Chapter- II

Poems of 1794 –96 : Shapings Of The Unregenerate Mind

.......... Good sense is the body of poetic genius, Fancy its drapery,
motion its life, and each ; and forms all into one graceful and
intelligent whole, (BL II 13)

Coleridge’s memorable words on the quintessence of poetry in his summing up of
a chapter of Biographia Literaria were definitely derived from his earlier insight into
poetry, though, obviously, a perpetual seeker as he was , the earlier conception would
undergo certain modifications and alteration , while the basic concept remained central to
his poetic ideas. In a notebook entry as early as 1795, we find these words which were to
be revised as the early enthusiast matured into a poetic genius:

     Peculiar not far fetched natural, but not obvious; Delicate, not affected;
dignified, not swelling; Fiery, but not mad; rich in Imagery, but not
Loaded with it, in short, a union of harmony and Good sense; of
perspicuity and conciseness; Thought is the body of such an Ode,
Enthusiasm the soul, and Imagination the Drapery! (NI 13)

Therefore, in his formative years, Coleridge had not yet begun to regard ‘good
sense’ as ‘the body’ and ‘Imagination’ as ‘the soul’ of poetry. It was only after he had
overthrown the Hartleyan mechanistic philosophy that he attempted a concomitant
desynonymization of ‘fancy’ and ‘Imagination’.
During the years 1794-95, Coleridge was preoccupied with ‘deep thinking’—this constitutes the body of his poetic works belonging to this period, and, overburdened as his poetry was with ‘the dark and deep perplexities of metaphysical controversy, it was seldom inspired by the divine act of the creation, the ‘Imagination’ which in his earlier works he often confused with the lesser faculty, ‘fancy’, is indulged in just meretricious ornamentation, not for blending and fusing the diverse into an organic unity.

After the hectic and restless years of revolutionary zeal and fire and the rise and fall of Pantisocracy as a scheme of social egalitarianism, Coleridge entered into that ill-fated marriage with Sara Fricker. Initially, however, the marriage appeared more a boon than a bane. Starting off happily in a cottage at Clevedon on the Somerset coast, it was a brief spell of happiness with the poet rhapsodizing on the newly acquired ‘love’ that would soon be dismissed as ‘the ebullience of schematism’. (Letters II 132)

Nevertheless, marriage and residence in the tranquil surrounding of Somerset induced a greater sense of reality in Coleridge. Half a dozen poems confirm this. The first, written while a clerical friend was teaching Sara the flute, still lays stress on the “undivided dell”, where the poet will wander with the dear lov’d maid. The others are more personal. A climb on Brockley Coomb inspires the reflection, ‘Enchanting spot! O were my sara here!’

“To The Nightingale” composed in 1795, an ode to the ‘Minstrel of the Moon’ is a record of the poet’s blissful domestic life with Sara, ‘the woman’ whom he loved ‘best of all created beings’, which would soon give away as the two giants named Bread and
Cheese would began to make their presence felt. Describing the nightingale as the most musical, most melancholy bird, Coleridge anticipates Shelley's word on the skylark.

Our sweetest songs are those
That tell of saddest thought.

In another poem "The Nightingale" composed later in April 1798, the poet reconsiders this former description of the bird as 'melancholy', he does so in the self-musing style which would be popular as the conversational style.

A melancholy bird? Oh! Idle thought!

In Nature there is nothing melancholy.

But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced with the remembrance of a grievous wrong,

Or slow distemper, or neglected love,

(And so, poor wretch! filled all things with himself,

And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale

Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,

First named these notes a melancholy strain.

And many a poet echoes the conceit; (PW 264 ll 14-23)

But the impulsive and passionate poet of the earlier years, steeped as he was in the momentary joys at the dawn of conjugal life, was far from regarding his views as a
mere 'conceit. Even the melancholy philomel's soft diversities of tone fill his heart with ecstasy:

Tho' sweeter far than the delicious airs
That vibrate from a white-armed Lady's harp,
What time the languishment of lonely love
Melts in her eye, and heaves her breast of snow,
Are not so sweet as is the voice of her,
My Sara—best beloved of human kind!
When breathing the pure soul of tenderness,
She thrills me with the Husband's promised name! (PW 94 ll 19-26)

In fact, the composer of these lines can be criticized for his limitations in his own words in "The Nightingale". As the maturer Coleridge looks back at his earlier creation, he perhaps find his younger self

Poet who hath been building up the rhyme
When he had better far have streched his limbs
Beside a brook in mossy forest-dell,
By sun or moon light, to the influxes
Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements
Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song
And of his fame forgetful! ?... (PW 264 ll 24-30)
Nevertheless, marriage and residence in Somerset induced in Coleridge a greater sense of reality. The world of nature and that of his immediate perception are more often chosen as the subjects and the remoter and far-fetched issues are being gradually abandoned. Spontaneity is slowly gaining in importance replacing artificiality which has marred his poetic creditability so long in the excessive use of the rhetoric, exclamatory style and cumbersome latinised diction and syntax. So there are lines in “The Hour when we Shall meet again”, composed during illness and absence in 1795, that is suggestive of the imitative style of his early years.

