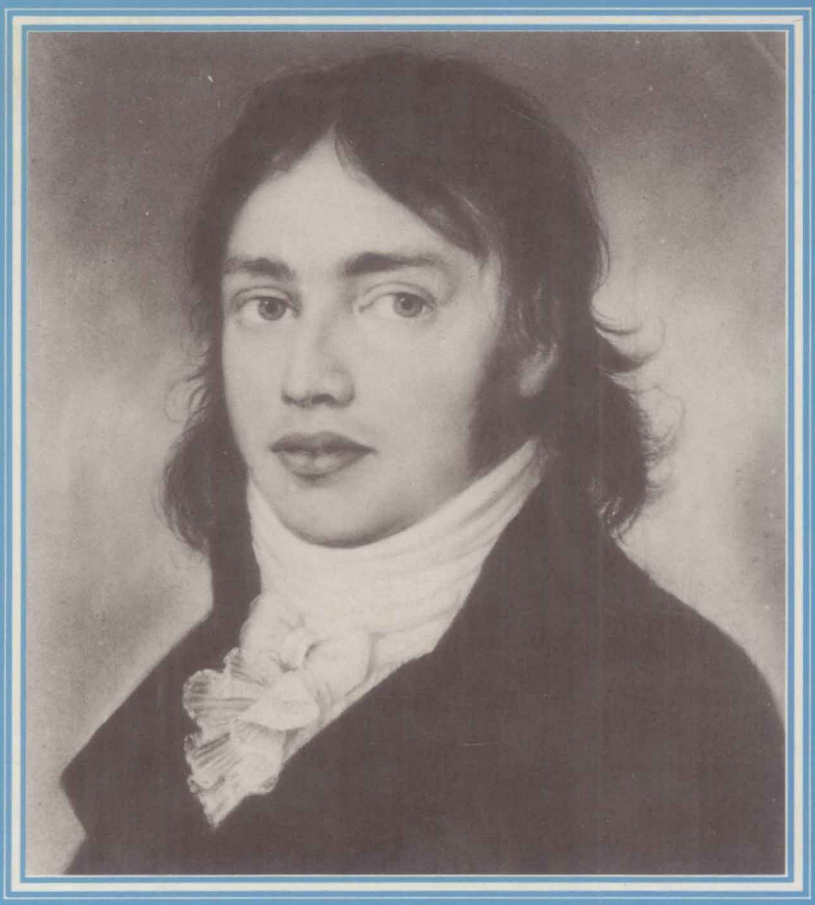
RAIMONDA MODIANO



COLERIDGE & THE CONCEPT OF NATURE

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Preface

The book originates from a question that puzzled me after reading Coleridge's early notebooks and letters. I was struck by the preponderance of landscape description in Coleridge's journals and by his obsessive preoccupation with recording the most minute appearances of nature. Surely, such manifest passion for nature makes it difficult to accept the view that, as some of Coleridge's contemporaries and later critics suggested, he was indifferent to 'Nature's living images'. But equally puzzling was my discovery that in later notebooks Coleridge draws away from a direct contact with nature and that the activity of landscape gazing, formerly a daily and deeply satisfying occupation, is carried on sporadically, if at all, and more significantly, seems to evoke guilt in Coleridge, as if it were illicit. My book is an attempt to provide some explanation for the striking imbalance of an excessive naturalistic zeal in the early Coleridge and his later withdrawal from a direct involvement with nature.

In this study I provide a comprehensive analysis of Coleridge's response to nature at various stages of his career and in various writings – in his poetry, his personal journals and letters, his marginalia to works of German *Naturphilosophen*, his religious and philosophic writings. While like Thomas McFarland and Trevor Levere, I examine the place held by nature in Coleridge's philosophic system, I also follow closely the sources of Coleridge's deep ambivalence to nature. The book is meant to offer a corrective to two equally reductive critical perspectives on Coleridge's interest in nature. According to some critics, nature mattered very little to Coleridge, especially when Coleridge's sentiments for nature are measured against Wordsworth's. Other critics have suggested that Coleridge *always* cared for nature, neglecting the many articulations of his doubts and apprehensions regarding a close association with nature. The view, which Coleridge himself originated, that metaphysics impoverished his receptivity to nature is likewise a simplistic answer to a very complicated question regarding the diminished presence of nature in Coleridge's later writings. Only by examining the convergence between circumstances in Coleridge's private life (his

relationship with Wordsworth and Sara Hutchinson) and the moral, philosophical and religious issues he had to resolve in various writings can we begin to appreciate Coleridge's difficulties in sustaining a close kinship with 'outward forms' and his efforts to prevent a complete break with the natural world.

