Chapter-VI

The Conversation Poems: Fusion Of Critical And Creative Selves

Unlike the unearthly tone of the Mystery Poems, Coleridge's Conversation Poem opens a rapport of familiarity with readers on account of the easy yet graceful chit-chat of conversation, where, any shift of context follows a down-to-earth logical course. In the three great works of his lifetime which I have already discussed, we discern a dissolving pattern of images and a choice of suitable subjects and symbols moving in and out of Nature and one's consciousness too subtly for instant perception. These poems reveal the poet in super human powers - the poet commands the same awe that he invests Nature with. However, despite intermittent sparks of brilliance, the Mystery poems fail to retain a consistent gravity of approach.

On the other hand, the conversation poems find Coleridge, if not an awe-inspiring poet, a man of sound practical sense, who can blend feeling and thought in a balanced preparation and project one thought at a time on any external object to make the latter a symbol of it. While the pattern of symbolism of the mystery poems was complex and multi dimensional, it is simple and unidirectional in the Conversation Poems. Here the thoughts are linked in a logical chain of progression - we pursue one subject after another as they come naturally in course of conversation.

Coleridge's Conversation Poems, draw heavily on the poetry of Collins and Cowper in particular. "The Aolian Harp" and "This Line Tree Bower My Prison" are poems in the group of those written in Cowperian style and, I have already discussed, how these poems, belonging to the initial years of Coleridge's poetic career, nevertheless demonstrate the workings of Coleridge's subtle and powerful intelligence. In these early poems, Coleridge, fresh from his days of political idealism, appears to be a man speaking to man, taking the
reader along with him in his imaginative and thoughtful wanderings. Herein lies the seminal importance of the conversation poems – they enable us to study the poet’s growth of poetic consciousness and metaphysical maturity.

When Coleridge commenced writing “Frost at Midnight”, “Fears in Solitude”, “The Nightingale”, he had already taken long strides in the realm of poetry along with his newly found friend Wordsworth. In these years, the Wordsworthian influence worked to a considerable extent to season, sober and organise the chaotic poetic sensibilities of Coleridge. From Wordsworth he learnt how to effect a complete and constant synthesis of thought and feeling and present the fusion in poetic forms & this is most conspicuous in the Conversation poems of his mature years. Humphry House, in his analysis of Coleridge’s Conversation Poems, finds a decided advance upon his predecessors’ which can most likely be attributed to the profundity of Wordsworthian influence.

……..the language of some of the poems, particularly “Frost at Midnight”, has the verbal concentration on which great poetry always depends, and Cowper so obviously nearly always lacks (House 73).

The minute and delicate descriptions and ‘verbal concentration’ bear the strong under-current of Wordsworth’s influence, while the psychological effects indicate the poet’s sharpened sensitivity, depending insight and heighten awareness to the world within the mind of man responding to the world around him.

“Frost at Midnight” begins with a description of the silent ministration of the frost at midnight carving ‘icicles / quietly shining to the quite moon’. In the juxtaposition of contra… (the silent ministration of the frost’ and ‘the loud cry of the owlet’, the soft breathings of the
cradled infant by his side and the inaudible numberless goings – on of life, the unquivering thin blue flame on the low-burnt fire and the fluttering film on the grate) the poet finds the same Oneness of spirit that he found in “This Lime Tree Brown My Prison” where he asserted ‘No sound is dissonant that till of life’. In fact the audible and the inaudible, the movable and the immovable are all part of the ‘numberless goings – on of life. This ebb and tide of life makes the poet perceive a spirit of Oneness which unifies his own spirit of solitude.

Only that film, which fluttered on the grate
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing
Material, its motion in their hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling spirit
By its own mood interprets, everywhere
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of thought

(PW 240 II 15-22)

As the poet’s gaze falls on the film that flutters on the grate, the percipient and the perceived merge and fuse, the world within and the world without get interchangeably linked and the poet’s thoughts ‘thingified’ in the fluttering film. Here again, we find the application of the ‘One Life’ theory in the traffic from the outer to the inner world and an absolute mastery of both sensuous and meditative context. This superb control over sensuous perception and meditative contemplation, according to Jean Pierre Mileur, gives to the poem a fulfilment and expands the range of experience:
Sensuous observation prompts revive and speculation and the pattern is repeated so that there is a steady pulse of outer and inner awareness imitating what Coleridge sees as the necessary rhythm of all creative experience (Mileur 43).

