Francesca Tesserin

«A LAND OF SHADOWS AND APPARITIONS»:
THOUGHT AND REALITY
IN COLERIDGE’S LATE POETRY

Since all, that beat about in Nature’s range,
Or veer or vanish; why shouldst thou remain
The only constant in a world of change,
O yearning Thought! that livest but in the brain? 1

Coleridge’s confutation of materialism forms an undercurrent of thought emerging in almost every observation of his prose works and especially of Biographia Literaria. After his approach to German idealism — which he was to call «the true and original realism» 2 — and his rejection of all the beliefs that he had formed in his early youth, he claimed that the «cold system» of mechanic philosophy had paradoxically destroyed «the reality of all that we actually behold» and banished man forever «to a land of shadows» and «apparitions». The very existence of the external world began to be questioned, while the intimate bond which was said to link our inner nature with outer reality was definitively broken. Instead of having the effect of grounding man’s existence in a tangible universe, emphasising the concreteness of the physical world above all, the sole result that the materialist achieved was the final negation of that «wonder-promising Matter» 3.

3 Ibid., I: 8, p. 82.
According to Coleridge, besides this rupture with «outness»\(^4\), or the phenomenal world, this doctrine brought about a more intimate crevice within the very nature of man. Thus, far from retaining the qualities of a harmonious whole, the nodal point of contact between the two worlds of spirit and matter, or the double-sided creature whose existence forms a continuum, in the Renaissance «Great Chain of Being», between the angelic elements and the lower, animal and vegetative forms of life, man must suffer from his own split, imperfect nature which, with the materialistic point of view, is deprived of his inner cohesion and dignity.

Therefore, the whole modern system of metaphysics is considered absurd, «utterly unintelligible» and inconsistent. Coleridge assumes that materialism had far better be called idealism, since it «stript matter of all its material properties, substituted spiritual powers; and when we expected to find body, behold! We had nothing but its ghost! The apparition of a defunct substance!»\(^5\). This standpoint brought about an inescapable and intimate discrepancy between metaphysical truth and empirical truth. In Coleridge’s own words, it introduced «the absolute and essential heterogeneity of the soul as intelligence and the body as matter»\(^6\) which deprived man of his constitutive perfection and coherence as a whole harmonious being.

The poem «Constancy to an Ideal Object» was first published in August 1828 in Coleridge’s Poetical Works, but the date of composition is conceivably around 1825\(^7\), still belonging to the poet’s mature poetic production. And indeed it represents the point of arrival and the maturation of Coleridge’s

---


\(^5\) *Biographia Literaria*, I: 8, p. 83.


\(^7\) J.R. Barth reports the different conjectures about the dating of the poem. For example, J.D. Campbell indicated 1804 as the most probable period of composition. Other critics, instead, following Ernest Hartley Coleridge’s hypotheses, suggested a later date, such as 1826 or even 1825, on the basis of the evidence proved by a letter to J.H. Green hinting, among other things, to a poem «on constancy to the Idea of a beloved Object». See Barth’s article, «Coleridge’s “Constancy to His Ideal Object”», *The Wordsworth Circle*, New York, XIV (1983), pp. 76-80, and *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E.L. Griggs, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1959, vol. V, 11 June 1825, p. 467.
thought, reflecting his conception of the relationship between man and nature, the inner and outer mode of existence, as well as the poet’s fundamental and final ideas about the role of poetry.

Having gained the awareness of the existing gap and profound crevice between the sphere of contingent reality and the subjective standpoint, the poet’s immediate attitude to nature loses the capacity of creative reproduction with the aid of memory and imagination, growing and developing itself into a complaint and regret for the total loss of a reassuring, immutable perspective on the external world. Everything in nature is seen as «veering» or «vanishing», every appearance or object of perception is viewed as fleeting, transitory and deceiving. All the elements are in perpetual motion and in a perennial activity that seems to exclude only the poet, who laments his being «the sole unquiet thing» \(^8\). Man is, then, the sole creature who is excluded from the privilege of having an intimate knowledge of external reality. In particular, the poet is alienated from it, being perfectly aware that his perceptions are nothing but the counterfeit and deceitful «image with a glory round its head» which Coleridge mentions at the end of the poem.

In *The Friend*, Coleridge expressed his conviction that both nature and the human mind must possess a common ground or find a common, inner principle of being, adding that the main and fundamental effort of man must be directed toward the «self-unravelling clue», the discovery of a method enabling him to comprehend «gradually and progressively the relation of each to the other, of each to all, of all to each» \(^9\). He wanted a kind of philosophy with which to respond to the

genial tendency toward, an earnest seeking after, some ground common to the world and to man, therein to find the one principle of permanence and identity, the rock of strength and refuge, to which the soul may cling amid the fleeting surge-like objects of the senses \(^10\).

In this final phase of his thought, Coleridge seemed to have departed from the reliance on both his own poetic and perceptive powers and from the conviction of being capable of grasping, mastering and recreating outer reality with the aid of

---

\(^8\) «Frost At Midnight», l. 16.
imagination. This faculty was once the sole power enabling man to bridge the gap between the two worlds of spirit and matter, mind and nature, those elements which were recognised by Coleridge as the polar forces operating in the universe and constituting the «wondrous whole»\(^{11}\) of the creation. The optimistic certainties of the past and the belief that «in our hearts alone does nature live»\(^{12}\) has been radically transformed into the bitter awareness that the «ideal object», the pure essence of things which was imagined by the poet as the sole intermediary between him and the higher truths, does not definitely exist. In fact, this is the final awakening and reintroduction of the painful dualism of the Coleridgean philosophy, his actual relapsing into the dejected recognition that the human mind cannot hope to fill this huge gap. The «yearning» and «fond» — therefore deceitful — thought is presented, in this poem, as the «only constant in a world of change», an almost vain illusion living «but in the brain», an evanescent and vanishing nothingness, for «not one of all that shining swarm / Will breathe on thee with life-enkindling breath».

