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From Harmony to Cacophony: The Image of the Aeolian Harp in Coleridge's Poetry

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The auditory image, namely, the way sounds or music are represented, in the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) is rich. He makes sounds heard in various forms, such as instrumental music, songs sung by human or angelic voices, storms or breezes, noises emanating from many sources, or even silence (that is, the absence of sound). But there is one image which stands out more impressively than any others; the eolian harp. The image plays a central part in two poems of Coleridge: “The Eolian Harp” and “Dejection: An Ode.” This essay attempts to analyze how the eolian (or, more usually spelt aeolian) harp functions in the two poems in the hope that the comparison will reveal the fascinating gamut of Coleridge's poetic mind.

The years between 1795 and 1798 were Coleridge's most productive period. Although the dream of “Pantisocracy”—a plan invented by Coleridge and Robert Southey to set up an egalitarian utopia in Pennsylvania¹⁾—was frustrated, it did leave a tangible result; Coleridge was married in 1795 to Sara Fricker, one of the Pantisocracy sympathizers. They settled in Clevedon near Bristol and the next year moved to Nether Stowey, not very far from Clevedon. In 1797 the friendship with William Wordsworth, whom he had met for the first time two years before, developed quickly, which resulted in a number of finest poems in his life and in the joint publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798²⁾.

“The Eolian Harp” (1795)³⁾ is the first work of that fruitful period and one of the six poems usually grouped together as “the Conversation Poems”; “The Eolian Harp,” “Reflections on Having Left a

Place of Retirement” (1795), “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” (1797), “Frost at Midnight” (1798), “Fears in Solitude” (1798), and “The Nightingale” (1798). All these poems are linked by a number of similarities. They are set in rural landscapes. Their manner of speech is confiding and often colloquial. The metrical form is in blank verse divided loosely in several stanzas⁴. “The Eolian Harp” is particularly idyllic in the group, incorporating a vivid description of the place as well as meditations inspired by the scene.

The aeolian harp, a name deriving from the Greek god of wind, Aeolos, is a string instrument sounded by natural wind. Mostly equipped with some device such as a slit draught for concentrating the wind, the strings (normally four to twelve) generate the notes uncontrolled by human activities. Its origin seems to belong to myth, and apparently it had been in existence for some time on an obscure level of legend or folklore. But it was in the seventeenth century that the famous German inventor Athanasius Kircher “re-invented” the instrument. He made great technical improvement and probably employed the adjective “aeolian”. But the harp did not become fashionable until the 1780s⁵.

Seen in the historical context, this is a cultural phenomenon interesting as much for its symbolic significance as for its musical importance. Poetry about the aeolian harp began to appear in England in the 1740s with James Thomson, but “not until the nineteenth century,” M. H. Abrams observes, “did the wind-harp become an analogy for the poetic mind as well as a subject for poetic description⁶.”

Coleridge’s poem, “The Eolian Harp,” is perhaps the most important document in the cultural history related to this particular instrument. Not only does it give detailed descriptions of the idyllic environment of the instrument but it also develops fully its symbolic implication as a medium between man and nature.

The poem consists of three sections; the opening part (ll. 1–12) sets the scene in the rural landscape of Clevedon, the middle part (ll. 12–48) describes the poet’s metaphysical perception inspired by the surroundings, and in the final part (ll. 49–64) he returns to the everyday life

shaking off philosophical fantasies.

Taking a closer look at the poem with special attention to the references to sounds, we are struck by an extraordinary ingenuity with which the sound imagery is employed. In the opening section, the poet is with his wife near a cottage that is situated in a peaceful village, surrounded by pleasant vegetation and genial light:

My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined
Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is
To sit beside our Cot, our Cot o'ergrown
With white-flower'd Jasmin, and the broad-leav'd Myrtle,
(Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love!)
And watch the clouds, that late were rich with light,
Slow saddening round, and mark the star of eve
Serenely brilliant (such should Wisdom be)
Shine opposite! How exquisite the scents
Snatch'd from yon bean-field!

(ll. 1–10)⁷⁾

So far the descriptions are all visual. What especially attracts our attention next is that this beautiful scene is characterized by soundlessness:

. . . and the world *so* hush'd!
The stilly murmur of the distant Sea
Tells us of silence.

(ll. 10–12)

We soon discover that the silence of the scene, established so exquisitely, is an anticipation of the following section.

