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Romanticism and the Materialist Imagination: Murmurs and Rustles in the Landscape

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PLAN

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TEXTE

- 1 A few decades ago, it would have been nonsensical, even contradictory, to define the Romantic imagination by the materialist turn. One of course would have in mind Coleridge’s definition of imagination with its spiritual and divine intimations, discarding the diversity of the phenomenal and fanciful world. Or one would think of William Blake’s “Mental things” “alone Real”. In the 1960s and 1970s, Romantic criticism would read the poetic forms as an attempt to transcend our physical world to get a glimpse of the sublime world of the Ideal. Yet this upward movement, from the phenomenal to the noumenal, described by Paul De Man in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, is always threatened by pure transparency or nothingness, the Idea or essence of the thing erasing its materiality. The Romantic image, he argued, is consumed by the unreal and the poem “Kubla Khan” is often quoted as the impossible “survival” of the Romantic image. As the Ancient Mariner enralls the wedding guest, Romantic poets and artists were doomed to repeat over and over again, through various poetic forms, this hopeless attempt to posit an absence:

Poetic language can do nothing but originate anew over and over again; it is always constitutive, able to posit regardless of presence

but, by the same token, unable to give a foundation to what it posits except as an intent of consciousness.¹

- 2 Yet, matter and consciousness are refused this “happy relationship” because of language. Since the 1990s with the advent of New Materialism and the diffusion of its influence upon sciences, literature and politics, Romantic studies have struggled to move away from this disjunction mind/nature, individual/society, artist/history and have offered a re-reading of poetic forms grounded in socio-political contexts and scientific breakthroughs. Science, chemistry, geology or botany have been used as a framework to offer renewed interpretations of poetic forms.² And of course, the idea of friendships, circles, dialogues, coteries between poets and scientists, their mutual love of art and discovery, resurfaced with these new readings. So today, to use W.J.T. Mitchell’s expression,³ we are “getting physical with Romanticism”, no longer only spiritual, unreal, metaphysical or ideal. The difficulty though is to define the nature of the physical world of romanticism. One can wonder if this is not a signal of New Materialism, which tries to redefine Nature as a powerful living assembly of agentic elements, forces and practices, intertwining the human and the non-human, matter and meaning, nature and the metaphysical. Are Romantic studies following the trends of cultural and academic interests? Is this body natural, cultural or material? Is it, in W.J.T. Mitchell’s words, a “replaying of the old romantic division” between mind and spirit, between the vital living organism and the dead mechanical material?
- 3 Mitchell refuses to abandon, as Paul De Man does, the fate of the Romantic image to airy nothingness. But he considers as absurd this gesture of grounding Romanticism in the purely physical and material world without the metaphysical. He offers a brilliant definition of the Romantic image as a “composite of two concrete concepts, the fossil and the totem”⁴:

Totemism is the figure of the longing for an intimate relationship with nature and the greeting of natural objects as “friends and companions.” (...) fossilism expresses the ironic and catastrophic consciousness of modernity and revolution.⁵

- 4 Quoting Ralph Emerson - language as “fossil poetry”⁶ - he sees the Romantic and impossible longing for a communion between man, nature and the divine in the totem. Yet, the materiality and the fixity of the fossil attest conjointly of the defeat of a language made up of dead images that have lost their poetic origin.
- 5 I would like to consider here the renewed interest for the Romantic imagination in the light of New Materialism. I will look at different poetic forms: major poems and traditional textual forms but also minor texts which offer a variation on the poetic form. Focusing on those forms, I will suggest that notebook and journal writing mirrors the process of image formation which, at that time, was strongly grounded in the natural world. Coleridge and Wordsworth, at their most prolific poetic time (1797-1798), composed mostly outdoors while roaming the Quantock Hills or the Somerset coast. I will examine the powerful affective force of these images, seeing in them the experience of the “body-becoming-mind.”⁷ But first, I will come back on the seemingly antithetical coupling of the Romantic Imagination and New Materialism to try and understand how both of these forms and discourses can benefit from one another in terms of the interconnectedness between body, mind and environment.