Just for a moment, Coleridge’s dualism seems to be overcome and the relation to nature restored with the assertion «Vain repetition! Home and Thou are one» (line 19) that is followed by a natural description which is reminiscent of the atmosphere which was created, for instance, in «Frost at Midnight» or in «This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison»: a peaceful cot, the moon casting its benignant and relieving light over the whole landscape, and, faintly heard from a distance, the song of some unseen and lonely bird.

But this positive moment of the poem does not last long. Deprived of the certainties which were provided by the reassuring and consoling existence of Coleridge’s «ideal object», man is but a creature who is being drifted away by the floating currents of an «Ocean waste and wide», a barren and void dreary immense space, where he is completely abandoned to himself and isolated. He is depicted as the spiritually isolated mariner, surrounded by no signs or symbols of regeneration to be interpreted, as a helmsman whose helm is «mouldering», sitting «mute and pale» without the possibility of holding any kind of control over the external world. He is thus completely

\(^{12}\) «Dejection: An Ode», l. 48.
cut off from *outness* ¹³, from every kind of contact with the external, deprived of symbols of truth, images to conceive or beauties to appreciate, living in a sort of death-like life ¹⁴, the drying up of his poetic creativity as well as of his perceptive powers.

All the senses are here employed in the act of searching for visible and audible signs of such an existence. The conviction, which he borrowed from Schelling, that the act of cognition and of perception depend on the activity of the human mind does not suffice alone to satisfy the poet. Indeed, the awareness that «the truth is universally placed in the coincidence of the thought with the thing, of the representation with the object represented» ¹⁵, does not prevent him from being puzzled and doubtful about whether his visions have an actual counterpart in reality or whether he just lives in a world of phantoms.

But soon there comes a terrible awareness, the realisation that «She is not thou, and only thou art she». The perfect and yearned-after correspondence between thoughts and thinking, between image and reality – which is represented on the structural level with the antistrophic construction of the line – is broken ¹⁶. What is left to the poet is the feeling of being utterly at the mercy of hostile elements, harmless and hopelessly subjected to them, deprived of every power or mastery over nature. The ideal object is depicted as a ghost, a spectre of reality and yet as a presence ailing and tormenting the peace of the lyric voice, who mourns for something which is probably lost forever, or perhaps never existed, except in the mind.

Some critics base the interpretation of this passage upon Coleridge’s own biographical data, explaining the reference to

¹³ «Outness» is the word with which Coleridge indicated the phenomenal world or the substantial reality, and is the title of an essay by O. Barfield, in *What Coleridge Thought*, op. cit., pp. 59-68.

¹⁴ In «Epitaph», which he wrote in November 1833, Coleridge described himself as that «who many a year with toil of breath / Found death in life, may here find life in death [...]> , *Complete Poems*, p. 416.

¹⁵ *Biographia Literaria*, I: 12, p. 152.

¹⁶ The grammatical negation which is encountered within the first hemistich of line 19 corresponds, in the second one, to the adverb «only» which indeed modifies the symmetrical pattern and defeats the expectation of a sort of regularity. The reader, in this way, perceives a gap between the wished-for formal regularity of the sentence and the actual meaning that is conveyed by it.
the female pronoun as a hint to the poet's beloved Sara Hutchinson. However, if this reading is satisfying to a certain extent, it seems but a literal and strongly limiting interpretation, which completely disregards the poem's more important, philosophical and aesthetic implications. Rajan's point of view appears more in tune with them, associating Coleridge's attitude to Renaissance love poems in which the poet lamented the absence of his beloved woman, who was the symbol of the whole poetic experience and of the inevitable conflict between the real and the idealised object. This biographical element could be supported only in the context of the poet's search for a universal reunion of opposite polarities embracing the beloved woman and her ideal counterpart as well as the relationship between thoughts and thinking, image and reality, and, finally, man and nature.

Yet still thou haunt'st me; and though well I see,
She is not thou, and only thou art she,
Still, still as though some dear embodied Good,
Some living Love before my eyes there stood
With answering look a ready ear to lend,
I mourn to thee and say — Ah! loveliest Friend!

(ll. 11-16)

The nature of the cheating and deceitful ideal image is ironically conveyed by means of what Coleridge himself called the «Broken-spectre» experience. In Aids To Reflection, he described it as a «curious phenomenon» occasionally occurring when «the air is filled with fine particles of frozen Snow, constituting an almost invisibly subtle Snow mist, and a person is walking with the Sun behind his back. His shadow is projected, and he sees a figure moving before him with a glory round his head», adding that he had himself «seen it twice» in his lifetime. This event is clearly reminiscent of the Platonic myth of the cave, where the perception of the outer world is

17 J.R. Barth claims that at the root of the whole poem lay the poet's unfulfilled love for Sara. See his «Constancy to His Ideal Object».


indirectly filtered through the interplay of light and shadows conveying and revealing nothing but blurred impressions and indistinct fragments of reality. The dualism is rendered here in terms of a baffling experience, suggesting that the certainties about man’s life and the relationship with outward objects are but the illusions of an «enamoured rustic», the untrustworthy and misleading result of an optical hallucination, mere chimeras.

Coleridge considered the phenomenal world the ultimate repository of the truths of life, the sole means through which man can discover «the originals of the forms presented to him in his own intellect» 20. Nature’s appearances represent the point of arrival of man’s quest, they are «the shadows and reflections of a clear river» over which he, «Narcissus-like, hangs delighted» 21, with the secret wish to participate in their organic inner life, to be reunited with the objective truths that they represent. But yet, this conviction had, to some extent, to co-exist with the awareness that:

We understand Nature just as if, at a distance, we looked at the image of a person in a looking-glass, plainly and fervently discoursing, yet what he uttered we could decipher only by the motion of the lips or by his mien 22.

