

Andrea Timár

Conversing Signs

Coleridge: *Effusion XXXV*

Veracity does not consist in *saying*, but in the intention of *communicating*, truth; and the philosopher who cannot utter the whole truth without conveying falsehood, and at the same time, perhaps, exciting the most malignant passions, is constrained to express himself either *mythically* or equivocally. When Kant therefore was importuned to settle the disputes of his commentators himself, [he replied,] "I meant what I said, and [...] I have something else, and more important to do, than to write a commentary on my own words."

(Coleridge, 1817)¹

Of all things that have to do with communicating ideas, what could be more fascinating than the question of whether such communication is actually possible? [...] I wanted to demonstrate that words often understand themselves better than do those who use them, wanted to point out that there must be a connection of some secret brotherhood among philosophical words that, like a host of spirits too soon aroused, bring everything into confusion in their writings and exert the invisible power of the World spirit on even those who try to deny it.

(Friedrich Schlegel, 1800)²

The first version of *The Eolian Harp* appeared in 1796 under the title *Effusion XXXV* and was constantly revised by Coleridge until the final version of 1834. Though the focus of critical attention has always been on *The Eolian Harp* (1834), most readers considering the first version of the poem as "a mere philological

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Biographia Literaria*. London: Oxford UP, 1969, Vol. 1, Ch. IX, p. 101.

² Friedrich Schlegel. "On Incomprehensibility." In: Kathleen M. Wheeler. *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984, p. 33.

curiosity,³ the present paper will concentrate on *Effusion XXXV* (1796), and will bring into the foreground the *footnote* which supplemented it from 1796 to 1803.⁴ The only critic who examined the note was Kathleen M. Wheeler,⁵ but since she attached it to the 1834 version of the poem, my point of reference will be different from hers.

1796

Effusion XXXV

Composed August 20th, 1795,
at Clevedon, Somersetshire

My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined
Thus on my arm, most soothing sweet it is
To sit beside our cot, our cot o'ergrown
With white-flowered jasmin, and the broad-
leaved 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
Snatched from yon bean-field! and the world
so hushed!

The stilly murmur of the distant sea
Tells us of silence. And that simplest lute,
Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!
How by the desultory breeze caressed,
Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,
It pours such sweet upbraidings, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong! And now, its strings
Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes

1834

The Eolian Harp

Composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire

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-flowered jasmin, and the broad-
leaved 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
Snatched from yon bean-field! and the world
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Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,
It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong! And now, its strings

³ J. Stillinger. *Coleridge and Textual Instability*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994, p. 27.

⁴ The sixteen versions of the poem can be found in Stillinger, pp. 142–149.

⁵ Cf. Stillinger, p. 241: “Wheeler, the only critic who discusses the note at length...” Stillinger alludes to Kathleen M. Wheeler. *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1981, pp. 83–90.

Over delicious surges sink and rise,
 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 untamed wing!

And thus, my love! As on the midway slope
 Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
 Whilst through my half-closed eye-lids I behold
 The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
 And tranquil muse upon tranquillity;
 Full many a thought uncalled and undetained,
 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!
 Or what if all animated nature
 Be but organic harps diversely framed,
 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?
 But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
 Darts, O beloved woman! Nor such thoughts
 Dim and unhallowed dost thou not reject,
 And biddest me walk humbly with my God.

Meek daughter in the family of Christ!
 Well hast thou said and holily dispraised
 These shapings of the unregenerate mind;
 Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
 On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.
 For never guiltless may I speak of him,
 Th' Incomprehensible! save when with awe

Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
 Over delicious surges sink and rise,
 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 untamed wing!
 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 filled;
 Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
 Is music slumbering on her instrument.

And thus, my love! as on the midway slope
 Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
 Whilst through my half-closed eye-lids I behold
 The sunbeams dance, like diamonds on the main,
 And tranquil muse upon tranquility;
 Full many a thought uncalled and undetained,
 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!
 And what if all animated nature
 Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
 That tremble into thought, as over them sweeps
 Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
 At once the soul of each and God of all?
 But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
 Darts, O beloved Woman! nor such thoughts
 Dim and unhallowed dost thou not reject,

I praise him, and with faith that inly feels;^{*}
 Who with his saving mercies healed me,
 A sinful and most miserable man,
 Wildered and dark, and gave me to possess
 Peace, and this cot, and thee, heart-honoured Maid!

And biddest me walk humbly with my God.
 Meek Daughter in the family of Christ!
 Well hast thou said and holily dispraised
 These shapings of the unregenerate mind;
 Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
 On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.
 For never guiltless may I speak of him,
 The Incomprehensible! Save when with awe
 I praise him, and with Faith that inly feels;
 Who with his saving mercies healed me,
 A sinful and a most miserable man,
 Wildered and dark, and gave me to possess
 Peace, and this cot, and thee, heart-honoured Maid!