Rethinking the human/non-human connectivity: why do we always come back to Romanticism?

- 6 Romanticism is itself often seen as a lost object, a lost world made of ruins, reveries, fading visions. Yet it also acts as a totem object, a kind of universal figure we can identify with and come back to in this attempt to unify and reconcile the human and nonhuman worlds. Reintegrating Man in history seems to be the major concern today in most fields of sciences. The influence of “environmental humanities” is gradually spreading throughout the academic world, not only to combine social sciences (environmental sociology, ecocriticism, philosophy of ecology, political ecology) but to come to this realization that we live in a world of finite resources and of impending crisis.

But maybe the focus is not as much on reinstating things, the nonhuman, in our human world as it is about finding a sense of place to Man. Foucault suggests in *The Order of Things* that the 19th century abandoned man to move into the physical world of things:

Things first of all received a historicity proper to them, which freed them from the continuous space that imposed the same chronology upon them as upon men. So that man found himself dispossessed of what constituted the most manifest contents of his history.⁸

- 7 The obsession of Romantics with the principle of Life and its enigma has given birth in fiction and poetry to monstrous formless forms that discard man because Reason and Will are unable to control them: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Wordsworth's Lucy figure, Coleridge's Geraldine in *Christabel* or the Ancient Mariner killing what made him human and natural, the Albatross. We can think also of William Blake's composite and organic figures in his "Jerusalem" plates: the butterfly-like or plant-like women whose corporeal lines, their feet, ribs, hair, seem to be incorporated to the vegetable organism. Those figures adumbrated the transition defined by Denise Gigante as the move "from a Christian cosmology to a world of self-shaping matter"⁹ and maybe the Romantic artist distanced himself from God because of this fascination and obsession for the mystery of the "living principle" that they could observe in the simplest forms of life. As Blumenbach, an 18th century German anthropologist and biologist writes:

The human being and his close animal relatives have only a limited ability to regenerate anything compared to the extraordinary power to do so among many cold-blooded animals, especially water salamanders, crabs, snails, earthworms, sea anemones, sea stars and arm-polyps.¹⁰

- 8 Darwin also noted the amazing concentration of Life in those same creatures, which enabled them, if cut in two, not only to regenerate themselves, but to regenerate differently. What originally was a head could become a tail and vice-versa and thus the organism would multiply and de-multiply itself. The ebullient vitalist power of natural forms was thus a source of fascination but also of great anxiety for

the Romantics. The figure of the polypus and its amazing capacity of regeneration emerged almost conjointly in natural sciences (see for instance the scientific works of Charles Bonnet and Abraham Trembley) and in poetry. The Mighty Polypus appears graphically and poetically in Blake's art as a Prolific "mighty threatening Form" that needs to be checked by its contrary, the Devourer. Heaven needs Hell in Blake's art. All those living nonhuman forms represented both the magnitude of the power of Life but also its unregulated self-shaping nature.

- 9 The collapse of organized divine structure into a slimy mass of self-reproducing matter haunts the Romantic age (we can think of the Ancient Mariner contemplating from afar the undulating water-snakes: "Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs / Upon the slimy sea")¹¹, but also its successive eras. Today, mankind is struggling with this same idea of disjunction and this uncontrolled growth of systems, processes, organisms: not only viruses, cancers, diseases but also man-made systems such as the robot, the cyborg, or complex man-made products such as markets, economies, financial systems contaminated by toxic assets. Yet what differentiates us from the Romantic age is this distance introduced by more sophisticated and virtual technologies, and the extension of what Bruno Latour calls "detours and compositions."¹² Each one of our gestures is articulated by an increasing number of detours, evermore complex and specialized, which makes it difficult to distinguish the human action from the use of technologies and sciences. We are witnessing today in all fields of sciences the development of concepts and theories which reposit man and things into a coupled system and a reciprocal interaction. We are rebuilding today the idea of a system but not as a closed, fixed and stable one where man has power over the non-human. We are thinking today in terms of assembly and agency where each component part, whether human or non-human, is imbued with vitality as it comes into contact with another force. So that the efficacy or agency of a part of the assemblage depends on the nature and quality of collaboration or interference with other bodies or forces. The idea of "vital materialism"¹³ for instance or "self-assembly"¹⁴ draws from the works of Deleuze and Spinoza to assert that "humanity and non-humanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other."¹⁵ The brain is not considered