The external world is then a medium through which man is enabled to gain a privileged insight into his inward self. It is properly a mirror through which he can follow the Socratic injunction to «know himself» and, at the same time, continue his search for hidden symbolic meanings. The image of the mirror is a fairly recurrent one in both Coleridge’s notebooks and his poetry, strongly recalling the perfect frame of correspondences, the parallelism between microcosm and macrocosm, the sphere of the subjective and that of the contingent, man

20 The Friend, in Collected Works, cit., Section the second, essay xi, p. 509.
21 Ibid., p. 509.
22 Anima Poetae, ed. E.H. Coleridge, London, William Heinemann, 1895, p. 232. This is not to be taken as an isolated statement: in «The Destiny of Nations» Coleridge, displaying clear Platonic influences, described the myth of the cave in poetic terms, claiming that we are «in this low world / Placed with our backs to bright reality», in the almost vain hope to learn «the substance from its shadow».
and the natural beings 23. In a notebook entry which he wrote in 1800, Coleridge claimed, quoting from Spinoza, that man’s mind is nothing but a «cracked Looking-glass» 24, expressing thus the need for an interpenetration, a close relationship with «outness» 25, or at least its dim reflections, without which human consciousness cannot reach any kind of knowledge, even less that concerning its own status and existence.

Only indirectly, as a reflection or shadowy appearance, is the external world rendered comprehensible or approachable by the human mind, whose highest aspiration is that of coming into contact with it, even if only for a fleeting glimpse or a brief and transitory moment of vision. And yet, it is still something to crave, toward which the romantic poet feels an ever unsatisfied yearning, for it is the embodiment of the ideal, prelapsarian state of perfection enjoyed by, borrowing Schiller’s definition, naive poets 26.

We can notice, in the following description, the peculiar Coleridgean taste for indefiniteness of outlines, the expression of the insubstantiality of the objects which are being depicted. The lights are suffused, owing to the «wintry dawn» and the weaving «glistening haze», while everything is almost covered with a snow-mist, blurring the edges and boundaries of things and being itself «viewless», neither well-defined nor clearly distinguishable. Moreover, the rustic is described in the act of worshipping the «fair hues» which he perceives before him, unaware of the bitterly ironical fact that he is the actual creator of the whole phenomenon, which is nothing but the dim reflection of a «glory round [his] head».

And art thou nothing? Such thou art, as when
The woodman winding westward up the glen
At wintry dawn, where o’er the sheep-track’s maze
The viewless snow-mist weaves a glist’ning haze,
Sees full before him, gliding without tread,
An image with a glory round its head;

23 K. Coburn, in her essay «Reflections in A Mirror», gives a full account of the importance of the image of the mirror in Coleridge’s thought; the essay is contained in From Sensibility to Romanticism, ed. H. Bloom, New York, Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 415-437.


25 See note 13.

The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues,
Nor knows, he makes the shadow, he pursues!

(ll. 25-32)

These lines convey, in poetic terms, the Coleridgean evaluation of epistemology, and reflect, as Stephen Prickett \(^{27}\) suggests, the problem of creativity, with the annexed issue of the prerogative of idealism over materialism. The fundamental irony of this passage is the fact that, while the rustic, in his ingenuity, is attracted by nature's coloured and yet fleeting appearances, worshipping them with devoutness, he is indeed cheated by the belief that he is cognising something new and separate from himself. He completely ignores that what he sees is but his own reflection modified by the sun-rays passing across the mist. It is, to some extent, the pessimistic radicalisation of the Schellingian idea that «the spirit in all the objects which it views, views only itself» \(^{28}\).

In *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge commented on the effects of this optical phenomenon: «The beholder either recognises it as a projected form of his own being that moves before him with a glory round its head, or recoils from it as a spectre» \(^{29}\). Granted the fact that the huge figure which is seen on the ground is the rustic's own projection, this image could be interpreted as the objectivisation of man's vision, the longed-for creation of an objective counterpart to the subjectivity of the human ego. This is actually the paradoxical nature of the whole question of creativity.

In a close examination of Coleridge's *Notebooks* and descriptive passages of his letters, we can observe how the mist-covered lights and in general the blurred outlines of things served to «emancipate the eye» \(^{30}\) from the grosser thralls of visual despotism. Here, instead, the snow-mist can be considered the correlative of the coloured lenses of the Kantian philosophy, inevitably altering human perception, severing man from the direct and unmediated contact with nature. In Platonic terms, it suggests a deformed, misleading – even though

\(^{28}\) *Biographia Literaria*, I: 12, p. 160.
\(^{29}\) *Aids to Reflection*, p. 227.
strongly coveted – correspondence between the realm of immediate perception and the noumenal ideal.

And indeed the terrible experience of perceiving the inevitable divorce from an indifferent external world is what is put forth in the poem «Limbo» 31. It is a most interesting and puzzling poem which, on the whole, has received scanty treatment by critics and which has been considered as a mere «unfinished curiosity» 32. Edward Kessler defines it as «one of the poet’s grandest metaphors of being» 33; while Deneau, at the end of his close analysis of the text, concludes that, far from displaying a solid coherence and an internal cohesion, the poem is to be considered a «logical failure».

One of the incongruities that has been noticed in the poem is, for instance, the use of a religious terminology out of its proper context. The very idea of «limbo» actually indicates, in the Christian doctrine, either the place where the souls await for their ultimate redemption or the edge or border of hell. But, more in tune with Coleridge’s rather loose use of the term, it may connote also an inescapable prison or place of confinement, and it is for this reason that some critics agree on the fact that here the Coleridgean limbo den is somewhat decontextualised 34 and freed from its major theological implications. However, the introduction of this element is indeed significant, as it appears to be strictly linked to what Thorslev defines as the «open universe» 35, a sort of relapsing into the mechanist world-view, the loss of faith in a coherent and reassuring organic universe and, most of all, the complete loss of identity and security when facing the threat of ultimate annihilation.

