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The Meaning of Dreams: Coleridge's Ambivalence

I

DID COLERIDGE HAVE A THEORY OF DREAMS? Coleridge's interest in dreams, and his acuity in observing them and in thinking about their causes and meaning, have often been noticed—especially since the main body of his remarks became available with the publication of the *Notebooks*. There have been only two discussions of any substance, however, dealing specifically with Coleridge and dreams. In 1953, in *Coleridge, Opium, and Kubla Khan*, Elizabeth Schneider showed that most of Coleridge's comparison of the states of dreaming and dramatic illusion was derived from Erasmus Darwin. She prefaced her discussion with the remark that Coleridge's theory of dreams in general rested on Darwin and other English and German thinkers—"I find hardly anything, on this subject," she said, "that sets him apart from the others. . . ."¹ Then, in 1971, in *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel*, Norman Fruman devoted a chapter to examining Coleridge's understanding of dreams, mostly attempting to psychoanalyze Coleridge through his dreams and to show that Coleridge had little grasp of the personal significance of the dreams he recorded in his notebooks. Fruman also claimed that Coleridge denied any moral connection between his dreams and his waking life.²

While Schneider found Coleridge's theory of dreams unoriginal, Fruman's wider survey (which included the first two volumes of *Notebooks* then published) denied Coleridge a theory at all. Coleridge's remarks on dreams, it is true, fail to exhibit a consistent approach to the topic. While he declared his wish to write a whole work on dreams, visions and related phenomena, "in which I might first give, and then endeavour to explain the most interesting and best attested fact of each,"³ he never

1. Elizabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium, and Kubla Khan* (1953; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1966). p. 91.

2. Norman Fruman, *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* (New York: George Braziller, 1971), p. 380.

3. *The Friend*, ed. Barbara Rooke (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 1, 145. The project is first mentioned in the issue of *The Friend* for October 5, 1809, as a possibility for some future issue (II, 117).

expanded on his brief attempts to outline a comprehensive treatment.⁴ The reasons for this failure cast an interesting light on Coleridge's thinking in general. Both in the ways he related dreams to other cognitive phenomena, and in his attempts to understand the origin and meaning of dreams themselves, Coleridge was ambivalent. The ultimate cause of his difficulties lay in larger and more critical questions about the unity of the self and its place in the world. In spite of his ambivalence, however, Coleridge generated many important and penetrating ideas about dreams, and in several respects he rose far above his sources in ways of which Schneider, working from the published writings of Coleridge then available, could not have been aware. One of Coleridge's original contributions, in fact, is his grasp of the moral significance of dreams, which Professor Fruman has denied him. (With Fruman's other claim, that Coleridge failed to understand the personal significance of his dreams, I am not concerned in this article: I assess the cognitive, not the psychoanalytical, significance of Coleridge's writings on dreams.)

Despite his originality, however, it would be wrong to claim that Coleridge approached Freud in his understanding of dream phenomena.⁵ Some of the same features of dreams that Freud was to discuss were also noticed by Coleridge, but his own discussion of them was rarely Freudian in implication. Freud's theory is not in any case the last word on dreams. Recent research on dreams has tended to modify or overturn many of Freud's claims,⁶ so it is no criticism of Coleridge's powers of insight to say that his remarks on dreams pointed in a different direction from Freud's.

In terms of Freud's own criteria for a theory of dreams, however, which still seem unimpeachable, Coleridge's remarks do not add up to a theory:

Any disquisition upon dreams which seems to explain as many of their observed characteristics from a particular point of view, and which at the same time defines the position occupied by dreams in a wider sphere of phenomena, deserves to be called a theory of dreams.⁷

4. See *Notebooks*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957-73), III, 4409. Subsequent references to the *Notebooks*, abbreviated to volume number and entry, are placed in the text.

5. As in the view of Kathleen Coburn, *The Self Conscious Imagination* (London: Oxford U. Press, 1974), p. 21. See also her notes to the *Notebooks*: I, 44n; II, 2638n; III, 4409n.