Though the wording of the two versions of the poem is very similar, *Effusion XXXV*, on the one hand, is supplemented by a footnote, while on the other, it is devoid of those famous lines celebrating the “one Life” which will appear for the first time in the 1817 version of the poem. As the first appearance of the “one Life” theme, in 1817, exactly coincides with the withdrawal of the footnote, the exchange of the strange, disrupting note for a passage stressing the unity of being obviously reflects a shift of focus between the composition of the two texts.

In many ways, *Effusion XXXV* abounds in perplexing ambiguities that are hard to resolve in any reassuring synthesis. In what follows here, I will try to examine whether the poem can be subjected to a unifying analysis or put in parallel with the writings of the Romantic Ironists, especially Friedrich Schlegel. I will also try to demonstrate that the later valorisation of the symbol, going together with the insertion of the “one Life” theme and the withdrawal of the footnote in *The Eolian Harp*, might also be considered as a strategic – though ineffective – response to this early text that shows up language as a ‘counter-spirit’ escaping the mastery of the self.

^{*} L'athée n'est point à mes yeux un faux esprit; je puis vivre avec lui aussi bien et mieux qu'avec le dévot, car il raisonne davantage, mais il lui manque un sens, et mon âme ne se fond point entièrement avec la sienne: il est froid au spectacle le plus ravissant, et il cherche un syllogisme lorsque je rends une action de grâce. “Appel à l'impartiale postérité, par la Citoyenne Roland,” troisième partie, p. 67. [Coleridge's own note.]

Interestingly, *Effusion* has been almost entirely excluded from the canon⁶ although critics have always acknowledged that it set the pattern for some later pieces, identified as ‘conversation poems.’⁷ These include “The Eolian Harp,” “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement,” “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” “Frost at Midnight,” “Fears in Solitude,” “The Nightingale,” “Dejection, an Ode” and “To William Wordsworth” – though Coleridge actually called only one of them, “The Nightingale,” a ‘conversation poem.’ Despite the fact that the impact of the denomination on contemporary reception has been so considerable that Tilottama Rajan even called attention to the “horizon of expectations called up by the ‘genre’ of conversation poems,”⁸ *Effusion* has been neglected on the ground of its being devoid of the contextual influences which would permit to read it as a “serious philosophical statement.”⁹ However, even if the poem cannot be interpreted as a statement and if it may indeed be nothing else but “an entertaining anecdote of mental fantasies and married life played out within conventional gender roles,”¹⁰ we might, nevertheless, endeavour to analyse it as a possible enactment of communication itself.

G. M. Harper, the first to identify the common pattern of the conversation poems, defines these pieces as Coleridge’s “Poems of Friendship.” More recent analyses have made the important point that these friendships, instead of being displayed in conversations, rather express the speaker’s *yearning for* conversation and his desperate desire for response.¹¹ For although in the majority of these poems, the speaker does address a listener, this concrete, real person or friend generally remains absent and/or silent.¹² Furthermore, as these

⁶ Stillinger gives a comprehensive review of the reception of the poem on pp. 26–43.

⁷ G.M. Harper was the first to identify the common pattern of these pieces and he was the one who termed them ‘conversation poems.’ See his “Coleridge’s Conversation Poems.” In: M.H. Abrams ed. *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*. New York, 1960, p. 189.

⁸ See her analysis of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” in Tilottama Rajan. *The Supplement of Reading*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990, p. 115.

⁹ Stillinger, p. 35.

¹⁰ Stillinger, p. 35.

¹¹ S. Eilenberg. *Strange Power of Speech*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992, p. 22.

¹² “Critics have noted [...] that the interlocutors in the so-called ‘conversation poems’ tend to seem strangely absent: Sara Coleridge is ‘pensive,’ the baby is *en fans*, Charles Lamb is literally absent, as are Sara Hutchinson, the Lady, Wordsworth, William and Edmund...” (A. Bennett. *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999, p. 124). “*Frost at Midnight*, like the other conversation poems, never fully achieves its status as such, for it is at best a one-sided conversation” (J. Plug. “The Rhetoric of Secrecy.” In: Fulford & Paley eds. *Coleridge’s Visionary*

concrete listeners are, according to Bennett, for instance, all “strangely absent,”¹³ the experience of Joy (the inter-communion of mind and nature) occurs, if it does, through a temporal and/or spatial deferral: through the mediation of an absent other.¹⁴ According to Eilenberg, both the speaker’s imaginary salvation and his poetic experience are entrusted to these listeners, generally transformed into an ideal poetic self.¹⁵ Surprisingly, there seems to be no distinction made in literature between the absent listeners of the other conversation poems and the posited listener addressed in *Effusion*, though this latter one is both present and responsive – even if her answer is restricted to a “mild reproof” in the eye. So while the listeners of the other poems support the speaker’s subjective poetic vocation, the posited listener’s detached eyes in *Effusion* turn the speaker into an object (into an object for himself). Meanwhile, the presence of this listener (or of a *reflective* second self) does not only disrupt the workings of the imagination, but it also makes the speaker realise that creative activity in itself is far from being “translucent,” it does not necessarily achieve its goal to unite two minds. As in his analysis of *The Eolian Harp* Philip Shaw argues, the “mild reproof” in Sara’s eyes draws attention to the “failure of poetic language to realise itself.”¹⁶