---

31 «Limbo» first appeared as part of the Notebooks in April-May 1811 at vol. III, entry 4073, but was then published with abridgements and changes several times until 1834.
34 Deneau, for example, considers it an «un-theological Limbo»: see p. 100.
The sole true Something – This! In Limbo Den
It frightens Ghosts, as here Ghosts frighten men –
Thence cross’d unseiz’d – and shall some fated hour
Be pulveris’d by Demogorgon’s power
And given as poison to annihilate Souls –
Even now it shrinks them – they shrink in as Moles
(Nature’s mute Monks, live Mandrakes of the ground)
Creep back from Light – then listen for its sound; –
See but to dread, and dread they know not why –
The natural Alien of their negative Eye.

(ll. 1-10)

From the very beginning, we are presented an almost apocalyptic setting, where everything is enveloped within a faint, unreal atmosphere that is endangered by complete extinction. The «limbo den» is defined as «the sole true something», a place where the souls are annihilated, from which every creature shrinks with terror and where the «live mandrakes of the ground» – presumably a borrowing from metaphysical poetry to indicate the human beings – try to retract in vain. In the second line we are introduced to the main dichotomy of the poem: the antithetical construction reveals a conceptual separation between «It» – referred to «the sole true something», which is the real, noumenal essence of things – and «men». In between, at the centre of this formal as well as ideal opposition, there are only «ghosts», merely visual and artificial apparitions, which are not, therefore, to be confused or mistaken for reliable and truthful intermediaries.

Man is described in terms of a harmless animal – the mole – which is characteristically deprived of any hold on the external world, moving only tentatively in the open air and living in a world of shadows which is totally void of visual images. Therefore, these half-human beings shrink from light, concentrating only on the «sound» of it – the most abstract of all qualities – and feeling a paralysing «dread» for something which is not in their power to perceive or understand in its

36 The connection to John Donne’s image of the «mandrake root» – see his song «Go and Catch a Falling Star» – seems to be supported by the fact that this fragment was conceived as the final part of the poem «On Donne’s Poetry». Here, Coleridge exercises his metaphysical wit in the description of a flea, which is considered by some critics as the grammatical subject of the verbs which are present in the first lines of «Limbo». See, for instance, M.D. Paley, «Coleridge’s “Limbo” Constellation», Studies in Romanticism, Boston, XXXIV (1995), pp. 189-209.
entirety. Men are not only blind as moles but also «mute Monks», whose capacity to communicate their own experience is therefore hindered. They are completely – morally as well as physically – isolated, just like the speaking voice at the beginning of «This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison» or the ancient Mariner, utterly unable to give vent to all their desperation, or to make the audience aware of their own situation.

The «sole true something» can be here clearly intended as that «ideal object» whose enjoyment is the poet’s principal need. It could be better defined as the «natural Alien of their negative Eye» (line 10), thus assessing the fundamental concept that sense data, especially if they are drawn from barely visual impressions, absolutely do not provide man with any final knowledge about the ideal or the transcendental. Coleridge was, in fact, the man who could claim:

My mind has been habituated to the Vast — & I never regarded my senses in any way as the criteria of my belief. I regulated all my creeds and my conceptions not by my sight — even at that age. [...] Those who have been led to the same truths step by step thro’ the constant testimony of their senses, seem to me to want a sense which I possess — they contemplate nothing but parts [...] and the Universe to them is but a mass of little things».

Here, however, the noumenal essence of the ideal object is felt as «alien», therefore completely detached from man’s life, belonging to «outness» and not capable of being perceived by the negative, blank and «uncons substantial»[37] eye.

The series of negations continue also in the following section, where the «Limbo» is defined as a «strange place» and yet, immediately after, as «not a place». Here the personifications of Time and Space are paradoxically «fettered from flight, with night-mare sense of fleeing», and depicted thus as still and immobile «half-beings», yet striving to escape and assess their «last crepuscular» incomplete existence, before being swallowed up by absolute nothingness. They are, in fact, depicted as bare earthly figures, somewhat harmless, inert and transitory, deprived of any validity.

[37] Coleridge, speaking of the incongruities which he found in the materialistic thought, was puzzled about the incomprehensible fact of how an object from the outside could act upon man’s inner faculties, since, according to him, they are neither «homogeneous» nor «cons substantial» and are, therefore, not likely to meet on any common ground. See Biographia Literaria, I: 8, p. 81.
The personifications of time and space are totally «unmeaning», void of significance, for they are divorced from the contingent world and have therefore no status. They are fleeting in a measureless sea of oblivion and utter negation. In fact, man’s earthly devices with which to control and master concrete reality – the «measuring sands» and the «Dial of the Day» – as Kessler suggests, are completely useless, since they cannot claim any hold on a world mysteriously detached from every reassuring certainty. Every minute particular of this description is conveyed by means of negative expressions, such as «unseiz’d», «soundless», «not marked», «unmeaning», «eyeless», «moveless», «growthless», thus reiterating the principal theme of absence, loss and privation.

But, indeed, the crucial and most impressive part of the whole poem is another recurrence of the mirror effect, which is this time associated with the following striking image of an old blind man.

An Old Man with a steady look sublime,
    That stops his earthly Task to watch the skies;
But he is blind – a Statue hath such eyes; –
    Yet having moonward turn’d his face by chance,
Gazes the orb with moon-like countenance,
With scant white hairs, with foretop bald & high,
He gazes still, – his eyeless Face all Eye; –
    As ’twere an organ full of silent sight,
His whole Face seemeth to rejoice in light!
Lip touching lip, all moveless, bust and limb, –
He seems to gaze at that which seems to gaze on him!