The thoughts pursued hereafter by the poet are actuated not solely by random association but also by his own mood that the poet's idling spirit interprets as its sole unquiet companionable form. Composed in February, 1798, "Frost at Midnight" records the poet's mood in his most blessed time, when he was living in Concord with his wife, under the wide-branching protection of strong Thomas Pool, with William and Dorothy near and poetry pouring unto him from heaven's height. In one of the letter written during this phase of his poetic career, Coleridge stressed on the moral lessons Nature can impart to his beloved Hartley.

It is melancholy to think, that the best of us are liable to be shaped and coloured by surrounding Objects and a demonstrative proof, that Man was not made to live in Great Cities!

....................................................

The pleasure which we receive from rural beauties, are of little Consequence compared with the Moral Effect of these pleasures - beholding constantly the Best possible we at least become ourselves the best possible (Letters 1154)

Firstly, by association, the film brings to the poet's mind recollections of his childhood when he would spend anxious nights anticipating the arrival of any stranger.

............. with most believing mind,

Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,

To watch that fluttering stranger! and as oft
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt.

Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church tower,
Whose bells, poor man's only music, rang
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
With a wild pleasure falling on mine ear
most like articulate sounds of things to come! (PW 241 ll- 23-33)

When Coleridge remembers his days under a stern preceptor, when he was reared in the great city, he turns affectionately to his beloved infant Hartly lying cradled in peaceful slumber by his side. The poem ends with the poet's assertion that his child would learn from Nature the lessons that he missed in city cloister.

But thou, my babe! shalt warder like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lake and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself (PW 242 ll 54-62)

That Coleridge wished to fulfil his unfulfilled wishes is Hartley is evident from one of his dairy entries compiled in Anima Poetae.

To deduce instincts from obscureRecollection of a pre existing state
I have after thought of it. 'Ey' I have said, when I have seen certain tempers and actions in Hartley 'that is I in my future State'. (140)
The same wish that he voices "Frost at Midnight" is found is a letter of 1796 addressed to Charles Lloyd's father

............... that my children should be bred up from earliest infancy is the simplicity of peasants, their food, dreams and habits completely rustic. (L I)

When Coleridge speaks of the Joys is the companionship with Nature that he missed in his school days, he recalls the same words he applied to Charles Lamb in "This Lime Tree Bower my Prison".

My gentle hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
And hunger'd after Nature, may a year"
In the great City pent............ (PW 179 II 28-30).

In harmony with Nature, he will be able to derive the divine lesson in interpreting the scriptures that lie embedded in Nature. The Great Universal Teacher would teach her to externalise the internal and internalise the external, super-naturalise the natural and naturalise the supernatural.

In such a blissful state of heightened perception, he would find no colour or sound dissonant that shows and tells of life. The greenness of the summer earth, and the white barrenness of winter - whatever be the hue, will show to the child:

As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he maker
Spirits perceive his presence. (PW 180 II 42-43)

The poem closes with the same quietness of tone with which it had begun. About this symmetry Mileur wrote:

The secret ministry in line one of the poem is a weather report, at its reappearance 72 lines later, it is a property of the poet's mind and an utterance made by God (Mileur 44)
The frost's secret ministrations, its moulding of icicles into icy forms and shapes, is the spontaneous activity of a mind in an active process of creation. In a letter to Thomas Poole written in 1801, Coleridge speaks of the activity of mind as a creative agent.

Newton was a mere materialist. Mind, is his system, is always passive, - a lazy Looker-on an external world. If the mind be not passive, if it be indeed made in God's Image, and that too, is the sublimest sense the Image of the Creator, there is ground for suspicion that any system built on the passive ness of the mind must be false as a system (L I)

In another letter, Coleridge voices the same discontent with the cold Newtonian system.

