

## ”This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”: A Poem of Achieved Communion

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“This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”:  
A Poem of Achieved Communion

Akiko SONODA

In his conversation poems Coleridge described spiritual communion between the speaker and nature; we find an instance of realised communion in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison.” In this poem the speaker, who first finds himself confined in the lime-tree bower, experiences communion through his meditation, with nature; he shares “joy” with his friends (in most places the speaker refers to one particular friend, Charles, and in others to a group of friends) and perceives the presence of “Almighty Spirit” in nature. After this spiritual pilgrimage, the speaker returns to the same bower with an awakened mind and realises the beauty of nature surrounding him. The movement of the poem is clear: from confinement to liberation, from self-pitying egotism to altruism for his friend. However, the process is delicately depicted in the subtly changing descriptions of natural scenes. It seems that the speaker expresses his spiritual pilgrimage without any specific prior intention, but under the unassuming appearance, he actually guides readers through an exploration through nature to the faith which he attained in the course of this experience:

Henceforth I shall know  
That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;  
No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,  
No waste so vacant, but may well employ  
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart  
Awake to Love and Beauty! . . . (lines 59-64)<sup>1</sup>

To borrow Humphry House's words, the "centre" of the conversation poems is "the Ego, the 'I'—the seeing, remembering, projecting mind."<sup>2</sup> In the preface to the *Poems on Various Subjects* published in 1796, Coleridge had already expressed his doubts about contemporary poets' modes of expression: "With what anxiety every fashionable author avoids the word I!—now he transforms himself into a third person, —'the present writer' now multiplies himself and swells into 'we' and this is the watchfulness of guilt."<sup>3</sup> Also in the preface to the *Poems* in 1797, Coleridge states: "If I could judge of others by myself, I should not hesitate to affirm, that the most interesting passage in our most interesting Poems are those, in which the Author develops his own feelings."<sup>4</sup> Coleridge's poetical works which are usually called "conversation poems" satisfy the demand expressed here: they are written in the style of dramatic monologue by a first-person speaker, and it is this voice, developing its own feelings, which guides readers throughout the poem to a larger truth.

Description of nature occupies the greater part of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison"; however, the poem is not mere description of the natural scene, as it also expresses the speaker's state of mind. That is, nature and the speaker's mind are expressed as interpenetrating and such description can be considered to reflect a kind of communion between nature and the human mind. In this poem, there are lines that are regarded as the most exquisite expressions of this state. But Coleridge had not fully achieved this when he first composed this poem. The earliest text of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" is to be found in Coleridge's letter to Robert Southey, which is presumed to have been written around 17 July 1797;<sup>5</sup> and the first publication of the poem was in February 1800 in the *Annual Anthology*. Between the letter to Southey and publication there also exists another version of this poem in Coleridge's letter to Charles Lloyd; and a part of the poem (lines 38-43) in his

letter to John Thelwall.<sup>6</sup> However, in these epistolary versions depiction of two kinds of landscape which skilfully express the change occurring within the speaker's mind, had not yet appeared. This poem was also published in William Frederick Mylius's *The Poetical Class-Book* in 1810, the *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), and *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1828, 1829 and 1834. But unlike other masterpieces such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and "The Eolian Harp," which appeared in the *Sibylline Leaves* in largely revised form, though there are several minor variants, the published versions of this poem were quite close to the text as first appeared. This means that significant revision occurred before its first publication. I will refer to the text in the letter to Southey as the 1797 text, and the first published text as the 1800 text.

The 1797 text was a 55-line poem divided into two verse paragraphs; while the first published version consisted of 76 lines and was divided into three verse paragraphs. Almost all of the expansion occurred in the first verse paragraph in the 1797 text, and as a result of this expansion the first paragraph was divided into two paragraphs. In the 1797 text, the process of the speaker coming to sympathise with his friend reads:

My friend, whom I may never meet again,  
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,  
Wander delighted, and look down, perchance,  
On that same rifted Dell, where many an Ash  
Twists it's wild limbs beside the ferny rock,  
Whose plummy ferns for ever nod and drip  
Spray's by the waterfall. But chiefly Thou,  
My gentle-hearted Charles! Thou, who hast pin'd  
And hunger'd after Nature any a year<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that the speaker refers to the same scenery of a dell that he depicted more precisely in later published versions. But the description is quite rough, and can hardly imply the speaker's mental state. In addi-

tion, there was no reference to the broad and magnificent landscape under the open sky that immediately follows the scene of the dell. Thus, in the 1797 text, what bring the speaker into a state of sympathy with his friend is not clear to readers. This brief description of the dell was expanded as follows in the first published 1800 text:

Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,  
To that still roaring dell, of which I told;  
The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep  
And only speckled by the mid-day sun;  
Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock  
Flings arching like a bridge; —that branchless ash,  
Unsun'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves  
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,  
Fann'd by the water-fall! and there my friends  
Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,  
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)  
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge  
Of the dim clay-stone. (1800 text)<sup>8</sup>

First, we should pay attention to the difference in the movement of the friends. In the 1797 text, they happened to pass by the dell and from upper point, just “look down” in it. On the other hand, in the 1800 text, they wander in gladness, and wind down to the dell. The speaker imagines his friends participating more intimately in nature. Next, most importantly, we should note that the speaker’s description becomes more precise as he gradually focuses his attention on smaller and lower parts of the dell: first he describes the whole space of the dell and then focuses on the “branchless ash” and the “dark green file of long lank weeds.” At the same time, there is a transit from a static appearance to the movement in the dell. At first the ash seems to be motionless, however, when the speaker turns his attention to its “few poor yellow leaves,” they

reveal a subtle movement as the leaves are fanned by the waterfall. He focuses his attention on the weeds, and notices that they “nod and drip beneath the dripping edge / Of the dim clay stone.” The dell which first seems to be lifeless and motionless turns out not to be so. It must be noted here that the scene that is depicted in these lines is not what the speaker actually sees. It is an imagined scene by the speaker and is supposed to be reflecting his state of mind. The confined dell, which is “narrow,” “deep,” “unsunn’d” and “damp” is considered to reflect the speaker’s mind, still imprisoned in self-pity and melancholy. Simultaneously the speaker’s gradual realisation of the motion in the deeper part of the dell indicates his gradually activated and sharpened insight. At the end of this scene, his imagination begins to pulsate to the rhythm of the nodding and dripping of the weed.

We note, furthermore, that the word “dim” in the last quoted line was altered to “blue” in the *Sibylline Leaves* and in later versions; this alteration of one word seems to refine the imagery of the poem. Whilst the word “dim” only implies a dark colour or an obscure shape, “blue” has two different implications: both melancholy and hope; and exquisitely expresses the speaker’s state of mind. J.S.Hill explains that Coleridge, referring to “Gentiana major,” wrote: “It’s blue Flower, the Colour of Hope,”<sup>9</sup> and says that blue is traditionally a colour of hope and spiritual insight.”<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the colour corresponds to the colour of the sea in the wide landscape that follows the lines describing the dell. Though the colour itself is not clearly mentioned, the “wide wide Heaven” is presumably blue and the sea is described as follows: “The slip of smooth clear *blue* betwixt two Isles / Of purple” (emphasis added) (25-26). By using the same colour, the poet successfully illustrates the uniformity of nature, that is the one of his most important contentions in the poem.

After the scene of the dell, we move into the second verse paragraph,

where the following description of a panoramic landscape occurs:

Now, my friends emerge  
Beneath the wide wide Heaven—and view again  
The many-steeped tract magnificent  
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,  
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up  
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles  
Of purple shadow! Yes! They wander on  
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,  
My gentle-hearted Charles! . . . (20-28)

Like the scene of the dell, the magnificent landscape reflects the speaker's state of mind and the lines above indicate that he has entered a new phase of his mind. The paragraph division of the poem occurs in the middle of one line, and while emphasising the change—the coming on of the new phase in the speaker's mind—it also impresses readers with the continuity of his meditation. By inserting these lines the poet successfully expresses the speaker's changing mind which is gradually moving toward communion with his friends and nature. We should also note that in this scene the poet employs words that have religious implication. The sky is described as "Heaven," and the view as the "many-steeped tract magnificent." By emphasising the religious aspect of the scenery, the poet provides a hint that is to be developed later: his recognition of the Almighty Spirit veiled by nature.

Thus after the scene of the dell, there occurs a continuous widening and ascending movement. The speaker's state of mind achieves a new elevation: he imagines a sublime scene which his friend too may be gazing upon; sympathises with his friend; invokes nature to reveal its sublimity to him; and finally achieves communion both with his friend and nature:

So my friend  
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,

Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round  
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem  
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues  
As veil the Almighty Spirits, when yet he makes  
Spirits perceive his presence.

