MOTIF OF QUEST FOR SELF

Quest for self is a recurrent motif in the poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge which were written in the later years of his life. Coleridge, in this period of life felt a kind of alienation from the self. This motif recurrently appears in the poems like “Human Life,” “Self Knowledge,” “Time, Real and Imaginary,” “Limbo” “The Friend,” “Phantom or Fact,” “Work without Hope,” and “Duty surviving Self-love,” “The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree,” and “Love’s Apparition and Evanishment.” Coleridge found that his belief in ‘Self’, an essential non-personal being, abstracted from outward circumstances and even from personal vices or virtues, was corroborated by his own psychological experience in dreams and meditation. As Jung says:

The self is not only the centre but also the whole circumference which embraces both conscious and unconscious; it is the centre of this totality, just as the ego is the centre of the conscious mind. The experience of the self is archetypal, and portrayed in dreams and visions by many and varied images, all of which may be called archetypes of the self. (Fordham 64)

Coleridge believed that “true being is not contemplatable in the forms of time and space” (Coleridge, H.N. 320), and yet as a poet he was compelled to find images for his earthly existence from which true Being could emerge. To represent his life he accurately, he had to mingle the true and the false, the world he lived in and the one imagined for himself. His being was sometimes “blind and stagnant” and sometime illumined by a renewing light from within. The ultimate metaphor for this condition occurs in his sublime poem “Limbo” in which time and space are being transcended. In “Time, Real and Imaginary” the poet attempts to create a clear allegory for two “states” of Being, represented by a sister and a brother who are running a race. The title of the poem indicates that the contemplative poet is confronting a situation in which “extremes meet” and his conjunction acts as a sign directing us to look beyond
the seeming nostalgia and sentimentality of the subject matter towards its metaphoric significance. Coleridge says in the poem:

On the wide level of a mountain’s head,
(I knew not where, but ’twas some faery place)
Their pinions, ostrich-like, for sails out-spread,
Two lovely children run an endless race,
A sister and a brother!

This far outstripp’d the other;
Yet ever runs she with reverted face,
And looks and listens for the boy behind;
For he, alas! Is blind!
Ov’r rough and smooth with even step he passed,
And knows not whether he be first or last. (Coleridge, E.H. 420)

In an earlier version of “Time, Real and Imaginary,” Coleridge’s allegory is explicit: “a sort of Emblem ’Tis of Hope and Time.” Hope is represented by the sister who runs ahead looking backward; Time is the blind brother who runs but cannot realise any direction. (Whalley 17) Coleridge, when came to revise the poem for *Sibbyline Leaves*, he realised that Hope should look forward, not backward and that in spite of blindness one can have direction and strive towards ultimate Being. Coleridge added a note: “by imaginary Time, I meant the state of a school boy’s mind when on return to school he projects his being in his day dreams and lives in his next holidays, six months hence; and this is contrasted with real Time.” (Coleridge, E.H. 419)

Coleridge would have agreed with Eliot that “to be conscious is not to be in time” but also that “only through time is time conquered” (Kessler 85). The poet’s imagination must be capable of looking backward and forward in order to avoid being trapped in an isolated present. The poet dislocates himself and his readers by creating some “faery place,” some Limbo, where races are never won because they are endless, but where, blind to time and space and possessed of inward light, we may move freely, independent of the natural world. Since Coleridge’s own divided self is the ultimate
subject of his poem, no single illustrative metaphor could represent his “reality,” and hence his poem, like ideal Being itself, provides only a possibility of unity.

Coleridge’s “two states of Being” seem essential to each other; they depend on one another for definition. The poet claimed to have loved Sara Hutchinson “in prospect, in retrospect” (Kessler 86), but what he often endured was the “negative Being” resulting from a present in which he enjoyed no love object: “despondent objectless manhood.” (Kessler 86) In this troubled state a condition found in many poems, most notably “Dejection: an Ode,” he remains passive, his outer world a blank. The retrospective vision of sister figure can only comprehend things made not things in the making. By only looking backward, potential power from within is thwarted and life becomes a series of completed but discontinuous moments. With her face reverted, the girl seems to be trapped by the phantoms of time and space, by appearances and by her own physical senses: she “looks” and “listens” for what is past. Unlike her brother who follows, she is limited, for, as Coleridge wrote, “whatever is presented to our senses (to the outward senses in Space, and to the inner sense in Time) is contemplated and apprehended, as it appears to us, not as it is in itself.” (Synder 99) If she is supposed to embody “Time real,” she represents a partial conception of reality, despite her human sympathy for her brother. She seems to lack a guiding “idea” of Hope that evidently provides her brother with his goal, even when that goal cannot be verified by the senses. Her feeling may be like one that Coleridge described for himself: “one blank Feeling, one blank idealess Feeling.” (Griggs 991)

The other state of Being, embodied in the blind boy, we might call existential Being. The boy’s “joyously active youth” resembles the ever-seeking poet who uses his imagination to create a “reality” that the backward-looking understanding cannot conceive of. His goal, because it is not situated in time and space, allows him the freedom to be and the strength to disregard what Coleridge called the “clockwork” of the eighteenth century. By identifying the blind boy with creating nature, Coleridge is able to turn his abstraction of time into a metaphor, even a symbol, whereby he can affirm his own potential for self-realisation. As he wrote, time is a symbol of “the Self-affirmance as the Unity” and space is a symbol of “the Self-affirmedness as the Omneity” (Griggs 768). What the youth “knows not” may be simply the “blank”
phenomenal world and he needs no signposts to tell him that “the stream of time is continuous as Life and a symbol of Eternity, in as much as the Past and the Future are virtually contained in the Present” (White 29). In his commentary on “Time, Real and Imaginary,” the poet unites his blind boy with an energised nature. As in common in Coleridge, participles indicate the motion that the poet felt was a synthesis of time and space, and without which time and space are “mere abstractions” (Griggs 775). Coleridge may be ironically suggesting that it is the girl who joins those people for whom Being is “an alien of which they know not . . . the very words that convey it are as sounds in an unknown language, or as the vision of heaven and earth expanded by the rising sun, which falls but as warmth on the eye-lids of the blind” (Rooke 515).

The boy, despite his blindness, or perhaps because of it, moves without apparent difficulty, and his impulsive action may suggest that he possesses “Hope” and thus “fullness of aim in any period.” Although the boy “knows not” the ways of the world, he acts as if an experience beyond the reaches of the understanding: “I know not where.” Being is in this world, but not of it. Coleridge, in later years in another poem “The Improvisatore” tells his young listeners to cultivate a mind that:

> While it feels the beautiful and the excellent in the beloved as its own and by right of love appropriates it, can call Goodness its Playfellow; and dares make sport of time and infirmity, while, in the person of a thousand foldly endeared partner, we feel for aged Virtue the caressing fondness that belongs to the Innocence of childhood, and repeat the same attentions and tender courtesies which had been dictated by the same affection to the same object when attired in feminine loveliness or in manly beauty. (Coleridge, E.H. 465)

The pursuit of an actual object (a person existing in space and time) must be replaced by that of an ideal object, “virtue,” that is emphatically in the person. Agape has replaced Eros. One can “make sport of time and infirmity” only when one is moving beyond them. Coleridge wishes to merge thought and Being, but like Kierkegaard after him, he realises that he must exist in time, with only “the process of becoming.”
Time real and time imaginary, like thought and feeling, or motive and impulse, should be one, but such unity was beyond the reach of the poet’s metaphors. In order to rationalise his loss of youth and innocence, Coleridge had ended the first version of “Youth and Age” by declaring:

Life is but thought: so think I will
That Youth and I are house-mates still.