Chill’d by the night, the drooping Rose of May
Mourns the long absence of the lovely Day;
Young Day returning at her promis’d hour
Weeps the soft dew, the balmy gale she sighs,
And darts a trembling lustre from her eyes .
New life and joy the ‘expanding flow’ ret feels
His pitying mistress mourns, and mourning heals! (PW 96 ll 11-18)

“The Verses written at Shurton Bars” however, marks an advance upon the earlier work, unimpeded as its flow is by the tardy diction, a besetting defect of his works of this period. A strong surge of emotional exuberance rebounds in the lines where he synonymizes Sara with peace and tranquility in his otherwise tempestuous days.

In the tumultuous evil hour
Ere peace with Sara came. (PW 98 ll 44-45)

She seemed to be his only lighthouse in life's tumultuous journey.

When stormy midnight howling round
Beats on our roof with clattering sound,
To me your arms you'll stretch:
Great God! You'll say- To us so kind,
O shelter from this loud bleak wind
The houseless, friendless wretch!

How oft, my love! with shapings sweet
I paint the moment, we shall meet!
With eager speed I dart-
I seize you in the vacant air,
Any fancy, with a husband's care
I press you to my heart! (PW 98 ll 75-78 & 85-90)

Now, a poet with infinite potential and intellectual cravings would seldom remain content with this style which might well have been penned by a lesser hand. Self-critical as he was, his own opinion of his poems of these years is revealed in a letter of April 1796 addressed to John Thelwall:

You will find much to blame in them—much effeminacy of sentiment,
much faulty glitter of expression. (Letters II 205)
This is a remarkable feature in Coleridge's evolution as a poet-the critic in him judging with almost objective detachment the poetic concepts formulated by the poet in him.

Simultaneously, there is an honest confession and a promise to improve voiced in another letter to Thelwall written in December.

In some (indeed in many of my poems) there is a garishness and swell of diction, which I hope, that my poems in future, if I write any, will be clear of.... (Letters II 278)

The sign of improvement is markedly evident in "The Eolian Harp" and "Reflections On Having Left a Place of Retirement", both written in 1795 and show a far greater poetic maturity. Here for the first time is perceived a blend of his philosophical opinions with his feelings

..........and this, I think peculiarizes my style of writing. And like everything else, it is sometimes a fault. But do not let us introduce an act of uniformity against Poets- I have room enough in my brain to admire age and almost equally. The head and fancy of Akenside, and the heart and fancy of Bowles, the solemn lordliness of Milton and the divine chit-chat of Cowper, and whatever a man's excellence is, that will be likewise his fault. (L II 278)
The influence of Akenside and Bowles in Coleridge’s poetry has already been established. The Miltonic imitations run riot in *Religious Musings* and *The Destiny of Nations*, disastrous poetic efforts falling for short of the solemn lordliness of the master.

But the conversational chit-chat of Cowper is followed in a unique kind of poetry – the conversational one – ‘The Eolian Harp’ being the first of its kind. It was Charles Lamb who helped Coleridge from his effusive style to health over models of simplicity and compression and the conversational tone was established. Here after, the old effusive manner if retained was not always to the poet’s disadvantage. George Watson throws some light on this new mode of poetry:

> The stimulus now is man, but man set in a landscape which may still yield parallels of a Moral kind, the just vehicle, as one can perceive, for a poet fascinated with the status of the poem as something obscurely hovering between a thought and a thing. (Watson 63)

Cowper who fitted this new mode precisely influenced Coleridge towards that daring humbleness of language and versification that characterizes his conversational poems, “The Eolian Harp” being the poet’s first exercise in this form.

In his well known Essay “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric”, M.H. Abrams, crediting Coleridge with inventing this Characteristic Romantic form, gives a comprehensive description of such poems which will be of immense significance as we begin to study the subtlety of thought-transition in “The Eolian Harp”: 
They present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually localized, outdoor setting whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape, an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation, the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.