For the personification of the lute in *Effusion*, the translation of lifeless nature into another subject (a “subject lute”) – that parallels the transformation, in the other conversation poems, of the other into an ideal self – is not only a means to overcome the alienation of subject from object,¹⁷ since it should also mediate between the speaker and the listener. This listener, however, just like those of the other poems, represents indeed the “road to salvation”: she is the repository of *meaning*.

Languages. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993, pp. 27–41). See also: Rajan. *The Supplement of Reading*, pp. 117–135; and S. Eilenberg. *Strange Power of Speech*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992, pp. 22–25.

¹³ Bennett, p. 124.

¹⁴ Though they might prove fruitful, the implications of a psychoanalytic or of a feminist reading are beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁵ Cf. Eilenberg, p. 23.

¹⁶ Philip Shaw. “Death Strolls Between Letters.” In: Geoff Ward ed. *Romantic Literature From 1790 to 1830*. London: Bloomsbury, 1993, pp. 33–34.

¹⁷ Cf. Jonathan Culler. “Apostrophe.” *The Pursuit of Signs*. Ithaca: Cornell UP 1981, p. 143.

Must take an Air less Solemn : She complies :

Good-Conscience! — at the Sound *the World* retires ;

Verse disaffects it, and *LORENZO* smiles ;

Yet has she her *Seraglio* full of Charms ;

And such as Age shall Heighten, not Impair.

Art thou dejected ? Is thy Mind o'ercaft ?

Amid her Fair Ones, thou the Fairest chuse,

Thy Gloom to chase. — “ Go, fix some weighty *Truth* ;

“ Chain down some *Passion* ; do some *gen'rous Good* ;

“ Teach *Ignorance* to see ; or *Grief* to smile ;

“ Correct thy *Friend* ; befriend thy greatest *Foe* ;

“ Or, with warm Heart, and Confidence divine,

“ Spring up, and lay strong Hold on *Him* who made Thee.” —

Thy Gloom is scatter'd, sprightly Spirits flow ;

Tho' wither'd is thy Vine, and Harp unstrung.

Do st call the Bowl, the Viol, and the Dance,
Loud Mirth, mad Laughter ? Wretched Comforters !

Physicians ! more than Half of thy Disease :

— *Laughter*, tho' never censur'd yet as Sin

(Pardon a Thought that only *seems* severe),

Is half-immoral : Is it much indulg'd ?

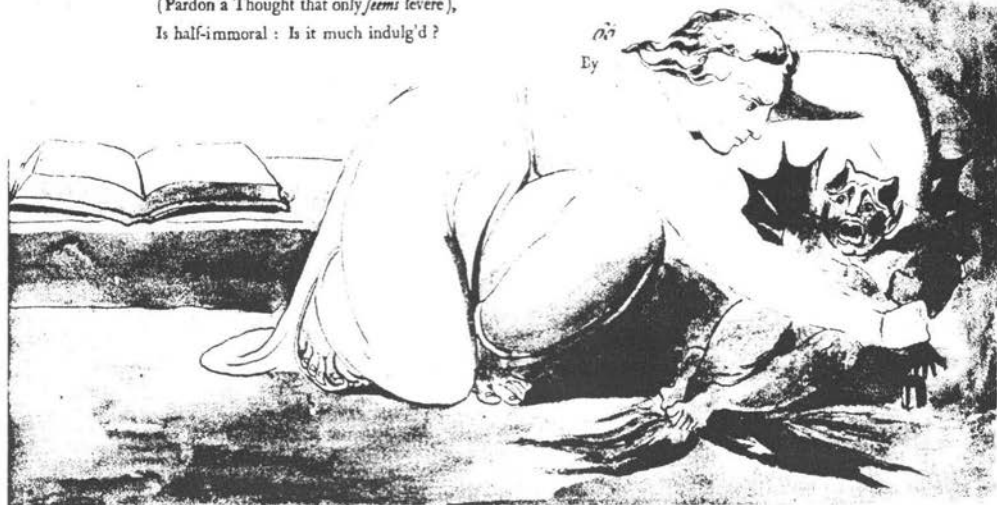


FIGURE 1. Night IX, page 37

Exceeding fair, and glorious, for its Size,
 But, elsewhere, far out-measur'd, far outdone ?
 In *Fancy* (for the *Faſt* beyond us lies)
 Canſt thou not figure it, an *Iſle*, almoſt
 Too ſmall for Notice, in the *Vaſt* of Being ;
 Sever'd by mighty Seas of *un-built* Space,
 From other *Realms* ; from ample *Continents*
 Of higher *Life*, where nobler Natives dwell ;
 Leſs *Northern*, leſs remote from DEITY,
 Glowing beneath the *Line* of the SUPREME,
 Where Souls in Excellence make Haſte, put forth
 Luxuriant Growths ; nor the late Autumn wait
 Of *Human* Worth, but ripen ſoon to Gods ?