6. See the review by S. Fisher and R. Greenberg, *The Scientific Credibility of Freud's Theories and Therapy* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1977), pp. 21-79.

7. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Vol. IV of *Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), p. 75.

Toward both the criteria proposed by Freud, Coleridge's attitude was ambivalent: while he was aware of the depth of thought present in dreams, and was often able to relate it to his most immediate and profound personal concerns, he was also uneasily aware of the uncontrolled nature of dream thought—comparing it at times to the trains of associationist thought or delirium. In his nightmares, moreover, he sensed the exercise of a power which seemed to him against his own will, as if he were possessed by some alien self. Coleridge's attitude to dreams embodied a dilemma central to the romantic era in this respect—whether the self, in all its powers and in its conscious and unconscious aspects, is a unity or not. Coleridge's claims about the "one life" within the self and the source of moral progressiveness in the unconscious were belied by his struggles to account for his nightmares. He was never able to bring his disparate views into a single focus which would satisfactorily have accounted for dreams within the general economy of the self.

Yet Coleridge's long struggle to understand his dreams, recorded mainly in the notebooks, produced a quality of insight much beyond that of his predecessors. An estimate of his originality may be obtained by comparing Coleridge with his English predecessors in the study of dreams. In most of these—Hobbes, Hartley, and Darwin—there is a stock of conventional ideas about dreams which Coleridge inherited; but he often improved and enlivened their ideas with more searching inquiry, making full use (as they did not) of his own dream experience. The case of Andrew Baxter is more unusual; some significant parallels can be found between Baxter's arguments and Coleridge's particular anxieties about the alien quality of certain of his dreams. I shall argue that Baxter's influence may be stronger, and of a less happy kind, than has been suggested.⁸

II

In relation to his predecessors, Coleridge was at his least original in just those areas discussed by Elizabeth Schneider, that is, in the comparison between the states of dreaming and dramatic illusion.⁹ The absence of the ability to judge the reality of images during dreaming, the suspension of the "voluntary" or "comparative power," had been noticed by several earlier thinkers. There is no surprise in dreams, said Hobbes, because

8. Kathleen Coburn: see *Notebooks*, I, 183n.

9. Coleridge's account is in *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. H. Raysor (London: Dent, 1974), I, 116, 179. See also *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (London: Oxford U. Press, 1959), IV, 641–42.

the memory is inactive—such surprise “requires that the things appearing be new and unusual, which can happen to none but those that remember former appearances; whereas in sleep, all things appear as present.”¹⁰ Darwin, in terms similar to Coleridge’s, remarked that “in dreams the power of volition is suspended, we can recollect and compare our present ideas with none of our acquired knowledge, and are hence incapable of observing any absurdities in them.”¹¹ Coleridge was less explicit than several earlier writers on the reason for the suspension of the “comparative power” in dreams: not only Hobbes and Darwin, but Baxter too mentioned the absence of an active memory, referring to “the register of former impressions being sealed up” from the view of the soul. The “region of memory,” he said, is “covered up in sleep, so that these [dream] objects, though fantastical, must appear real.”¹² While Coleridge denied that “we take our dreams for realities,” he omitted claiming that the “comparative power” requires an active memory. The ideas that Coleridge mentioned in drawing the analogy between dreams and dramatic illusion were not explored in any of the remarks on his own dreams; in fact, the dream I shall now discuss rather contradicted the implication that memory is inactive.

The other unoriginal idea of Coleridge concerns the absence of surprise in dreams. This was also the common stock of earlier discussions; in addition to Hobbes it was also mentioned by Hartley,¹³ Baxter and Darwin.¹⁴ Unlike these earlier writers, however, Coleridge did give several illustrations of it with dreams that occurred on the same night in 1802: “October 3—Night—My Dreams uncommonly illustrative of the non-existence of Surprise in sleep. . . .” In the dreams Coleridge related, he found that he was at school although aged 30, that Dorothy Wordsworth appeared with every feature altered, and that a large smoke-like woman changed into a stool and back: none of these manifestations was attended by surprise. This is interesting, since in two of these dreams Coleridge’s “comparative power” appeared to be functioning: finding himself in school, he at first claimed to be twenty—“I then recollected that I was thirty, & of course could not be in the School

10. Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Philosophy*, Vol. 1 of *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1839), pp. 401–2.

11. Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia, or The Laws of Organic Life* (London: J. Johnson, 1794), I, 204.

12. Andrew Baxter, *An Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul*, 3rd. ed. (London: A. Millar, 1745), II, 8, 167–8.

13. David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, Duty, and Expectations*, 3rd. ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1791), I, 386.

14. Baxter, p. 206; Darwin, p. 215. See also Schneider, pp. 104–5.

. . .”; and his response to the appearance of Dorothy displayed a sense of her alteration *during* the dream: “I said, if I did not *know* you to be Dorothy, I never should *suppose* it” (N 1:1250). As this suggests, when Coleridge closely observed his own dreams, his accounts far excelled in subtlety and persuasiveness the remarks of his predecessors.

All of the writers mentioned, except for Baxter, attributed the origin of dreams at least in part to sensory or somatic causes. Besides the generation of dreams from emotions of appetite or aversion, Hobbes observed that “cold doth in the same manner generate fear in those that sleep, and causeth them to dream of ghosts, and to have phantasms of horror and danger. . . .” Hartley also found that dreams may arise from the state of the body, which “suggests such ideas, amongst those that have been lately impressed, as are most suitable to the various kinds and degrees of pleasant and painful vibrations excited in the stomach, brain, or some other part.” Darwin also placed the cause of dreams in the body, in the workings of the arterial and glandular systems, the respiratory muscles, and internal senses of hunger, thirst and lust. All these “are not only occasionally excited in our sleep, but their irritative motions are succeeded by their usual sensations, and make a part of the farrago of our dreams.”¹⁵ Both types of explanation, by sensory and somatic causes, can in addition be found much further back. Aristotle notes both that a dreamer may fashion a faint ringing in the ears into a dream of thunder and lightning, and that the beginnings of diseases may be evident first in dreams.¹⁶

Coleridge also frequently had recourse to the same two types of explanation, but while his predecessors took such mechanisms for the origins of dreams for granted, Coleridge was able to discover something of the laws behind the generation of dream images; what he had to say, moreover, related to other observations he made on the connection of conscious and unconscious thought. In a note of 1804 he suggested how the imagination may be stimulated by the state of the body:

A really important Hint suggested itself to me, as I was falling into my first Sleep—the effect of the posture of the Body, *open mouth* for instance, on first Dreams—& perhaps on all. White Teeth in behind . . . open mouth of a dim face—/ My Mind is not vigorous enough to pursue it—but I see, that it leads to a developement of the effects of continued Indistinctness of *Impressions* on the Imagi-

15. Hobbes, p. 401; Hartley, p. 385; Darwin, p. 209.

16. Aristotle, *De Somnis*, Vol. III of *The Works of Aristotle*, trans. J. I. Beare and G. R. T. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), p. 463a.

nation according to laws of Likeness & what ever that may solve itself into. (*N II:2064*)

Both the factors mentioned here—indistinctness and the laws of likeness—can be found further developed elsewhere, giving an insight into the workings of the imagination.

Likeness was described by Coleridge in both metonymic and metaphorical terms. In the production both of dream images and “ghosts” (illusions seen during semi-sleep states), “small and remote resemblances . . . mere *hints* of likeness from some real external object . . . will suffice to make a vivid thought consubstantiate with the real object. . . .” This was “the great law of the imagination, that a likeness in part tends to become a likeness of a whole. . . .” Thus Luther mistook a dark stone on the wall for a vision of the devil approaching him.¹⁷ But Coleridge also noticed how dream images convey meaning by transfer. Following a dream in which a hypnagogic image of a fish’s backbone turned into a scorpion and gave him a nightmare in consequence of having eaten a red herring for supper, he observed:

J. Boehmen’s mind may be well illustrated from Dreams—there is meaning, important meaning, in both; both the exponents are almost accidental—such infinitely of synonymes exist in the language of vision, considered as the language or representatives of Sensations & Notions. (*N III:3692*)

A later note, in which he attempted to organise his thoughts about dreams, speaks of the “Language of Dreams,” in which the action of images is “either direct, as when a Letter reminds me of itself, or symbolic—as Darkness for Calamity”; such imagery works by “either anticipation or reminiscence” (*N III:4409*).