Then the breeze suddenly burst into the cottage, strikes the aeolian harp placed at the window:

And that simplest Lute,
Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!

How by the desultory breeze caress'd,

(ll. 12-14)

What kind of sound does the harp produce? That is described in two successive similes. Firstly, the sound seems to give a slightly erotic impression:

Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,
It [The harp] pours such sweet upbraidings, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong!

(ll. 15-17)

Secondly, when the strings are “[b]oldlier swept,” (l. 18), the tone changes to a paradisiacal melody sung by elves in a fairy-land:

Such a soft floating witchery of sound
As twilight Elfins make, when they at eve
Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land,
Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers
Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,
Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untam'd wing!

(ll. 20-5)

In these lines, the sensual and the celestial are put together, suggesting the harmonious unity of opposites⁹.

Listening to these sounds, the poet is suddenly struck by a kind of revelation. It occurs to him that he is experiencing exactly the unification of all existences as it is achieved through the musical instrument. He cries ecstatically:

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 joyance every where—
Methinks, it should have been impossible

Not to love all things in a world so fill'd;

(ll. 26–31)

We cannot, or need not, the poet asserts, distinguish the life within us from the life without us. There is no boundary. This one life creates in human perception a state of synaesthesia: the fusion of sound and sight. We both hear and see⁹. This unification is neatly epitomized in an image composed of breeze, harp, and music:

Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
Is Music slumbering on her instrument.

(ll. 32–3)

Within the sounds of the harp, a variety of senses and rhythms converge upon “the one Life.” And everything seems to point to the one lesson: “Love”. This Neoplatonistic view constitutes the first high moment of the poet’s vision.

The poet’s perception is then expanded from eye and ear to the whole body. He lies on the meadow, stretching his limbs:

. . . as on the midway slope
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
Whilst through my half-clos’d eye-lids I behold
The sunbeam dance, like diamonds, on the main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquillity;

(ll. 34–8)

The scene becomes silent again, but the poet himself is now a lute and enjoys fragmentary thoughts and desultory ideas which pass through the brain:

Full many a thought uncall’d and undetain’d,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various as the random gales

That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

(ll. 39-43)

The association of the harp and nature is finally exalted to the emphatic claim that every living existence in the world is the wind-harp played by nature and the God:

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

(ll. 44-8)

This may be called the second wave-crest in the poet's meditation.

This idealistic speculation is, however, short-lived. After this follows the concluding section, and the poem ends with a kind of palinode. Under the reproving eyes of his wife Sara, Coleridge retreats from Neoplatonistic heterodoxy to the dimension of orthodox pious life. Being unable to find a way to reconcile his philosophical fantasies with his religious background, he denies the whole meditation he has been indulging in, calling them "vain Philosophy" (l. 57).

In this poem, we find the poet responding to nature in what may be called a naive way. Nature first appeals to him through the device of an aeolian harp, producing ethereal sounds with the power of wind. Then the poet himself becomes a harp and lets the "correspondent breeze" blow through his whole being. He thus realizes that the whole universe is a vast harp. But we notice that his attitude is wholly receptive and passive. In fact, he himself admits that his "brain" is "indolent" and "passive". Although his thought flies loftily, it is not solidly grounded in experience. So that he cannot defend his "vain philosophy" against his wife, who admonishes him from the orthodox standpoint. The ending of the poem is, we must say, a little bathetic.

The passiveness of the speaker in this poem reflects Coleridge's

optimistic view about the identification of himself with nature. “By means of this concept [of the aeolian harp],” John Beer points out, “he [Coleridge] was able to reconcile necessitarianism with a benevolent theism”¹⁰. Though this ignores Coleridge’s withdrawal of idealistic speculation at the end of the poem, it is certainly important to stress his pantheistic idea of nature¹¹. Here is the same idea expressed in prose in his philosophical work where the image of the aeolian harp is again used:

In the act of perception, the object and subject are so closely united that we cannot determine to which of the two the priority belongs. In the tune produced on an Aeolian harp, it is perfectly indifferent whether we take the organic harp or the breeze as the first of its two efficient causes¹²

This is clearly an echo of the lines 32–3 of “The Eolian Harp,” where the breeze and the harp are no longer distinguishable and blend into “Music”. It is easy to see how much Coleridge was attracted by the aeolian harp, a perfect symbol for the fusion of man and nature, the inner and the outer world.

