve "depression of spirits." They exhibit "occasional reflections which naturally rose in his mind" and were in general suggested by the scenes before them; and wherever such scenes appeared to harmonise with his disposition at the moment, the sentiments

were involuntarily prompted.[15]

The local poem has been lyricized. That is, Bowles's sonnets present a determinate speaker, whom we are invited to identify with the author himself, whose responses to the local scene are a spontaneous overflow of feeling and displace the landscape as the center of poetic interest; hence the "occasional reflections" and "sentiments," instead of being a series of impersonal sententiae linked to details of the setting by analogy, are mediated by the particular temperament and circumstances of the perceiving mind, and tend to compose a single curve of feelingful meditation. To the River Itchin, near Winton—which so impressed Coleridge that he emulated it in his sonnet *To the River Otter*—will represent Bowles's procedure, including his use of the recollection of an earlier visit to stimulate the meditation:

Itchin, when I behold thy banks again,
Thy crumbling margin, and thy silver breast,
On which the self-same tints still seem'd to rest,
Why feels my heart the shivering sense of pain?
Is it—that many a summer's day has past
Since, in life's morn, I carolled on thy side?
Is it—that oft, since then, my heart has sighed,
As Youth, and Hope's delusive gleams, flew fast?
Is it—that those, who circled on thy shore,
Companions of my youth, now meet no more?
Whate'er the cause, upon thy banks I bend,
Sorrowing, yet feel such solace at my heart,
As at the meeting of some long-lost friend,
From whom, in happier hours, we wept to part.

Why Coleridge should have been moved to idolatry by so slender, if genuine, a talent as that of Bowles has been an enigma of literary history. It is significant, however, that Bowles's *Sonnets of 1789* had an impact on both Southey and Wordsworth which was also immediate and powerful. As Wordsworth later told Samuel Rogers:

I bought them in a walk through London with my dear brother. . . . I read them as we went along; and to the great annoyance of my brother, I stopped in a niche of London Bridge to finish the pamphlet.[16]

And if we take into account Coleridge's intellectual preoccupations between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five, as well as his growing discontent with current modes of poetry, including his own, we find a sufficiency of reasons to explain the power of Bowles over his sensibility and his practice as a poet. Some of these are literary reasons, pertaining to Bowles's characteristic subjects and style, while others concern the philosophy of mind and its place in nature which, Coleridge believed, was implicit in Bowles's habitual manner of proceeding.

Bowles's sonnets represent the lonely mind in meditation, and their fin de siècle mood of weary and self-pitying isolation—what Coleridge called their "lonely feeling"[17]—proved irresistible to a vigorous young newcomer to poetry. Of much greater and more enduring importance, however, as Coleridge emphasized in his

Biographia, was the revelation to him of the possibility of a style "so tender and yet so manly, so natural and real, and yet so dignified and harmonious, as the sonnets etc. of Mr. Bowles!"[18] Even while he was absorbedly reading and tentatively imitating Bowles, Coleridge himself in his major efforts was primarily the poet "to turgid ode and tumid stanza dear," of Byron's unadmiring comment. In his poetic volume of 1796, as enlarged in 1797, the most ambitious undertakings were the Religious Musings and Ode on the Departing Year. Of this publication Coleridge said in the Biographia that though, even then, he clearly saw "the superiority of an austerer and more natural style" than his own obscure and turgid language, he failed to realize his ideal, partly out of "diffidence of my own comparative talent," and "partly owing to a wrong choice of subjects, and the desire of giving a poetic colouring to abstract and metaphysical truths, in which a new world then seemed to open upon me."[19] In the turbulence and crises of the early period of the French Revolution, he had been obsessed with the need to give public voice to his political, religious, and philosophical beliefs, and he had tried to poetize such materials in the fashion current in the 1790s.[20] That is to say, he had adopted a visionary and oracular persona—in accordance, as he said in the Dedication to his Ode on the Departing Year, with the practice of the ancients, when "the Bard and the Prophet were one and the same character"[21]—and had compounded biblical prophecy, the hieratic stance of Milton, and the formal rhetoric, allegorical tactics, and calculated disorder of what he called "the sublimer Ode" of Gray and Collins, in the effort to endow his subjects with the requisite elevation, passion, drama, and impact. As Coleridge wrote to Southey in December of 1794, while Bowles's poems were his "morning Companions," helping him, "a thought-bewilder'd Man," to discover his own defects, "I am so habituated to philosophizing, that I cannot divest myself of it even when my own Wretchedness is the subject."