"In the Hebrew poets each thing has a life of its own, and yet they are all one life. In God they move and live and have their being; not had, as the cold system of Newtonian Theology represents, but have "(L - I)

Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" is therefore a meditative verse that is introspective and simultaneously, self-critical. The frost's spontaneous shaping of icicles is perhaps symbolic of the poet to spontaneous creation 'unhelped' by outward impressions. It is by their active operation of the Mind that the poet is able to interpret surrounding objects in the light of his own moods. This idyllic setting of poetic creativity should have an intimate association with Nature. For one divorced from the secret springs of joy is Nature, his desired ideal of projection of thought into Nature and of Nature into Thought can seldom be reached.

Perhaps aware of his failure to live up to his poetic ideal, Coleridge yearns for a closer connection with Nature. But child is the father of Man, and Coleridge feels that having been
deprived of this joy in childhood, he has, to a certain extent, lost his sensibility to the joys that Nature could have afforded him.

This genuine feeling of deprivation of the joy in Nature and the acute sensitivity of childhood turns into a heartbreaking lament is Ode on Dejection, another conversation poem composed several years later, and considered by most critics as the swan song of his poetic career. "Frost at Midnight" ends with a prayer for Hartley and Dejection Ode ends with one for Sara, but while the latter shows Coleridge a thoroughly devastated poet clinging on to the last straw of religion and prayer, the former shows a poet, confident of his powers, aware of his limitations and hopeful of overcoming them.

Finally, we cannot but agree with Humphry House when he comments:

"The ending of "Frost at Midnight" was one of the finest pieces of short descriptive writing in the language, intricate and yet at the same time so sparsely clear (House 82)

For the first time in Conversation poem, Coleridge weaves the past, present and future in a perfect unity of experience.

The lines establish a continuity in Coleridge's experience. The 'dim sympathies' between the poet and the flame is the confirmation of an existing relationship rediscovered. The 'stranger' points to a continuity in line which links Coleridge to thoughts is his cottage to his memory in school of a still earlier moment. Memories die hard, they lie buried and compressed under layers of experiences acquired through time. This is how memories awaken one another on the planes of time.

Speaking of the essential unity in experience that emerges in the poem, as it telescopes out in range, Kelvin Everest makes an observation that is quite significant is the light of Coleridge's life-long poetic endeavour of reconciliation of opposites.
"A connectedness is suggested, not only in the continuity between Coleridge and his earlier self, but between his present self and the sleeping beauty at his side. As the unifying impulse is consciousness strengthens, so the apparently discreet elements in experience multiply and lead to a constantly more comprehensive unity" (Everest 265).

II

The situation in the 1790s, with France in revolution, England aligning herself with Austria and Prussia against revolutionary politics and the eventual betrayal of French democratic ideals with the rise of Napoleon, presented contemporary poetry with a huge problem: how to unify their deluge of experience and relate it to the inner life of sensibility and belief. Coleridge met this challenge by creating a new form, what he called the 'conversation' poem" (Corner -vi)

In his introduction to Coleridge's Poetical Works, Prof. Martin Corner of Kingston University made their comment, which is remarkably relevant to our study of another conversation poem written in 1798, Fears is Solitude. The hopper registered in solitude is 'Frost at Midnight" turn to fears in solitude is the alarm of an invasion. Abroad there is war, the threat of invasion and tyranny from which England is not free; at home he sees hypocrisy, greed, religious apathy or atheism, but above all, lack of imagination - all these factors contribute to intensify the grave ............... regarding public affair that the poet voices is Fears in Solitude. Here, Coleridge shapes an elastic form in which personal reflection on Nature, political ideals and anxieties are all intricately countered in a vision of Unity.

Again, like "Frost at Midnight" the course of the poem is circular, starting from a description of the silent and solitary dell through his anxiety over the heedless 'deeds of murder' to the thoughts of restoration of the peace and tranquillity of Nature in the 'green and
silent still'. In fact, the movement of their conversation poem is a swinging to-and-fro from silence to clamour and back to silence. Again, an essential unity of experience strings up the diverse and disparates - war and peace, religion and blasphemy, love and hatred, and mindless action and meditative contemplation.