* * *

We now move on to another poem to look at the problem from a different angle. The poem is “Dejection: An Ode,” and the question is whether we can find the same kind of passive optimism.

By the time “Dejection” was composed in 1802, Coleridge’s health and spirit had been heavily damaged by his addiction to opium. He was keenly aware of the decline of his creativity and confessed his painful position in a poignant verse-letter (April 4th, 1802)¹³ to Sara Hutchinson, the sister of Wordsworth’s wife, with whom he was hopelessly in love. The letter eventually evolved into the poem, “Dejection”.

In this poem, Coleridge again resorts to the image of the aeolian

harp—indeed for the first time in poetry since the composition of “The Eolian Harp,” and never again is it to be found in his poetry, though he uses it in other forms such as notebooks or philosophical essays. Rather like “The Eolian Harp,” the first stanza begins in a soundless scene, though the exact location is not clear. The important difference is that this time it is night with the moonlight whereas the earlier poem was set in the daytime. More importantly, we find that the lute here produces sounds which are neither pleasant nor meaningful to the poet:

This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade
Than those which mould you cloud in lazy flakes,
Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes,
Upon the strings of this Æolian lute,
Which better far were mute.

(ll. 3–8)

The music produced by the harp—which, the poet mutters, had better be silent—could not be more different from the sweet melodies of “The Eolian Harp.” If the winds are “dull and sobbing,” so must be the sounds of the harp. It is so weak and uninvigorating that the poet waits for the wild sounds of storm to stimulate the numbed soul:

Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,
Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

(ll. 17–20)

While waiting, the poet ponders on his present situation. He *sees* nature, he says, but cannot *feel* how beautiful it is (ll. 37–8). In the fourth stanza, in a moment of inspiration, he has an illusion of the recovery of the power of imagination:

Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth

A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
 Enveloping the Earth—
And from the soul itself must there be sent
 A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

(ll. 53–8)

Here again, we come across a synaesthetic perception of light and sounds. But it is interesting to note that, compared with the “intellectual breeze” of “The Eolian Harp,” a great emphasis is put on “the soul itself.” It is only from “the soul itself” that both the glorious “light” and the “sweet and potent voice” must issue forth to envelope the whole earth, auditorily and visually.

There is another important thing to note in this connection. It is “Joy” (the word never occurred in “The Eolian Harp”) that is regarded as supremely valuable. “Joy” is not “intellectual”; it has to do with the heart. It is a gift to the pure-hearted:

Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne’er was given,
Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,

(ll. 64–5)

And the poet goes on to identify “Joy” with that synaesthetic union of sound and light which, as we have seen, has long been his theme:

Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—
 We in ourselves rejoice!
And thence flows all the charms or ear or sight,
 All melodies the echoes of that voice,
All colours a suffusion from that light.

(ll. 71–5)

This praise of “Joy” is certainly more powerful and deeply-felt than the praise of “love” in “The Eolian Harp” where the poet could say rather complacently, “Methinks, it should have been impossible / Not

to love all things in a world so fill'd."

But this happy insight soon gives way to a dark mood. The poet must move on to a bitter recognition of his present predicament. He admits that his heart is *not* pure. Biographically speaking, the "un-pureness" is presumably caused by his unlawful and unfulfilled love for Sara Hutchinson and the addiction to opium. He deplors that he is unable to achieve Joy:

But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.

(ll. 82-6)

In the seventh stanza, the poet shakes off these "viper thoughts" and turns to the storm, which at last has reached the scene. For the wild wind, here called "Mad Lutanist," the craggy mountain and the deserted house would be a fitter instrument than a graceful aeolian harp. This stormy landscape, reminiscent of the pictures of J.M.W. Turner, marks a sharp contrast with the landscape in which was set the wind-harp in "The Eolian Harp." Nature seems to reveal itself as "mad" and chaotic, violent and threatening. It is no longer gentle, sensual, or celestial, as was suggested by "The Eolian Harp."

The storm gradually fades away after a moment of silence:

But hush! there is a pause of deepest silence!
And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd,
With groans, and tremulous shuddering—all is over—

(ll. 114-16)

And the poem goes on towards the final stanza where everything is becalmed and put to sleep. But it is difficult to believe that this "sleep" is a happy one. It rather suggests exhaustion of mental energy, or paralysis of imagination. Maybe it is close to the numbed

sleep of opium.