ſe/ſ

YET why drown *Fancy* in ſuch Depths as theſe ?
 Return, preſumptuous Rover ! and confeſs
 The Bounds of Man ; nor blame them, as too ſmall :
 Enjoy we not full Scope in what is ſeen ?
 Full ample the Dominions of the Sun !
 Full glorious to behold ! How far, how wide,
 The matchleſs Monarch, from his flaming Throne,
 Lavish of Luſtre, throws his Beams about him,

ſe/ſ

Farther,

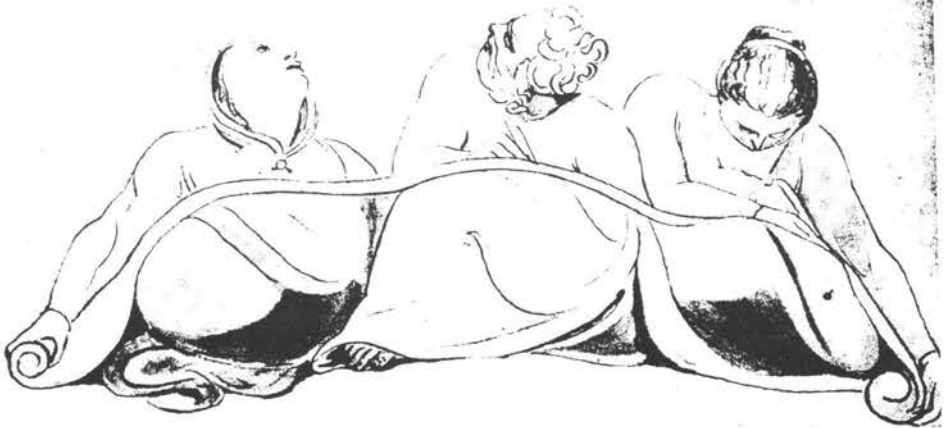
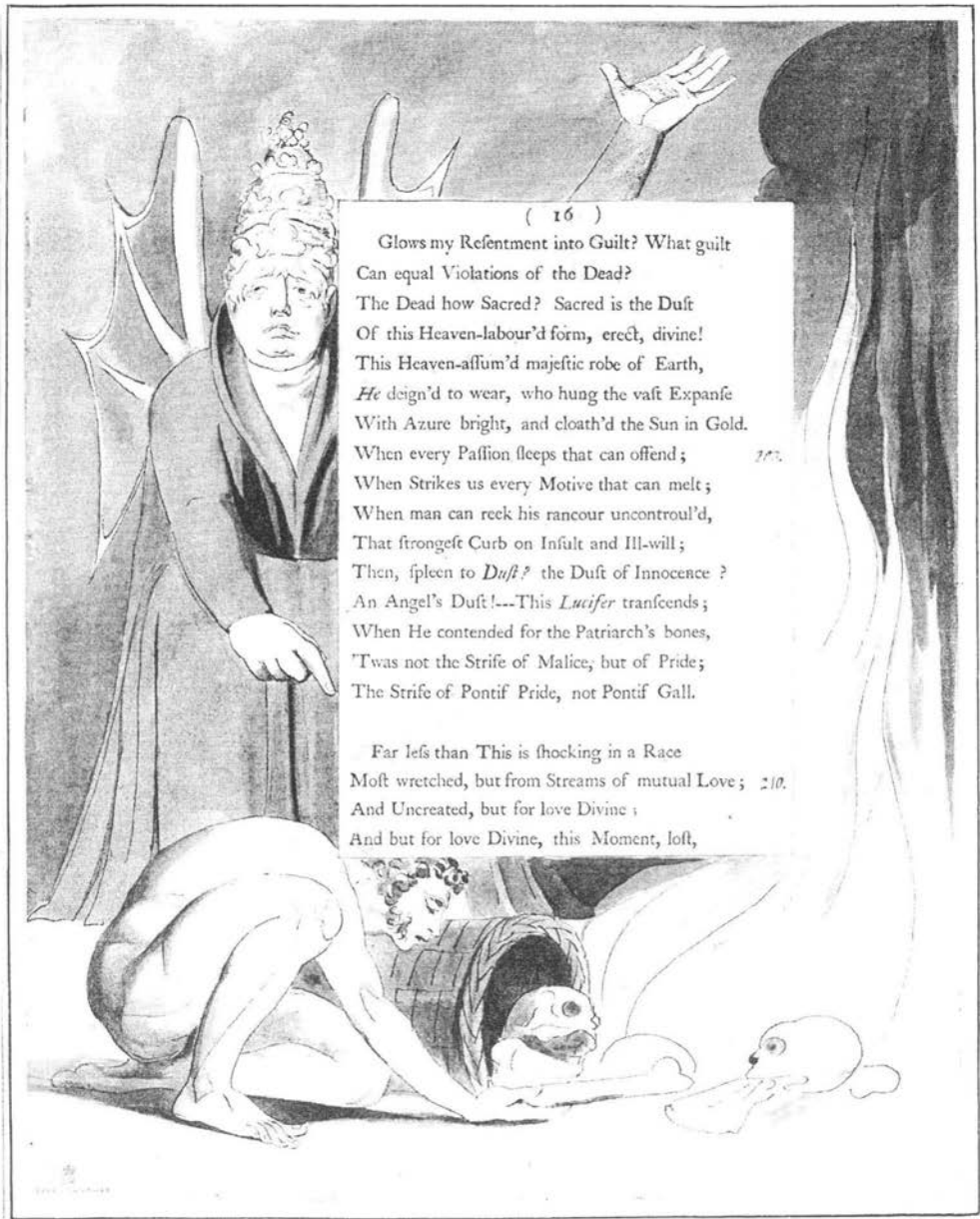