(Coleridge, E.H. 440)

But the poet could not “will” this Phantom reasoning permanently; almost a decade later he returns to his poem and defines his temporal existence as a sad process of “tedious taking-leave.” (Coleridge, E.H. 440) Likewise, “Time, Real and Imaginary” is unable successfully to reduce human life to ideas about life. The poet can not choose between his “two different states of Being” without denying one part of himself, one aspect of reality; for “negative reality” was also felt powerfully by Coleridge. The brother and the sister are both in motion, indicating again that Coleridge’s personal Being arises from the dynamic relationship between opposites. The poet’s use of “sense” suggests some ultimate definition that includes both what we know through sense perception and what we know through inner feeling, the blind boy’s feeling that escapes “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.” (Coburn The Philosophical Letters 434) Coleridge’s struggle with words as things and words as thoughts could not be ended by a choice between opposites, but by an act in time that is not bound by time:

And like a flower that coils forth from a ruin,
I feel and seek the light I can not see! (Coleridge, E.H. 324)

The power that “coils forth” from nature does so also in man: we have the capability of feeling and seeking. But the poet caught between two states of Being, with a language that both presents and represents must endure contradiction in order to point toward a divine reason that is “aloof from time and space” (Raysor 198). He believed that all ideas concerning eternity could only be expressed because of our limited understanding through “two contradictory positions.” And he distinguished eternity in
the “negative sense as the mere absence of succession,” from eternity as God. (Coleridge, H.N. 394)

The consciousness of Being is absent from the thinking process described in “Human Life,” which begins in academic speculation and ends in suicidal despair. Coleridge’s belief in a Supreme Being was evident in his love for the human Being. As he wrote to his friend Poole, “Love so deep & so domesticated with the whole Being, as mine was to you, can never cease to be” (Griggs 435). Coleridge envisioned human life as a forward-moving stream, continuous in spite of occasional eddies. Man’s “natural” mind can define life only by deducing it from appearances, but the poet believes that nature provides only a dead end, that value cannot be derived from experience or as Eliot says, there is “only a limited value/ In the knowledge derived from experience.” (Eliot 125) This limited human understanding, which Coleridge recognises as “the source and faculty of words,” (Coburn The Philosophical Letters 403) is doomed to contradiction whenever it seeks to investigate “means” in the hope of finding an “end.” To see human life as a “surplus of Nature’s dread activity” is to deprive man of his consciousness and his will to act. Coleridge use of “dread” to describe nature’s act reveals his obsessive fear of being identified with matter. Death can end natural existence but it cannot end life, for, as his poem implicitly states, “the breath” is not “Life itself.” The poet brings to his poem the presumption of permanent Being. If not, we will be captivated by the poem’s Phantom appearances. Coleridge surely has a “motive” in denying man his continuity. The thought that Being ceases with the death of the body produces a poem of total gloom. The poet allows his “negative faith” (Shawcross 107) to lower him from “tendency to self-contempt, a sense of the utter disproportionateness of all, I can call me, to the promises of the Gospel, this is my sorest temptation.” (Griggs 573)

This poem proceeds from its statement of doubt to accumulate a series of meaningless actions, “Phantom purposes” that allow Being to be trapped by contradiction (“Thy being’s being is contradiction”), and thus by despair. Human life is identified with natural appearances, a “brief flash” or a “summer-gust” that must eventually subside into darkness and stasis. Coleridge’s entire poem laments the separation of experience from its meaning, laments that things can “mean but
themselves.” The despair expressed in “human Life,” seems to be a despair that serves an eventual joyful affirmation. The poet is like the chrysalis that, through suffering, discards its Phantom, material form because this form is ultimately valueless, “these costless shadows of thy shadowy self.” (Kessler 75)

Coleridge could imagine discontinuity in life in his dark hours even wish not to exist, but he never doubted his need for permanent Being. He refused to be a Phantom “Image of Image, Ghost of Ghostly Elf, “or a passive creature that nature “formed with restless hands unconsciously.” (Coleridge, E.H. 425) Coleridge believed in “joy” even when he could bring it into his day-to-day life and he found no value in natural man, considering him a form without content. His question, “Why rejoices/Thy heart with hollow joy for hollow good?” (Coleridge, E.H. 425) contains its implicit answer: that there is a joy that passes all understanding and it must be sought through the “Universal Consciousness” just as Coleridge’s purpose is achieved by means of “purposeless” man.

The poem “Human Life” embodies an act of anticipating ultimate Being. The poem shows what is happening now to every sick soul who is trapped in Phantom nature and alienated from Being. Coleridge presents a fragmented life and confronts a present and private dread, with no certainty of escape.

In “Limbo” the poet dispenses with allegory, with the “Similitudes or Allegories” and creates a purely symbolic work, one whose relationship of images is made meaningful through “passion or universal logic” and not through “the logic of grammar.” (Raysor 163) Limbo is one of the poet’s grandest metaphors of Being and it ultimately has little to do with the Catholic “notions,” as he called them, of Limbo and Purgatory. Coleridge compared the mind to a kaleidoscope that can bring symmetry to various shapes provided by the past. The form or pattern is produced by the kaleidoscope, not by the fragmentary materials it contains. “And be assured that the time will come,” he prophesies, “when the particular knowledges themselves taken separately from the form, in which the mind arranges them . . . will appear to you of not much greater comparative Value than the fragments of glass.” (Griggs 258)

In “Limbo” Coleridge enters the poet’s reverie, different from either dreaming or waking consciousness and revitalises an old metaphor for his two states of Being
that are not to be unified in time and space. The surface fragmentation of “Limbo” is essential in order for the poet to point toward his ulterior Being. True Being appears when God’s light, shining in and through nature, marries the light that comes from within man. Such a rare Unity of Being is what Coleridge had imagined for his beloved Sara, as we saw in the poem “Phantom”:

She, she herself, and only she,
Shone through her body visibly. (Coleridge, E.H. 393)

At one with God and Nature, man possesses integrated vision. In the words of St. Matthew: “the light of thine is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.” But in “Limbo” man’s Being is divided; the speaker is alienated from man, nature and God, but he intensely feels his need for all three.

Coleridge began to use blindness as a metaphor for both spiritual deprivation and potential spiritual fulfilment when he wrote to a friend: “I have, at times, experienced such an extinction of Light in my mind, I have been so forsaken by all the forms and colourings of Existence, as if the organs of Life had been dried up; as if only simple Being remained, blind and stagnant!” (Griggs 470) This “simple Being” was, in other words, the blindness of “negative Being,” and it appears in numerous poems and notebook entries. It stands in marked contrast with the poet’s positive use of blindness in a very late concerning the death of a friend: “in Christ only did he build a hope yea, he blessed the emptiness, that made him capable of his Lord’s fullness, gloried in the Blindness that was receptive of his Master’s Light.” (Griggs 922) Coleridge’s “negative capability” enabled the poet to conceive of a composite “form” called “Limbo,” a metaphor that could encompass both blindness as ignorance and blindness as a willed means of finding God. The blind old man in Coleridge’s poem is no serene image of assured sainthood, no embodiment of pure faith because Coleridge does not allow himself God like omniscience. The line “He seems to gaze at that which seems to gaze on him!” is accepting of man’s inability to know spiritual truth with certainty. The poet’s “seeming” likewise acknowledges the limitations of poetic language, as in Milton’s line on Death: “what seem’d his head / The likeness of a Kingly Crown had on.” (Coleridge, E.H 672)
Coleridge never, however, claimed to justify God’s ways; he only suffered them. He recognised his own inadequacy: he is that “half-nothing” and yet “something,” a body moving toward decay and a soul struggling to find God, within the “ghost light” of Limbo. The poet knew that the imagination could seize an arbitrary control over time and space, whereas “the reason is aloof from time and space.” (Raysor 198) Being neither pure reason nor debased understanding, the imagination was capable of finding a shape to express his personal feeling of alienation. As Lacan says when the subject enters in the symbolic stage, the feeling of oneness with the world is lost because there is no access to the preverbal self. Human subject lives ever after the feeling of lacking something. This loss of preverbal self results in desire. The desire can not be completely fulfilled but can only be substituted temporarily with symbolic means. The child feels alienated from his ‘Real’ self. ‘Real’ returns again and again but it can not be grasped or conceptualised. It is:

That which is lacking in the symbolic order, the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached but never grasped:
the umbilical cord of the symbolic. (Lacan 263)

The imagination could embrace opposing states of Being, even if it could not perfectly marry them. Coleridge’s divided self is exemplified by the moles shrinking from the light and the old man welcoming it, by both “growthless” thought and the creative light. Conflicts that the poet could sometimes resolve intellectually in his prose writings remained to be dealt within that zone where logical argument loses its force and where two opposites can be equally true. Coleridge came to believe that his son Hartley, the free spirit capable of integrated Being, the “one life,” had come to a bad end as a result of his “shrinking from all things connected with painful associations.” (Griggs 119) But the poet knew that his son’s weakness was also his own: guilt remained even when the mind indicated that there was no cause for guilt. Like the Mariner’s killing of the Albatross, Coleridge’s act of creating “Limbo” is perhaps best explained as an impulse rather than a motive and may resemble the experience described in a notebook entry of 1812:
One of the strangest and most painful Peculiarities of my Nature (unless others have the same, & like me, hide it from the same inexplicable feeling of causeless shame & sense of a sort of guilt, joined with the apprehension of being feared and shrunk from as a something transnatural) I will here record and my Motive or rather Impulse to do this, seems to myself an effort to eloiq and alienate it from the dark Abyt of my own Being by a visual Outness & not the wish for others to see it. (Coburn *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 416)

“Limbo,” which begins with light-hearted satire and ends in metaphysical terror. Coleridge described materialism as a philosophy that “fleeing from inward alarm, tries to shelter itself in outward contempt - that is at once folly and a stumbling block to the partisans of a crass and sensual materialism. But even though he could ridicule blind materialists, he knew what it was like to be deprived of inner light and he lived with a deep-seated fear that without it he would be helplessly vulnerable to that Nothingness from without.