(ll. 20-30)

The viewpoint which is depicted in «Constancy to an Ideal Object» can be considered as the pessimistic version of Coleridge’s belief that man hangs over nature with a Narcissistic feeling, searching in it the final achievement of a heightened self-consciousness. It represents the failure of the poet’s attempt to objectify his own private vision and to communicate this inner experience to a sort of silent listener, as Coleridge

---

38 Lines 16 and 18.
39 Coleridge’s Metaphors of Being, cit., chapter 3.
40 According to Rajan, the addressee of Coleridge’s conversation poems indeed reflects the poet’s search for a sort of «alter ego», «the supplement and completion of the speaking voice». See Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 223.
had tried to do in his former lyric poems. To a certain extent, we can assess that this poem envisages the failed quest for the image in a mirror, the realisation that the «inward eye» of imagination provides man with nothing more than a feeble, dim and discoloured shadow of truth, which is nevertheless overestimated.

It is almost the search for a double self, the quest for a reflection in the mirror which, to some extent, is expected as the completion of human experience. And yet, this sought-for correspondence is ambiguously conveyed through the image of a blind man apparently contemplating the moonlit sky, gazing at «that which seems to gaze at him». At this point, the reader is presented with two possible interpretations. The first is that the poet is describing an impossible relationship between two blind subjects, namely the man, who is compared to an inanimate, «hollow» statue, and the sky. In facing one another, in fact, they reveal their utter indifference and separateness from one another, being merely mechanical mirrors, none of which is self-conscious or aware of another existence apart from its own. The second reading would underline the fact that the whole scene is depicted by the poet who has already lost his characteristic sensibility and is therefore alienated from the poetically inspiring insight into nature: he is in fact unable — just like the reader — to recognise that the man is not effectively blind, or at least not spiritually so. According to Coleridge, the kind of cognition which is obtained through the sole means of experience will inevitably be a partial and limited one. He deplored, in fact, «that Slavery of the Mind to the Eye and the visual Imagination or Fancy under the influence of which the Reasoner must have a picture and mistakes surface for substance» 41, trying in this way to rescue man's cognitive power from the «despotism of the eye» or «strong sensuous influence» 42 which he complains about in Biographia Literaria.

The old man, who is introduced as «Human Time», has a «steady look sublime», perhaps reminiscent of that glittering eye which identified Coleridge's supernatural characters. Yet, he is totally blind. The theme of blindness, either spiritual or actual, is thus reiterated, even if it here acquires a new conno-

42 Biographia Literaria, I: 6, p. 67.
TION. The man is unable to see, but he is depicted in the act of «watching the sky», interrupting his «earthly Task» as if to contemplate the sublime beauties of nature. Immediately, he is made to participate in the natural scenery, as, looking towards the moon, his face seems to «rejoice in light», acquiring a «moon-like countenance». His eyes are that of a statue, but yet «he gazes still», and the paradox of «his eyeless Face all Eye» serves to emphasise the radical difference between the sensuous capacity of seeing and the spiritual insight into the outer world – that assertion of the «power of Feelings over Images» \(^{43}\) which was so dear to Coleridge.

An analogous image of Time as embodied by a blind human figure recurs also in a poem which Coleridge wrote around 1817: «Time, Real and Imaginary» \(^{44}\). Here, the poet allegorically depicted these two figures respectively as a «Sister and a Brother»:

Two lovely children run an endless race,
A sister and a brother!
That far outstripped the other;
Yet ever runs she with reverted face,
And looks and listens for the boy behind:
For he, alas! is blind!
O'er rough and smooth with even step he passed,
And knows not whether he be first or last.

(ll. 4-11)

This poem has been defined as an allegory dealing with the relationship between «transcendence and temporality» \(^{45}\). This strange and yet powerful image of the endless race between the real and the human, or imaginary, temporal sphere is directed to the acknowledgement that the former is not cognisable by means of the scanty tools belonging to man. In fact, the real essence of time, the knowledge of its noumenal being, which is represented by the fleeing sister is the constant aim of the blind figure, and yet, he is totally unable to see it, reach it, and indeed unable to understand whether he is «first or last» in the race. They are, though, strictly linked to each other, as the girl continually looks backward towards the boy: she ap-

\(^{43}\) Notebooks, vol. II, entry 2600.
\(^{44}\) Complete Poems, p. 334.
\(^{45}\) T. RAJAN, Dark Interpreter, cit., p. 255.
pears, to some extent, as his completion, a sort of double, correspondent self, sharing, thus, part of his blindness.

The thematic cluster which is connected with sight is developed through a series of reiterated words and expressions, such as «steady look sublime» \( ^{46} \), «watch the skies», «blind», «such eyes», «gazes», «gazes still», «eyeless face all eye», «sweet sights» and «organ full of silent sight». This last expression synaesthetically fuses the sense of hearing with the visual faculty and conveys the idea of the all-rounded perceptiveness of the man, to be set in clear contrast with the initial portrait of those mute and mole-like human beings. Man, according to Coleridge, in order to reach completeness, must find a way to harmonise all his faculties, since «The eye is not more inappropriate to sound, than the mere understanding to the modes and laws of spiritual existence» \(^{47}\).

The paradox of the blind man’s vision is considered by the narrative voice as a «lovely sight», perhaps ironically underlining the distance between the two points of view: on the one hand, the man’s undisturbed enjoyment of that strange contemplation and, on the other hand, the narrator’s utter loss of his poetic powers. This is perhaps the reason why the man, though clearly able to see and rejoice in the external landscape, is presented as an almost superhuman creature whose peculiar capabilities are recognised neither by the narrator, nor by the reader \(^{48}\).

The poet feels himself to be no longer in the privileged situation of a person endowed with a special, imaginative mode of perception. He seems to surrender to this awareness, placing himself on the other side of the poetic experience and admitting in this way his own inability to interact with external reality. What is even worse, he is indirectly declaring that the

\(^{46}\) This expression immediately follows the verb «looks like» (line 19), so that the phonetic juxtaposition of these two terms having different meanings as and the same form as implicitly supports the idea that the capacity to see itself provides man with nothing more than a tentative and hypothetical knowledge of a supposed truth.

\(^{47}\) The Statesman’s Manual, p. 44.