And I cannot write without a body of thought--hence my Poetry is crowded and sweats beneath a heavy burthen of Ideas and Imagery! It has seldom Ease. [22]

This "Ease" Coleridge had early discovered in Bowles. And as he said in the Biographia, the example of Bowles—together with Cowper, the first of the living poets who, in the style "more sustained and elevated" than in Percy's collection of popular ballads, "combined natural thoughts with natural diction; the first who reconciled the heart with the head"—rescued him from the unnatural division between intellect and feeling, and consonantly, from his use of "a laborious and florid diction"; but only, as he adds, "gradually." [23] The reason for the delay in making, as he put it, his "practice" conform to his "better judgment" is, I think, plain. Coleridge succeeded in emulating Bowles's ease only after he learned to adopt and commit himself to the lyric persona which demands such a style. That is, in place of philosophical, moral, and historical pronouncements translated into allegoric action by Pindaric artifice and amplified for public delivery in a ceremonious bardic voice, Bowles's sonnets opened out to Coleridge the possibilities in the quite ordinary circumstances of a private person in a specific time and place whose meditation, credibly stimulated by the setting, is grounded in his particular character, follows the various and seemingly random flow of the living consciousness, and is conducted in the intimate yet adaptive voice of the interior monologue. (Bowles's style, as Coleridge said, unites the possibilities of both colloquialism and elevation—it is "natural and real, and yet. . . dignified and harmonious.") It was in "the compositions of my twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth years," Coleridge goes on to say, including "the shorter blank verse poems"—that is, the poems

of 1796-97, beginning with *The Eolian Harp*, which established the persona, idiom, materials, and ordonnance of the greater Romantic lyric—that he achieved his "present ideal in respect of the general tissue of the style." [24] No doubt the scholars are right who claim some influence on these poems of the relaxed and conversational blank verse of Cowper's *The Task*, [25] in the recurrent passages, within its mock-Miltonic manner, of serious description or meditation. I see no reason, however, to doubt Coleridge's repeated assertion that Bowles's sonnets and blank-verse poems were for him the prior and by far the preeminent models.

So much for the speaker and voice of Bowles's sonnets. Now what of their central structural trope, by which, as Coleridge described it in 1796, "moral Sentiments, Affections, or Feelings, are deduced from, and associated with, the scenery of Nature"? Even so early in his career Coleridge was an integral thinker for whom questions of poetic structure were inseparable from general philosophic issues, and he at once went on to interpret this device as the correlate of a mode of perception which unites the mind to its physical environment. Such compositions, he said,

create a sweet and indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world. . . . Hence the Sonnets of BOWLES derive their marked superiority over all other Sonnets; hence they domesticate with the heart, and become, as it were, a part of our identity. [26]

This philosophical and psychological interpretation of Bowles's lyric procedure was not only, as Coleridge indicates, a cardinal reason for his early fascination with Bowles, but also the chief clue to his later disenchantment, and it merits attention.

IV. THE COALESCENCE OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT

In the opening chapter of his "Literary Life," Coleridge introduces Bowles's sonnets not on their own account, but as representing a stage in his total intellectual development—"as introductory to the statement of my principles in *Politics, Religion, and Philosophy*, and an application of the rules, deduced from philosophical principles, to poetry and criticism." [27] Hence he moves from his account of the shaping influence of Bowyer, Bowles, and Wordsworth into a summary review of the history of philosophy, as preliminary to establishing his own metaphysical and critical premises, of which the culmination was to be the crucial distinction between fancy and imagination.

In the course of his survey of the dominant philosophy of the preceding age, it becomes clear that Coleridge found intolerable two of its main features, common to philosophers in both the school of Descartes and the school of Locke. The first was its dualism, the absolute separation between mind and the material universe, which replaced a providential, vital, and companionable world by a world of particles in purposeless movement. The second was the method of reasoning underlying this dualism, that pervasive elementarism which takes as its starting point the irreducible element or part and conceives all wholes to be a combination of discrete parts, whether material atoms or mental "ideas."

Even in 1797, while Coleridge was still a Hartleian associationist in philosophy, he had expressed his recoil from elementarist thinking. The fault of "the experimentalists,"

who rely only on the "testimony of their senses," is that "they contemplate nothing but parts—and all parts are necessarily little—and the Universe to them is but a mass of little things." "I can contemplate nothing but parts, & parts are all little--! My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something great—something one & indivisible. . . ." [28] And he wrote later in *The Friend* about that particular separation between part and part which divides mind from nature:

The ground-work, therefore, of all true philosophy is the full apprehension of the difference between, . . . that intuition of things which arises when we possess ourselves, as one with the whole. . . and that which presents itself when. . . we think of ourselves as separated beings, and place nature in antithesis to the mind, as object to subject, thing to thought, death to life. [29]

As to Coleridge, so to Wordsworth in 1797-98, "solitary objects . . . beheld / In disconnection" are "dead and spiritless," and division, breaking down "all grandeur" into successive "littleness," is opposed to man's proper spiritual condition, in which "all things shall live in us and we shall live / In all things that surround us." [30] Absolute separation, in other words, is death-dealing--in Coleridge's words, it is "the philosophy of Death, and only of a dead nature can it hold good" [31]—so that the separation of mind from nature leads inevitably to the conception of a dead world in which the estranged mind is doomed to lead a life-in-death.