Whereas materialism could be aptly represented by the earthly moles, Coleridge’s surrogate in the poem, the old man, needed to be liberated from the restrictions of time and space and from the material world and its images. Coleridge describes the old man as blind and bald, with a high forehead and scanty hair; the old man’s actions can be reported as he watches and turns but his “look sublime” can be achieved only by a “Moon-like Countenance.” He is nearing eternity and becoming, as it were, a Yeatsian statue. He seems almost “out of nature,” motionless, a gaze fixed on the absolute. Here Coleridge was probably remembering an actual blind man he met on a walking trip who found its way into Coleridge’s poem.

In order to achieve some ideal image, a Yeatsian symbol of permanence, Coleridge would have had to deny his own idea of organic and spiritual evolution of becoming and accept at least a poetic dogma, if not a religious one. The old man stops performing his earthly tasks, but nevertheless, he is not yet the statue Coleridge
compares him to. Having ended his restless search for final answers, he achieves a state of Being in which physical passivity and spiritual activity are combined. His mind is independent of the phenomenal world and his soul is like the one described in the *Biographia Literaria*: “steady and collected in its pure Act of inward adoration to the great I AM. (Shawcross 218) The impulse that turns the old man’s face toward heaven is not governed by the rational process of his understanding but by the grace of his imagination, which has its own logic. (Eliot 10) In “Limbo” the souls are deprived of both darkness and light. But the blind old man, likewise denied both light and darkness, sees what he can be. He embodies Coleridge’s definition of reality: “the Real exists only as the Identity of the actual and the potential.” (Fausset 126)

However, such an identity can only be attained through an imaginative projection and Limbo probably remains the single most accurate metaphor for Coleridge’s own poetic life, a life lived on the border between the extremes of materialism and mysticism. The form and meaning of Coleridge’s poem can only be considered a unified whole, for Coleridge could not rest with a transcendent vision in which “extremes meet” never to divide again. In his “Dejection: an Ode” the poet evoked joy and conferred it on the absent Sara Hutchinson, leaving for himself only the consciousness of joy. In his later poem “Limbo,” still seeking a pure joy, he summons it up for another surrogate in a poem; but in his sad honesty, he provides his projected self with only the possibility of joy: “His whole face seemth to rejoice in Light.” (Kessler 104)

Coleridge could not allow himself to worship external light, whether from sun and moon. Light could serve only as a metaphor to suggest the power that must originate within the human soul: “from the soul itself must issue forth/ A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud.” (Dejection: an Ode) Even though the sun does not appear directly in “Limbo,” nevertheless issues the light from which the materialist moles shrink, creates the reflected light that the old man faces and provides the power that defines even the “antipathist of light” in hell. Coleridge could accept the “sun” as the traditional metaphor for God’s power, the source of growth and self-realisation, but he was ever alert to the danger of identifying God with His creation. What we see is a gift: “Man knows God only by revelation from God as we see the sun by his own
Light.” (Coburn *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 209) The moon, however, as an emblem of the human imagination, could project the false light of illusion, of self-deception and of the unreality in dreams: “there is nothing in it that can be called tangible—nothing which presents motives or shapes itself to human imperfections. Allow the light: it is moonlight and moths float about in it!” (Coburn *The Philosophical Lectures* 226) For Coleridge the life of nature is not nature’s Being, just as man’s Being is not his earthly existence. But Coleridge was not a man confidently radiating sunlight in his eternal moment; he was compelled by his own doubts and his “reflective” nature to choose the moon as a metaphor for his uncompleted Being. The poet saw Christian faith as:

> A deep and inward conviction, which is as the moon to us; and like the moon with all its massy shadows and deceptive gleams, it yet lights us on our way, poor travellers as we are and benighted pilgrims. With all its spots and changes and temporary eclipses, with all its vain halos and bedimming vapors, it yet reflects the light that is to rise on us, which even now is rising, though intercepted from our immediate view by the mountains that enclose and frown over the vale of our mortal life. (Rooke 97)

In “Limbo,” time and space are “unmeaning” because they, like the sundial, are divorced from the world that provides their limited power. The beauty of the line “As Moon-light on the Dial of the Day” is equalled by its Horatian usefulness in representing all of man’s measuring devices, the tools of his ineffectual human understanding that can not solve the mystery of Being. The sundial recalls the Ancient Mariner’s “steady weathercock” that was “steeped in silentness” by the moon and was surely no guide through rough interior weather. Within the realm of Coleridge’s potent, highly suggestive sun-moon imagery, the sundial becomes more than a casual image. The poet had written that “the Conscience, I say, bears the same relation to God, as an accurate Time-piece bears to Sun.” (Rooke 150) The sun’s light is absent from “Limbo,” except as the power that the moles acknowledge but fear to confront
directly. Coleridge wrote: “what if the natives of the Sun should refuse to avail themselves of the Light, which had called the Worlds around them out of Death and Darkness. . .?” (Griggs 773) Completely in the dark, they would suffer “negative Being,” unable to imagine joy. But Coleridge’s “ghosts” in “Limbo” are conscious of their alienation and even though they are preoccupied by the possibility of total annihilation, their “horror of blank Nought-at-all” suggests their potential for realising an allied emotion, hope and not fear. The moonlight illuminating “Limbo” is a ghost light that, like Coleridge’s own existence in time, can be endured because there is another light, “which even now is rising.” (Kessler 106)

The contrast between the moles, who shun the light and the old man, who welcomes it; the opposition of the sun and the moon; and the insufficiency of time and space when viewed against the background of eternity are demonstrations of Coleridge’s characteristic use of polarities to help describe both man and nature. But in quest for ultimate Being he often found language inadequate. Definitions and distinctions created by his understanding often acted as “toys” (Griggs 267) diverting him from his goal. Coleridge’s struggle with language was a struggle to reach and express Being. His shift from “privation” to “negation” in the manuscript of “Limbo,” as we shall see, reveals a poet seeking a name for his unique anguish.

In physical life Coleridge discovered a continuous process at work, that of opposites meeting in order to divide and begin moving toward another reconciliation. While writing “Limbo,” the poet had to embark upon a metaphysical consideration of Being in terms of the fixed opposites of heaven and hell. Coleridge knew that his personal religious experience in any form imposed from without and language itself was such a form:

Religion, in its widest sense, signifies the act and habit of reverencing THE INVISIBLE, as the highest both in ourselves and in nature. To this the sense and their immediate objects are to be made subservient, the one as its organs, the other as its exponents and as such therefore, having on their own account no true value, because of no inherent worth. They are a
language, in short and taken independently of their representative function, from words they become mere empty sounds. (Rooke 440)

These “empty sounds” must be transformed into what Coleridge in “Frost at Midnight” called “articulate sounds of things to come.” The images in “limbo” become vital when they begin the painful process of changing into abstractions; they are not designed to please us, but to declare the difficulty of Being. All the inhabitants of Coleridge’s poem except the old man are paralysed by their fear of the unknown. In this surrealistic creation, Coleridge acknowledges his own despair, but his thinking is neither “lurid” nor “growthless.” Even though he said as a young man, “I have rather made up my mind that I am a mere apparition, a naked Spirit” (Griggs 295), he finds, through poetry, that one can discover Being in the world, in the movement from negation to affirmation. His poem dramatically signifies the act and habit reverencing THE INVISIBLE.” (Kessler 108)

In his urge to unify opposites, Coleridge sought to eliminate any distinction between time and space and to experience God as life, that is, as movement or energy. But he recognised that because time and space are only language “terms” and consequently of “no inherent worth” in themselves they could not be meaningfully applied to the idea of the Supreme Being. But because God can only be contemplated in separation from Him, the poet must serve his sentence in Limbo and point toward higher synthesis. Unity can only be effected by means of opposites, but the opposite of Coleridge’s “Limbo” is a power in man that is either residual or potential. Neither mere images nor finally mere abstractions can be “taken independently of their representative function”:

That both time and space are mere abstractions I am well aware; but I know with equal certainty that what is expressed by them as the identity of both is the highest reality, and the root of all power, the power to suffer as well as the power to act. (Watson 93)

The “beauty-making power” that he lamented losing in “Dejection: An Ode” has been transformed into a greater power, the power of Being. Coleridge’s tolerance of these
Limbo images of his own incomplete self demonstrates that what the poet sought was not an “objective correlative” but a “subjective correlative.” He saw all “modern poetry” as “a fleeting away of external things, the mind or subject greater than the object, the reflective character predominant.” (Raysor 164) The act of Being is not confined by time or space, unlike physical acts with their finite ends. Coleridge’s “Limbo” reveals a subject creating itself.