\(^{48}\) Personally, I am inclined to disagree with the comments on this poem which tend to overlook its symbolic implications. Deneau, for instance, claims that the poem is «faulty in coherence» and, in particular, referring to the lines 20-30, he adds that they convey a description which is «more fanciful than meaningful». See his «Coleridge's "Limbo": A "Riddling Tale"?», p. 102.
experience of another man – presumably a sort of blind bard 49 – is, at this point, made incomprehensible to him. Just as in «Constancy to an Ideal Object», where the poet-narrator manifested his ironic detachment from the «naïve» visual experience of the simple and humble countryman, here, he is almost forced to admit, even if in an indirect way, his impossibility to partake in the blind man’s vision. The only difference lies in the fact that, this time, he is the observer of an incomprehensible and yet seemingly intimate relationship with the natural scenery.

The interaction between the man and the moon is emblematic in that it represents the incommunicability of these two self-standing and separate worlds, the impossible point of contact between microcosm and macrocosm and the total and irreversible breach separating man from a universe which is alien and unknowable. The man gazing at the landscape is indeed mistaken, completely absorbed in an unconscious self-deception. And the disillusioned narrator is perfectly aware of it, as he bitterly and ironically comments: «No such sweet sights does Limbo Den immure», emphasising once again that the place which has been described is surrounded by «the mere horror of blank Naught-at-all», allowing for no such refreshing and blissful visions. Although the souls may be entranced and fatally entranced by this dream-like or nightmare-like place, to the speaking voice, it is but a «Purgatory curse», a «spirit-jail secure», a fallen condition – referred to both artistic creativity and sense-perception – whence man cannot hope to escape.

From the time in which he wrote «Dejection: An Ode», Coleridge’s increasing concern was that of finding a way to awaken his mind to the spiritual vision which had so strongly characterised his early poetry. As early as 1802, in his verse «Letter to Sara Hutchinson», he lamented that he had lost the particular sensibility with which he once looked at the beauties of nature: «and still I gaze – & with how blank an eye!», arriving at the conclusion that he «may not hope from outward Forms to win / The Passion & the Life whose Fountains are

49 In Coleridge’s Notebooks, the concept of blindness is a fairly recurrent one. See, for instance, entries 572, 573, 589, 709 and Anima Poetae, p. 270. In the poem «Fancy in Nubibus, or The Poet in the Clouds» (1818), Coleridge depicted the blind bard of the Chian strand «listening to the tide, with closed sight», l. 10, Complete Poems, p. 365.
within!» 50. This is nothing more that the Coleridgean awareness that in the act of perception there is an interplay of subject and object and that neither can ever exist without the other 51. The sole difference is that, in his development as a poet and philosopher, Coleridge endowed this aspect with an implicitly negative and paradoxical connotation. Pondering over its implications, this view of man’s perceptive powers and of poetic creativity acquired a sense of unreliability, hindering the desired objectivity and increasingly resembling a definitely private, incommunicable and purely solipsistic expression.

In the years of his early poetic production, Coleridge was convinced that «poetry without egotism» was «comparatively uninteresting» 52, thus almost blindly relying on his own mind’s capacity of setting itself at the centre of its own visionary world. Even though when he tried, to some extent, to communicate his private visions and the results of his imaginative powers, he still chose what Rajan considers a «silent listener» as the receiver of his inward dreams and memories – we may think of the baby in the cradle of «Frost At Midnight», or of the implicit and totally passive addressee of «This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison». He actually remained, in this way, within the sphere of his own intellectual solipsism and spiritual isolation. In the long run, this internal disposition and poetical attitude was inevitably to produce a sort of creative scepticism and a radical doubt about the real consistence of his own poetic productions, about the sought-for and yet illusory objectivity of his fanciful creations. The result of all this was the metaphorical division of the poet’s self into two, together with the ironical realisation that his own «art» is merely the wondrous, phantasmagorial and mirage-like spectre much ingenuously worshipped by a naive rustic.

The image of the mirror – in all its forms, from the snow-mist to the surface of water or ice to the frosty window-panes – is, at this point, endowed with the special connotation expressing the failure of the «conversation» between eye and

51 In Biographia Literaria. Coleridge claims that «all knowledge rests on the coincidence of an object with a subject» (I: 12, p. 152), directly borrowing Schelling’s assertion that «alles Wissen beruht auf der Übereinstimmung eines Objectiven mit einem Subjectiven». See SCHELLING’s System, cit., p. 339.
object. This aspect is so eloquently exemplified in «Limbo» by
the silent and reciprocal – and therefore actually impossible –
reflection between the blind man and the moon, each of them
self-enclosed within their own impenetrable, «unconsustantial»
and hopelessly unrelated worlds. The theme of reflection is also
present, with slight variations, in «To Two Sisters» 53 and in
«The Pang More Sharp Than All». In the latter poem, the
speaking voice bemoans the loss of «Hope’s last and dearest»
son, but still painfully retains the «magic image of the magic
Child», who, imprisoned in a magic mirror, or «World of
Glass», is deemed «To live and yearn and languish incomplete», 
forever severed from his own reflection, from his own other
half.

In a few of his late poems, Coleridge seemed to abandon
the «natural» diction which had so much appealed to him in
his early youth. He seems to adopt, therefore, that kind of
«glare and glitter of a perpetual, yet broken and heterogeneous
imagery», or rather that «amphibious something, made up, half
of image, and half of abstract meaning» 54 which he had so
strongly criticised in eighteenth-century diction. In «Constancy
to an Ideal Object», we have noticed the personifications of
Thought and the Hours – that Human Time which is to reap-
pear in «Limbo». In the final part of the poem, the long
yearned-after idea or subjective vision is depicted by means of
a long, sustained simile which is introduced by the classical,
standard expression «as when» (line 28). The same happens in
«Time: Real and Imaginary» and in «The Pang More Sharp
Than All» 55, both of them bearing the subtitle «An Allegory».