(Abrams 20)

The conversation poems are therefore characterized by subjective treatment of any external object in which the poet has invested himself. "The Eolian Harp" is an excellent example of an early conversation poem in which a subjective demand for perfect expression and confirmation of an extraordinary moment of insight exceeds the signifying capacities of self and nature, leading to the negative revelation of a conflict at the heart of the poet's conception of himself. It opens with the poet and his wife Sara sitting happily by their cottage door watching the falling of the evening light. The soothing mood of their love blends effectively with the tranquility of the scene:
How exquisite the scents
Snatch'd from your fear field! And the world so hush'd!
The stilly murmur of the distant sea
Tell us of silence. (PW 100 ll 9-12)

The hush of the evening world in harmony with the feeling of the newly married pair (which is too deep for words) is skillfully conveyed through the flexible and gentle blank verse, the use of sibilants blending and fusing effortlessly into one another. All this creates an effect of intimacy which follows the movement of feeling and thought with ease. J.B. Beer detects in the exquisite description of the natural setting 'the presence of a general spirit, playing over and interfusing itself with every component of the scene'. The opening stanza, in fact, replete as it is with a sensuous apprehension of the natural objects (the sight of the 'star of eve serenely brilliant, the exquisite scents / Snatched from you been fields!', the 'stilly murmur of the Distant Sea' having a more telling effect on the silence of this exotic setting) dwells also on the dual aspects of activity and passivity which is to be continued in the following stanzas.

The clouds 'that late were rich with light' and now dimming down, contrasts the star of eve shining brilliant. The distant sea is murmuring and yet it 'stilly murmur, the oxymoron probably intended to intensify the stillness of 'the world so hush'd. Yet, underlying the multiplicity of Nature is that unifying spirit of soothing quiet and peace. Everything moves together—the sound of the sea, the scent of the bean-field, the peace of the sunset, and the feeling of love for his Sara—to give him the sense of a magical central
process in Nature, which is summed up by the sound of the Eolian Harp in the window, making a music of nature for them.

And that simplest Lute,

Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!

How by the desultory breeze caress’d,

Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,

It pours such sweet upbraidings, as must needs

Tempt to repeat the wrong! (PW 100-101 ll 13-17)