These notes hint at the important connection of dream images with an individual’s thought. The notion of “indistinctness” was developed elsewhere by Coleridge to show how the most profound thought of the unconscious appears in the conscious mind. He referred, for example, to the necessity of keeping the notion of Heaven indistinct if it is not to be made cheap and worthless: “The best part of Heaven &c is that being utterly indistinct & dim it acts as nothing but a representation of Virtue itself” (*N I:1715*). Similarly, Coleridge spoke of dim feelings being related to profound ideas. Objecting to the simplistic certainties of a Paley or Priestley, he referred to “a stupid piece of mock-knowledge, having no *root* for then it would have feelings of dimness from *growth*,

17. *The Friend*, 1, 145–46.

having no buds or twigs, for then it would have yearnings & strivings of obscurity from *growing* . . .” (*N* II:2509).¹⁸

Although dream imagery may be suggested by the body, therefore, Coleridge’s understanding of the language of imagery and of the relation of indistinctness to the development of profound ideas, enabled him to suggest how the body provides hints for the individual’s imagination; what was developed, by “anticipation or reminiscence,” were the individual’s deepest thoughts. His understanding was much more productive in this respect than the simple association suggested by Hobbes, that a sensation of cold leads to dreaming of ghosts. Coleridge’s insight into the process of image-generation enabled him to grasp the importance of the meaning in dreams; it did not lead him to explore the content of his own dreams. He could not say why a specific stimulus gives rise to a particular dream, for example, the ticking of a watch that became Hartley’s irritating “Hum & Ha” in a dream of his Christening (*N* I:1620). He did not meet the criterion of Freud in this respect, who observed that one must be able to explain *why* a stimulus appears in a dream in a given form.¹⁹

The general connection of dreams with the development of the individual is evident in Coleridge’s remark, that in sleep the Soul never *is*, “but lives in *approaches*—touched by the outgoing pre-existent Ghosts of many feelings . . .” (*N* II:3215). But this did not lead Coleridge to assume that dreams must always be about one’s most immediate concerns. Lucretius, for instance, observed that “whatever the things on which we have been occupied much in the past, the mind being thus more intent upon that pursuit, it is generally the same things that we seem to encounter in dreams. . . .” Hartley, likewise, spoke generally of dreams being partly “deducible from the impressions and ideas of the preceding day. . . .”²⁰ Coleridge, on the other hand, recorded several dreams in which some *minor* impression of the preceding day has been taken as the starting point. For example, he dreamt of a Crusoe making an empire of pens “in consequence of making 5 or 6 Pens just as I was going to Bed” (*N* II:2489). While he did not always notice this phenomenon (e.g. *N* II:1998, 2468), it was in agreement with Freud’s theory of the “day residue,”²¹ and encourages respect for the accuracy with which Coleridge recorded his dreams.

18. Cf. *The Friend*, I, 106.

19. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Vol. xv of *Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1963), pp. 93–94.

20. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse, revised by M. F. Smith (London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1975), Bk. 4, ll. 962–65; Hartley, p. 384.

21. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 165–83.