The poem begins in a low key with a quiet description of his surroundings. He is reposing, happy and tranquil, in a green dell, above which sings a skylark in the clouds. It is in the Solitude of Nature that one, overwhelmed with the feeling of Unity of the cosmos begins to dream of better worlds to come. Then quite suddenly his conscience cries out when he thinks of the dangers and suffering of others. From the mood of self-tormenting thoughts, he passes into an indictment of his countrymen for going lightly to war and for bringing in its wake slavery, suffering, and vice.

\[
\text{We have offended, Oh! my countrymen!}
\]
\[
\text{We have offended very grievously,}
\]
\[
\text{And been most tyrannous. From east to west}
\]
\[
\text{A groan of accusation pierces Heaven! (PW 258, ll 41-44)}
\]

The love of faith and erosion of religious base and to the misery of man and forebode destruction.

\[
\text{All, all make up one scheme of perjury,}
\]
\[
\text{That faith doth reel; the very name of God}
\]
\[
\text{Sounds like a juggler's charm; and bold with joy,}
\]
\[
\text{Forth from his dark and lonely hiding place,}
\]
\[
\text{(Portentous sight) the owlet Atheism,}
\]
\[
\text{Sailing on obscure wings athwart the moon,}
\]
\[
\text{Drops his blue-fringed lids, and holds them close,}
\]
\[
\text{And hooting at the glorious sun in Heaven,}
\]
Cries out 'Where is it?' (PW 259 LL 78-86)

It is the confession of a tender hearted, conscience stricken man, to whom has been revealed a region above partisan and national views. However, after the 129th line, the tone unexpectedly changes and he bursts into a tirade against the French, calling upon Englishmen to stand forth and 'repel an impious foe'.

Then comes a sweet 'return' as he bids farewell to the soft and silent spot where he has been reclining and recollects joyfully his beloved Stowey and the cherished company of his loved friend, wife and 'babe'. The failure of political ideal can be compensated in Nature, which 'conversing with the mind' gives it 'a lovelier impulse and a dance of thought'. Universal love that can seldom be attained in public life can be more successfully realised in private life is blissful communion with Nature in its solitary mood.

.......... With light
And quickened footsteps thither ward I tend,
Remembering thee, O green and silent dell!
And grateful, that by nature quitness
And solitary meetings, all my heart
Is softened, and made worthy to indulge

Love, and the thoughts that yearn for human kind'. (PW 263 ll 226 - 32)

A distressing public situation is compensated for a pleasurable private experience. Abroad there is war, the threat of invasion and tyranny from which England is not free. 'At home, he sees hypocrisy, greed, religious apathy or atheism, but above all, lack of imagination. For Coleridge, Imagination is the 'esemplastic' power that fuses the disparates into a Unified Vision. With the weakening of the centrifugal force of religious faith and subsequently of universal love, the centre cannot hold and things fall apart - a disintegrated world-view throttles imagination to death.
As the poet straddles the public and private worlds, the patriotism of a passionately personal kind drives him on, as the poem gets its force and edge from the contrast between the ghastliness of public action (of which war is the extreme example) and the integrity of private experience.

"Fears in Solitude" evidently written is the older, effective manner, nonetheless bears the record of Coleridge's early adulthood when he was beginning to experience not communion, but alienation. We cannot but agree with Marilyn Butler when she comments that "Fears in Solitude" shows Coleridge, the public man, to be gradually introverted into a simply meaningful seclusion:

It is the demonstration that attachment to the little platoon we belong to in society is attachment to society itself. Thus the minutiae of Coleridge's actual life is their rich year were made to illuminate public issues. Hyper-emotional, acutely responsive, he caught the fear in the public mood and availed himself of a moment when his own insecurity could be made the correlative for England's (Butler 86)

Truly, hereafter we find Coleridge more concerned with his private joys, hopes and frustrations than with issues of 'public' import. The power by which he could correlate the public and private worlds appears to have abandoned him and 'his emotional life ceased to make natural material for public poetry'.

III

"The Nightingale" composed in an April evening in the same year continues with the cheerful mood of "Frost at Midnight", though, unlike the former, it is digressive, disorganised, and has a 'scattered air'. It begins in the same tranquil setting of the night,
however, it is not the still wintry night, rather, it is a balmy night with dim and stars and sonorous song of nightingales intensifying the pleasure.

Inevitably, the song of the nightingale recalls Milton's lines on the same in "Il Penseroso".