In the hush of the evening, the harp placed in the window becomes an image of sexual union. The harp stroked passionately by the desultory breeze, has erotic connotations in an otherwise chaste situation. The lute as passive as a ‘coy bride’ is activated into ‘sweet upbraidings’ by the sensual caress of the active breeze, ‘her lover’. Again, the active and passive states have been bought together in a state of reconciliation. However, the mind which ached to behold something Great and Indivisible would seldom remain content with these immediate perception of his surrounding, something to inadequate to satisfy his poetic needs. Hence the wind-harp as an erotic imagery fades into insignificance as the same is illuminated in the light of an imaginative arousal.

~~~~~~~~ And now, its strings

Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes

Over delicious surges sink and rise,
Such a soft floating witchery of sound
Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-land,
Where melodies round honey-dropping flowers,
Toothless and wild, like birds of Paradise,
Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untam'd wing. (PW 101 ll 17-25)

The explicit sexuality of the previous lines is masked as the wind becomes an image of the movement of fantasies over the mind. Patricia Adair finds a perfect imaginative fusion of the inner and the outer world, the subject lute and the object lute in these lines. J. Robert Barth also contends that the wind enables the lute to attune all the discordants into unity.

The wind sets in motion, though, not merely the harp but the poet's imagination as well and we are carried in the second movement into a fantasy world, farther and farther it seems from the actual world of their quiet evening together. In fact, however, the poet soon find that this imaginative leap has carried him, not away from reality, but rather into a deeper awareness of the oneness of all things, whether present to him or not. (Barth 82-83)

Likewise, George Watson finds in the 'Harp' a 'to-and-fro between the particular and the general that characterized the conversation poems'. Hence, 'the breeze which passes over the beanfield, releasing its scents,' now becomes a more generalized image of fantasies passing over the brain. And then it becomes the 'intellectual breeze which
passes over all animated things (including human beings) in a manner which at once unifies them all in its energizing action yet assists the individual identity of each

O! the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joy once everywhere-
Methings, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so fill'd,
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
Is Music slumbering on her instrument. (PW 101 ll 26-33)

This ‘One Life’ theory which, at this phase, owes its origin to Priestleyan Unitarianism, was to haunt Coleridge throughout his relentless search after the vast potentialities of Nature. As he developed, he attempted to achieve this unification of the multifarious in nature with the supreme faculty of the mind- the Imagination. In “The Eolian Harp” he tries to do philosophically what he would later do imaginatively.

Full many a thought uncalled and undetained
And many idle flitting fantasies
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute (PW 101-2 ll 37-43)
Here the Lockean empiricism and Hartleyan associationism make their predominance in the poet’s mind profoundly felt. As R.L.Brett points out in Fancy and Imagination, Hartley’s account of the mind described material of consciousness as firstly sensation, secondly, simple ideas or images which are copies of sensations, or sensations which remain after the sense objects which cause them have been removed, and thirdly, complex ideas which are produced by relating simple ideas together. These correspond to the three stages of sensation, memory and thought. The principle by which the mind operates is the associations of ideas. Outside objects impinge upon the sense organs and set up vibrations in the present, these vibrations will continue, though with diminishing force, and can be reactivated by the association of ideas. The mind as a passive receptor, the harp coaxed into ‘sweet upbraidings’ by sense impressions, was not yet ousted from the poet’s mind by the Kantian philosophy which later came to regard the Mind as an active organ assimilating with perfect success the incompatibilities and giving them a semblance of a comprehensible whole.

But the poet’s being ill-at-ease with the mechanistic and empirical explanation of the mental activity and his insight into the wind harp as an imaginative equivalent is vaguely felt, if not explicitly stated in the very initial words of the following line (‘And what if?’)

And what if all animated nature

Be but organic Harps diversely farm’d

That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps

At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (PW 102 ll 44-47)
These lines anticipate what he later expressed in a letter of 10th September, 1802, to Willam Sotheby, in which he compares and contrasts the Greek religious poets and the Hebrew poets of the Old Testament. The Greek writers, he says, were poets of Fancy, whereas the Hebrew poets wrote with the power of Imagination.

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. (LIII 866)

It is conspicuous in a passage of Religious Musings where the poet apostrophizes the organizing sprits which are supposed to act as intermediaries between God and the created world, and evokes, in a characteristic ‘what if’ clause, the possibility that they might be components of the divine substance:

And ye of plastic power, that interfused
Role through the grosser and material mass
In organizing surge! Holies of God!

(And what if Monads of the infinite mind?) (PW 124 ll 405-8)

Deeply aware as the romantics were of the unity of the cosmos, they were trying to express this intensely felt unity, either through poetic images or in philosophical statements. It is then by no means surprising that Coleridge should have been attracted to some form of monism, and particularly to a notion of God as a plastic sprit identifying himself with material forms to organize and shape them from within and to endow them