To the Romantic sensibility such a universe could not be endured, and the central enterprise common to many post-Kantian German philosophers and poets, as well as to Coleridge and Wordsworth, was to join together the "subject" and "object" that modern intellection had put asunder, and thus to revivify a dead nature, restore its concreteness, significance, and human values, and re-domiciliate man in a world which had become alien to him. The pervasive sense of estrangement, of a lost and isolated existence in an alien world, is not peculiar to our own age of anxiety, but was a commonplace of Romantic philosophy. According to Friedrich Schelling, the most representative philosopher of that age, division from unity was the fall of man consequent upon his eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge in the Enlightenment. The guilt of modern men must be

ascribed to their own will, which deviated from unity. . . . [This is] a truly Platonic fall of man, the condition in which man believes that the dead, the absolutely manifold and separated world which he conceives, is in fact the true and actual world. [32]

Long before he read Schelling, and while at the height of his enthusiasm for Bowles, Coleridge had included in his visionary *Religious Musings* (begun in 1794) an outline of human history in which mankind's highest good had been "to know ourselves / Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole"; the present evil was defined as a fall into an anarchic separation in which each man, "disherited of soul," feels "himself, his own low self the whole"; and man's redemption at the Second Coming was anticipated as a reintegration into his lost unity by a "sacred sympathy" which makes "the whole one Self! Self, that no alien knows! . . . all of all possessing!" [33] And in 1815 Coleridge recalled that the plan of Wordsworth's projected masterpiece, *The Recluse*, as he had understood it, had also been to affirm "a Fall in some sense, as a fact," to be redeemed

by a

Reconciliation from this Enmity with Nature . . . by the substitution of Life, and Intelligence . . . for the Philosophy of mechanism which in every thing that is most worthy of the human Intellect strikes Death. [34]

In the *Biographia Literaria*, when Coleridge came to lay down his own metaphysical system, he based it on a premise designed to overcome both the elementarism in method and the dualism in theory of knowledge of his eighteenth-century predecessors, by converting their absolute division between subject and object into a logical "antithesis," in order to make it eligible for resolution by the Romantic dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. The "primary ground" of his theory of knowledge, he says, is "the coincidence of an object with a subject" or "of the thought with the thing," in a synthesis, or "coalescence," in which the elements lose their separate identities. "In the reconciling, and recurrence of this contradiction exists the process and mystery of production and life." [35] And the process of vital artistic creation reflects the process of this vital creative perception. Unlike the fancy, which can only rearrange the "fixities and definites" of sense-perception without altering their identity, the "synthetic and magical power" of the secondary imagination repeats the primal act of knowing by dissolving the elements of perception "in order to recreate" them, and "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities"—including the reconciliation of intellect with emotion, and of thought with object: "the idea, with the image." [36]

In short, the reintegration of the divided self (of "head and heart") and the simultaneous healing of the breach between the ego and the alien other (of "subject and object") was for Coleridge a profound emotional need which he translated into the grounds of both his theory of knowledge and his theory of art. How pivotal the concept of human-nonhuman reconciliation came to be for Coleridge's aesthetics is apparent in his essay "On Poesy or Art," in which he specifically defined art as "the reconciler of nature and man . . . the power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into every thing which is the object of his contemplation." It is "the union and reconciliation of that which is nature with that which is exclusively human." [37]

Perhaps now, to return at last to the sonnets of Bowles, we can understand better why those seemingly inconsequential poems made so powerful an impact on Coleridge, in their materials as well as their structure and style. Bowles's primary device by which sentiments and feelings "are deduced from, and associated with, the scenery of Nature" had seemed to Coleridge evidence of a poetry which not only "reconciled the heart with the head," but also united the mind with nature; in the terms available to him in 1796, it created "a sweet and indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world." Through the next half-decade, however, Coleridge carried on his own experiments in the descriptive and meditative lyric, came to know the early poetry of Wordsworth, had his introduction to German metaphysics, and, in intense and almost fevered speculation, groped his way out of the mechanism and associationism of David Hartley and other English empiricists. Increasingly in the process he became dissatisfied with the constitution of Bowles's poems, and the reasons came sharply into focus in 1802, at about the time he was recasting his verse "Letter to [Asra]" into his highest achievement in the greater Romantic lyric, *Dejection: An Ode*. On 10 September he

wrote a letter to William Sotheby which shows that his working his way through and beyond Bowles was an integral part of his working his way toward a new poetry, a new criticism, and a new world-view. The letter is a preliminary sketch for the *Biographia Literaria*, for like that work it moves from a critique of Bowles through a view of the relation of mind to nature in perception to a theory of poetic production, and it culminates in Coleridge's first explicit distinction between the elementaristic fancy and the synthetic imagination. Bowles had just published a new edition of his sonnets, supplemented by several long poems in blank verse which reverted to a process of scenic inventory and incidental meditation very close to the eighteenth-century local poem. Bowles's second volume, Coleridge begins, "is woefully inferior to it's Predecessor."