anymore as an all-powerful organ, clearly separated from the outside world, which determines our capacity to seize and hold the outside world. The extended mind theory (EMT) developed by the young Scottish philosopher Andy Clark for instance reconsiders the question: “where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?”¹⁶ Through his famous demonstration of Otto’s Notebook, A. Clarke overturns the old division between the “I am” and “it is”, idealism and realism. Two fictional characters, Inga and Otto, are travelling to a museum. Otto suffers from Alzheimer’s disease so he has noted down in his notebook the directions to the museum. While both had the same belief as to the location of the museum, Inga recalls the directions with her memory, which is internally processed by the brain. On the contrary, Otto, who shares the same belief (the location of the museum) needs to check the directions in his notebook, which then acts as a kind of extension of his memory. What Andy Clark has addressed here is the division point between mind and environment and his “Extended Mind Theory” suggests that some extracranial objects (such as the notebook, bodily gestures or close environmental entities) are incorporated in the human thought process. Active and coupled with the brain, the body and close environmental entities create a cognitive loop or a coupled system. So Andy Clark goes one step further than Hilary Putnam by pointing at the extension of the mind into the environment which becomes active in our cognitive process.

- 10 Now I will use the reference to Otto’s notebook to aptly switch to that of the Romantics. What I would like to suggest here is how these writings, in terms of content but also of form, offer us a glimpse of this deep connection and interaction between mind, body and environment where each force, whether human or non-human, becomes an integrated part of the thinking process. I will consider the notebooks and diaries as semiotic and graphic figurations of the mind in action, and in relation with its environment. They are pictures of how the mind brims with life when connected to natural forms and how matter is itself endowed with vibrancy, agency and meaning when enlivened by the mind. And I quite believe that Romanticism is seen as a kind of starting-point for New Materialism because Romantics, intermingling poetry, sciences and politics, prefigured to a certain

extent what interdisciplinary research is attempting to define world-wide with New Materialism.

The living principle: “within and beyond” perception

- 11 We know that what saves the Ancient Mariner from his terrible fate of living among the dead is his blessing of the water snakes. The disjunction between living matter and himself is marked rhythmically by the caesura; the inversion auxiliary / subject (“so did I”) suggests a closed world yet with one body, the “I”, severed from the rest.

And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.¹⁷

- 12 A shift first in perception then in language is what brings the Ancient Mariner back to Life. Seeing the movements, the tracks, the changing colours of the water-snakes, seeing “beyond and within” matter allows the Mariner to perceive Life again; language can then reinstate the beauty of matter and the connection of man to these forms of Life. As soon as the living is blessed, the dead mass of the Albatross drops from his neck and disappears into the sea.

Beyond the shadow of the ship,
I watch'd the water-snakes:
They mov'd in tracks of shining white;
And when they rear'd, the elfish light
Fell off in hoary flakes.

Within the shadow of the ship
I watch'd their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coil'd and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gush't from my heart,
And I bless'd them unaware!
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,

And I bless'd them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.¹⁸

- 13 Art for the Romantics was not about showing the visible but making visible a motion, reaching to the essence of living forms thanks to imagination. The task of the perceptive gaze of the artist and of art was then to abridge the natural world into natural forms, lines and fluids to access those formative forces at work within nature, to materialize the “beyond and within” principle which held together the inner and outer worlds.
- 14 Imagining matter as a living form, as endowed with agency, was clearly the purpose of Romantic “peregrine writing”, this private form of outdoor writing recounting one’s experience within the natural world while walking. I will focus here on the writings of two poets, Dorothy Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge in 1797-1798, one of the greatest periods in Romantic creation, to try and figure out how some “minor” writing contributed to the shaping of this Romantic perception.