'Most musical, most melancholy bird'

melancholy bird? (PW-264 II 13-14)

This seemingly disruptive, strange usage of an elder poet and his rejection justifies itself as the poem proceeds. George Watson notes how Coleridge accomplished a criticism of Milton in Miltonic style - in the abundance of enjambment, in the inversions and suspension of syntax and the characteristic Miltonic blank verse.

But the relationship is alternately one of attraction and repulsion, an alternation of Miltonizing and anti-miltonizing (Watson 72)

In his repudiation of the association of the nightingale with melancholy, the poet asserts that 'In Nature there is nothing melancholy'. When the soul of man is inadequately responsive to the sights and sounds of Nature, he is unable to lift himself up from the smothering burden of worldly grief and miseries. Rather, he projects his own moods into objects of Nature, and perceives of Nature as melancholy when he himself is melancholy. Only those who cut themselves off from 'the deepening twilight of the spring', in the unnatural surroundings of 'ball-room hot theatres', attribute sadness to the nightingale.

Earlier, in "Frost at midnight", the poet had spoken of the interpretation of one's surroundings according to one's own moods. Here too, he finds 'some night wandering man whose heart was pierced with the remembrance of a grievous wrong' projects his soul's grief into his surroundings - to him even the happy chant of the nightingale appears to be laden with grief.
Again, like "Frost at Midnight", the poet speaks with contempt of the education received in urban seclusion which tend to blunt our sensitivity to 'Nature's sweet voices, always full of love and joyance'

Poet who hath been building up the rhyme
When he had better hour stretched his limbs
Beside a brook is mossy forest-dell,
By sun or moon light, to the influxes
Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements
Surrendering his whole spirit, of her song
And of his fame forgetful!
..............................

Who lose the deepening twilights of the Spring
In ball-rooms and hot theatres, they still
Full of meek sympathy must heave their sighs

O'er Philomela's pity-pleading stairs. (PW 264-6 ll 24 - 30 & ll 36-39)

As the poet describes the song of the nightingale, he lends a touch of spontaneity and freshness and a lyrical quality to the verse. Here he abandons the stilted, artificial style and uses an easy, graceful verse that matches the ease of the nightingale's full-throated melody. "The poetry is as musical and unselfconscious as the song it describes and among the best that Coleridge ever wrote." (Adair 107)

The poem now digresses into a description of a castle in a grove (poetically referring to their Alfoxden house), the trio's trim walks in the grove 'wild with tangling underwood' where they would hear the 'musical and swift jug jug murmur' of the nightingale stirring the air with the harmony. The mysterious lady who suddenly glides into the poem like a moon-maiden and listens to the nightingale by its light, is mostly drawn in the like of Dorothy; but
here, we also discover faint glimmerings of the image of the holy Christabel and her nocturnal adventure.

The poem ends bidding adieu to William and Dorothy, with a sentimental 'father's tale' of the infant Hartley's reaction to the nightingale's song. The poem, once again, expresses the poet's desire to harmonise her spirit with that of the Universe.

'........................ But if that Heaven
Should give me life, his childhood shall grow up
Familiar with these songs, that with the night
He may associate joy" (PW 267 ll 106-10)

Ironically, the more Coleridge yearned to unify his soul with Nature, the more he drifted into the wide sea of isolation and estrangement. This is most markedly felt several years later, is another conversational poem 'Dejection; an Ode.'

IV

In his days of strength, Coleridge was sustained by faith and confidence in his creative power. There were afflictions and miseries and frustration of ideas, yet, he could, in the years 1797-98, subserviate language to his purpose to generalise the personal and give the individual an abstract, general significance. When he has written of sorrow, it has been sorrow for suffering mankind; if he has written of sin, it has been the sin of his country. Though the personality of the poet lurks behind his Mystery poems, and yet, the personal distress and frustrations are made to transcend the limitations of particularity by exercising the esemplastic power of Imagination. In his conversation poems, he has been too manly to invent reasons for self-pity. In Dejection: An Ode, we find, for the first time, the poet
voicing his distress which is intensely personal, and which, for the decline of his imaginative power, he is unable to transmute the utterance into one of general significance.