with their own living identity. The metaphysical links between Nature and man were a problem that confronted Coleridge in his youth; the solution then was not carried beyond the position that physical nature is, in Berkleyan terms, the language of God. This is also precisely the dilemma of Coleridge the Romantic who is unable to reconcile himself fully to the concept of the passivity of the mind. If the intellectual breeze is at once the soul of each organic phenomenon (including every man) and God of all, then a radical identity between man, Nature and God is suggested. The question however remains unresolved, because the poet soon casts of 'these shapings of the unregenerate mind' as irreligious. It was only some years later that he found the route by which the human can be analogous to the Divine. He would then be able to relate the world of Mind and that of Nature through Imagination, 'a repetition in the finite mind of eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM!'

As I have discussed earlier, the dual aspects of passivity and activity in the world of nature as of the mind is presented in the poem. Perhaps Coleridge had been influenced by Blake's idea of contraries which lead to progression when he wrote these lines later in a chapter of Biographia Literaria:

Most of my readers will have observed a small water insect on the surface of rivulets, which throws a cinque spotted shadow fringed with prismatic colours on the sunny bottom of the brook; and you will have noticed, how the little animal wins its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to
it in order to gather strength and a momentary fulcrum for a further propulsion. There is no unapt emblem of the mind’s self experience in the act of thinking. There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive.

This intermediate faculty was the Imagination that the romantics held out to be of supreme importance. But the composer of ‘The Eolian Harp’ was as yet to realize the full potential of the Mind, and dismissed it as a daring thought to equate the Human with the Divine. I.A.Richards thus explains why Coleridge later in the poem accepts Sara’s rebuke of ‘such thoughts’ as ‘dim and unhallowed’:

We can, by weighting all motion, animated nature, organic and thought, make this more an account of the birth of the known from the mind than a perception of a transcendent living reality without. (Richards 148)

In ‘The Eolian Harp’ the poet allowed this idea to emerge freely in his mind, picked it up for consideration, finally made up his mind about it, and dropped it as irresponsible and dangerous to the salvation of the soul.

Well hast thou said and holly disprais’d
These shapings of the unregenerate mind.
Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
On vain philoshopy’s aye babbling spring.
For never guiltless may I speak of him,
Regarding the conclusion of the poem, Harold Bloom's words merit quotation:

The poem collapses in a self surrender that augurs badly for the imagination. Coleridge will go on to write several poems of pure imagination, but he will liberate himself into his potential all too rarely.

'The Eolian Harp' shows why. The imagination wishes to be indulged, and Coleridge feared the moral consequences of such indulgence. (Bloom 196)

Perhaps Coleridge feared the divine retribution of transcending his 'limits' like Icarus, by being borne away on the waxen wings of 'vain philosophy'. The consequence – the poem comes a full circle – after a trip into various realms of thought, we swing back to our starting point. Nevertheless, Albert S. Gerard finds in this circular trip a poet who 'has been enriched, heightened and uplifted by the various inner and outer experiences to which he has submitted and from which he now emerges with what the poet considers to be a deeper and more accurate knowledge of the universe and of his place in it.'

(Gerard 85)

III

There would be no dispute however to the fact that the poetic integrity of 'The Eolian Harp' is to some extent marred by Coleridge's dogmatic adherence to one aspect of Christian doctrine which could not but obliterate his heartfelt experience. His attitude
as expressed in “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement” sounds both rhetorical and conventional because of an underlying mechanical acquiescence to the usual theological casuistry of that problem. At that particular stage in his evolution, Coleridge, it would seem, found relief in the comfortable view that evil somehow, sometime, must be ‘ultimately subservient to good’. This kind of sophistry came to him all the more naturally since it harmonized with his monistic ideals. ‘Reflections’ opens with a description of the ‘goodly scene’ of retirement, a ‘little landscape’ very similar to the opening lines of “The Eolian Harp”.

Low was our pretty cot: our tallest Rose

Peep’d at the chamber-window. We could hear

At silent moon, and eve, and early morn,

The Sea’s faint murmur. In the open air

Our myrtles blossom’d; and across the porch

Thick Jasmines turned: the little landscape round

Was green and woody, and refresh’d the eye.

It was a spot which you might optly call

The valley of Seclusion! (PW 106 ll 1-9)

The cottage at Clevedon is a retreat from the world, a refuge where he can nourish the virtues of modesty, humility, and tranquility and where he is free from the temptations of active life. Yet it is merely a ‘Valley of Seclusion’ not an Eden of complete innocence. The language of natural description is at once minute in observation
and exactly expressive of Coleridge’s developing mood, with its emerging potential to register a pervasive unity between the natural phenomena and the perceiving self. Nature around the jasmine – and – myrtle covered cottage which had been a haven of repose, untouched and undefiled as it is by the world’s evil, is temple-like to the poet. He imagines to worship this serenity but he has been deceived by the elevating song of the skylark, which must be rejected as dream-like.

...............oft with patient ear

Long-listening to the viewless sky-lark’s note
(Viewless, or haply for a moment seen
Gleaming on sunny wings) in whisper’d tones