In pursuing various approaches to Coleridge's preoccupation with nature, I found myself at times engaged with new subjects in Coleridge scholarship or familiar topics that, none the less, became increasingly unfamiliar the more I looked at some of Coleridge's private writings. In Coleridge's writings on the symbol, for example, I discovered important connections between his changing view of nature, his philosophy of love and his emerging conception of symbolism. His journal entries in particular reveal more clearly than his statements in published works the philosophical and religious, no less than the psychological bases of his conception of symbolism. Coleridge's notebooks have also made me aware that his relationship with Wordsworth played a crucial role in the development of his response to nature. No matter how much Wordsworth wished to encourage Coleridge's dependence on nature, he merely intensified Coleridge's difficulties in interacting with 'outward forms'.

Coleridge's speculative writings on the subject of nature led me to reevaluate his contribution to the Romantic sublime, including his deft adaptation of Kant's theory of the sublime and his extraordinary feat of passing on to Wordsworth a purer form of Kantian philosophy than Coleridge himself integrated in his work. His interest in science and natural philosophy required an analysis of his advanced philosophy of nature and the works upon which it is based. I go into some detail on the general goals of *Naturphilosophie* in Germany and the systems of some of its proponents (especially Kant, Schelling and Steffens) which influenced Coleridge's speculative concerns in his later years. My analysis of Coleridge's debt to the *Naturphilosophen* attempts to correct the view that Coleridge's conception of the Trinity – the cornerstone of his religious philosophy – represents a rejection of one side of Schelling's philosophy and of pantheistic systems in general. In fact, Coleridge derived his schema for the Trinity from Schelling and other *Naturphilosophen*, and to the end of his life he was unable to cast away Schelling's dynamic model of the coexistence of a triad of powers within an original unity in the Absolute. By refining the Schellingean model in order to purge it of its pantheistic implications, Coleridge tried to reconcile the rival tenets of dynamic philosophy and Christian orthodox thought, and I think in some measure he finally did.

Acknowledgements

Chapter 3 of Part III ('The Kantian Seduction: Wordsworth on the Sublime') appeared in a slightly abbreviated form in *Houston German Studies*, 5 (1984) 17–26, and a shorter version of Chapter 4 of Part IV ('*Naturphilosophie* and Christian Orthodoxy in Coleridge's View of the Trinity') appeared in *Pacific Coast Philology*, 17 (1982) 59–68. I presented some of the material of Part III in 'Coleridge and the Sublime: A Response to Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime*', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 9 (1978) 110–20. I wish to thank the editors of these journals for permission to use these articles. I am also grateful to Princeton University Press for permission to quote from *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Bollingen Series 50, vol. I: *1794–1804* (1957); vol. II: *1804–1808* (1961); vol. III: *1808–1819* (1973).

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important documents of Coleridge's learning, intellectual resourcefulness, and the originality of his thinking. I wish to acknowledge the late George Whalley's kindness in providing me with material I requested and in granting me respite from my editorial tasks so that I could devote time to writing the book. I am also grateful to Kathleen Coburn for her edition of Coleridge's *Notebooks*, without which there would have been little material for my study of Coleridge's concern with nature, and for lending me a typescript of an unpublished notebook.

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Abbreviations

AP	*Anima Poetae*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (London: Heinemann, 1895).
AR	*Aids to Reflection*, vol. I of *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York: Harper, 1853).
BE	*Biographia Epistolaris*, ed. A. Turnbull, 2 vols (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1911).
BL	*Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907).
C & S	*On the Constitution of the Church and State*, ed. John Colmer. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 10, Bollingen Series 75 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton University Press, 1976).
CL	*Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71).
CM	*Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 12, Bollingen Series 75 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton University Press, 1980—).
CN	*The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Bollingen Series 50, vols I and II (New York: Pantheon Books; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, 1961); vol. III (Princeton University Press, 1973).
The Friend	*The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 4, Bollingen Series 75, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton University Press, 1969).
Logic	*Logic*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 13, Bollingen Series 75 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton University Press, 1981).
L & L	*Coleridge on Logic and Learning*, ed. Alice D. Snyder (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929).