If Coleridge’s heaven required the unity of time and space, his concept of hell demanded their annihilation. He wished to share with Jeremy Taylor the belief that hell is only the “separation from God’s presence,” but he could not avoid formulating intellectually what he had experienced in the course of his own temporal history: the negation of power, rather than the satanic use of power for negative ends. The Godhead must enjoy what the poet’s life could only suffer. Coleridge combines moral seriousness with a logician’s play in his annotation to Taylor:

> Why, if hell be a state and not a mere place, and a particular state; its meaning must common sense be a state of the worst (sort). If then there be a mere poena damni (i.e. not so blest as some others may be) this is a different state in genre from the poena sensus ergo, not Hell ergo rather, a third state, or else Heaven. For every angel must be in it, than whom another Angel is happier i.e. negatively damned, tho’ positively very happy. (Taylor 191)

Coleridge confesses that like Taylor he is inclined to the belief that the only immortality exists in heaven and that hell is simply privation or absence, but he goes back to the Bible and finds “so many texts against it!” Physical torment was a cruel punishment that Coleridge’s tender nature could not bear to ascribe to the creator of the “one life.” Coleridge could not imagine a God capable of hatred, just as he could endure his own alienation from his wife or Southey or Wordsworth but could never actively hate them.

The poet’s struggle to define hell is evident in the manuscript of “Limbo,” in which “privation” and “negation” are interchanged in order to indicate some
progressive evolution. The Limbo souls, deprived of God, reveal Coleridge’s own divided Being: separation from his physical love object, Sara Hutchinson, is only a diminutive counterpart to his separation from God, the ultimate love object. Coleridge’s poetic and spiritual evolution proves complementary. Progressing from natural imagery to self-made imagery, the poet sought ultimately to experience God without images. Actually in “Limbo” there is quest for the ‘Real.’ But as Lacan says ‘Real’ is ‘the impossible’ to say. Language is unable to represent it as words are unable to grasp it. Language is a world of signs and signifiers which have no stability. To further explain it:

The ‘Real’ turns up in man’s relation to desired objects. It makes its appearance because the signifying system is revealed as inadequate: the desired object is never what one thinks one desires. What one imagines is always the primordial lost object, the union with the mother. (Jafferson 153)

In his search for “true Being” Coleridge drew many metaphors from “the Being of Nature,” but perhaps his most difficult struggle came when his imagination sent him beyond time and space into the medium of “Limbo.” Poetry had for a short time effected a marriage with nature, but when that failed, poetry was still on hand to help him reach beyond nature. Poetic form, even poetic imagery, became subservient to a higher reality. As he wrote in a notebook: “Form is factitious Being, and Thinking is the Process. Imagination the Laboratory, in which Thought elaborates Essence into Existence.” (Coburn The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge 315)

In Coleridge’s later poems, the poet is moving away from love for natural objects (such as Sara Hutchinson or his own Phantom self) towards an objectless love, uniting the various aspects of temporal love. But as thinking is not the same as a thought and the process of imagining cannot be equated with an imagined poem, so abstracting is not to be confused with mere abstractions, the lifeless forms of a dogmatic mind. In his quest for Being, Coleridge found that he needed a new and more “substantial” language that could correspond with his “substantial” self. He needed to create a poetry of abstraction and make “Love” into a “mode of Being.”
(Griggs 304) Abstraction became Coleridge’s chief “instrument” of Being (Rooks 521), a means of passing beyond the Phantom world and its Things.

In one of his important later poems, “Constancy to an Ideal Object,” Coleridge used his experience of a phenomenon world called the “Broken-Spectre” as an introduction to his meditation on the difficulty of reconciling things and thoughts, a subject with its desired object. (Perkin 22) Numerous accounts have been given serve well: “this refers to a curious phenomenon which occurs occasionally when the air is filled with fine particles of frozen snow constituting an almost invisible subtle snow-mist and a person walking with the Sun behind his back. His shadow is projected and he sees a figure moving before him with a glory round its head. I myself have seen it twice. (Coleridge, H.N 220) Coleridge wanted to prove that the spectre was either real or fictive, but because the phenomenon evoked his most intimate doubts about Being, any resolution of the conflict that he could make seemed arbitrary, a “toy” of the understanding. Even his poetic treatment of the Spectre in “Constancy to an Ideal Object” reached no satisfying conclusion: many things could be perceived, but the mystery of Being remained behind in the mind that conceives.

Coleridge carried the vision of the Broken-Spectre into other situations, for it was a demonstration of the mind’s power to transfigure actuality and such power was one of his paramount ideas. In a Methodist chapel, with the sun shining on a wall, he noticed how “each spectator opposite would see his own shadow with a heavenly glory, & all the rest dark and rayless.” (Kessler 127) This glory must have suggested to him the light of Being. Although he had only momentary glimpses of that light, he knew that the poet’s role was to resurrect it from dead forms of every kind. As we have seen with his poems “Phantom” and “Apologia Pro Vita Sua,” Coleridge aspired to liberate Being from the “accidents” of temporal existence, to emancipate his eyes from “the black shapeless accidents of size.” (Kessler 128) He believed that the physical world apprehended through sense lacks true substance and that images are undependable representative of Being, but the poet does not consequently escape into abstraction. The Broken-Spectre caused one of those meetings of opposites that unsettles the understanding and prepares the way for Being. In “Constancy to an Ideal Object,” Coleridge says:
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 glis’ning haze,
Sees full before him, gliding without tread,
An image with a glory round its head;
The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues,
Nor knows he makes the shadow, he pursues! (25-32)

The poet’s final question, followed by an “answer” that is truly an extended simile, leads the reader to believe that a categorical choice has been made: man is either a phantom or a fact, a deluded dreamer or an impoverished realist. But the questions and doubts of the haunted mind behind the poem remain and Coleridge’s dictum that we should distinguish but not divide is useful here in considering mind and world. Reflection, with its dual meaning of meditation and self-mirroring, may lead to death, but when reflection focuses on an ideal object a reconciliation of opposites is possible and a new identity can be conceived. By distinguishing the subject from its desired object, the poet makes of his desire an object for meditation: he begins to know himself. Coleridge’s ending does not provide a statement that resolves the conflict between mere abstraction, a “yearning Thought! That liv’st but in the brain,” (4) and the élan vital outside that yearns to transcend the limitations of matter. Both would unite in the “one life,” just as the poet and the thinker seek to unite Being that transcends restricting labels. Owen Barfield alerts us to a difficulty that continually faces some readers of Coleridge: “it is the inexorable presupposition in the minds of his readers, that whatever is not a thing must be an abstraction, which, more than perhaps anything else, has prevented his system from being understood.” (Barfield 24) A thought that “liv’st in brain” is only half alive and a natural object without a governing consciousness is an “idol of sense,” a Phantom.

Coleridge’s love for Sara Hutchinson that could not find its “outness” in physical expression is clearly the underlying impulse that brings about the philosophical debate over how and what one can know in “Constancy to an Ideal Object.” As a poet, Coleridge is committed to the ideal, abstract world; his ideal
object is the thought of Sara rather than her physical presence, it is love and not love’s embodiment. The personal speech directed to the woman, in which the poet expresses his need for a particular “English home, and thee,” (18) fits into a larger, general context in which the speaker must find his consolation, if not his ultimate fulfilment. For Coleridge, that context is more poetic than philosophical, for as he said in the Biographia Literaria: “it is not less an essential mark of true genius, that its sensibility is excited by any other cause more powerfully than by its own personal interests; for this plain reason, that the man of genius lives most in the ideal world, in which the present is still constituted by the future or the past.” (Shawcross 30) Despite the record of his own failed ideal objects, Coleridge refused to accept his Being as a series of disparate, unrelated moments. “Without memory,” he wrote, “there can be no hope, the Present is a phantom known only by its pining, if it do not breathe the vital air of the Future: and what is the Future, but the Image of the Past projected on the mist of the Unknown and seen with a glory round its head.” (Griggs 266) Coleridge’s memory would not permit him to live in Blake’s “eternal sunrise”: he needed to recover what he had lost. Past, Present and Future blend or modify each other but the poet must continually project himself into eternity. Memory produces knowledge and, in fact, is the “Great guide of Things to come, Sole Presence of Things Past.” (Coburn The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge 308) However, Coleridge’s frequent inability to progress in time, to see through nature to the Being within objects, was the cause of his recurring despair.