The metaphorical, immediate participation of language – and
of its addressee – in the poet’s vision is, in this way, forever
lost. The poet himself becomes aware of the increasing crevice
which separates him from objective reality, and which, further-
more, severs his own abstractions and subjective descriptions
from universal validity. The power of words is felt as vanish-
ing, and the poet surrenders to the awareness that his person-
al, immediate associations of words and images, his capacity of

53 This poem first appeared in 1807, but then it was abridged and pub-
lished again in 1843.


55 «Time, Real and Imaginary» was first published in 1817, while «The
Pang More Sharp Than All» is to be dated in 1834.
«naming», has no fixed and universal counterpart in what is felt, to this point, as an alien world. This changed attitude to poetry and language seems to point out that the poet’s message is no longer to be conveyed by means of implicit statements or figures of speech, based on the fact that the common ground linking narrator and reader is broken. While the *Conversation Poems* relied in the power of poetry to communicate the lyric voice’s feelings to a silent auditor, the last poems present no such figure, no naive addressee to partake of the poet’s vision, and therefore, no poetic confidence in the power of words and of poetry itself.

Coleridge’s faith in the immediate correspondence between thoughts and things is finally destroyed. The poet has abandoned the metaphorical use of language, a literary mode which, on the whole, reveals the confidence in the capacity of words to reproduce and to give birth to a new reality. As Paul De Man points out, «the metaphor is not the combination of two entities or experiences more or less deliberately linked together, but one single and particular experience: that of origination».  

The shaping power of imagination has lost the capacity of the creative act, the power to frame and order its own poetic world through language. Once abandoned by the demiurgic might which is strictly connected to the act of naming, the poet has to content himself with the indirect linking of the objective and the subjective. Let us have a final glance, again, at the Coleridgean definition of allegory as contra-distinguished from symbolic approach:

Now an Allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from object of the senses; [...] On the other hand, a symbol, [...] while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is representative.

In the light of this assertion, therefore, the allegorical lan-

---


57 Consider also the following assertion, which illustrates at best the present discussion: «A Poet’s *Heart & Intellect* should be combined, intimately combined and fused with the great appearances in Nature & not merely held in solution & loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal Similes».  

596
guage is definitely considered a mode of expression which is empty, void of any universal validity. What is even worse, it reflects, on a formal level, the mature poetic attitude of Coleridge's last poems: namely, the surrendering of the poet to the intimate, radical and unsurmountable gap between «thoughts and thinking», image and reality, the object and its ideal.

Northrop Frye has pointed out that «in Romanticism the main direction of the quest of identity tends increasingly to be downward and inward, toward a hidden basis or ground of identity between man and nature» 58. This reconciliation of opposites was exactly Coleridge's constant intent throughout his whole life, ranging from his philosophical ideas and speculations to his poetic and lyric production, showing in both cases his inclination towards the overcoming of every kind of dualism or dichotomy.

Then, from this point of view, Coleridgean poetics appears as a coherent whole endowed with a good deal of internal cohesion, rather than the inevitable and irreversible decay of his youthful and powerfully visionary attitude to poetry and nature. A number of critics have laid the stress on Coleridge's «myriad-mindedness» 59 as the cause of his own philosophical inconsistency. They pointed out the fact that he actually drew, at times even heavily, from heterogeneous and often irreconcilable sources, achieving what has been defined a «baffling amalgam» 60 of contrasting theories. This attitude gained him the reputation of a mere «compiler» who merely reports other thinkers’ ideas, as they were borrowed almost — according to those critics 61 — at random and plagiarised in order to frame a personal philosophic system.

And yet, even if the question of plagiarism has been thoroughly settled and confirmed, we must admit that Coleridge's thought is characterised by the achievement of a great deal of originality, even if it was composed by a number of borrowings

58 Quoted by H. Bloom in his essay «The Internalization of Quest-Romance», in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, cit., p. 10.
59 This expression was first used by Coleridge himself when speaking of Shakespeare, and only afterwards did it become a definition that a number of critics have attached to him. See, for example, H. House, *Coleridge*, Clark Lectures 1951-2; London, Rupert Hart Davis, 1953, repr. 1969, p. 34.
60 S. Prickett, *Coleridge and Wordsworth*, cit., p. 77.
more or less coherently – as for what regards the strict adherence to the original sources in their entirety – assembled. In *Biographia Literaria*, as if to clear exactly this point, he claimed: «I regard truth as a divine ventriloquist: I care not from whose mouth the sounds are supposed to proceed, if only the words are audible and intelligible» 62.

As a philosopher, he had tried, from his early speculations, to operate an almost impossible unification between the materialistic and the idealistic standpoint. He aimed at the achievement of a higher kind of philosophy with which to restore the lost harmony between the «heart» and the «head», the totally self-centered radical idealism and the deterministic and utterly blind materialism. He searched for a common ground with which to make compatible the mechanical conception of the mind, with the vitalistic and egotistical view, which attributed the whole subsistence of outward reality to the activity of the «I» and to human consciousness. The typical Coleridgean concept of the mind, then, began to be conceived as a blend of two contrasting standpoints, namely as the interpenetration of an active and a passive stage, of consciousness and unconsciousness, a peculiar middle ground between mechanism and organism.