I’ve said to my Beloved, ‘Such sweet Girl!
The inobstrusive song of Happiness,
Unearthly minstrelsy! (PW 106-7 ll 18-24)

Kelvin Everest has written some memorable lines in this context.

Coleridge here repeats more explicitly an effect that we recognize from ‘The Eolian Harp’, and that he uses again in the later conversation poems; the creative effect of a properly attuned consciousness of nature is displayed in the capacity for increasingly fine auditory discrimination. Local sounds fade away to allow the emergence of distant, or fainter or more delicate sounds. There is most characteristically a gradual fall into silence that is broken by some auditory detail that initiates the growth of
consciousness into a state of mind capable of registering connection, the ‘dim sympathies’ of “Frost at Midnight”. (Everest 251)

But the poet now opens out his horizon from the limited consciousness of the ‘low Dell’ as he climbs up the ‘story mount’ ‘with perilous tail’ and had a panoramic view of a vast expanse of Nature which he describes in the manner Wordsworth describes the slumbering city from atop the Westminster Bridge.

............... Here the bleak mount

The bare bleak mountain speckled thin with sheep;
Grey clouds, that shadowing spot the sunny fields;
And river, now with bushy rocks o’ev brow’d,
Now winding bright and full, with naked banks;
And seats, and lawns, the Abbey and the wood,
And cots, and hamlets, and faint city-spire;
The channel their, the islands and white sails,
Dim coasts and cloud-like hills, and shoreless Ocean –
(PW 107 ll 29-37)

In these lines we see the verse medium cleared of any blurring generality and we feel the rhythm of a natural movement instead of the bustle of ideas pushed allowed by the external force like the Will to convince. Coleridge’s power to delineate the natural world with such exact, individual rightness is matched by his capacity to reproduced with comparable surety not simply the general energy of the mind but the precious activity of his own consciousness. The physical reality, the sensational presence of
nature is insisted on even as it leads the poet to a luxurious confidence in the designing creator beyond his sensory experience.

It seem'd like omnipresence! God, methought
Had built him there a Temple; the whole world
Seem'd imag'd in its vast circumference.

(107 ll 38–40)

This is essentially Coleridge the pantheist, on whom Wordsworthian influence was making its presence felt.

But a deep commitment to some greater cause compels the poet to quit this heavenly abode, this 'quite Dell'. His heart is overwhelmed in the value of Seclusion, but in the active world he will 'join head, heart and hand' 'to fight the bloodless fight / Of Science, Freedom and the Truth in Christ.' Here is a firm determination to enter the sphere of action as a Unitarian should

While my unnumbered brethren toil'd and bled,

That I should dream away the entrusted hours

On rose-leaf beds, pampering the coward heart

With feelings all too delicate for use?

(108 ll 44–48)

Yet, until the coming of the millennium when the busy commerce of the social world and the quiet valley of retirement will be reconciled, the valley can be a refreshing dream.
In “Reflections” therefore, the poet is a divided self drawn apart by the diverse calls of the aesthete and the revolutionary activity in joining the ‘bloodless fight’ is given importance at the expense of the ‘luxury’ of indulging in feelings, ‘all too delicate for use’.

“Ode To The Departing Year” however finds the poet with a solution, obviously in favour of his ‘delicate’ feelings, for that is more utilitarian to a poet than wild rebelliousness. In the opening lines, there is indeed genuine pathos.

Spirit who sweepest the wild Harp of Time

It is most hard, with an untroubled ear

Thy dark in woven harmonies to hear! (160 ll 1-3)

But the first stanza as a whole sounds as if the poet was less indignant at the unpleasant events of 1796 than querulously resentful of the fact that they prevented his contemplative eye from remaining ‘fix’d on Heaven’s unchanging clime’. After a long, turgid account of the workings of ‘Strange-eyed Destruction’, the poet ultimately turns back with relief to his own gentle meditative soul:

Now I recentre my immortal mind

In the deep Sabbath of meek self-content;

Cleans’d from the vapourous passion that bedim

God’s Image, sister of the Seraphim (PW 168 ll 158-161)

Now onwards, the poet, averse to local and temporary politics as ‘they narrow the understanding, they narrow the heart, they fret the temper’, would delve deeper into the stream of metaphysics.
IV

Thus far my scanty brain hath built the rhyme

Elaborate and swelling: yet the heart

Not owns it.  

The lines contained in an early poem of 1974, ‘To A Friend’ sent to Charles Lamb with an unfinished version of ‘Religious Musings’, hints at the poet’s unease with his early imitations of diverse style. These had given way in 1794, at first manhood, to the Miltonizing ‘effusions’ that represented a talent at its undisciplined worst.

Humphry House painted out in his learned and subtle essay that, ‘the Romantics and Coleridge particularly inherited from Milton and tried to renovate a tradition of poetry which combined political, philosophical and religious themes’. Coleridge’s Religious Musings and Destiny of Nations, two grotesque Miltonic imitation in blank verse, ambitious and yet, disastrously tedious poetic efforts.

Religious Musings a vast blank verse monody of 1794-96, is expressive of Coleridge’s early unitarian enthusiasm and the influence of the ideals of the Berkeley and Hartley on the shaping of his philosophical and religious temperaments. Opening with an orthodox pompous expression of the vision of the coming of the Prince of Peace, Religious Musings has obvious Miltonic echoes in the lines describing Nature as a reflection of God.
For the great Invisible (by symbols only seen)
With a peculiar and surpassing light
Shines from the visage of the oppressed good man
When heedless of himself of the scourg'd saint
Mourns for the oppressor. Fair the vernal mead,
Fair the high grove, the sea, the sun, the stars,
True impress each of their Creating Sir!