FIGURE 2. Night IX, page 80



FIGURE 3. *Europe*, plate 11



(16)

Glows my Repentment into Guilt? What guilt
Can equal Violations of the Dead?
The Dead how Sacred? Sacred is the Dust
Of this Heaven-labour'd form, erect, divine!
This Heaven-assum'd majestic robe of Earth,
He deign'd to wear, who hung the vast Expanse
With Azure bright, and cloath'd the Sun in Gold.
When every Passion sleeps that can offend;
When Strikes us every Motive that can melt;
When man can reek his rancour uncontroll'd,
That strongest Curb on Insult and Ill-will;
Then, spleen to *Dust*? the Dust of Innocence?
An Angel's Dust!--This *Lucifer* transcends;
When He contended for the Patriarch's bones,
'Twas not the Strife of Malice, but of Pride;
The Strife of Pontif Pride, not Pontif Gall.

Far less than This is shocking in a Race
Most wretched, but from Streams of mutual Love;
And Uncreated, but for love Divine;
And but for love Divine, this Moment, lost,

FIGURE 4. Night III, page 16



FIGURE 5. Allan Ramsay: *Portrait of George III*

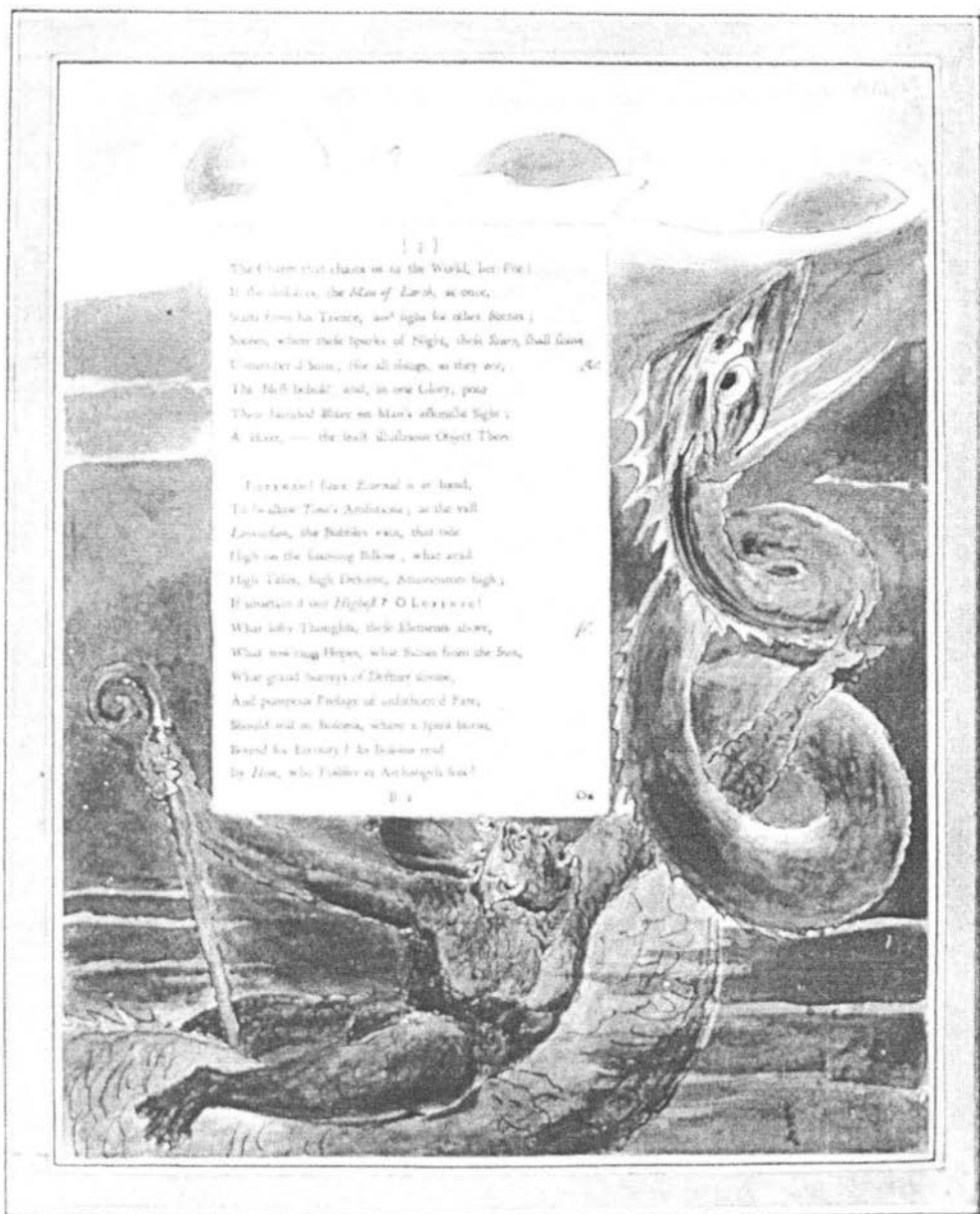


FIGURE 6. Night VIII, page 3 (full design)



FIGURE 7. Night VIII, page 3 (close-up)



FIGURE 8. James Gillray's caricature (1784)



FIGURE 9. James Gillray's caricature (1792)



FIGURE 10. Jacques-Louis David: *The Coronation of Napoleon* (1804)

(9)

A thousand Opiates scatters to delude,
To fascinate, inebriate, lay asleep,
And the fool'd Mind delightfully confound.
Thus that which flock'd the *Judgment*, flocks no more;
That which gave *Pride* Offence, no more offends.
Pleasure and *Pride*, by Nature mortal Foes,
At War eternal which in Man shall reign,
By *Wit's* Address, patch up a fatal Peace,
And hand in hand lead on the rank Debauch,
From rank refin'd to delicate and gay.
Art, cursed *Art*! wipes off th'indebted Blush
From Nature's Check, and bronzes every Shame.
Man smiles in Ruin, glories in his Guilt,
And Infamy stands Candidate for Praise.
All writ by Man in favour of the Soul,
These *sensual Ethics* far, in Bulk, transcend.
The Flow'rs of *Eloquence* profusely pour'd
O'er spotted Vice, fills half the letter'd World.
Can Pow'rs of *Genius* exorcise their Page,
And consecrate Enormities with Song?