There reigns thro' all the blank verse poems such a perpetual trick of moralizing every thing—which is very well, occasionally—but never to see or describe any interesting appearance in nature, without connecting it by dim analogies with the moral world, proves faintness of Impression. Nature has her proper interest; & he will know what it is, who believes & feels, that every Thing has a Life of it's own, & that we are all one Life. A Poet's Heart & Intellect should be combined, intimately combined & unified, with the great appearances in Nature & not merely held in solution & loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal Similes. . . . The truth is—Bowles has indeed the sensibility of a poet; but he has not the Passion of a great Poet. . . he has no native Passion, because he is not a Thinker. [38]

Bowles's exaggeration in his later poems of his earlier devices has opened out to Coleridge his inherent failings. Bowles is able to reconcile the heart with the head, but only because of an equality of weakness in the antagonist powers of intellect and passion. And what Coleridge had earlier described as an "indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world" now turns out to be no better than a "loose mixture," in which the separate parts, instead of being "intimately combined & unified," are merely held together by the rhetorical expedient of "formal Similes." In other words, what to Coleridge, the Hartleian associationist, had in 1796 appeared to be an adequate integration of mind and its milieu reveal itself—when he has learned to think of all higher mental processes in terms of a synthesis of contraries—to be what he later called the "conjunction-disjunctive" of neoclassic unity by a decorum of the parts.

In the letter to Sotheby, Coleridge goes on to draw a parallel distinction between the treatment of nature in Greek mythology and in the Hebrew poets, and ends by assigning the former type to the collocative process of the lower productive faculty, or Fancy. To the Greek poets

all natural Objects were dead—mere hollow Statues—but there was a Godkin or Goddessling included in each. . . . At best, it is but Fancy, or the aggregating Faculty of the mind—not Imagination, or the modifying, and co-adunating Faculty. . . . In the Hebrew Poets each Thing has a Life of it's own, & yet they are all one Life.

Bowles's poems, it becomes apparent, remain in the mode of the Fancy because they fail to overcome the division between living mind and a dead nature by that act of the

coadunating Imagination which fuses the two into "one Life"; for when Bowles joins the parts a and b they form an aggregate ab, instead of "interpenetrating" (in terms of Coleridge's critique of elementarist thinking) to "generate a higher third, including both the former," the product. [39] For the "mystery of genius in the Fine Arts," as Coleridge said in "On Poesy or Art," is

so to place these images [of nature] . . . as to elicit from, and to superinduce upon, the forms themselves the moral reflexions to which they approximate, to make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature. [40]

The shift in Coleridge's theory of descriptive poetry corresponded with a change in his practice of the form; and in the sequence of sonnets and conversation poems that he wrote under Bowles's influence we can observe him in the process of converting the conjunction of parts, in which nature stays on one side and thought on the other, into the Romantic interfusion of subject and object. W. K. Wimsatt has acutely remarked that Coleridge's sonnet *To the River Otter*—though written in express imitation of Bowles's *To the River Itchin*, perhaps so early as 1793—has begun to diverge from Bowles's "simple association. . . simply asserted" by involving the thought in the descriptive details so that the design "is latent in the multiform sensuous picture." [41] The *Eolian Harp* (1795-96) set the expanded pattern of the greater lyric, but in it the meditative flight is a short one, while the thought is still at times expressed in the mode of *sententiae* which are joined to the details of the scene by formal similes. We sit

beside our Cot, our Cot o'ergrown
With white-Hower'd Jasmin, and the broad-leav'd
Myrtle, (Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love!)
And watch the clouds, that late were rich with light,
Slow saddening round, and mark the star of eve
Serenely brilliant (such should Wisdom be)
Shine opposite!

In *Frost at Midnight*, however, written two years later, the images in the initial description are already suffused with an unstated significance which, in Coleridge's terms, is merely "elicited" and expanded by the subsequent reflection, which in turn "superinduces" a richer meaning upon the scene to which it reverts. *Fears in Solitude*, a few months after that, exemplifies the sustained dialogue between mind and landscape which Coleridge describes in lines 215-20 of the poem: the prospect of sea and fields

seems like society
Conversing with the mind, and giving it
A livelier impulse and a dance of thought!

And *Dejection: An Ode*, on which Coleridge was working in 1802 just as he got Bowles's poems into critical perspective, is a triumph of the "co-adunating" imagination, in the very poem which laments the severance of his community with nature and the suspension of his shaping spirit of imagination. In unspoken consonance with the change of the outer scene and of the responsive wind-harp from ominous quiet to violent storm to momentary calm, the poet's mind, momentarily revitalized by a

correspondent inner breeze, moves from torpor through violence to calm, by a process in which the properties earlier specified of the landscape—the spring rebirth, the radiated light of moon and stars, the clouds and rain, the voice of the harp—reappear as the metaphors of the evolving meditation on the relation of mind to nature; these culminate in the figure of the one life as an eddy between antitheses:

To her may all things live, from pole to pole,
Their life the eddying of her living soul!

On Coleridge's philosophical premises, in this poem nature is made thought and thought nature, both by their sustained interaction and by their seamless metaphoric continuity.