In connection with our subject, the sound in the poem is far from what we might think of as "music". The sound the "Mad Lutanist" makes cannot be harmonious. It is cacophonous: it is, to borrow Macbeth's words, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." But even such a chaotic sound is desirable to Coleridge; he responds to the furious wind passionately (and desperately) in the hope that it may rouse his failing creativity¹⁴.

The poet is certainly in a bad position, but he shows a far more mature attitude than the one we saw in "The Eolian Harp." It seems that Coleridge has learned, through his sufferings, to listen to the untamed, uncontrollable sound in nature. He has grown out of his facile naive optimism which seemed to take too much for granted. His new attitude, which takes into account cacophonous elements in nature, may even anticipate a certain modern concept of music¹⁵.

It is true that Coleridge is now dejected, but it cannot be said that he is totally pessimistic. Watching his own dejected state of mind carefully, he at least succeeded in creating a poem *about* dejection. That is a significant paradox. Did he manage to redeem himself out of his predicament by writing the poem? We do not know for certain¹⁶. But "The Dejection" would seem to suggest that, in composing the poem, Coleridge is trapped in a limbo of an artistic kind. He is torn between a longing for the sweet music of an aeolian harp and an awareness of its impossibility. He knows how vitally important "Joy" is for creativity, but also knows how irrevocably he has lost it. This is what makes Coleridge so typically Romantic and so interesting to us.

NOTES

- 1) For the detailed plan of the Pantisocracy scheme, see Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), I. p. 99.
- 2) For biographical details, see E. K. Chambers, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Biographical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938; rpt. 1950), p. 98 ff.

- 3) For the history of composition, revision, and publication, see M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism*, with a Foreword by Jack Stillinger (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984), pp. 159–65.
- 4) John Spencer Hill, *A Coleridge Companion: An Introduction to the Major Poems and the Biographia Literaria* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 19. George Watson adds to the category two more poems: “Dejection: An Ode” (1802) and “To William Wordsworth” (1807). See George Watson, *Coleridge the Poet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 61–84.
- 5) “Aeolian harp” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980). For the numerous inventions of Athanasius Kircher, see Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge*, with 105 illustrations (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).
- 6) M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 51.
- 7) All the references to Coleridge’s poems are taken from Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, including Poems and Versions of Poems Now Published for the First Time*, ed. with textual and bibliographical notes by Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1912).
- 8) For Coleridge the necessity for the reconciliation of the opposite qualities was paramount:

This power [of imagination] . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities . . .

(Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), II, p. 16.)

- 9) For detailed discussion of synaesthesia in “The Eolian Harp,” see Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze*, pp. 165–73.
- 10) John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), p. 88. He suspects that Coleridge’s image of aeolian harp is ultimately derived from his reading of the Neoplatonists. See *ibid.*, p. 92.
- 11) For the detailed account of pantheism in Coleridge, see Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- 12) Coleridge, *Logic*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson (Princeton, N. J. and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 38.

- 13) "A Letter to—" in Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, II, pp. 790–8.
- 14) William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1802–4), which is also concerned with the loss of poetic creativity and is indeed considered to be connected with the composition of "Dejection", also makes use of musical imagery, but music there is much sweeter and more benevolent in comparison:

Then, sing ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
 And let the young Lambs bound
 As to the tabor's sound!
 We in thought will join your throng,
 Ye that pipe and ye that play,
 Ye that through your hearts today
 Feel the gladness of the May!

(ll. 171–7)

What these lines suggest is not very remote from the consoling "still, sad music of humanity" which Wordsworth heard near Tintern Abbey ("Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" (1798), l. 92). One might be tempted to conclude that Wordsworth's awareness of his critical condition was not as imminent as Coleridge's. (The quotations of the poems of Wordsworth are taken from Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)).

- 15) The ultimate example would be a work by the American composer John Cage (1912–) entitled *4'33''* (1952). The performer(s) sit silently on the stage for the duration of the piece; the music consists of whatever noises are made by the audience and whatever sounds come from outside the auditorium. In terms of the quality and variety of sounds, this work seems to be closer to "Dejection" than to "The Eolian Harp" in that sounds are not restricted to harmonious ones but are extended to include dissonants and noises.
- 16) For various interpretations of the poem, see Hill, pp. 204–5.