Murmurs and rustles in notebooks and journals

- 15 The expression “peregrine writing” embraces two forms: that of the journal and that of the notebook. Each form has its own temporal specificity (recollection against immediacy) yet each textual form responds to the other, through echoes and allusions, to try and posit the image created by the interaction between mind and landscape, not as a representation, but as a figuration of the principle of Life; that is to materialize through various poetic, semiotic and graphic means the crossing-over of the mind into the natural world. French proto-phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty may have called it “the chiasmus”,¹⁹ that is the reciprocal exchange between human flesh and that of the world that happens during the act of perception.

- 16 Along with William Wordsworth, the three poets roamed the Quantock hills, looking for something “interesting” in the landscape:

27th. Walked from seven o'clock till half-past eight. Upon the whole an uninteresting evening.²⁰

7th. William and I drank tea at Coleridge's. A cloudy sky. Observed nothing particularly interesting – the distant prospect obscured.²¹

- 17 Dorothy's journals were not meant to be published. William, Dorothy and Coleridge often met at that time, enjoying together morning and evening walks, especially during fall or winter and in windy, even stormy conditions. She was an acute observer of the minutest details of the landscape. Coleridge and Dorothy both shared in their peregrine writing the same fascination for the insubstantial in nature and their journal/notebook writing was an attempt to seize those fleeting and evanescent forms. Yet, while Coleridge favoured a wandering view and wrote about the world as he perceived it, Dorothy's writing is reminiscent and her poetic images usually gathered from hill-tops:

6th. Walked to Stowey over the hills.²²

8th. Went up the park, and over the tops of the hills, till we came to a new and very delicious pathway, which conducted us to the Coombe.²³

24th. Went to the hill-top. Sat a considerable time overlooking the country towards the sea.²⁴

- 18 However, what they were looking at while wandering was not the natural objects that composed the landscape; they were gazing at or rather contemplating phenomena (flux or eddies of water, atmospheric effects, fading lights, nocturnal skies) and listening to sounds of things unseen. Their writing is more about the murmur of the stream than about the object itself, it's more about the rustle in the oaks than about the trees. They delighted in the dying away of things, objects or sounds suddenly or slowly disappearing, and thus stirring emotions and affects.

The sun shone clear, but all at once a heavy blackness hung over the sea. The trees almost *roared*, and the ground seemed in motion with the multitudes of dancing leaves, which made a rustling sound distinct from that of the trees.²⁵

The withered leaves were coloured with a deeper yellow, a brighter gloss spotted the hollies; again her form became dimmer (...) The manufacturer's dog makes strange uncouth howl which it continues many minutes after there is no noise near it but that of the brook. It howls at the murmur of the village stream.²⁶

William called me into the garden to observe a singular appearance about the moon. A perfect rainbow, within the bow one star, only of colours more vivid. The semi-circle soon became a complete circle, and in the course of three or four minutes the whole faded away.²⁷

- 19 In Coleridge and Dorothy's fragments, we can note the persistent use of the adjective "dim". In all three fragments, perception and language distance natural objects until they become only a shade and merge: "We [Coleridge and Dorothy] lay sidelong upon the turf, and gazed on the landscape till it melted into more than natural loveliness".²⁸ They both literally "[fed] upon the prospect",²⁹ to use Dorothy's words, to gain access to this perception. William composed his lines "I have thoughts that are fed by the Sun" during a walk with Coleridge and Dorothy in April 1802. Dorothy writes that these lines came to "his mind by the dying away of the stunning of the Waterfall when he came behind a stone."³⁰ We have very few descriptive notebook fragments from Coleridge at that time, as if all his poetic perception fed only his poetry. A few fragments though were jotted down in notebook²¹:

Tw'as not a mist, nor was it a cloud,
But it pass'd smoothly on towards the Sea
Smoothly and lightly betwixt Earth & Heaven³¹