Irrespective of all his original powers, the genius of Coleridge, as he himself confessed, was dependent on love and cordiality that he enjoyed in the company of the Wordsworths. That he is wretched without the company of his loved friends is admitted in a letter of 1804:

"....... I own myself no self-subsisting mind. I know, I feel, that I am weak, apt to faint away, inwardly self-diverted, and bereft of the confidence in my own powers; and that the approbation and sympathy of good and intelligent men is my sea-breeze, without which I should languish from morn to evening - a very trade wind to me, in which my bark drives on regularly and lightly.

In Germany, when separated from the Wordsworths, he first sensed desolation which soon becomes an utter cry of distress. Prior to his return from Germany, in the summer of 1799, he had not become a slave to opium, though the habit of taking it had formed. In the next three years the vice grew fixed, his will decayed, and he fell into depths of remorse. At home, an incompatibility of temperament with his wife had surfaced and Coleridge had fallen deeply and hopelessly in love with Sara Hutchinson.

In the winter of 1801 - 182, the two causes of Coleridge's unhappiness, opium and domestic discord, worked havoc with him and brought him to despair. Addressed to Sara, Coleridge's Dejection: An Ode remains one of the best accounts of the acute phase of depression that the poet experienced in his hopeless isolation. Gone is the conviction voiced in "The Nightingale": "In Nature there is nothing melancholy". Now, the poet's eyes, moistened with tears, presents a refracted vision of Nature that is nothing but melancholy.
The poem's epigraph, taken from the ballad of Sir Patrick Spens, refers to the deadly storm portended by the sign that the new moon holds the old moon in her arms and thereafter, the poem is organised around a series of contrasts between the new and the old and scrupulously records the changing weather of the mind. George Watson finds an analogy of the stormy gust with the ups and downs of the tonal gravity of an intensely private poem cast into the most public of all forms, the neo-classical Pindaric:

The language swirls upwards and downwards from a studiously conversational opening (Well! If the bard was weather-wise....) to passages of a grave sublimity that Coleridge had scarcely ever achieved ....... It is by their startling contrast of the formal and the informal that the poem lives... (Watson 74)

As in "Frost at Midnight" is Dejection: An Ode, the progress enacted is from voicing distress, by uneasy and fanciful toying with a superstitious belief, to discerning how the terms of that superstition and the imagery associated with them can sustain a different and more substantial creed.

In the opening stanza the poet labours under such vexed melancholy that he only wishes that the squall can wrench him from his mood.

And oh! that even now the gust were swelling
And the slant night shower driving loud and fast!
Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,
Might now perhaps their wanted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live! (PW 363 ll 15-20)
This sense of melancholy is intensified when he is at a loss to find joy in the tranquillity of his natural surroundings.

I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are! (PW 364 ll 37-38)

With a smothering burden weighing down on his breast, the poet makes a vain effort to win from outward forms "the passion and the life, whose fountains are within". The melancholy poet's projection of his soul's grief into Nature had been criticised in "The Nightingale". Ironically, he now feels convinced that 'mind in its own place /can make a Heaven of Hell, and Hell if Heaven'. He stresses on the fact that the sources of the soul to life lie within.

"O Lady! we receive but what we give
And is our life alone does Nature live
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!" (PW 365 ll 47-49)

Harper finds in these lines a notable departure from the Wordsworthian belief in the divinity of Nature; his confidence that all knowledge comes from sensation, reflects his atheism.

Coleridge never faltered in his conviction that spirit was independent of matter. His unhappy experience deepened his faith in the existence of God, and of his own soul as something detachable from her body that did him grievous wrong (Abrams 198)

Like the melancholy poet of "The Nightingale", Coleridge too begins to cast Nature in his mood. Since the subjective drawing force within him is dead and the self generated springs of joy have dried up, the living contact with Nature is lost and the scrutiny of outward
forms is without point or purpose. This subjective driving force is that of Hope, a gift which he previously enjoyed; it lifted him from the smothering burden of 'humiliation and fears'.

There was a time when, through my path was rough,

This joy within me dallied with distress

But now afflictions bow me down to earth:

But Oh! each visitation

Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,

My shaping spirit of Imagination." (PW 366 ll 76-79, 82 & 84-86)

For want of Imagination, the truly creative power, the poet simply 'sees' but not 'feels'.