Like his other late poems of dejection, “Constancy to an Ideal Object” presents the poet in a stagnant condition. When he invokes the “Hours” at the beginning of the poem, he denies the possibility of a future; several lines later, thought cannot generate “life-enkindling breath”; and finally, unable to imagine a world without Sara, the poet, like his Mariner, is in a “becalmed bark” upon “an ocean waste and wide.” He must, through poetry, create an abstraction or an “object” that can inspire movement, a “fond Thought” that can replace the unattainable fond Sara. Coleridge cannot find satisfaction within nature. The woman who exists in a world of change must be redefined, given a life beyond “Nature’s range,” a life made visible in art, which Coleridge defined as “a middle quality between a thought and a thing . .
.the union and reconciliation of that which is nature with that which is exclusively human." (Shawcross 254) By remaking Sara, Coleridge was recreating himself. By means of the poet’s enlivening imagination, love becomes “living Love” and good becomes “embodied Good.” But here the poet’s doubts will not allow him the pure apprehension of Being he enjoyed in “Phantom.” Haunted by the thought of Sara, he is clearly aware that “She is not thou, and only thou art she.” (25) Only through symbol and paradox (“She is not thou, and only thou art she”) can the poet begin the process of transformation that leads to Being. Abstractions as well as objects live for Coleridge, and he acknowledges this life even when he denies its attainability, just as he accepts the existence of God although he often cannot reach Him through the language of prayer. Coleridge tries to objectify himself by means of another person, as he did with the old man in “Limbo.” He would convert Sara into a living idea, neither a generalisation drawn from phenomenon nor a cold Cartesian abstraction. (Kessler 133) The Thought is clearly not Sara, but the only Sara that Coleridge can enjoy is in Thought. His frustration furthers self-realisation; his feeling takes form through his “act and power of abstracting the thoughts and images from their original cause and of reflecting on them with less and less reference to the individual suffering that had been their first subject.” (Shedd 435)

In “Constancy to an Ideal Object” the poet is perhaps ambivalent, praising innocence while ridiculing the superstitious Woodman who, unaware that art and nature can collaborate, seems to worship a Phantom that is neither God nor external nature. He resembles other men who tend “to break and scatter the one divine and invisible life of nature into countless idols of the sense.” (Rooke 518) Coleridge at once believes that no picture can stand for a living idea, but nevertheless the phenomenon must be seen before it can be understood. Knowledge grows out of a continuum, for “without seeing, we should never know (i.e. know ourselves to have known) that we had Eyes.” (Griggs 97) Striving for a higher consciousness, Coleridge may be using the Woodman to embody that aspect of himself which was tempted to dream beneath the mystic’s “Cloud of Unknowing.”

Coleridge’s question, “And art thou nothing?” is certainly not rhetorical, despite the subsequent lines that seem to offer the clarifying answer and meaning. The
poet questions not only the self he has created but, moreover, the work of art in which that self momentarily appears. The whole poem, rather than the concluding assertion alone, provides the poet’s answer. He has attempted to take a person, a noun, a thing existing in space and time, a Sara, and by means of thought to transform her into an ideal object worthy of adoration: “the only constant in a world of change.” Coleridge was continually suspended between thoughts and things. His own opposing selves can meet in a poem, but one cannot fully dominate the other. Coleridge links with a conjunction the two abstractions Hope and Despair, but they are not unified, for they embody Coleridge’s two realities of feeling, his positive and negative Being. Only in death will their conflict be ended. Coleridge’s ideal object, finally, must not be regarded as an entity but as an act, an act of consciousness that joins opposites without cancelling them out. In contrast to the stagnant, passive Being represented by the “mute” and “pale” Helmsman who cannot progress toward any meaning goal, the Woodman at the end of the poem is filled with Hope and the final lines of the poem register an activity, an energy that makes thought vital, the woodman is winding his way through nature as its invisible power “weaves” the haze that separates us from ultimate meaning. The image the Woodman sees is also “gliding” and while celebrating his objects he “pursues” it.

Like “Frost at Midnight,” whose ending unites created and creating nature, “Constancy to an Ideal Object” unites the meditative mind and its object of meditation. Through the “life-enkindling” power of the poet’s imagination, his abstractions are reclaimed from pure thought and returned to the life that fostered them. Coleridge speculated that the mind is a verb and the body a substantive, but in his poem he created a remarkable combination, the “Verb substantive.” (Coburn The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge 441) The act of seeing in itself cannot be a means of discovering Being. In nature we may find only shapeless accidents and in mind only counterfeits. Art, however, can bring thoughts and things experience itself into a temporary form, a shape for Being. In a work of art, the imaginative viewer can discover both himself and his transfigured self:

In the plays of Shakespeare every man sees himself, without knowing that he does so; as in some of the
phenomenon of nature, in the mist of the mountain the traveller beholds his own figure, but the glory round the head distinguishes it from a mere vulgar copy. In traversing the Brocken, in the north of Germany at sunrise, the brilliant beams are shot askance, and you see before you a being of gigantic proportions, and of such elevated dignity, that you only know it to be yourself by similarity of action. In the same way, near Messina, natural forms, at determined distances, are represented on an invisible mist, not as they really exist, but dressed in all the prismatic colours of the imagination. So in Shakespeare: every form is true, everything has reality for its foundation; we can all recognise the truth but we see it decorated with such hues of beauty and magnified to such proportions of grandeur that while we know also how much it has been refined and exalted by the poet. (Raysor 163)

Perhaps the rustic Woodman in approaching either nature or Shakespeare “sees himself, without knowing that he does so,” but Coleridge’s quotation ends with a kind of waking knowledge that extends beyond self-deception: “while we know the figure, we know also how much it has been refined and exalted by the poet.” Abstraction may be what Coleridge calls an “instrument” of Being, but abstract knowledge is a falsehood when “we think ourselves as separated beings, and place the nature in antithesis to the mind, as object to subject, thing to thought, death to life. This is abstract knowledge, or the science of the mere understanding.” (Rooke 520) Being, like nature itself, is forever about to be born. Opposites serve to demonstrate their interdependence. The ideal object is finally not an object, but a subject that has been realised: “the I is not an object, but a self-affirmed act and if it will not believe itself, what or whom can it believe?” (Coburn The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge 435)
Coleridge’s another poem “Work Without Hope” can be interpreted as a quest for self, the ultimate Being. In the prose introduction by Coleridge, we find that from the beginning Coleridge avoided the confessional mode by creating another speaker for his lines: the Biblical Jacob. Coleridge’s love for Sara, transposed into Jacob’s love for Leah, must be elevated to a higher realm of abstraction where the subject and the object are subsumed by Love itself, by absolute Being. Although the opening stanza of the poem seems to suggest that the phenomenal world was a possible “object” for the poet, the longer version reveals that, on the contrary, nature works to prevent self-realisation. Earlier, Coleridge’s two images, an Eolian harp and its breeze, represented two complementary forces that produced harmonious music. In his later years, however, nature became an antagonist. We can never say of Coleridge what was said of Wordsworth, that “the life of the mind was wholly projected upon external nature.” (Perkin 59) Coleridge says:

My Faith (say I: I and my Faith are one)
Hung, as a Mirror there! And face to face
(For nothing else there was, between or near)
One Sister Mirror hid the dreary Wall.
But That is broke! And with that bright Compeer
I lost my Object and my inmost All
Faith in the Faith of THE ALONE MOST DEAR! (29-35)

In Coleridge’s letter he announces that he has been thinking about a “self-conscious Looking-glass,” an emblem of the subject-object duality that he must engage before he can begin to move toward ideal Being. As he further speculates on the possibility of “two such Looking-glasses fronting, each seeing the other in itself and itself in the other.” (Kessler 141) We realise that the natural world can now serve only as background for the process of self-realisation: the self must ultimately confront itself. As Lacan postulates that in mirror phase, the child is confronted with an image that the world gives back to it. It discovers itself as an identity, as whole, coherent being. But this image, is like the image that is seen in an actual mirror which is a distortion of the real.
The child experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates the child’s own body, and the persons and things around him. (Lacan 1)

It is false recognition or identity. The world is the mirror which gives us imaginary sense of ourselves. Our identity is constructed in interaction with others, i.e., what is outside of us. This identity is subject to change. It can never be fixed or stable or coherent. Because the world which constructs our identity is a process in which changes are inevitable and it never leads to completion, so is our identity. Our identity is constructed under the ‘gaze’ of the ‘other’. We realise that we are different from others, though we resemble them also. Thus our identity is relational which allows for difference.

Coleridge avoided using nature as a reflecting pool and his use of artificial “mirror” within nature as a means of abstracting himself in order to define that Love which can “outlive all change save a change with regard to itself.” The world with its images spreads a spider web that blocks out the light of Being, but the poet’s abstracting mind, when “Thought becomes image,” (18) can create an equally inhospitable, windowless house that “excludes the day.” (26) In contrast to the active, “stirring” earth in the published version of the poem, the original version contains no appealing images of physical nature; in fact, nature prevents man from finding his own “reflex.” Because Coleridge had exposed the world as a Phantom, he was unwilling to “value its Shews,” (16) its misleading consolations. His idea of Love, so intimately related to his idea of Being, could not find expression very long in objects in time and space.