Yet nor high grove, nor many coloured mead,
Nor the green ocean with his thousand isles
Nor the starred azure, nor the sov'ran sun,
E'er with such majesty of portraiture
Imaged the supreme beauty uncreate
As thou, meek Saviour! (PW 109-10, ll 9-22)

The mood of high endeavor and the latinised distion and syntax are clearly Miltonic, but some of the lines which follow proclaim the gospel, accordingly to Hartley and Priestley, the sages of Associationism and the Unitarian doctrine. In the first published version the insistence on the mortal nature of Christ is stronger than in later versions. The revision removes the emphasis on the moral nature of Christ, although it does retain the phrase, 'the oppressed a good man' 'the scourg'd saint'. The next stanza
elaborates upon another Unitarian premise – cosmic oneness, to which he had developed and intellectual affinity ever since he composed 'The Eolian Harp'.

God only to be hold, and know, and feel,
Till by exclusive consciousness of god
All self annihilated it shall make
God its identity: god all in all!
We and our father one!
And blest are they,
Who in their fleshly world the elect of Heaven,
Their strong eye darting through the deeds of man
Adore with steadfast – unpresuming gaze
Him Nature's essence, mind, and energy! (PW 110 ll 41-50)

Coleridge informs us in his note that Hartley had demonstrated this merging of the individual in the divine consciousness. If God is of the same essence as the natural force of the universe, he becomes a natural rather than a transcendental deity. All thoughts and association begin in and ultimately return to a loving God. The crude passions are refined and a moral sense emerges:

There is one Mind, one omnipresent mind,
Omnific. His most holy is Love. (PW 113 ll 105-6)
Having reached the mystic destination, the elect can realize in retrospect that the seeming evil in the world was in reality God’s ‘ salutary wrath’, that the earthly distinctions between good and evil is fallacious, for in God’s sight, all is pure.

In terms of Coleridge’s intellectual development, his discovery in 1795 of Cudworth’s *True Intellectual System* was an event of great importance. Cudworth had challenged the rising tide of empiricism by asserting that the universe was not composed merely of inert material atoms governed by mechanical laws: rather, the natural world was symbolic of a transcendent reality that lay beyond material appearances. Cudworth’s doctrine of nature as an adumbration of deity, a second book of scripture though which God perpetually reveals himself was promptly appropriated by Coleridge in the lines:

‘Tis the sublime of man,

Our moontide majesty, to know ourselves

Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole!

This fraternises man, this constitutes

Our charities and bearings. But’tis god

Diffused through all, that doth make all one whole.

( *PW* 113-14, ll 126-31 )

John Spencer Hill finds in these lines an overthrow of Hartleyan psychology and an act of distinguishing Fancy and Imagination.

Imagination, then is the mental faculty that allows man to interpret the symbolic language in which god has written himself into the natura
naturata and to discover an all-embracing unity extended through the
multiform appearances of the material universe.

( Hill 30 )

Yet, behind the optimism there is a dim awareness that the problem of evil has not
been completely solved. He goes onto refer to the outcast figure Coin, who is a presence
behind the Ancient Mariner. He also recognizes the evil of the war with France:

But first offences needs must come! Even now

( Black Hell horrible to hear the scoff!)
Thee to defend, meek Galilean! Thee

And thy mild laws of Love unalterable,

Mistrust and Enmity have burst the bands of

Social peace. ( 115 ll 159 -64 )

Again he asserts

These, even these, in mercy didst thou from,

Teacher of Good through Evil, by brief wrong

Making Truth lovely .................. ( 116 ll 194-96 )

Once again, the way by which good can come out of evil is kept vaguely answered. At
this point in the poem he abandons the intractable nature of good and evil only to return
to it with greater maturity in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.

The history of the world from primeval times to the coming millennium is now
related. Beginning with the shepherd in his tent, he goes no to the invention of Property,
piling on the horrors of every kind of the oppression of the ‘wretched many’ till the astonishing climax is mounted at:

The innumerable multitude of wrongs

By man on man inflicted (120 ll 306 7)

The style becomes more apocalyptic as in the vision of the terror of the French Revolution. Nevertheless, the poet is optimistic enough to consider all earthly wretchedness as a prelude to the arrival of the millennium of God’s vengeance in Revelation:

Old ocean claps his hands! The mighty Dead
Rise to new life, who’er from earliest time
With conscious zeal had verged Love’s wonder plan
Coadjutors of God ............... (122 ll 361 – 64)

In 1794, when Coleridge was drafting ‘Religious Musing’ he was attracted by the thoughts of Hartley and Priestly, who united scientific enlightenment with a confident, optimistic theism. Hartley taught that life itself, through the beneficent workings of Laws of Association, automatically built up the being that we are, and led us on by stages from the pleasures of sense to the love God. Priestley taught that ‘Nature’s vast ever acting Energy’ was the energy of God himself, everywhere and always causing, impelling and sustaining. It is therefore quite natural for the young impressionable Coleridge to regard the unitarian inspirers-Milton, Newton, Hartley and Priestley as the chief among God’s coadjutors. Here is a reference to Hartley’s account of the origin of ideas in vibrations of the nerves and brain.
he of mortal kind

Wisest, he first who marked the ideal tribe

Up the fine fibres through the sentient brain. (123 ll 367-69)

It was not until bitter experience had revealed his own insufficiency that their essentially limited and prosaic quality became manifest to him.