Another principle of dream formation discussed by Freud, the work of condensation and displacement, was noticed before Coleridge. Hartley observed that the same person can appear in two places at once, or that two persons coalesce into one.²² But Coleridge was the first to record detailed dreams in which this phenomenon occurs. A dream of 1803 begins with “two Sons of a Nobleman . . . brought out by the Footman to resign their Property”; as they resisted this wrong “my Interest for them, I suppose, increased, I became they—the duality vanished . . .” and he found himself asking Boyer, the headmaster of his Christ’s Hospital days, “to have pity on a Nobleman’s Orphan . . .” (*N* I:1649). Following another dream in which he gave “the names, Characters, mine & their appropriate Language & Feelings to 3 or 4 forms, having no one Likeness of the real Persons,” he conjured himself to “Think of this” (*N* II:2018). Although he never did so, and did not offer an explanation of the phenomenon, the number of similar dreams he recorded in detail²³ induces faith in Coleridge as an observer of his own dreams. Where Coleridge did not exceed his predecessors in explaining the nature of dreams, his observations of their various features were invariably more accurate and vivid.

III

What meaning did Coleridge himself then ascribe to dreams? While Coleridge’s remarks do not, as I mentioned, add up to a theory, they often touch on some of Coleridge’s most important ideas and feelings. They issue in two opposite kinds of meaning: there are dreams and related phenomena that accord with the best feelings of the self, but there are also those which seem to originate with some alien power, subjugating or endangering the self. I will describe first those relating to Coleridge’s ideas of the self, in which an ambivalence in Coleridge’s attitude can be traced; then I will mention Coleridge’s views on the nature of dream thought itself, in which a similar ambivalence is apparent.

Some of Coleridge’s most important and powerful dreams were imbued with his love for Sara Hutchinson. While she appeared in person in some dreams—in 1805, for example, while in Malta, he dreamt of returning to the welcome of Sara and of marriage with her (*N* II:2600)—he enjoyed numerous dreams in which her personality was everywhere, but her appearance nowhere concretely represented. In 1804 he described dreams that “lead to Sara as the first waking Thought,” in which

22. Hartley, p. 386.

23. See I, 1250; II, 2061, 2539.

in some incomprehensible manner the whole Dream seems to have been—about her? nay—perhaps, all wild—no form, no . . . place, no incident, any way connected with her!—What then? Shall I dare say, the whole Dream seems to have been *Her—She*.

He remembered the dream in which Dorothy appeared with every feature altered (*N* I:1250), and added, “Does not this establish the existence of a *Feeling* of a Person quite distinct at all times, & at certain times *perfectly separable* from, the Image of the Person?” (*N* II:2061).

This is a key idea in Coleridge’s system of thought. It led to his poem about the being of Sara, entitled rather misleadingly “Phantom” by Coleridge’s publishers.²⁴ It accords with Coleridge’s frequent assertion that love is for the being of the beloved—it is only incidentally concerned with the person’s appearance or actions. In 1808, talking of the fullness of his love for Sara, he said that “even when the Beloved is present,” there was a “seeming to look thro’ her and asking for her very Self within or even beyond her apparent Form” (*N* III:3370). This is the real or “substance” self which Coleridge described. Love induced a conscious sense of it, and an awareness that consciousness (which has access only to appearances) was a shadow by comparison:

All our Thoughts all that we abstract from our consciousness & so form the Phaenomenon Self is a Shadow, its whole Substance is the dim yet powerful sense that it is but a Shadow, & ought to belong to a Substance / but this Substance can have no marks, no discriminating Characters. . . . (*N* II:3026)

Coleridge also spoke elsewhere of the sense of depth in oneself resulting from intense love (*N* III:3520), and of the increased consciousness of the self in love (*N* III:3430). Similarly, he wrote that in love we “crave an outward confirmation of that *something* within us, which is our *very self*, that something, not *made up* of our qualities and relations, but itself the supporter and substantial basis of all these.”²⁵

When it is appreciated, moreover, that for Coleridge the hidden self of the beloved was the symbol of God and that such love tended towards the perfection of the soul (*N* II:2540), the moral and philosophical significance of Coleridge’s dream sense of Sara becomes apparent. Such dreams appear to have played a key role in helping Coleridge to develop his theory of the self. It is the same obscure part of the self in which the principal ideas of Coleridge’s system are located, ideas of “Being, Form,

24. *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford U. Press, 1912), I, 393; see also *Notebooks*, II, 2441.