Imagination, in the broader sense of the term, was thus conceived as a complex entity which was divided into at least three levels. Each of them constituted a successive stage in the process of emancipation from the sphere of the contingent, presenting each a peculiar «mode» of operation. Thus the nature of this paramount faculty of the mind ranged from the merely mechanical fancy, dealing with «fixities and definities» 63, to the more autonomous and unrestrained secondary imagination. The latter was defined as that poetic and creative faculty whose prerogative was to melt and transcend the images of intellect, therefore pointing to the achievement of a higher synthesis between objective and subjective truth. The whole question of imagination was directed towards the identification of what Coleridge called the *tertium aliquid*, or a middle ground between «outness» and inwardness, the power of co-adunation, or *In-Eins-Bildung*, or the capacity of forming «the many into one» 64. His principal tenet and, if we may consider

62 *Biographia Literaria*, I: 9, p. 95.
64 The power of *Einbildungskraft*, or *In-Eins-Bildung* implies, according
it so, his philosophic – as well as his poetic – programme originated from the awareness that «to reconcile is truly the work of the inspired»  

In his early supernatural poetry, he gave vent to and indeed displayed all his imaginative and originally creative power, moulding a totally far-fetched and fanciful world laying no claim to truthfulness or morality. He raised an utterly inward-looking and fantastic universe to be grasped only by means of that «willing suspension of disbelief for the moment»  which alone could serve as a bridge between the narrator and the addressee, between the poet and his reader.

However, in his Conversation Poems, Coleridge, as if increasingly aware of the ever-growing crevice between objective truth and subjective vision, evidently tried to build up a sort of bridge between the two issues, adopting a dialogue form which alone would enable a sort of communication between the poet’s ego and his audience. In these poems then, his main aim was that of rendering his private vision in objective terms and, with the aid of memory and recollection, recreating a kind of internal landscape, an intimate blend of imagination and reality, self-filtered elements and natural truths. He produced a kind of poetry in which, through the mediation of memory, it was difficult to distinguish between imagination and perception, the object and its image, and between recollected past and the poetically inspired and recreating present. The poet’s yearning for the denied landscape – as in «This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison» – arises out of his actual impossibility of contemplation, from his actual dissociation and severance from its beauties and forms. Soon this nostalgic urge leads to the consciousness’ mnemonic efforts of recreation of his transcen-

to Coleridge, in its very definition, a reconciliation of opposites, a yoking together of two separate spheres such as the contingent on the one hand and the ideally subjective on the other hand. It is the skill to represent artificially what in nature is immediately present, to reunite what in nature remains forever undivided. And Coleridge, in a notebook entry of 1813, wrote in this regard: «How excellently the German Einbildungskraft expresses this prime & loftiest Faculty, the power of co-adunation, the faculty that forms the many into one, in eins Bildung, Eisenoplasys or esenoplasic Power» [...] Fantasy, or the Mmrorment, [...] – repeating simply, or by transposition – & again, involuntarily (as in dreams) or by an act of the will. Coleridge’s Anima Poetae, p. 236.

65 Anima Poetae, p. 81.
66 Biographia Literaria, II: 14, p. 179.
dent, ideal counterpart, still remaining, to some extent, the echo of the poet’s solitary being.

As De Man points out, «the existence of the poetic image is itself a sign of divine absence, and the conscious use of poetic imagery an admission of this absence» \(^{67}\). This distrust of the power of language as a medium to grasp the real essence of noumenal or ideal reality brings about the utter scepticism in the objective validity of the poetic utterance, which is thus considered as nothing more than the solipsistic reflection of the insulated ego.

And this outlook seems indeed the principal conclusion at which the mature Coleridge arrived in his later poetic production. Toward the end of his life — therefore, long after the composition of the poems which characterised his so-called *annus mirabilis* — Coleridge seemed to be ultimately aware of this paradoxical nature of the poetic utterance, which, in asserting, at the same time denied. In «Limbo», he eloquently expressed this divorce and insoluble dichotomy by means of a sort of non-description: he namely depicted a setting, a place which is not a place, with which he superbly conveyed, in definitely negative terms, a sense of utter loss, privation and complete absence.

A most illuminating passage which resumes the whole point about Coleridge’s maturation, as far as his relationship with outer reality is concerned, is to be found in a letter to James Gillman \(^{68}\). It attests the poet’s awareness of the endless strife taking place between the mind and nature, which are here described as two «rival artists, potent magicians» trying restlessly to «turn the other into Canvas to paint on, Clay to mould or Cabinet to contain». Coleridge was aware, at this point, that the control which the mind seems to hold over external reality was a definitely transient one. He went on to claim that «For a while the Mind seems to have the better in the contest, and makes of Nature what it likes»: the transforming and transcending of the contingent forms in order to detect secret correspondences and meanings provides the mind only with the illusion of having achieved a mastery over them. And, eventual-

\(^{67}\) *Paul De Man*, «Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image, cit., p. 69.

\(^{68}\) Letter to James Gillman, 9 October 1825, in *Collected Letters*, vol. IV, pp. 496-7.
ly, the poet is actually seized by the terrible and yet inescapable awareness that:

Alas! alas! Nature [...] is sure to get the better of Lady Mind in the long run, and to take her revenge too – transforms our To Day into a Canvas dead-colored to receive the dull featureless Portrait of Yesterday; not alone turns the mimic Mind, [...] into clay, but leaves it such a clay, to cast dumps or bullets in; and lastly [...] she mocks the mind with it's own metaphors, metamorphosing the Memory into a lignum vitae Escrutoire to keep [...] Outlines that had never been filled up.

ABSTRACT
Coleridge's late poetry seems to depart from the reliance on both his own poetic and perceptive powers and from his early conviction of being capable of grasping, mastering and recreating outer reality with the aid of imagination. In «Constancy to An Ideal Object», the certainties of the past and the belief that «in our hearts alone does nature live» is radically transformed into the bitter awareness that the «ideal object», the pure essence and truth of things which was formerly conceived as the sole intermediary between thought and reality, is nothing but a ghost and an optical hallucination. This standpoint is, to some extent, the pessimistic radicalisation of the Schellingian idea that «the spirit in all the objects which it views, views only itself». Coleridge acknowledged thus the paradoxical nature of the poetic utterance, which, in asserting, at the same time denied. In «Limbo», this insoluble dichotomy is superbly conveyed by means of a non-description, expressing a sense of utter loss, privation and complete absence.

KEY WORDS
Coleridge, late poetry. Image and reality. Artistic creation.