Again the poem is not one of exclusive conviction. There are enough evidences of the poet's discomfort with even those systems he adored at this phase. Hence the principles of Unity and Necessity fairly jostle with each other in rivalry for the first place in the reader's attention. The poet's repeated Unitarian suggestion that the 'One omnipresent Mind', whose 'holy name is Love' is the only revelation of the Godhead and that men who filled with this love come to know themselves as 'parts and portions of one wondrous whole', vie with the necessitarian concept of the 'elect of Heaven' who with steadfast gaze adore the deity. Two letters address to Thelwall in the same year 'Religious Musings' was published reveal the poet's dualism as a Unitarian and Necessitarian.

Now the religion which Christ taught is simply, First, that there is an omnipresent Father of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, in whom we all of us move and have our being; and secondly, that when we appear to man to die we do not utterly perish, but after this life shall continue to enjoy, or suffer the consequences of natural effects of the habits we have formed here,
Whether good or evil. This is the Christian religion (Letters II 280)

A necessitarian, I cannot possibly disesteem a man for his religious or antireligious opinions—and as an optimist, I feel diminished concern. (Letters II 205)

That the poet was not oblivious of the inconsistency in his philosophic stand which complicates and overburdens his poetic effort is in these words in a better addressed to Thomas Poole in 1796.

He (Richard Poole) deems my Religious Musing too metaphysical for common readers.

The 'Religious Musings' has more mind than the introduction of B.2nd of Joan of Arc, but its versification is not equally rich: it has more passages of sublimity, but it has not that diffused air of severe Dignity which characterizes my Epic Slice. (Letters II 207)

In fact, Coleridge, at this stage, could not write' without a body of thought' hence his 'poetry is crowded and sweats beneath a heavy berthen of Ideas and Imagery'. This is also the besetting fault of the Destiny of Nations, another grotesque and indisciplined blank verse where the poet again tries to reconcile the control of the universe by the natural forces of the mechanistic philosophy with the existence of God.

The poem ends with a vision of God revealed 'through meaner powers and secondary things'.
For all that meets the bodily sense I deem
Symbolic, one mighty alphabet
For infant minds; and we in this low world
Placed with our back to bright reality,
That we learn with young unwounded ken
The substance from its shadow. (PW 132 ll 18-23)

These lines evoke the memory of Plato's cave in The Republic, where all we call real is only a shadow of the Absolute Good and Love. He then proceeds to attack the mechanical Newtonian theory of the universe and expresses his deep distrust of the materialist science and philosophy and his longing for a transcendental explanation.

........ Those blind omniscients, those almighty slaves
Untenanting creation of its God. (PW 132 ll 38-39)

Fashioned largely by The Arabian Nights, Robinson Crusoe and other such works, Coleridge attached a livelier faith to the world of wonder and fantasy than to the actual world of his senses. When his father discoursed to him of the stars dwelling upon their magnitude and wondrous motion, he heard the tale 'with a profound delight and admiration' but without the least impulse to question its veracity.

My mind feels as if it ached to behold and know something great-something one and know something great-something one and indivisible — and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me The sense of sublimity or majesty! But in faith all
things counterfeit infinity! (L II 349)

With a mind habituated to the vast, he never regarded his senses as the criteria of his belief. For those who are educated though the senses, Coleridge believed, 'the universe them is but a mass of little things'.

While composing The Destiny of Nations, Coleridge apparently agreed with both Unitarian and Platonic principles, for the invocation emphasizes the unity and paternalism of God, while the borrowing from the allegory of the cave reflects Platonism; and the passages also reveal Coleridge's belief in Nature as an extension of God, of the divine energy.

Glory to thee, Father of Earth and Heaven!
All conscious Presence of the Universe!
Nature's vast ever-acting energy!
In will, in deed, Impulse of all to all!
Whether thy love with unrefracted ray
Beam on the Prophet's purged eye, or if
Diseaseing realms the enthusiast, wild of thoughts,
Scatter new frenzies on the infected throng
Thou both inspiring and predooming both,
Fit instruments and best, of perfect end:
Glory to thee, Father of earth and Heaven!

Coleridge was born with a believing and temper and a questing intellect and the tension between these two elements in him (the heart and the head as he so often called
them) determined the whole pattern of his life and thought. In a letter addressed to Benjamin Flower he voices his longing to find a mental clue to the mighty maze of things

I found no comport till its pleased the unimaginable high and lofty one to make my heart more tender in regard of religious feeling. My metaphysical theories lay before me in the hour of anguish as toys by the bedside of a child deadly sick. (L II 267)

And even if his philosophic basis for religious beliefs varied, his religious symbolism remained fixed

Man knows God only by revelation from God-as we see the Sun by his own light (NI 209 G.205)

In The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, we find the same symbolism handled with confidence and mastery. Thus Religious Musings and The Destiny of Nations are significant as indicating the trend of his most serious thinking at that period. Here for the first time do we find the conception of mind through which the cosmic order, the omnipresent Love, finds an avenue of expression. Rightly does Patricia Adair comment:

We must suffer ‘Religious Musings’ and ‘The Destiny of Nations’ in order to understand The Ancient Mariner. (Adair 23)

The poems composed in 1794-96 pave the way to the poet’s journey to his realm of Mystery.
WORKS CITED