Rather than being simply a faculty for rearranging materialise fed to it by the seven and memory, the Imagination is a shaping and ordering power which colours objects of sense with the mind's own light. The poet's imaginative insight seems to have been blurred by his unhappiness his soul's misery. Earlier, the poet's misfortunes could little affect his power to steal from my own nature all the natural man by 'abstruse research'. This optimism is revealed in many note book entries and letters written to confidants.

There have been times when looking up beneath the sheltering Trees, could invest every leaf with Awe (N-I 1510)

In a letter written to John Prior Estlin in 1800, the poet still hopeful of retaining his creative powers even in the web of life's afflictions, voices the optimism which he failed to recover when he came to compose Dejection: An Ode.

Oft like a winged spider I am entangled in a new spun web, but never fear for me, 'tis but the flutter of my wings - and off I am again! (L I 323)
That the basis of his faith in his poetic potential was slowly being eroded by the overwhelming tide of miseries resulting from loneliness and lovelessness is evidenced in another letter written to Godwin in 1801, the year before the composition of *Dejection: An Ode*. The letter conveys the same crisis that the Ode bears out,

......I look at the mountains (that visible God Almighty that looks in at all my windows) I look at the mountains only for the curves of their outlines. The poet is dead in me - my imagination (or rather the somewhat that had been imaginative) lies, like a Cold Snuff on the Circular Rim of a Brass Candlestick (LI 362)

The soft-floating witchery of sound that the Eolian harp produced when caressed by the 'desultory breeze', transforms into 'a scream of agony' is *Dejection: An Ode*, when struck by the violent wind. Cut off from the sources of Joy and Hope and Faith, the poet experiences the same intellectual impotence as Satan did in *Paradise Lost*. In the madness of the raving wind's song we can hear Miltonic and Wordsworthian narratives of the distress of war: defeat, agony, confusion, despair. In "Kubla Khan" too, the poet had heard, in the tumult of the sunless sea, 'ancestral voices prophesying war'. Coleridge's unique creativity kept warring with his rich intellectual ancestry in the very depth of his consciousness. In his finest fits of Imagination, he attempted to shrug off their influence. *Dejection: An Ode* bears signs of the profound Miltonian influence that has gone down into his subconscious and that for want of a conscious effort of reason and will, surfaces every now and then.

............... the language accomplishes an absolute distancing of wind and poet, a recognition that the correspondences in the poet's frame of mind to the roaring of the wind came at the price of his submission to its impulses......and that such submission was, in the Miltonian context, yielding to Satanic despair. (Parker 200)
The Ode ends, like "Frost at Midnight" with a prayer of wish fulfilment for his beloved Sara.

Joy life her spirit, joy attune her voice,
To her may all things live, from job to pole,
Their life the eddying of her living soul! (PW 368 ii 134 - 136)

Dealing with the same crisis of the loss of poetic potential, Wordsworth's Ode on Immortality and Coleridge's Dejection: An Ode have markedly different approaches which reveal the basic difference in their theology of Nature. Such a difference in religious conviction cannot hold two minds together for long. Hence, estrangement from the Wordsworths was a natural indication of Coleridge's uniqueness of poetic ideas. Had Coleridge realised that the isolation was a sign of intellectual difference rather than of personal loss, he would not have lost the inspiration that lies at the root of all poetry. But, after all, Coleridge was, in the words of Henry James, a 'rare, anomalous, magnificent, interesting, curious, tremendously suggestive character, vices and all, with all its imperfections on its head'. He could, but he didn't; with his viability to face facts, he marred his prospects - is life and is art. The seclusion which could be transferred to meaningful poetry, now rests solely on the metaphysical theory that the only knowledge is that of oneself. This is nothing but Solipsism in critical terms.

Apart from indicating a decisive course in his thoughts and ideas, Coleridge's Dejection: an Ode, in its entire length, bears the quintessence of his developed thinking on the art of poetry.

A. C. Goodson's comment that the conversation poems reveal a critical mind that is also creative is one of the best assessments of his work.

He proved his own best critic, in the poem and outside them. He listened to his voice and learned its ways. In resigning poetic aspiration he was responding to
the critical reflection mounting in a line of meditative verse which underwrites
his developed thinking on the art of poetry. (Goodson 179).

The Conversation Poems pave Colridge's way from Poetry to theory.

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WORKS CITED