For Coleridge, Jacob the persona in the poem probably represented the virtue of Constancy to an Ideal Object. His labours in the temporal world acquired their value through an abstraction, Hope, and his very life embodied the abstraction, since union with his physical love object was perpetually postponed. An ideal object is beyond time and space. Coleridge felt that as a man Jacob was being tested and punished by God. The poet’s frustration and pain seemed inexplicable until he
realised that they might be essential to his evolution toward Being, that “our misery may be a merciful mode of recalling us from our Self-chosen Exile.” (Coburn *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 434) Both Coleridge and Jacob learned the power of Hope. In the poem, Coleridge acknowledges his own weakness, his tendency toward self-pity and demonstrates through Jacob’s ordeal that patience is an act and Hope a way of life.

The poem “Work Without Hope” testifies to the poet’s desire to find a new definition that would urge him toward absolute Being: “the absolute is neither singly that which affirms, nor that which is affirmed; but the identity and living copula of both.” (Rooke 521) The loss of faith in one of God’s creatures should never destroy man’s faith in God, for He can make “The whole one Self! Self, that no alien knows!” (Coleridge, E.H. 115) If Jacob detected “Symptoms of Alienations” in Rachel as he came close to attaining her, he never appears to have deserted his “inmost All.” (37) He exemplifies Coleridge’s idea of genius: “genius to live in the universal, to know no self but that which is reflected not only from the faces of all around us, our fellow creatures, but reflected from the flowers, the trees, the beasts, yea from the very surface of the waters and the sands of the desert. A man of genius finds a reflex of himself, were it only in the mystery of Being.”(Coburn *The Philosophical Lectures* 179)

Many of Coleridge’s later poems act as evidence that one can work without hope. At the time of Coleridge’s break with Sara Hutchinson in 1810, Coleridge was devastated unable even to imagine that she was not the “Bodiless substance” and the “unborrowed self” he was looking for. Having identified his self with his projected self and his love with the physical object of love, Coleridge’s precarious sense of Being had been shattered. Like a widower, he became distraught, unable to rid himself of that self-indulgence which prevents elf-consciousness:

I have experience’d

The worst, the World can wreak on me; the worst
That can make Life indifferent, yet disturb
With whisper’d Discontents the dying prayer.
I have beheld the whole of all, wherein
My heart had any interest in this Life,
To be disrent and torn from off my Hopes,
That nothing now is left. Why then live

(Coburn *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 379)

By making Sara “the whole of all” Coleridge had short circuited his developing line of self-evolution: a line that should have progressed from the personal to the Absolute self. By falsely equating Being with the body, which is its confining form, he had almost committed the sin of confounding the Creator with His creation. The poet, with his mirror object shattered, seems incapable of resurrecting Being from the body as he had done in the poem “Phantom.” The despair that he experienced was his counterfeit, for as Kierkegaard wrote:

Despair is not the loss of the beloved, that is misfortune, pain, suffering; but despair is the lack of the eternal. (Kierkegaard 34)

Coleridge raged against the limitations of phenomenal form, but he had already written his way out of true despair, even before the tragic experience. But this experience had authenticated the words: “and now, that I am alone, & utterly hopeless for myself yet still I love & more strongly than ever feel that Conscience, or the Duty of Love, is the Proof of continuing, as it is the Cause & Condition of existing, Consciousness.” (Coburn *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 323) In the end, Coleridge discovered that he was not alone and that he had mistaken Phantom objects for real ones. Perhaps all artists use the world and its inhabitants as materials out of which they create a new consciousness, a new awareness of Being:

... strange and generous self! there can only be such a self by a complete divestment of all that men call self, of all that can make it either practically to others, or consciously to the individual himself, different from the human race in its ideal. Such self is but a perpetual religion, an inalienable acknowledgement of God, the sole basis and ground
of being. In this sense, how can I love God, and not love myself, as far as it is of God? (Raysor 115)

After his break with Sara, Coleridge never again demanded so much from an earthly love object, but he continued to maintain his belief that “feeling is not objectless.” Even though he could picture himself as an Arab that “some Caravan had left behind” in a desert, he nevertheless knew that “the very duty must for ever keep alive feelings the appropriate objects of which are indeed in another world.” (Coleridge, E.H. 292)

In his constancy to ideal Being and to the human language from which poets must attempt to create temporary forms that declare Being, Coleridge turned often in his later years to the abstraction “Duty” to help him keep his desire from stagnating as a result of his unsatisfactory love objects.

His poem “Duty Surviving Self-Love” may at first seem to be mere sentimental moralising, a preacher’s stock phraseology, but here the poet does not escape from experience into abstraction, he enlists abstraction to give form to the suffering and disappointment that accompany earthly activity. Never to have risked the self, never to have brought Love onto the field of action, was to have remained at a lower level of evolution toward Being, content with what he called a “filagree religion.” (Raysor 350) Coleridge in the poem which is soliloquy says:

Return thy radiance or absorb it quite:
And though thou notest from thy safe recess
Old Friends burn dim, like lamps in noisome air,
Love them for what they are; nor love them less,
Because to thee they are not what they were. (9-13)

Coleridge’s “Soliloquy” has, by definition, no responding voice, but it seems to be spoken to Coleridge who had sometimes sought a “safe recess” from the bombardments of life by accepting conventional forms. Ironically the poem demonstrates that there can be no sanctuary from suffering, no anodyne to relieve the pain of consciousness. The “old Friends” decay in a decaying world is a fact of existence but not of Being and the poet can see things as they are by means of “the gift of distance without detachment,” a gift that Coleridge said characterised Genius. (Coburn The Philosophical Lectures 97) The “Duty” that survives the failure and
death of phenomenal objects is a rejuvenating power. The poet has endured his “blank lot” and learned, like Blake’s Little Black Boy, “to bear the beams of love.” Experience has taught him in evolving a new form for Love, a spiritual shining that encompasses all physical objects but does not depend on them for self-realisation. Coleridge faces his disappointment in Wordsworth, among others, starkly and unsentimentally in the line “Old Friends burn dim, like lamps in noisome air,” but Duty lives on to direct the poet toward Being itself. Coleridge suffered through a long history of conflicts, but in the end the struggle strengthened his will. He wrote that “the spirit (originally the identity of object and subject) must in some sense dissolve this identity, in order to be conscious of it. But this implies an act, and it follows therefore that intelligence or self-consciousness is impossible, except by and in a will.” (Shawcross 185) The word Duty does not simply designate proper social behaviour or our obligation to others; it first signifies an obligation to the self our need to distinguish a self existing in time (what we were) and the Being that is only revealed through time (what we are).

Coleridge’s “Duty Surviving Self-Love” was written after Wordsworth’s “Ode to Duty,” mirrors a mind undergoing the difficult struggle for Being and resisting the temptation to despair. Without naming Duty, Coleridge presents Duty in action defining a life. By the end of his poem, Duty has educated the poet to a Love that transcends self-love and shines on even when the world provides no object for love. Duty frees the poet from his need for temporal satisfaction and prepares him for the light that is to come. In contrast, Wordsworth considers duty to be a restraining power than a liberating one. According to Wordsworth, Love and Joy are not present realities related to Duty but are only possible in some future realm. In the present world, the Joy of Being must be restrained. For Coleridge, Joy and Love are not simply future possibilities, even though he considered them more available to others than to himself. Duty instructs Coleridge to “shine on!” to declare Being and not repress it. His Duty is to make Love a present, self-affirming act. Coleridge’s “Soliloquy” presents that Duty must turn into active love and includes his existential weakness: his loneliness, his need for people, his self-pity, his bitterness toward a “noisome” world. Wordsworth wrote that “the education of man, and above all a
Christian, is the education of duty, which is most forcibly taught by the business and concerns of life.” (Hartman 278) Hartman’s reference to the poet’s “dignified self-consciousness” may suggest a less dynamic self than Coleridge was willing to accept. Coleridge’s ultimate aim was to perfect self-love and Duty must resist the established forms of Christianity and language so that it can promote self-evolution. Duty as an abstraction must be constantly rejuvenated, for Coleridge questioned “whether words as the already organised Materials of the higher Organic Life... may not after a given period, become effete?” (Synder 138)

Coleridge’s search for his “abstract self” led him to some happy collaboration with the physical world, to some poems in which he imagined an integrated self, fully at home in the world. Duty juxtaposed to the integrated self in the same poem, we discover a self that can not project onto nature, which becomes a tabula rasa, a desert, or the “blank lot and hard to bear.” (Kessler 152) Doubt was essential to Coleridge’s belief and he often had to imagine away the world’s abundant consolations in order to discover inner Being.