The best Romantic meditations on a landscape, following Coleridge's examples, all manifest a transaction between subject and object in which the thought incorporates and makes explicit what was already implicit in the outer scene. And all the poets testify independently to a fact of consciousness which underlay these poems, and was the experiential source and warrant for the philosophy of cognition as an interfusion of mind and nature. When the Romantic poet confronted a landscape, the distinction between self and not-self tended to dissolve. Coleridge asserted that from childhood he had been accustomed to "unrealize . . . and then by a sort of transfusion and transmission of my consciousness to identify myself with the Object"; also that

in looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking . . . I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing any thing new.

So with Wordsworth: "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature." Shelley witnessed to "the state called reverie," when men "feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction." Even Byron's Childe Harold claimed that "I live not in myself," but that mountains, waves, and skies become "a part / Of me, and of my soul, as I of them." Keats's experience differs, but only in the conditions that, instead of assimilating the other to the self, the self goes out into the other, and that the boundary of self is "annihilated" when he contemplates, not a broad prospect, but a solid particular endowed with outline, mass, and posture or motion. That type of poet of which "I am a Member. . . has no self" but "is continually [informing] and filling some other Body"—a moving billiard ball, a breaking wave, a human form in arrested motion, a sparrow, an urn, or a nightingale.[42]

V. THE ROMANTIC MEDITATION

The greater Romantic lyric, then, as established by Coleridge, evolved from the descriptive-meditative structure of the eighteenth-century local poem, primarily through the intermediate stage of Bowles's sequence of sonnets. There remains, however, a wide disparity between the Romantic lyric and its predecessors, a disparity in the organization and nature of the meditation proper. In local poetry the order of the

thoughts is the sequence in which the natural objects are observed; the poet surveys a prospect, or climbs a hill, or undertakes a tour, or follows the course of a stream, and he introduces memories and ideas intermittently, as the descriptive occasion offers. In Bowles's sonnets, the meditation, while more continuous, is severely limited by the straitness of the form, and consists mainly of the pensive commonplaces of the typical late-century man of feeling. In the fully developed Romantic lyric, on the other hand, the description is structurally subordinate to the meditation, and the meditation is sustained, continuous, and highly serious. Even when the initial impression is of the casual movement of a relaxed mind, retrospect reveals the whole to have been firmly organized around an emotional issue pressing for resolution. And in a number of the greatest lyrics—including Coleridge's *Dejection*, Wordsworth's *Intimations*, Shelley's *Stanzas Written in Dejection and West Wind*, Keats's *Nightingale*—the issue is one of a recurrent state often called by the specialized term "dejection." This is not the pleasing melancholy of the eighteenth-century poet of sensibility, nor Bowles's muted selfpity, but a profound sadness, sometimes bordering on the anguish of terror or despair, at the sense of loss, dereliction, isolation, or inner death, which is presented as inherent in the conditions of the speaker's existence.

In the English literary tradition these Romantic meditations had their closest analogue in the devotional poems of the seventeenth century. In his study *The Poetry of Meditation*, Louis Martz has emphasized the importance, for the religious poets we usually class as "metaphysical," of the numerous and immensely popular devotional handbooks which undertook to discipline the casual flow of ordinary consciousness by setting down a detailed regimen for evoking, sustaining, and ordering a process of meditation toward resolution. A standard sub-department was the "meditation on the creatures" (that is, on the created world) in order, as the title of Robert Bellarmine's influential treatise of 1615 put it, to achieve *The Ascent of the Mind to God by a Ladder of Things Created*. The recommended procedure, as this became stabilized at the turn of the century, tended to fall into three major divisions. The first involved what Loyola called the "composition of place, seeing the spot"; that is, envisioning in vivid detail the person, object, or scene which initiates the meditation. The second, the meditation proper, was the analysis of the relevance to our salvation of this scene, interpreted analogically; it often included a turn inward to a close examination of conscience. The last specified the results of this meditation for our affections and will, and either included, or concluded with, a "colloquy"—usually a prayer, or discourse with God, although as Saint Francis de Sales advises, "while we are forming our affections and resolutions," we do well to address our colloquy also "to ourselves, to our own hearts. . . and even to insensible creatures." [40]

Few seventeenth-century meditative poems accord exactly with the formulas of the Catholic or Anglican devotional manuals, but many of them unmistakably profited from that disciplining of fluid thought into an organized pattern which was a central enterprise in the spiritual life of the age. And those poetic meditations on the creatures which envision a natural scene or object, go on in sorrow, anguish, or dejection to explore the significance for the speaker of the spiritual signs built into the object by God, and end in reconciliation and the hope of rebirth, are closer to the best Romantic lyrics in meditative content, mood, and ordonnance than any poem by Bowles or his eighteenth-century predecessors. Good instances of the type are Vaughan's *The Waterfall*, *Regeneration*, *Vanity of Spirit*, and *"I walkt the other day (to spend my hour,)*

/ Into a field"-an hour being a standard time set aside for formal meditation. Regeneration, for example, begins with a walk through a spring landscape which stands in sharp contrast to the sterile winter of the poet's spirit, finds its resolution in a sudden storm of wind which, as spiritual, is the material equivalent both of the breath of God and the spirit of man, and ends in a short colloquy which is a prayer for a spiritual dying-into-life:

Here musing long, I heard
A rushing wind
Which still increased, but whence it stirred
Nowhere I could not find. . . .
Lord, then said I, on me one breath,
And let me die before my death!