So thin a cloud-
It scarce bedimm'd the Star that shone behind it.³²

- 20 These lines speak to us because they resonate both in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and in *Christabel*, which were composed at that time. The murmur of the brook, in Alfoxden and later in Grasmere, becomes a constant and perpetual voice in Coleridge and Dorothy's writings. It is also, in William Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches* (1793), what defines the principle of Life:

Thro' vacant worlds where Nature never gave
A brook to murmur or a bough to wave,
Which unsubstantial Phantoms sacred keep
Thro' worlds where Life and Sound, and Motion sleep³³

- 21 The murmur and rustle would become focal points in Coleridge's nocturnal fragments written while in the Lake District in 1803:

Thursday Morning, 40 minutes past One o'clock - a perfect calm - now & then a breeze shakes the heads of the two Poplars, [& disturbs] the murmur of the moonlight Greta, that in almost a direct Line from the moon to me is all silver - Motion and Wrinkle & Light (...) the murmur of the Greta, perpetual Voice of the Vale.³⁴

Item - Murmur of a stream - Item - *well with Shadows*. Item - Why aren't you here?³⁵

- 22 These bedimmed images, "sweetness and breath with the quiet of death"³⁶ to use Wordsworth's line in the poem "These chairs they have no words to utter", speaking both of everywhere and nowhere, tell of absence but they are at the same time imbued with spiritual vitality. They seem to act as what Pierre Fédida calls "des images-souffles [qui n'ont] pour seule consistance de leur matériau que leur apparaître fantomatique"³⁷:

March 1st. We rose early. A thick fog obscured the distant prospect entirely, but the shapes of the near trees and the dome of the wood dimly seen and dilated. It cleared away between ten and eleven. The shapes of the mist, slowly moving along, exquisitely beautiful; passing over the sheep they almost seemed to have more of life than those quiet creatures. The unseen birds singing in the mist.³⁸

The indistinct breath of images

- 23 Dorothy seems to have triggered this habit of reporting their emotional perceptions, and Coleridge developed it while in Germany in 1798. The absence of his beloved, Sara his wife, prompted his first descriptive lines:

Over what place does the Moon hang to your eye, my dearest Sara?
To me it hangs over the left bank of the Elbe and a long trembling
road of moonlight comes transversely from the left bank, reaches the
stern of our Vessel, & there it ends.³⁹

- 24 Murmurs of streams, shifting moonlight shades, misty pillars of moving light, dancing leaves, all these images both impalpable, almost spectral at times, yet real and incarnated, became the substance of Coleridge's later notebooks and materialized the reversible movement of exchange between the outer and inner worlds that takes place during contemplation. Coleridge had a tremendous capacity, either at the moment of experiencing natural phenomena or later, in memory, to identify himself with them. For Pierre Fédida, who wrote about "the indistinct breath of the image", the movement whereby the depth of things becomes a surface was to be found in the air imagery. Georges Didi-Huberman identifies these images as the organic matter of the psyche:

La psyché elle-même, non pas en tant que *lieu* séparé du corps ou quelque part en son centre, mais bien en tant que sa *matière* vitale en mouvement. La psyché comme matière organique ? C'est le souffle : principe de vie, principe des affects et du désir, principe même de l'intelligence et de la volonté.⁴⁰

- 25 The images of air abound in the journals and notebooks of Coleridge and Dorothy Wordsworth, they are the substance of their "peregrine writing": the murmurs and rustles, the far-away sounds, the breeze creating this perpetual motion that characterized Coleridge's poetry and his "One Life" doctrine. These sounds and motions had a deep affective power for the poets; they embodied the life of affects and desire.