Coleridge’s short poem “Self-Knowledge” exposes the futile workings of the human “Understanding,” which cannot solve the riddle of existence. That is why the epigraph for Coleridge’s poem is “From Heaven descend: Know Thyself.” Coleridge wrote:

And heaven-sprung and is this the prime
Say, canst thou make thyself? Learn first that trade;
Happy thou mayst know what thyself had made.
What hast thou, Man, that thou dar’st call thine own?
What is there in thee, Man, that can be known?
Dark fluxion, all unfixable by thought,
A phantom dim of past and future wrought,
Vain sister of the worm - life, death, soul, clod
Ignore thyself, and strive to know thy God! (1-9)

The human “Understanding” has to be outgrown, since its very function is to deal with man in relation to external nature and it ends up as in Coleridge’s poem, “Human Life,” viewing him only as a “Surplus of Nature’s dread activity.” Any object as an
object was to Coleridge “dead, fixed, incapable in itself of any action, and necessarily finite.” (Shawcross 185) Although he had mirrored the “tragic dance” of life and death, the riddle of existence, in his poems, he had resisted efforts to “fix” his Being in time and space or within a poem.

The directive provided by the adage “know thyself” is one more platitude, consisting of words that are meaningless until the poet tests their validity within his own life. As in “Human Life,” Coleridge gives the Understanding free rein so that it can expose its own inadequacy. We follow, as if steadily downward, a series of questions by which the speaker negates the human will, until man becomes only a series of nominatives without a verb that would signify his power to act: dark fluxion, a phantom, a sister of the worm, life, death, soul and clod. The lack of any syntactic action for the clustered names and the rhetorical questions that seek no response, suggests that man’s Reason has been trapped and, ironically, fixed by thought, the “stagnant understanding.” (Shawcross 169) However, in the final injunction, the poet offers his own strong imperatives “ignore” and “strive” that urge man to pursue genuine abstraction. At the end, the Understanding with its mere abstractions is rejected and the poet affirms the active life of knowing, as contrasted with having what we commonly call the “body” of knowledge.

To “strive to know” God is very different from “to know” Him. In the act of writing his poem, Coleridge has reformed his title: self-knowledge, the phenomenal self as object, has become self-knowing, the self as a subject moving freely in its evolution toward God, “in whom we live and move and have our Being.” One must ignore what is outside because the external world is only a “modification of our own Being,” man would be foolish to attempt to find there “the originals of the forms presented to him in his own intellect. . .[and] he learns at last what he seeks he had left behind and but lengthens the distance as he prolongs the search.” (Rooke 509) Coleridge admits the temporal restrictions that prevent man from self-knowledge: “Happy thou mayst know what thyself had made. To know only what had been made is to know phenomenal man whose limited understanding associates him with his own past and not with abstracts laws that govern the life of things. Reason is continually
making the self, not trying to fix it in thought but to free it through thinking, and true
Being is Reason.” (Rooke 515)

Some critics find pessimism in “Self-Knowledge,” and his late poems. I. A.
Richards, for example, asserts that Coleridge’s lines “seem almost to spit scorn on the
endeavour” of self-knowledge. (Richards 50) But even though Coleridge is unable to
resolve his own opposites (“life, death, soul, clod”) his poem does not end in “dark
fluxion” but forcefully points toward the “knowledge that passeth all understanding.”
The poet’s opposing selves (his Reason or positive Being, and his Understanding or
negative Being) meet in the poem. Alienation becomes his means of forging a higher
identity. The unaided understanding can only passively deduce a Phenomenal self, but
by abstracting himself from phenomena the poet can will himself toward ideal Being:
“to be known, this Identity must be dissolved and yet it cannot be dissolved. For its
Essence consists in this Identity. This Contradiction can be solved no otherwise, than
by an Act, in consequence of which and from the necessity of Self-manifestation the
Principle makes itself its own object, in and thus becomes a Subject, The Self-
affirmation is therefore a Will: and Freedom is a primary Intuition, & can never be
deduced.” (Coburn The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge 426) Coleridge makes
himself an object in a world of objects for the ultimate purpose of self-affirmation.

Because Richards believes that Coleridge’s subject is his Self and his object is
Nature, he reads “Self-Knowledge” as the poet’s admission of defeat: nature no
longer reflects the self. But rather than expressing “scorn, timidity and bafflement,”
the poem directly engages the problem of self-reflection: “the Christian world was for
centuries divided into the Many, that did not think at all, and the Few who did nothing
but think—both alike unreflecting, the one from defect of the Act, the other from the
absence of the Object.” (Coleridge, H.N. 184) By rejecting nature as an object until he
freed himself to move beyond the self as an object.

The several references to “Know Thyself” that appear in Coleridge’s writing
indicate that he never abandoned his belief in knowledge of the abstract self as a
correlative to knowing God. Although he recognised that “there is a strange—nay,
rather a too natural-aversion in many to know themselves” (Shawcross 212), he never
avoided the agonising choice that had to be made each time his own duality was
exposed. Coleridge feared self-contradiction, seeing it as characteristic of all pagan philosophies and he advised man to “obey the simple unconditional commandment of eschewing every act that implies a self-contradiction.” (Rooke 150) As he demonstrated with heavy irony in his poem “Human Life,” man cannot act and incapable of self-reflection cannot achieve even a momentary apprehension of Being: “Thy being’s being is contradiction.” The Mariner could not correct himself by means of thought, but he did risk his self by going to sea and after an act of transgression he perhaps discovered that “the first step to knowledge or rather the previous condition of all insight into truth, is to dare commune with our very and permanent self.” (Rooke 115) The loneliness of man when he lacks consoling earthly objects cannot be cured by the human understanding, which eventually turns in on itself and produces a self-circling form, an “eddy Without Progression” and one “recoils from the discovery.” (Rooke 509) The simplest statement of this progressive realisation of Being appears in the Biographia Literaria: “we begin with the I know myself, in order to end with the absolute I AM. We proceed from the SELF, in order to lose and find all self in GOD.” (Shawcross 186) For Coleridge, knowledge, abstract or otherwise, was always subordinate to Being and like a modern existentialist, he asserted that “We must be it in order to know it.” (Griggs 768)

Coleridge’s concept of Being could be articulated as an idea, but the poet had a difficult time in making his living experience conform to this abstraction. He knew that isolation and alienation had characterised his own existence but he could not believe, like Kierkegaard, that a solitary state was essential to mankind’s spiritual evolution. Yet the poet would have agreed with the theologian that “the merely human interpretation of love can never get further than reciprocity: the lover is the beloved and the beloved is the lover. Christianity teaches that such a love has not yet found its right object-God. A love relationship is threefold: the lover, the beloved, the love: but the love is God.” (Kierkegaard 99) Coleridge’s continual search for self-defining metaphors in his later poems reveals the difficulty of accommodating the absolute in our temporal language. He knew in his mind the “one absolute Object” he must seek, but he had also learned from experience that a terrible coldness comes about when love suffers “the absence of objects to reflect the rays.”
In “The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree,” Coleridge struggles to outgrow his dependence on phenomena. Through its external form and its thematic concerns, the poem denies the possibility of fulfilment in the world and questions why this should be so. In this poem, Coleridge forcefully demonstrates that the act of making a poem was more important than the poem itself, just as he comes to realise that the act of love does not depend on anything but what is “within.” Coleridge is indicating that Being is an act, a movement toward an ideal object.

Wordsworth could be happily alone with nature and his choice of the “solitary” as the central metaphor for many of his poems suggests that the poet’s “self” is secure and is certainly not dependent upon other people. On the other hand, Coleridge’s solitary figures in late poems like “The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree” are painfully incomplete and are either homesick or love-sick within an unreflecting landscape. In his earlier years, the poet’s “seeming” could transform nature and he could enjoy the “luxury” of Being:

It seem’d like Omnipresence! God, me thought,
Had built him there a Temple: the whole World
Seem’d imag’d in its vast circumstance:
No wish profan’d my overwhelmed heart.
Blest hour! It was a luxury, to be!
“Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement”
(Coleridge, E.H. 107)

But even in youth, the delights of nature conceal a vacancy, an absent object that can give value to the physical scene:

Ah! What a luxury of landscape meets
My gaze! Proud towers, and Cots more dear to me,
Elm-shadow’d Fields, and prospect-bounding Sea!
Deep sighs my lonely heart: I drop the tear:
Enchanting spot! O were my Sara here!
(Coleridge, E.H. 94)

Wordsworth does not need to abstract himself from his experience of the natural world; by metaphoric extension he can unify man and thing without fear of becoming
either a stone or a beast. In contrast, when Coleridge said, “I would allegorise myself, as a Rock (Griggs 975), he was lamenting his failure to find any fulfilling human relationship. To be isolated from human “otherness” was to be abandoned in nature and his idea of Being was inextricably linked with the “other,” whether it be Sara Hutchinson, his own “abstract self,” or, finally, “the absolute I AM.” (Kessler 175) When Coleridge recounted the “four gripping and grasping Sorrows” of his whole life, he simply enumerated shattered love “objects”: his alienation from his wife, his quarrel with Wordsworth, the loss of Sara Hutchinson, and his son Hartley’s misspent life. (Griggs 249) Since for Coleridge one must recognise Being in one’s need for the “other,” the solitary man is damned: “I love but few but those I love as my soul - for I feel that without them I should not indeed cease to be kind, and effluent; but by little and little become a soulless fixed Star receiving no rays nor influences into my being, a solitude, which I so tremble at that I cannot attribute it even to the Divine Nature.” (Griggs 240)