E

Bat

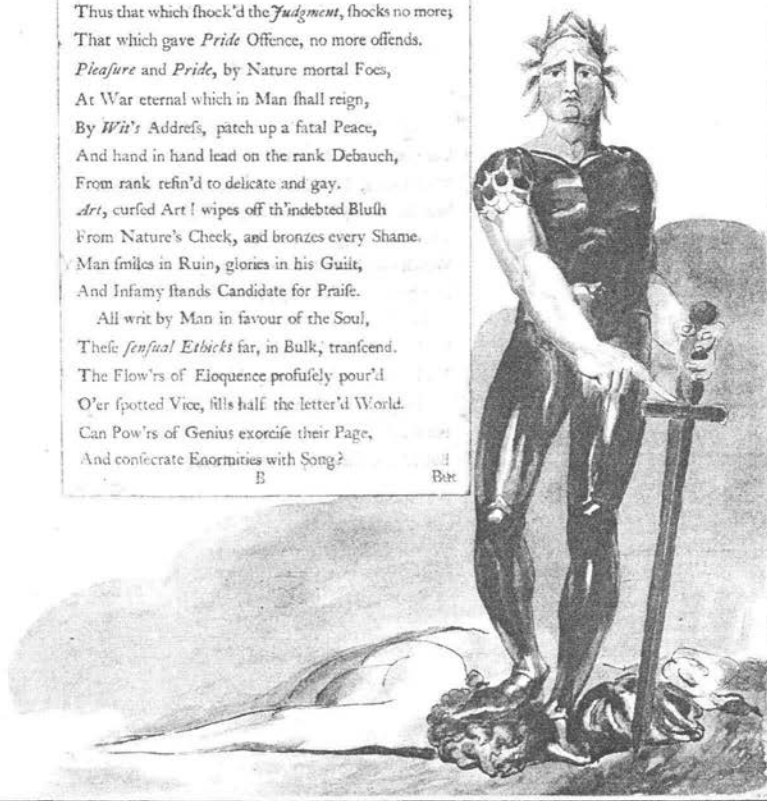
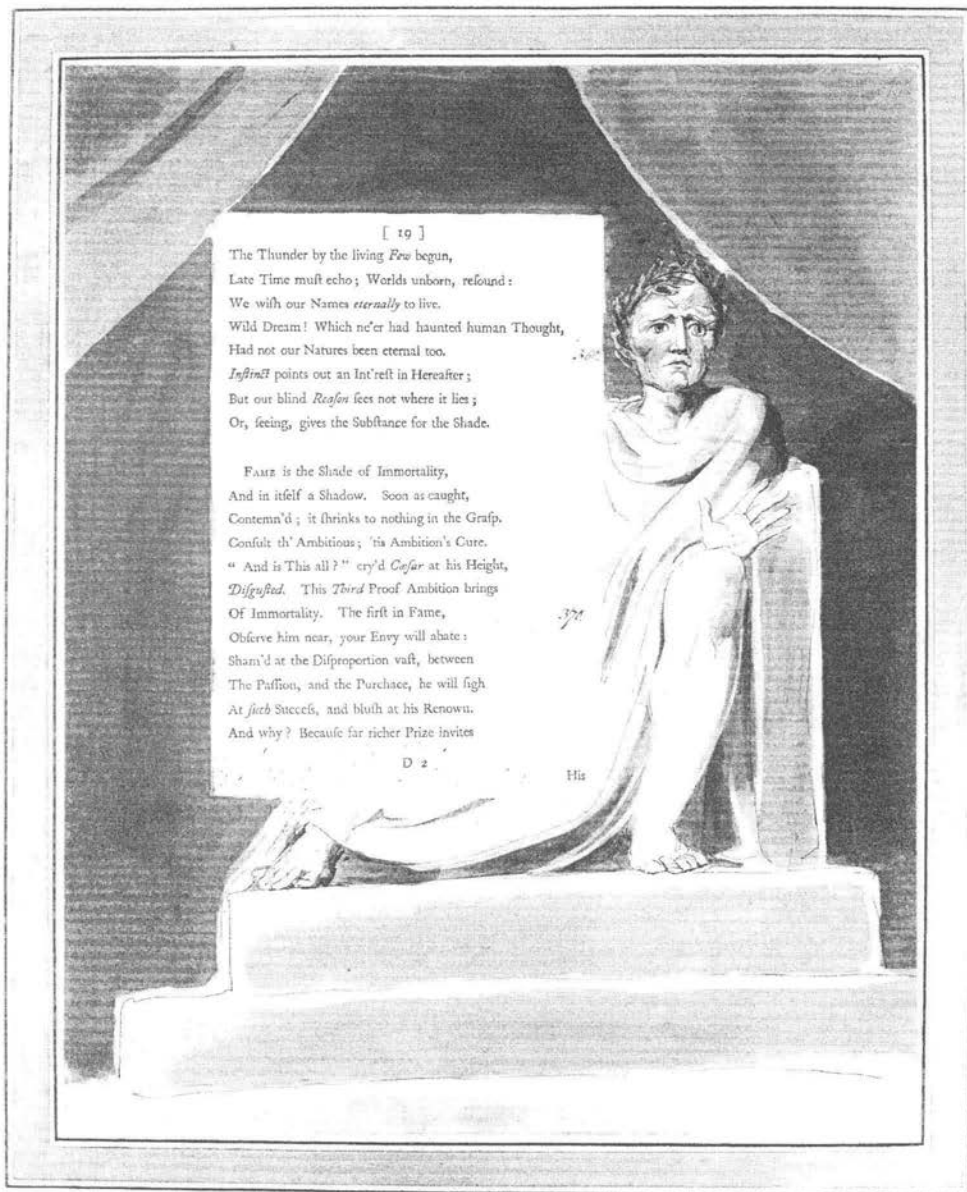


FIGURE 11. Night V, page 9



[19]