These plants now in perpetual motion from the current of the air.⁴¹

The near trees still, even to their top most boughs, but a perpetual motion in those that skirt the wood. The breeze rose gently; its path distinctly marked till it came to the very spot where we were.⁴²

The half dead sound of the sheep-bell, in the hollow of the sloping coombe, exquisitely soothing.⁴³

Bell thro' a mist in Langdale vale – simile for a melancholy⁴⁴

- 26 Coleridge explained in a later notebook how he perceived the landscape as an extension of his affects:

One travels along with the Lines of a mountain - / I wanted, years ago, to make Wordsworth sensible of this - / how fine is Keswick Vale, would I repose? My Soul lies & is quiet, upon the broad level vale – would it acted? it darts up into the mountain Tops like a Kite, & like a chamois goat runs along the Ridges –⁴⁵

- 27 The natural lines set in motion by air or perception, and not the objects in themselves, came to embody and materialize the affects which for Coleridge, inspired by Spinoza's *Ethics*, were ideas of the bodies. These airy landscape images are in a way part of the Romantic body or maybe hauntings of the body and of the principle of Life. They are an extension of the body in its physical and spiritual reality. The breathing of air is what joins most intimately and vitally our deepest self with the outer world; ontologically, it is what enables us to pass from the visceral to the natural, from the physical to the metaphysical. It is vital though impalpable matter in perpetual motion.

Sat a considerable time upon the heath. Its surface restless and glittering with the motion of the scattered piles of withered grass, and the waving of the spider's threads.⁴⁶

Peregrine writing or the mapping of affects

- 28 To put it more simply and to come back to our reflection on New Materialism, I think that these texts envisaged in their graphic dimension tell us something about the active role of the environment in the shaping of the self through affects. Dorothy, William and Coleridge were deeply aware of the close intertwining between bodily sensations and emotions. Coleridge coined the word “psycho-somatic” in his dream theory sketched in his notebooks to highlight the permeability of the body’s sensations and the mind’s feelings and images.

(...) images forced into the mind by the feelings that arise out of the position & state of the Body and its different members.⁴⁷

- 29 For Coleridge, each organ was responsible for bringing up a specific emotion: pain in the umbilical region engendered terror, heart sensations intense grief, sexual desire intense Love:

Images in sickly profusion by & in which I talk in certain diseased States of my Stomach (...) ⁴⁸

For what is Forgetfulness? Renew the state of affection or bodily Feeling, same or similar – sometimes dimly similar / and instantly the trains of forgotten Thought rise from their living catacombs (...) ⁴⁹

The Organic Perceptions, those Parts which assimilate or transform the external into the personal (...) the vital & personal linked to & combined with the external, the former gaining by the mutually assimilant Junction a phantom of Extranity, the latter, a spirit of personality & Life. ⁵⁰

- 30 Coleridge sensed what current neuroscientific research⁵¹ on the biology of feelings and affects have been able to prove, namely that emotions are conceived by bodily reactions orchestrated by the brain. Feelings occur after emotions and manifest themselves in the

mind through the form of mental representations or images. Feeling, Damasio writes, is “*the idea of the body being in a certain way. [...] Its contents consist[s] of representing a particular state of the body*”.⁵²

- 31 In his “Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798), the poetic persona recalls this intimate link between the natural forms (the “soft inland murmur”, the “little lines / Of sportive wood run wild”, the “wreathes of smoke”), the emotions “felt in the blood” and “along the heart” and then their passing into the mind.

These forms of beauty have not been to me,
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration: – feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure⁵³

- 32 These airy images and natural lines are in some kind of way what holds body and spirit together, they capture the feeling as a “body-becoming-mind” experience. “Peregrine writing” is an attempt, I believe, to seize these airy forms, to get a grasp of their impalpable substance through words. And looking at manuscripts, we understand the importance of the gesture of writing these forms, of the way emotions alter the tracing of letters and the flow of writing. In an article entitled “Lines in Motion and Thoughts in Act,”⁵⁴ I had a closer look at Coleridge’s “graphic imagination”, that is his use of sketches and lines and his habit of mixing visual and verbal signs. I read them as an attempt to capture, through the gesture of sketching and tracing, those formative forces at work within the natural forms.