Misc C	*Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936).
N	Unpublished Notebooks.
NTP	*Notes, Theological, Political and Miscellaneous*, ed. Derwent Coleridge (London: Edward Moxon, 1853).
P Lect	*The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: The Pilot Press, 1949).
PW	*The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols (Oxford University Press, 1912).
Sh L	*Lectures upon Shakespeare and Other Dramatists*, vol. IV of *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York: Harper, 1853).
SM	*The Statesman's Manual.* In *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6, Bollingen Series 75 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton University Press, 1972).
TL	*Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life*, in *Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge*, ed. Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Random House, 1951).
TT	*Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H. N. Coleridge (New York: Harper, 1835). Cited by date.

Contents

Introduction: Coleridge and the Natural World

> Every season Nature converts me from some unloving Heresy – & will make a *Catholic* of me at last . . . (*CN*, I, 1302)

Writing to his brother George in March 1798, Coleridge disavowed his regrettable involvement in radical politics and announced his decision to devote himself to the much worthier cause of deepening man's sensitivity to nature. He informed his brother that he had given up his concern with revolutions and social reforms, having realized 'the error of attributing to Governments a talismanic influence over our virtues & our happiness'. Governments rise and fall like 'abscesses produced by certain fevers', and they are more likely to stir than cure man's evil inclinations. Nature, on the other hand, instils the love of the good and can gratify one's hopes for moral regeneration, a truth well known to Rousseau and Wordsworth and one that Coleridge wished to perpetuate through his poetry:

> I love fields & woods & mounta[ins] with almost a visionary fondness – and because I have found benevolence & quietness growing within me as that fondness [has] increased, therefore I should wish to be the means of implanting it in others – & to destroy the bad passions not by combating them, but by keeping them in inaction. (*CL*, I, 397)

In catering to the opinions of his elder brother, who did not favour radical politics or unorthodox religious views, Coleridge masked his true political feelings. However, his decision to write about the benefits of a salubrious life spent in the company of nature was not entirely disingenuous. Coleridge's notebooks show that he entertained a good number of poetic projects on the subject of 'the virtues connected with the Love of Nature' (*CN*, II, 2026), both prior to his association with Wordsworth and after the composition of 'Dejection: An Ode', which

publicizes the end of his short-lived communion with 'outward forms'. For some of these poems, Coleridge envisioned ambitious philosophic and religious themes unfolding against a grand setting of elemental forces. In 1796 he projected six 'Hymns to the Sun, the Moon, and the Elements', the last of which was to present 'a bold avowal of Berkeley's System' (*CN*, I, 174). The hymns eventually found their way into 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and Coleridge's free adaptation of Stolberg's 'Hymne an die Erde', although the hope of writing a full sequence of poems according to his original design stayed with him for many years, as we can gather from a letter of 1821.[1] Other plans were conceived on a more modest scale in the familiar tradition of loco-descriptive poetry and were frequently inspired by Coleridge's direct contact with a landscape of unusual beauty. In August 1802, during his second tour of the Lakes, Coleridge 'resolved to write under the name of The Soother of Absence' the 'topographical poem' which had long been on his mind and which he tentatively entitled 'The Bards of Helvellin or the Stone Hovels' (*CN*, I, 1225). A month earlier he wrote to Sara Hutchinson about another deeply-cherished plan, which appears to be a localized, quasi-meteorological version of his hymns to the elements.[2] He also proposed to write poems on his experience of *genii loci* (*CN*, I, 1214 and 1241), as well as a separate volume of poetic translations from George Beaumont's landscape drawings in the form of a 'moral Descriptive poem', 'an Inscription' or 'a Tale'.[3] During his voyage to Italy in 1804, Coleridge thought of including similar poems in his collection 'Comforts and Consolations', a work first outlined in 1803 and finally converted into parts of *Biographia Literaria* and *The Friend* (*CN*, II, 1993 and n.).

These and many other projects show how persistently Coleridge relied on nature as a source of new material for his poetry. As late as 1826, when he seemed to have exhausted all resources of poetic survival, he 'was still responding sharply enough to a landscape to feel impelled to write in his notebook a few lines of verse'.[4] And yet to his friends and contemporaries Coleridge did not appear as a man who had a serious attachment to nature, being too engrossed in metaphysical studies to take notice of 'Nature's living images'.[5] This view is not entirely absent in twentieth-century critical opinion. It has been often said that Coleridge 'is less concerned with the phenomena of external nature',[6] and that he turns out minor poetry when he 'attends to the notation of immediate objects and prospects'.[7] He is not, like Wordsworth, 'moved . . . by . . . the process that links nature and mind', and his lyrical effusions on this subject display all the blatant personifications that