25. *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford U. Press, 1958), II, 188.

Life, the Reason . . .” which, Coleridge tells us, tend to our moral perfection, and for which alone we must reserve our deep feelings.²⁶ The idea of Sara in Coleridge’s dreams was another of those “dim feelings” which, as we have seen, make for moral growth and the unity of the self.

This beneficial aspect of dreams, and the insight it gave Coleridge into the unconscious as the seat of reason and the true self, was reflected in another note on his dream-feelings for Sara. “I fall asleep night after night,” he said in 1807, “watching that perpetual feeling, to which Imagination . . . has given a place and seat of manifestation a shechinah in the heart.” This holy place he figured as “an animant self-conscious pendulum,” “a life within Life,” “A consciousness within a Consciousness” (*N* II:2999). Such a view of dreaming enabled him to use the dream as an image of the thought-process in response to poetry; just as love continually developed the self within the self, so poetry developed the feelings within the self. Poetry, he said, is “a rationalized dream dealing . . . to manifold Forms our own Feelings, that never perhaps were attached by us consciously to our own personal Selves.” He referred to *Othello* and *Lear* as “a divine Dream,” adding that “we *become* that which we understandly behold and hear . . .” (*N* II:2086). Coleridge’s praise for the goodness of dreams could not be pitched higher than in this association of the word with his beloved Shakespeare.

And yet Coleridge also had dreams of great terror. In his nightmares he was pursued by attacking women, he was possessed by nameless guilt, and would awaken screaming with such fear that he disturbed his whole house. As he describes it in his well-known and vivid poem, “The Pains of Sleep,” there seemed also to be an “unfathomable hell within.”²⁷ Coleridge’s poem testified to his bewilderment and horror that such dreams should be visited on one whose nature was dedicated only to loving and being loved. Some of the nightmares he recorded fully validate the descriptions in the poem, but his accounts also show him groping at times for an explanation of such dreams. A quite different view of the self emerges.

In each of these accounts Coleridge exteriorized the influence that caused the dream. In another 1804 note on the influence of body posture, he asked: “does it not act sometimes by suggesting the postures of Objects, of inanimates so that *I* could see them, of the animate partly so & partly so as they could see me / & would look in on me . . .” (*N* II:2073). This is obscure, but it seems to imply that some subliminal

26. *The Friend*, I, 106.

27. *Poetical Works*, I, 390.

perception induced by body posture transmuted into those alien animate forms that populate a dream. This is a step towards dissociating such images from the self: the cause lies in the suggestive power of body posture, not in the thoughts or feelings of the self.

In a later note of 1811, on nightmares, Coleridge took a further step, attributing them to sensations in the stomach or gut, and awkward pressure in the limbs. The resulting terror was a sensation in itself, *terror corporeus sive materialis*—"corporeal or material terror." The solution to the problem of how it arose would "perhaps, throw great doubt on this present dogma, that the Forms & Feelings of Sleep are always the reflections & confused Echoes of our waking Thoughts, & Experiences" (*N III:4046*). Coleridge could not, in other words, find any cause for the nightmares in the immaterial (the "substance") self.

The most revealing explanation, however, was attached to a nightmare of 1805, in which there appeared a sneering and fiendishly malignant girl of two or two and a half years old, succeeded by a more abstract sensation which actually awoke Coleridge. He described an alien force impressing itself on him against his will:

it gave the *idea* and *sensation* of actual grasp or touch contrary to *my* will, & in apparent consequence of the malignant will of the external Form, actually appearing or (as sometimes happens) believed to exist. . . . (*N II:2468*)

When Coleridge spoke here of an external Form causing the nightmare, such as is "believed to exist," he may have been recalling Andrew Baxter's explanation of dreams. The whole substance of Baxter's long discourse on dreams was that since dreams are not willed, they cannot be produced by the soul of the dreamer. It is inconceivable, said Baxter, "what the soul could design by these extravagances, always deceiving, and often terrifying itself: no one can have a notion of the possibility of this." Therefore "the soul doth not form, and present to itself those scenes."