- 33 The notebooks and journals are material evidence of the way the mind extends itself into the environment and of the way environmental lines and forms affect our deepest self, the movement whereby the external becomes internal. Our body incorporates these lines and forms. The poets did not “watch” or “gaze” at the landscape when they were at Alfoxden, they “fed” upon it. “Mine Eye gluttonizes”, Coleridge wrote when he arrived at Nether Stowey. Those “companionable forms” that Coleridge and Dorothy were sketching

(the eddies, flux, running lines, flights of starlings) are traces of the process of body-becoming-mind or imagination. Only if we look at the manuscript do we have the feeling that what was at stake in notebook or journal writing was less the object than the process of creation. The graph, but also the letter as line, was the opening of a form, “a form in proceeding” that usually preceded the linguistic description:

Came to Poele a pretty little Cluster of House between Hills in the shape

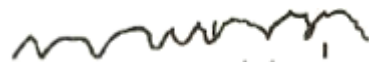


of a little half Moon completely covered with Beech.⁵⁵

There saw a wood to the brink of the water – open space with a house – woods



(...) The woods on the left bank run up into semicircles & Triangles leaving green banks for the water –



So the woods run for a mile from Rat. Then cease, and for a quarter of a mile naked Arable with one farmhouse at the end where the wood recommences.⁵⁶

- 34 The curve or line opens here a kind of intermediary space between the perception of the natural objects and its textual inscription, empowering the mind to create poetic devices to translate motion in nature.
- 35 Coleridge was poetically extremely prolific at that time, while feeding upon those natural forms. The *Notebooks* are graphic experiences of this blending of natural forms and thoughts into an act of creation. To put it in other words, these lines encapsulate the “poetic thought in act” and what Coleridge may be highlighting, through his use of curves and squiggles in his notebooks, is the intense paradox of representation: the most complex and unseizable aspects of human experience can perhaps only be captured by the most abridged and elliptical forms:

Comment représenter directement des êtres complexes voire étendus et insaisissables? Comment visualiser des réalités buissonnantes, tracer des croquis super-elliptiques, cependant pertinents ?⁵⁷

- 36 Yet, the poetic act was for him an affective experience, which explains his deep ambivalence towards poetry writing. Torn between the “I am” and “it is”, Coleridge chose to abandon nature, affects and poetry for his abstruse research, which would allow him to stop creating poetic images and stop feeling. In a wonderful passage from a letter to James Gillman, he asserts this necessary disjunction of mind and spirit after his Malta journey, concluding his letter with a depiction of Nature as a monstrous self-shaping matter, taking revenge along with Time, on the poet’s Mind.

But alas! alas! that Nature is a wary wily long-breathed old Witch, tough-lived as a Turtle and divisible as the Polyp, repullulative in a thousand Snips and Cuttings, integra et in toto! She is sure to get the better of Lady MIND in the long run, and to take her revenge too – transforms our To Day into a Canvass dead-colored to receive the dull featureless Portrait of Yesterday.⁵⁸

NOTES

- 1 de Man, Paul, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York : Columbia University Press, 2013, 6.
- 2 Fairclough, Mary, *Literature, Electricity, and Politics 1740-1840 : ‘Electrick Communication Every Where*, New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Fulford, Tim (ed.), *Romanticism and Science*, London : Routledge, 2002. Richardson, Alan, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2001. Ruston, Sharon, *Creating Romanticism : Case Studies in the Literature, Science and Medecine of the 1790s*, New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- 3 Mitchell, W.J.T., “Romanticism and the Life of Things : Fossils, Totems, and Images”, *Critical Inquiry* 28.1, *Things* (Autumn 2001), 167-184.
- 4 Mitchell, W.J.T., *art. cit.*, 182.
- 5 *Ibid.*