A delight

Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad  
As I myself were there! . . . (37-45)

Here the speaker reaches the consummation of his visionary insight. As he imagines the friends on their walk, his heart is assimilated to their heart in his imagination. From the moment when he sympathised with one of his friends, Charles, who pines after nature in the "great City pent," the speaker begins to project himself onto him. While at the opening line of the poem the speaker emphasises the difference between himself and his friends: "Well! they are gone, here must I remain"; here, he inserts "as I have stood" and stresses the similarity between them. He imagines himself sharing the joy with his friends, and as a result, "delight" visits him like a revelation. In the third paragraph, the speaker comes to appreciate the totality of the beauty of the lime-tree bower, which he defined as a prison at the opening of the poem:

Pale beneath the blaze

Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd  
Some broad and sunny leaf and lov'd to see  
The shadow of the leaf and stem above  
Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree  
Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay  
Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps  
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass  
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue



Through the late twilight: . . . (47-56)

The same light that may reveal the magnificence of nature to his friends adds the charm to the leaves over his head, and to him, too, nature disclose its beauty. It should be noted that this is the first description of the natural scene that the speaker actually sees in the line-tree bower besides his cottage. Helped by his own internalised version of nature portrayed in the first two verse paragraphs, he achieves an insight and comes to recognises subtleties of the natural beauty which is surrounding him.

As is often the case with Coleridge's poetical works, "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" is accompanied by explanatory prose, which explains the occasion of the poem:

In the June of 1797 some long-expected friends paid a visit to the author's cottage; and on the morning of their arrival, he met with an accident, which disabled him from walking during the whole time of their stay. One evening, when they had left him for a few hours, he composed the following lines in the garden-bower.<sup>11</sup>

Here the poet specifies the time, "June of 1797"; the reason he could not accompany his friends, and the place where he experienced or possibly composed this poem. M. H. Abrams has pointed out that such a particularisation of occasion is one of the features of "local" or "loco-descriptive" poems, a poetic style which was popular in the eighteenth century and which was supposed to have influenced Coleridge. According to Abrams, this is a "poetic type, in which the title named a geographical location, and which combined a description of that scene with the thought that the scene suggested."<sup>12</sup> The specification is understood, partly, as an influence of the "loco-descriptive" poem; however, further it is considered to be a strategy employed by Coleridge. This specification enhances the reality of the poem and dramatises how a personal experience at a particular moment can lead a person to the attainment of the

universal truth.

As House has pointed out, in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” the speaker “I” is the “centre.” He reflects, meditates, re-create nature, and guides readers through his experience to the faith which it reaffirmed. At the opening of “On Poesy or on Art” Coleridge stated: “Art is the mediatress between, and reconciler of nature and man.”<sup>13</sup> In this poem, the speaker plays precisely the a role of a “reconciler” of nature and human beings—his friends and his readers. Coleridge shows how a person’s personal experience can be connected to a deeper truth.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The text of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” is in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, vol.1, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1912) 178-81. Hereafter abbreviated as *CPW*. Except where otherwise noted all the textual citations are from this text. Hereafter line numbers are indicated parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> Humphry House, *Coleridge: The Clark Lectures 1951-52* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953) 79.

<sup>3</sup> *CPW*, vol.2, 1136.

<sup>4</sup> *CPW*, vol.2, 1144.

<sup>5</sup> The first version of the poem is in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, vol.1, 334-36. Hereafter cited as *Letters*.

<sup>6</sup> The letter to Charles Lloyd is not included in the *Letters*, but we can reproduce the text from the apparatus in *CPW*. For the letter to John Thelwall, see *Letters*, vol.1, 349-50.

<sup>7</sup> *Letters*, vol.1, 335.

<sup>8</sup> See *CPW*, vol.1, 179. According to the textual note in *CPW*, the word “dim” in the last quoted line is altered from “blue.”

<sup>9</sup> See the note by Coleridge in *Letters*, vol.2, 996.

<sup>10</sup> John Spencer Hill, *A Coleridge Companion: An Introduction to the*

*Major Poems and the Biographia Literaria* (London: Macmillan, 1983) 35.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, vol.2 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 13.

<sup>12</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: Norton, 1984) 84.

<sup>13</sup> Qtd. in "Editors' Introduction," *Biographia Literaria*, vol.1, cv. "On poesy or Art" was included in John Shawcross ed., *Biographia Literaria*, vol.2 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1907) 253-63.