The two key figures of the outer and inner seasons and of the correspondent, regenerative wind later served as the radical metaphors in a number of Romantic poems, including Coleridge's *Dejection* and Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*.

Or consider the meditation on a creature which-at least in his later life-was Coleridge's favorite poem by one of his favorite Iyristis, George Herbert's *The Flower*.^[45] Reflecting upon the annual death and rebirth of the plant, the poet draws a complex analogy with his own soul in its cycles of depression and joy, spiritual drouth and rain, death and springlike revival, alienation from God and reconciliation; in the concluding colloquy he also (as Coleridge and Shelley were to do) incorporates into the analogy the sterility and revival of his poetic powers:

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing. O my only light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night! ^[46]

Herbert is describing the state of inner torpor through alienation from God known in theology as *accidie*, *dejection*, *spiritual dryness*, *interior desolation*; this condition was often analogized to circumstances of the seasons and weather, and was a matter of frequent consideration in the devotional manuals. As Saint Francis de Sales wrote, in his section "*Of Spiritual Dryness and Sterility*":

Sometimes you will find yourself so deprived and destitute of all devout feelings of devotion that your soul will seem to be a fruitless, barren desert, in which there is no . . . water of grace to refresh her, on account of the dryness that seems to threaten her with a total and absolute desolation. . . . At the same time, to cast her into despair, the enemy mocks her by a thousand suggestions of despondency and says: "Ah! poor wretch, where is thy God? . . . Who can ever restore to thee the joy of His holy grace?" ^[47]

Coleridge, during the several years just preceding *Dejection*, described in his letters a

recurrent state of apathy and of the paralysis of imagination in terms which seem to echo such discussions of spiritual dryness: "My Imagination is tired, down, flat and powerless. . . as if the organs of Life had been dried up; as if only simple BEING remained, blind and stagnant!" "I have been. . . undergoing a process of intellectual exsiccation. . . . The Poet is dead in me." [48]

The Romantic meditations, then, though secular meditations, often turn on crises—alienation, dejection, the loss of a "celestial light" or "glory" in experiencing the created world which are closely akin to the spiritual crises of the earlier religious poets. And at times Romantic lyrics become overtly theological in expression. Some of them include not only colloquies with a human auditor, real or imagined, and with what de Sales called "insensible creatures," but also with God or with a Spirit of Nature, in the mode of a formal prayer (Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement, Ode to the West Wind), or else of a terminal benediction. Thus Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight* falls into the ritual language of a blessing ("Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee")—a tactic which Wordsworth at once picked up in *Tintern Abbey* ("and this prayer I make. . . . Therefore let the moon / Shine on thee in thy solitary walk") and which Coleridge himself repeated in *Dejection* ("Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing To her may all things live, from pole to pole").

We must not drive the parallel too hard. There is little external evidence of the direct influence of the metaphysical poem upon the greater Romantic lyric; the similarity between them may well be the result of a common tradition of meditations on the creatures—a tradition which continued in the eighteenth century in so prodigiously popular a work as James Hervey's *Meditations and Contemplations* (1746-47). [49] And there is a very conspicuous and significant difference between the Romantic lyric and the seventeenth-century meditation on created nature—a difference in the description which initiates and directs the process of mind. The "composition of place" was not a specific locality, nor did it need to be present to the eyes of the speaker, but was a typical scene or object, usually called up, as Saint Ignatius and other preceptors said, before "the eyes of the imagination," [50] in order to set off and guide the thought by means of correspondences whose interpretation was firmly controlled by an inherited typology. The landscape set forth in Vaughan's *Regeneration*, for example, is not a particular geographical location, nor even a literal setting, but the allegorical landscape common to the genre of spiritual pilgrimages, from the *Divine Comedy* to *Pilgrim's Progress*. And Herbert's flower is not a specified plant, described by the poet with his eye on the object, but a generic one; it is simply the class of all perennials, in which God has inscribed the invariable signatures of His providential plan. In the Romantic poem, on the other hand, the speaker merely happens upon a natural scene which is present, particular, and almost always precisely located; and though Coleridge occasionally alludes to it still as "that eternal language, which thy God / Utters," [51] the primary meanings educed from the scene are not governed by a public symbolism, but have been brought to it by the private mind which perceives it. But we know already that these attributes also had a seventeenth-century origin, in a poet who inherited the metaphysical tradition yet went on, as Dryden and many of his successors commented [52], to alter it in such a way as to establish the typical meter, rhetoric, and formal devices of neoclassic poetry. The crucial event in the development of the most distinctive of the Romantic lyric forms occurred when John Denham climbed Cooper's Hill and undertook to describe, in balanced couplets, the landscape before his eyes, and

to embellish the description with incidental reminiscence and meditation.