- 6 Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "The Poet", *Essays. Second Series*, Boston : Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1844, 26.
- 7 I borrow here the expression from Douglas Robinson's *Sociality as Extended Body-becoming-mind*, Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 2013. He expands on Andy Clark's "Extended Mind Theory" but, while Scottish philosopher Andy Clark argues that our cognitive system incorporates extracranial objects such as pencils, computers or notebooks to make sense of the world, Douglas Robinson makes his point by stating the centrality of feeling and affect. So what extends in the world is first and foremost feeling.
- 8 Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things : An Archeology of the Sciences*, no indication of translator, London : Routledge, 2005, 402.
- 9 Gigante, Denise, *Life : Organic Form and Romanticism*, New Haven, Conn. : Yale University Press, 2009, 29.
- 10 Blumenbach quoted by Denise Gigante, *op. cit.*, 119.
- 11 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", *Coleridge : Poems and Prose*, New York : Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014, v.125-126.
- 12 Latour, Bruno, *Cogitamus : six lettres sur les humanités scientifiques*, Paris : La Découverte, 2010, 65.
- 13 See Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter : A political ecology of things*, Durham, North Car. : Duke University Press, 2010.
- 14 See for instance the use of this concept by John A. Pelesko, *Self Assembly : the Science of Things That Put Themselves Together*, Cleveland, Oh. : CRC Press, 2007, 3. "In this book, the belief that a new cross-cutting discipline is emerging and that this discipline should be called "self-assembly" will serve as our guide. (...) we want to understand how nature self-assembles structures, we want to understand her principles and techniques, and, we want to learn how to use self-assembly to build engineered systems".
- 15 Bennett, Jane, *op. cit.*, 31.
- 16 Clark, Andy & David J Chalmers, "The Extended Mind", in Richard Menary (ed.), *The Extended Mind*, Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 2010, 27.
- 17 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", *op. cit.*, v. 238-239.
- 18 *Ibid*, v. 272-291.

- 19 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alfonso Lingis, Evanston, Ill. : Northwestern University Press, 1968, 130.
- 20 Wordsworth, Dorothy, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2002, 142.
- 21 *Ibid*, 149.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 145.
- 23 *Ibid*.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 147.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 143.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 142-143.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 143.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 147.
- 29 *Ibid*.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 31 *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (vol.1)*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn and Anthony John Harding, London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, Bollingen Series, 1957, note 315.
- 32 *Ibid.*, note 316.
- 33 Wordsworth, William, *Descriptive Sketches*, Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1984, 745, v. 322-325.
- 34 *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (vol.1)*, *op. cit*, note 1624.
- 35 *Ibid*, note 981.
- 36 Wordsworth, William, *The Major Works*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2000, 255, v. 29.
- 37 Fédida, Pierre, "Le souffle indistinct de l'image", *Le site de l'étranger. La situation psychanalytique*, Paris : P.U.F., 1995, 187-220, quoted by Georges Didi-Huberman in *Gestes d'air et de pierre : corps, parole, souffle, image*, Paris : Minuit, 2005, 58.
- 38 Wordsworth, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, 148.
- 39 *The Notebooks of Samuel Talor Coleridge (vol. 1)*, *op. cit.*, note 335.
- 40 Fédida, Pierre, *op. cit.*, 38.
- 41 Wordsworth, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, 145.

42 *Ibid.*, 146.

43 *Ibid.*, 142.

44 *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (vol. 1), *op. cit.*, note 720.

45 *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (vol. 2), note 2347.

46 Wordsworth, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, 145.

47 *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (vol. 2), *op. cit.*, note 2543.

48 *Ibid.*, note 1822.

49 *Ibid.*, note 1575.

50 *Ibid.*, note 1822.

51 See for instance the work of Antonio Damasio, who examines the biological roots of our feelings and emotions in *Looking for Spinoza : Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*, London : William Heinemann, 2003.

52 *Ibid.*, 85.

53 Wordsworth, William, *The Major Works*, Oxford : Oxford University press, 2000, 132, v. 25-32.

54 Page-Jones, Kimberley, "One travels along with the Lines of the Mountain : Lines in Motion and Thoughts in Act in the early Notebooks of S.T. Coleridge", *Coleridge Bulletin*, 2014, New Series, 15-28.

55 *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (vol. 1), *op. cit.*, note 410.

56 *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*(vol. 1), *op. cit.*, note 360.

57 Dagonnet, François, *Écriture et iconographie*, Paris : J. Vrin, 1973, 11.

58 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Coleridge's Writings* (vol.4), *On Religion and Psychology*, ed. by John Beer, New-York : Palgrave, 2002, 196.

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