come 'from the conventional vocabulary of natural influence', which Wordsworth had used only in the most adolescent phase of his career and even then with far greater tact. Coleridge's awkward attempts to speak in 'the language of the sense' demonstrate 'what is plain in the letters of the time', that he 'did not share a "matter-of-factness" that proceeded from Wordsworth's highly personal feelings for nature'.[8] If in speculative matters Coleridge may have had the upper hand over Wordsworth, in that he articulated more cogently the Romantic response to nature, nevertheless 'it was Wordsworth who actually *wrote* the nature – poetry'.[9] It has even been suggested that Coleridge's failure to produce nature poetry was due to the fact that he derived from Schelling a theory of the interaction between self and object too good to be 'translated into the life of a poem';[10] thus, Coleridge's downfall as a poet was the price he paid for his merits as a philosopher.

The trouble with such statements, even when they contain a grain of truth, is that they tend to perpetuate an oversimplified view of Coleridge's dealings with nature. They tell us nothing about the history of Coleridge's involvement with nature, his varied responses to nature at different stages of his career, and, more importantly, the complex problems he faced in maintaining close ties with natural objects. Such problems involve a variety of factors, ranging from personal relationships to philosophic predilections and religious dilemmas. No one would contest the fact that Wordsworth was better versed in 'the vocabulary of natural influence' than Coleridge, or that of the two, Wordsworth was by far the greater poet of nature. But comparisons between Coleridge's and Wordsworth's accomplishments in poetry have consistently worked to Coleridge's disadvantage and have been responsible for a number of critical oversights. Thus, critics have not taken into account the fact that Wordsworth, notwithstanding his lament that Coleridge was alienated from nature, often inhibited his friend from expressing himself in 'the language of the sense'. Coleridge's disenchantment with nature and his frequent confessions in his later poetry that 'outward forms' were 'of import vague / Or unconcerning' to him ('Lines written in the Album at Elbingerode in the Hartz Forest', ll. 19–20) originated in part from the difficulties he encountered in his relationship with Wordsworth.[11] Secondly, comparisons between Coleridge and Wordsworth have generally encouraged critics to look on Coleridge's poetry as the main record of his response to nature. But with a writer of such extraordinary versatility as Coleridge, for whom poetry was only one of many interests and never separate from his philosophical or theological investigations, this approach can only be mislead-

ing. In order to determine the full scope of Coleridge's concern with nature, we must consult the many different kinds of writings he left and establish the variants of his utterances in each, as well as their immediate sources. Neither Coleridge's poetry alone, nor a handful of his speculative remarks, can give us an adequate view of his preoccupation with nature. From the poetry we may well conclude that by about 1802 Coleridge's courtship of nature ended definitively. Other works, especially Coleridge's notebooks, indicate on the contrary that in 1802, when Coleridge went on his second tour of the Lake District, and also later, he was deeply absorbed in an exploration of the natural world, which resulted in a record of significant literary value. His descriptions of natural scenery in his journals are frequently more gifted and memorable than those of Dorothy Wordsworth and other celebrated naturalists. On the other hand, some of Coleridge's often-quoted statements about the mutual dependence of subject and object reduce the spectrum of his reactions to nature, concealing in the rhetorical equipoise of seemingly indestructible ideals ('to make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought and thought nature'[12]) a vastly troubled history of conflicting attitudes and uncertain aspirations.

The texts that provide a measure of Coleridge's interest in nature are voluminous but scattered and intermixed with a wide range of diverse subjects. They will be found in Coleridge's letters and journals no less than in his poetry, in brief marginal notes no less than in a polished section of his published works, in passages which deal with philosophical and aesthetic questions no less than moral and religious ones. To follow Coleridge through all the stages of his enchantment and disaffection with nature is, in effect, to pursue the complicated path of his career as a whole. We shall see that events of major importance in Coleridge's life, such as his friendship with Wordsworth and love for Sara Hutchinson, as well as concerns which remained central to Coleridge's thinking, directly or indirectly affected his response to the natural world. His conception of symbolism, his religious and moral beliefs, his aesthetic theories, his debt to the German transcendentalists, and not least of all, his difficulties in personal relationships, must all be considered if we are to gain a better understanding of Coleridge's involvement with nature.