Notes

From *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hillis and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 527-60. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

1. *The Prelude* (1850 text), XII, 222-23. Even Keats, though he sometimes longed for a life of sensations rather than of thought, objected to the poems of John Clare that too often "the Description overlaid and stilled that which ought to be the prevailing Idea" (letter to John Clare from John Taylor, 27 September 1820, quoted by Edmund Blunden, *Keats's Publisher*, London, 1936, p. 80).

2. *Descriptive Sketches* (1793) drew from a contemporary reviewer the cry: "More descriptive poetry! Have we not yet enough? . . . Yes; more, and yet more: so it is decreed" (*Monthly Review*, 2nd ser., 12 [1793], cited by Robert A. Aubin, *Topographical Poetry in XVIII-Century England*, New York, 1936, p. 255; see also pp. 217-19).

3. Perhaps that is the reason for Coleridge's later judgment that *The Eolian Harp* was "the most perfect poem I ever wrote" (quoted by James D. Campbell, ed., *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, London, 1893, p. 578). The first version of the poem and a MS version of 1797 (Coleridge then entitled it "Effusion") are reproduced in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (Oxford, 1912), 11, 1021-23. For accounts of the revisions of the poem, see J. H. W. Milley, "Some Notes on Coleridge's 'Eolian Harp,'" *Modern Philology*, 36 (1989), 359-75, and M. H. Abrams, "Coleridge's 'A Light in Sound': Science, Metascience, and Poetic Imagination," pp. 158-91 in the present volume.

4. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (Oxford, 1956-71), IV, 545.

5. Keats used a different figure for the poetic return. In a letter of December 1818-January 1819 he transcribed *Fancy and Bards of passion and of mirth*; in which the last lines are variants of the opening lines, and said, "These are specimens of a sort of rondeau which I think I shall become partial to" (*The Letters of John Keats*, ed. H. E. Rollins, Cambridge, Mass., 1955, II, 21-26). In the next few months he exemplified the rondeau form in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, as well as in the descriptive-meditative lyric *Ode to a Nightingale*.

6. So titled in the Dowden MS in the Morgan Library; see Carl R. Woodring, *Politics in the Poetry of Coleridge* (Madison, 1961, p. 255, n. 16.)

7. *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill (Oxford, 1905), I, 77.

8. *The Subtler Language* (Baltimore, 1959), chap. 3.

9. *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1925-31), I, 17.

10. The opening eight lines of Cooper's Hill, despite some approximation to neoclassic neatness and dispatch, are much closer to Donne's Couplets, in the cramped syntax of their run-on lines, which deploy a tortuous analogical argument to demonstrate a paradox that inverts and explodes a mythological cliché:

Sure there are Poets which did never dream
Upon *Parnassus*, nor did taste the stream
Of *Helicon*, we therefore may suppose
Those made no Poets, but the Poets those.
And as Courts make not Kings, but Kings the Court,
So where the Muses and their train resort, *Parnassus* stands; if I can be to thee
A Poet, thou *Parnassus* are to me.

Compare the opening of Andrew Marvell's *Upon the Hill and Grove at Billborow* (probably written in the early 1650s) for the jolting movement, the doughty hyperbole, and witty shock tactics of the thoroughly metaphysical management of a local hill-poem.

11. See Earl R. Wasserman, "Nature Moralized: The Divine Analogy in the Eighteenth Century," *ELH*, 20 (1953), 39-76. For commentators on the local poem, the chief structural problem was how to establish easy, just, yet varied connections between its two components, the *visibilia* and the *moralia*. Joseph Warton's observation is typical, that "it is one of the greatest and most pleasing arts of descriptive poetry, to introduce moral sentences and instructions in an oblique and indirect manner" (*An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* [1756], London, 1806, I, 29).

12. Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J. B. Owen and Jane W. Smyser (Oxford, 1974), 1,133.

13. *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford, 1907, I, 13).

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-16.

15. *The Poetical Works of William Lisle Bowles*, ed. George Gilfillan (Edinburgh, 1855), I, 1.

16. *Recollections of the Table-Talk of Samuel Rogers* (New York, 1856), p. 258 n. For Bowles's effect on Southey see William Haller, *The Early Life of Robert Southey* (New York, 1917), pp. 73-76. As late as 1806-20, in *The River Duddon*, Wordsworth adopted Bowles's design of a tour represented in a sequence of local-meditative sonnets.

17. Coleridge, Introduction to the "Sheet of Sonnets" (1796), in *Complete Poetical Works*, II, 1139. As early as November of 1797, however, Coleridge as "Nehemiah Higginbottom" parodied "the spirit of *doleful egotism*" in the sonnet. See *Biographia Literaria*, I, 17, and David Erdman, "Coleridge as Nehemiah Higginbottom," *Modern Language Notes*, 73 (1958), 569-80.

18. *Biographia Literaria*, I, 10.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3, and 203-204 n. Coleridge's claim that he had recognized the defects of

the "swell and glitter" of his elevated style, even as he employed it, is borne out by his Preface to the *Poems* of 1797, in *Complete Poetical Works*, II, 1 145.

20. See "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age," pp. 44-75 in the present volume.

21. *Complete Poetical Works*, II, I 113-14; see also p. I 145.