Baxter's account of dreams also noted the passivity of the dreamer, in a manner strongly reminiscent of several of Coleridge's nightmares:

most of those representations, which are offered to the soul in sleep, are not only not produced by it, since it hath no consciousness of any act of the *will* to introduce them; but . . . they are *involuntarily intruded upon it*. It hears, sees, feels objects at that time, not as it would itself, but such as they are made to appear to it. . . .²⁸

28. Baxter, II, 11–13.

For Coleridge, as for Baxter, the will was essential to the self, if not a synonym for the self (*N* II:2382).²⁹ Thus a peculiar horror of the nightmare for Coleridge was the self's passivity and what this implied. While at sea on the way to Malta in 1804, Coleridge described his "frightful Dreams of Despair" in terms of a life in death:

The sense of individual Existence is full & lively only ⟨for one⟩ to feel oneself powerless, crushed *in* by every power—a stifling bod-ing, one abject miserable Wretch / yet hopeless, yet struggling, removed from all touch of Life, deprived of all notion of Death / strange mixture of Fear and Despair—& that passio purissima, that mere Passiveness with Pain (the essence of which is perhaps Passivity—& which our word—mere Suffering—well comprizes—) in which the Devils are the Antithesis of Deity, who is Actus Purissimus, and eternal Life, as they are an ever-living Death. (*N* II:2078)

For Baxter the answer to the problem of dreams was simple: since he also maintained that dreams cannot be produced by bodily causes, the solution he offered was that they are the work of spirits. Our dreams, he said, "are formed and represented to the soul, by an intelligent and free cause"; and in this "the agency of separate spirits is plainly necessary. . . ." Nor were the spirits benign ones, since they take advantage of the vulnerability of men during sleep, especially during bodily indispositions when the *Incubus* or *Nightmare* is sent to terrify the sleeper. Coleridge's reference to external Forms, "believed to exist," as well as the entry of *Devils* into the note quoted above, suggests that he had been impressed by Baxter's argument when he read the *Enquiry* in 1794, and that he continued to credit at least the possibility of its truth. As late as 1826, in a note analyzing dream phenomena, he ended by remarking with hesitation:

It is time to be saying my prayers, and to intreat protection 'from the Spirits of Darkness'—a phrase in one of Jer. Taylor's fine Prayers, which I am always *inclined* to retain—tho' the fear of praying what I do not fully believe makes me alter it into—Afflictions of Sleep.³⁰

29. See John H. Muirhead, *Coleridge as Philosopher* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), p. 146; Laurence S. Lockridge, *Coleridge the Moralizer* (New York: Cornell U. Press, 1977), p. 22.

30. From Folio Notebook, *f*43, as quoted in Coburn, *The Self Conscious Imagination*, p. 18. Cf. the quotation from Thomas Burnet prefixed to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

IV

Unlike Baxter, Coleridge could not attribute the meanings of dreams entirely to the work of spirits. His keen sense for the workings of the unconscious enabled him to recognize that some dreams originate in, and express, the deepest interests of the self. Yet how could the mind inflict on the dreamer against his will such alien forms and terrors when the self, of which the mind is a part, was constituted by the will? A similar ambivalence can be seen in Coleridge's remarks about the nature of dream thought itself.

While Coleridge, as I have shown, aligned the image-forming power of the dream with the work of the imagination, associating its power in this way with our obscure feelings, he was also aware that the readiness of this power to act during half-sleep states or nightmares could produce the delusions he called "ghosts"; both were produced by that law of the imagination according to which "a likeness in part tends to become a likeness of the whole. . . ." The thought produced in this way was not only factitious, but formed itself beyond the control of the thinker. Such uncontrolled power of thought unnerved Coleridge: he complained of his dreams that

Fancy and Sleep *stream on*; and (instead of outward Forms and Sounds, the Sanctifiers, the Strengtheners!) they connect with them motions of the blood and nerves, and images forced into the mind by the feelings that arise out of the position & state of the Body and its different members. (N II:2543)

At such moments Coleridge sounds unduly prudish about the form taken by certain dreams. ("Desire with loathing strangely mixed" perhaps?) But behind this complaint lay a genuinely philosophical objection to such unchecked trains of thought.