In tracing the history of Coleridge's attitudes towards nature, I have tried to combine a chronological method, outlining certain changes that take place in Coleridge's view of nature, with a quasi-dialectical method for structuring the discussion of various aspects of Coleridge's preoc-

cupation with nature. But I should warn the reader from the start that strict adherence either to chronology or dialectics can only misrepresent Coleridge's ideas. It is difficult to find in Coleridge smooth lines of so-called 'development' in his thinking or changes that are clearly earmarked by certain dates. This difficulty is in no small measure due to the fragmentary state of many of Coleridge's writings and the fact that one must always create a text for any of Coleridge's concerns by retrieving relevant passages from an assortment of documents of varied cohesiveness and design. Some of these passages, especially those belonging to Coleridge's journals and marginalia, cannot be dated with precision, even with all the editorial expertise available from very able scholars. Furthermore, in working with Coleridge one discovers sooner or later that one is dealing with an extraordinarily retentive mind and even conservative personality; that although Coleridge is moving forward in time, changing his views, developing new intellectual allegiances, he nevertheless retains ideas and preferences that he developed at an earlier time. (Perhaps one of the greatest virtues of Lowes's study, *The Road to Xanadu*, was to show how impossible it was for Coleridge to forget anything.) In studying Coleridge's relationship with nature, I have found that although certain stages of development can be differentiated, the dividing lines between them are often blurred. Early attitudes resurface in later years and combine with new and sometimes conflicting views on nature. For the sake of analytic clarity I have had to isolate some of these attitudes and present them separately, but, to the extent to which this was possible, I have also tried to point to the complex ways in which early and later reactions to nature coexist in Coleridge.

The dialectical method I pursue here parallels in some way the stages of Coleridge's involvement with nature, from an early period of intense infatuation with its picturesque beauty, to a stage of alienation and grave doubts about the value of encounters with nature, to a later phase of 'higher synthesis' in which nature is given a prominent place in Coleridge's philosophic system. But like the chronological method, this serves merely as a heuristic tool in locating certain problems in Coleridge's complex dealings with nature. There is, I should emphasize, no simple progression from one phase to the next. Coleridge's doubts about nature are present at the time when his passion for nature is at its peak. Similarly, although in his later years Coleridge gives up a direct engagement with external objects for a predominantly speculative interest in nature's dynamic constitution, his attraction to 'outward forms' is still alive, however submerged; and the doubts he entertained

about nature surface even at moments of grand intellectual syntheses.

The discussion begins with a chapter that explores the influence of picturesque aesthetics on Coleridge's early perception of nature. I examine the reasons for Coleridge's surprisingly favourable reception of this tradition, a tradition which in his time had already met with severe criticism, and point out the differences between his conception of the picturesque and the theories developed by British aestheticians. In Part II, I turn to the nexus of factors that made it difficult for Coleridge to maintain his preoccupation with landscape viewing and his attachment to nature. For instance, the complex problems Coleridge had to solve in his concept of 'symbol' ultimately dictated a rejection of the natural world. The Coleridgean symbol has an inherently divisive structure, pointing in one direction to the celebration of nature as a medium of divine revelation, yet also in the opposite direction, to a denunciation of nature as a dangerous ground of identification for the self. In later poems and notebooks Coleridge began to draw his symbols from love objects instead of nature. Moreover, he feared that a sensory enchantment with external objects triggered 'eye-given yearnings' which could be transferred to love objects under the form of sexual passion. His great anxiety about maintaining the purity of personal relationships made it imperative that love objects be placed at a great distance from nature.

In Parts I and II the term 'nature', as employed by Coleridge, refers to the external world as an object of imaginative experience (either in immediate encounters by direct observation of the appearances of nature or encounters mediated by poetry) and aesthetic contemplation. In the next two sections, following Coleridge's lead, the word takes on a predominantly abstract meaning, as a philosophic term in his aesthetic theory and system of *Naturphilosophie*. Here I discuss various developments in the intellectual history of the nineteenth century, showing the manner in which Coleridge's early attachment to nature shapes the direction of his speculative concerns. Coleridge systematically rejects doctrines that involve a radical denial of the experiential world. In Part III, I examine Coleridge's conception of the sublime, focusing on his ability to integrate Kant's theory of the sublime within a new formula that no longer requires a sharp conflict between the mind and the phenomenal world. In Part IV, I present Coleridge's system of natural philosophy as it appears in his advanced speculative writings. I begin by introducing the movement known as *Naturphilosophie*, which flourished in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century, and present a detailed commentary on Kant's, Schelling's and Steffens's systems of natural philosophy, as well as an analysis of Coleridge's response to their works.