22. 11 December 1794, *Collected Letters*, 1,133-37.

23. *Biographia Literaria*, I, 10, 15-16.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

25. See, for example, Humphry House, *Coleridge*, London, 1953), chap. 3; George Whalley, "Coleridge's Debt to Charles Lamb," in *Essays and Studies* (1958), pp. 68-85; and Max F. Schulz, *The Poetic Voices of Coleridge* (Detroit, 1963), chap. 5. A comment of Lamb to Coleridge in December 1796 substantiates Coleridge's own statements about the relative importance for him of Bowles and Cowper: "Burns was the god or my idolatry, as Bowles or yours. I am jealous of your fraternising with Bowles, when I think you relish him more than Burns or my old favourite, Cowper" (*The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, London, 1903-1905, VI, 73).

26. Introduction to the "Sheet or Sonnets" (1796), in *Complete Poetical Works*, II, 1139.

27. *Biographia Literaria*, I, I.

28. *Collected Letters*, 1,354,349. See also *ibid.*, IV, 574-75, and *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London, 1957-), II, entry 2151.

29. *The Friend* (London, 1818), III, 261-62.

30. *The Ruined Cottage*, addendum to MS B, in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1940-49), V, 402.

31. *Hints Towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life*, ed. Seth B. Watson (London, 1848), p. 63.

32. Friedrich Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart and Augsburg, 1856-61), Pt. I, Vol. VII, pp. 81-82.

33. *Religious Musings*, lines 126-58.

34. To Wordsworth, 30 May 1815, *Collected Letters*, IV, 574-75.

35. *Biographia Literaria*, I, 174-85.

36. *Ibid.*, I, 202; II, 12. See *The Friend*, III, 263-64, on the "one principle which alone reconciles the man with himself, with other [men] and with the world."

37. In *Biographia Literaria*, 11, 253-55, Though "On Poesy or Art" takes its departure from Schelling's "On the Relation of the Plastic Arts to Nature," the quoted statements are Coleridge's own.

38. 10 September 1802, *Collected Letters*, II, 864.

39. *Hints Towards the . . . Theory of Life*, p. 63.

40. In *Biographia Literaria*, II, 258.

41. "The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery," in *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, Ky., 1954), pp. 106, III.

42. Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, IV, 974-75, and *Notebooks*, II, entry 2546; Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, IV, 463; *Shelley's Prose*, ed. D. L. Clark (Albuquerque, 1954), p. 174; Byron, *Childe Harold*, III, lxxii, lxxv; Keats, *Letters*, I, 387.

43. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City, N.Y., 1955), p. 88.

44. See "The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor," pp. 25-43 in the present volume.

45. Coleridge's comments on Herbert are gathered in *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Roberta F. Brinkley (Durham, N.C., 1955), pp. 533-40.

46. Coleridge wrote his later poem of aridity in a spring landscape, *Work Without Hope* (1825), expressly "in the manner or G. HERBERT" (*Complete Poetical Works*, II, 1110-11).

47. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, pp. 256-57; on "spiritual desolation," see also Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, ed. Orby Shipley (London, 1870), pp. 139-40.

48. *Collected Letters*, 1,470; II, 713-14; see also I, 643.

49. In the *Meditations and Contemplations*, 7th ed. (London, 1750), II, xv-xvii, Hervey describes his aim to "exhibit a Prospect of still Life, and grand Operation" in order "to open the Door of Meditation," and show how we may "gather up the unstable, fluctuating Train of Fancy; and collect her fickle Powers into a consistent, regular, and useful Habit of Thinking."

50. See Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven, 1954), pp. 27-28.

51. *Frost at Midnight*, lines 58-62; cf. *This Lime-Tree Bower*, lines 39-43. and *Fears in Solitude*, lines 22-24. In Coleridge's *Hymn before Sunrise* (1802), unlike his greater lyrics, the meditation moves from the creatures to the Creator by a hereditary symbolism as old as Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handy-work."

52. Dr. Johnson listed Denham among the metaphysical poets, then added, in the great commonplace of neoclassical literary history, that he "and Waller sought another way to fame, by improving the harmony of our numbers" ("Cowley," in *Lives of the English*

Poets, I, 22).

The structure of the greater Romantic lyric is as follows: the poem begins with the poet describing the immediate natural surroundings, which aspect triggers "memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling" and leads to a meditation whereby the observer "achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem" (201).¹ Abrams traces Coleridge's poetic influences and personal philosophy to arrive at a deeper understanding of how the greater Romantic lyric is structured and operates within his poems. For Abrams, an important poem in the advancement of the Romantic lyric is Sir John Denham's "Cooper's Hill," in which the speaker interfuses in his observations of nature reflections on history and politics. Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric.² The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism. M H Abrams.³ My essay on the "experimental" Romantic lyric situates this genre in a philosophical and scientific context. Reading Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" in conjunction with contemporary depictions of scientific self-experimentation, I argue that the literary experiment poses a question, often associated with Immanuel Kant, of how, through self-reflection, one determines the basis for an aesthetic "common sense."