Although an early adherent of Hartley's Associationism, during the early years of the nineteenth century Coleridge began extricating himself from Hartley, seeing many dangerous implications in his theory. In 1803, he wrote

I will at least make the attempt to explain to myself the Origin of moral Evil from the *streamy* Nature of Association, which Thinking = Reason, curbs & rudders / how this comes to be so difficult / Do not the bad Passions in Dreams throw light & shew of proof upon this Hypothesis?

As the note continued he observed, "what is the height, & ideal of mere association?—Delirium" (N I:1770). This initiated the connection in

Coleridge's mind between associationist thought and delirium which was to be fully developed in the *Biographia Literaria*.³¹ But it also led Coleridge to use the word *dream* to disparage states of thought into which reason and the obscure feelings did not enter. Speaking of the reading of books, for example, he observed that experience gives a light and shade in the mind to what is read, conferring a greater vividness on certain ideas; otherwise, "all being equally vivid = (the whole becomes) a dream" (*N* II:2526). Similarly, speaking of the Light of St. John, Coleridge said, "Being rejected, it leaves the understanding to a world of dreams and darkness," and a philosophy (i.e. Associationism) for which nothing remained but "apparitions."³² Again, without the discipline of Attention, said Coleridge in *The Friend*, Thinking "must remain a thoughtless substitute for dreaming with our eyes open."³³

Attention is the will of the self which directs thought; similarly, the spiritual understanding of St. John's Light, or the reason, also belongs to the self. Thus when Coleridge used *dream* metaphorically in this way, he was referring to thought in which the best energies of the self remained uninvolved. The same fear lay behind his objection to the "streamy" nature of thought in actual dreams. In a less intense form, it repeated the inference that certain dreams belong, not to the self, but to an alien or evil power operative in thought, before which the self is passive.

The whole question of what Coleridge understood about the meaning of dreams is only a footnote to his inquiry into the laws of thought and imagination; but the ambivalence Coleridge displayed about dreams also ran through his thinking on the larger subject. As Laurence Kramer has observed,³⁴ the imagination can be a compulsive and wayward power; it seems at times to have a will of its own, starting up "to threaten the self's existence." Kramer uses the term *daemonic* for this experience, in which the self acts "like a hostile other." It is here that Associationist thought and Imagination come curiously near to each other. Coleridge's eventual hostility to the streamy nature of Associationist thought arose from a more than purely philosophical concern: such thought is manifested in dark dreams and daydreams which seem to degrade the self. The Imagination, in its turn, resulted in poems such as *The Ancient Mariner* or "Christabel," works which Coleridge himself seems only to

31. *Biographia*, I, 77.

32. *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 96.

33. *The Friend*, I, 150.

34. Laurence Kramer, "That Other Will: The Daemonic in Coleridge and Wordsworth," *Philological Quarterly*, 58 (1979), 298-320.

have half understood. Did such thought issue from the self? Who was willing it?

The question of whether dreams issue from the self may have perplexed Coleridge, but it is certain that dreams impinged on his central moral concerns regarding the self. Norman Fruman's observation that Coleridge "repeatedly asserted that his dreams had no moral significance" (a claim that rests on one ambiguous phrase in a letter),³⁵ cannot be accepted when Coleridge's writings on dreams are studied in relation to his general thinking about the self. Coleridge's moral awareness was not a modern one—his understanding of dreams did not place him with Freud or Jung. But in the context of his period, Coleridge's remarks on dreams display a depth and complexity which was unique, and which cast a revealing light on the theory of the self which romantic philosophers and poets were attempting to frame.

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35. Fruman, p. 368. For the letter concerned, see *Collected Letters*, II, 1021.