“The Blossoming of Date-Tree” deals with severed communication, the loved one’s silence portending an unresponsive God. The metaphors Coleridge used in the poem reveal his need to find a Being that is not defined, hence limited, by his senses and sensory language: a blind Arab in the desert listening for a voice; and a parent (usually a mother) seeking the answering voice of a child. These metaphors for Being is made clear in a letter to Sotheby; “a great Poet must be, implicite if not explicite, a profound Metaphysician . . . he must have the ear of a wild Arab listening in the silent desert, the eye of an Enemy upon the Leaves that strew the Forest: the Touch of a Blind Man feeling the face of a darling child.” (Griggs 810) the poet and the metaphysician seek Being beyond nature’s appearances and neither echo nor mirror could satisfy Coleridge’s need for original response, a need for the “other” that could complete his own self. The picture of a mother who is satisfied by an echo of her own voice is given a frightening variation that anticipated Coleridge’s own spiritual desolation when earthly objects fail: “Mother listening for the sound of a still-born child, blind Arab listening in the wilderness.” (Griggs 124) Eventually, the acts of watching or listening without any assurance of response became his own expression of what we now call Christian Existentialism.
In the “The Blossoming of the Solitary-Date Tree,” Coleridge attempts to evade his very personal “ache of solitariness” by building a general context and telling his reader about “us” and “it” and “the individual’s” capacity for joy. He tries to conceal his personal “ache of solitariness” within an “objective” discussion of the relationship of inner to outer world, of Phantom to fact, and he creates poetic analogies that are intended to make his problem less immediately personal. The poet laments the “absence of objects,” even though he is striving to free himself of any dependence on them. In part three, he can still imagine “the buoyant child surviving in the man,” but he cannot accept nature as an end for aspiring man because, despite its many voices, nature lacks a counterfeit:

It is her largeness, and her overflow,
Which being Incomplete, disquieteth me so!
(Coleridge, E.H. 396-97)

The poet’s analogies cannot serve to distract him from his condition and the last three lines disrupt the decorum of the poem:

Dear maid! No prattler at a mother’s knee,
Was e’er so dearly prized as I prize thee:
Why was I made for Love and Love denied to me?
(Coleridge, E.H. 396-97)

When Coleridge wrote to his friend Allsop about this poem, he recognised the duality he was struggling with, and also that he had not at that time succeeded in finding ideal objects to represent his abstractions Love and Hope: “the man in the Poet sighed forth.” (Griggs 216) He had not achieved that union of subject and object that he called his “unborrow’d Self.” Coleridge needed to imagine a transcendent “other” toward which he could direct his spiritual evolution. Sara Hutchinson was perhaps a synecdoche that for many years he imagined to be the whole. The Date-Tree, Coleridge said in a comment on the poem, bears fruit only when another of its kind is planted nearby. But the poet’s parable, like the poem itself, must be read on an analogical level: “the yearning of the soul for its answering image and completing counterfeit.” (Kessler 178) The poet’s “blossoming” bears fruit only as a higher consciousness.
In the very last year of his life, Coleridge returns to his solitary Arab in “Love’s Apparition and Evanishment,” but even though the figure is still passively attending some human voice, he performs an act of humility that seems to provide the answer to Coleridge’s earlier self-pitying cry, “Why was I made for Love and Love denied to me?”

And now he hangs his aged head aslant,
And listens for a human sound in vain!
And now the aid, which Heaven alone can grant,
Upturns his eyeless face from Heaven to gain. . .

(Coleridge, E.H. 488-89)

The Arab’s gesture may indicate that Coleridge has found “a living instead of a reasoning Faith” (Coburn The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge 462), and that he realises that “Our misery may be a merciful mode of calling us from our Self-chosen Exile.” (Coburn The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge 434) Separated from a love object, Coleridge turned toward the love object, his own “Absolute” self, and ultimately toward the great “I AM.”

The poem “Love’s Apparition and Evanishment” is composed of three parts: an extended metaphor, a personal account of a dream, and an “envoy” added after Coleridge’s death, but written and published long before. In the poem three separate fragments parts are united to dramatise a spiritual accidie, the refusal of joy. Coleridge’s favourite metaphor for his movement toward Being, a movement inherent in the process of making a poem, is that of a caterpillar evolving into a butterfly. Life precedes its outward manifestations, and parts of poem may arrive from the unconscious mind at different times and be combined in different ways, as long as the life “within” is shaping the products. One need not create a new whole; one need only become more conscious of the kinship of parts, for “Whatever is grand, whatever is truly organic and living, the whole is prior to parts.” (Coburn The Philosophical Letters 96) The process of creating a new consciousness of Being is difficult because the poet must overcome the strictures of sensory language, as the caterpillar strains to become a butterfly, freeing itself from Phantom appearance. (Kessler 181)
Coleridge’s “Love’s Apparition and Evanishment” is one last demonstration of the poet’s negative Being in which he eddies without progressing and submits to the vacancy of outward forms. The passive, blind Arab who begins the “Romance” has been left behind in a lower state of development. Abandoned in nature, he still “Upturns his eyeless face,” (8) as does the Old Man in “Limbo,” and thereby reveals his humility before the great “I AM.” Hope is in his gesture, but it cannot assume its active life as an abstraction until the poet has, through his own will, “turn’d his eye inward.”(17) It seems necessary to be blind to the world or blind to time and space like the poet in his “transient sleep” or “trance,” before the abstractions “Love” and “Hope” can come to life. Coleridge recognised years earlier that he alone was responsible for his own peculiar development: “I seem to myself like a butterfly who having foolishly torn or bedaubed his wings, is obliged to crawl like a Caterpillar with all the restless Instincts of the Butterfly.” (Coburn The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge 408)

Like other of Coleridge’s despairing poems, “Love’s Apparition and Evanishment” can be interpreted in the light of the poet’s theory of organic form: the poet sees a stage of self-recognition that must be seen and abandoned before any spiritual progress is possible. The Arab’s blindness, like Coleridge’s turning away from superficial metaphors, may be essential before the poet can restore life to those stoney abstractions that were once fluid. The “sickly calm,” in which the poet can find no outlet in nature, may be a necessary “disease,” like Coleridge’s sins, which he viewed as painfully necessary to his evolution toward Being. Unable to embody themselves in earthly objects, the abstractions “Love” and “Hope” continue their evolving life within the consciousness. Hope, the awareness of possibility, seems dead; but Love, even though feeble and cold, has the strength to induce Hope to reclaim some of its lost power. In this drama of mind, active Love refuses to accept the Phantom appearance of death that she encounters on Hope’s face. Despite the pessimistic Envoy, Love can always be resurrected if one moves away from love of objects and toward love of Being itself. Like Phoenix, Hope both lives and dies within an ongoing process (not life or death, but life-in-death), so that, ironically, to “die anew’ is to be renewed, as in a Christian’s daily death to the world. The lines: “There is no resurrection for a love/ That uneclips’d, unshadowed, wanes away” (32) suggest
that divine radiance is still present, if the poet could but look beyond his earthly shadow. Coleridge could not realise physical love for Sara Hutchinson in a physical world, but he found that Love was still vital in the life of the mind as an abstraction, although at times it was sadly a “warmthless flame.” (Coleridge, E.H. 457)

Remaining true to his idea of spiritual evolution, Coleridge declared that reality is a “thing of Degrees” and that he had progressed toward it “as far at least as Reality if predictable at all of aught below Heaven.” (Griggs 705) Thus Coleridge exquisitely brings the motif of self-recognition through a blind Arab.

Thus the motif of quest for self is treated differently in the above discussed poems. Coleridge needed to create a self capable of living the Christian paradox of Being-in-time. As Eliot wrote:

> It is not enough to understand what we ought to be,
> unless we know what we are; and we do not understand
> what we are, unless we know what we ought to be. The
> two forms of self-consciousness, knowing what we are
> and what we ought to be, must go together. (Eliot 109)

However, the failure of the human will to achieve such a consummation became the central concern of Coleridge’s later poems. Coleridge’s journey into the union with his “ultimate Being,” may continue beyond the “Epitaph” he created for himself:

> Stop, Christian Passer-by _ Stop, the child of God,
> And read with gentle breast. Beneath this sod,
> A poet lies, or that which once seem’d he.
> O, lift one thought in prayer for S.T.C.;
> That he who many a year with toil of breath
> Found death in life, may here find life in death!
> Mercy for praise _ to be given for fame
> He ask’d, and hoped, through Christ. Do thou the same!

(Coleridge, E.H. 491-92)
WORKS CITED