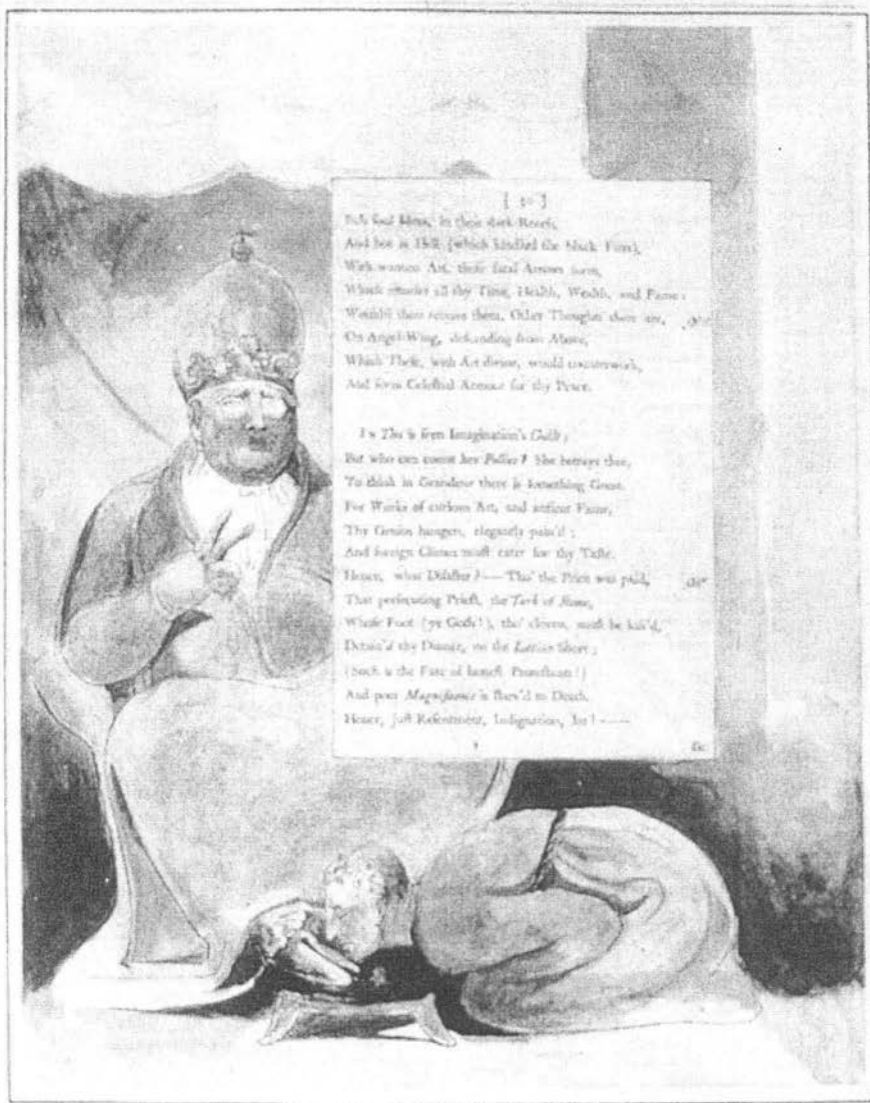
The Thunder by the living *Few* begun,
Late Time must echo; Worlds unborn, refund:
We with our Names *eternally* to live.
Wild Dream! Which ne'er had haunted human Thought,
Had not our Natures been eternal too.
Infract points out an Int'rest in Hereafter;
But our blind *Reason* sees not where it lies;
Or, seeing, gives the Substance for the Shade.

FAME is the Shade of Immortality,
And in itself a Shadow. Soon as caught,
Contemn'd; it shrinks to nothing in the Grasp.
Consult th' Ambitious; 'tis Ambition's Cure.
" And is This all? " cry'd *Cæsar* at his Height,
*Disgust*d. This *Third* Proof Ambition brings
Of Immortality. The first in Fame,
Observe him near, your Envy will abate:
Sham'd at the Disproportion vast, between
The Passion, and the Purchase, he will sigh
At *such* Success, and blush at his Renown.
And why? Because far richer Prize invites

D 2

His

FIGURE 12. Night VII, page 19



[10]

To a God *in* their dark *Roofs*,
 And *see* in *182* (which *filled* the *Black* *Fun*),
 With *woman* *Am*, their *fatal* *Arrows* *born*,
 While *studies* *all* thy *Time*, *Health*, *Wealth*, and *Fame*;
 Wouldst *then* *scorn* them, *Older* *Thoughts* *there* *are*,
 On *Angel* *Wing*, *descending* *from* *Heaven*,
 Which *Flies*, with *Art* *divine*, *swirls* *in* *air*,
 And *from* *Celestial* *Arms* for *thy* *Power*.

I *is* *Thy* *is* *from* *Imagination's* *Gift*;
 But *who* *can* *trust* *her* *Power*? *She* *betrays* *thee*,
 To *think* *in* *Grandeur* *there* *is* *something* *Great*,
 For *Works* *of* *artless* *Art*, and *artless* *Power*,
 Thy *Genius* *hunger*, *elegantly* *paid*;
 And *foreign* *Clinics* *must* *cater* *for* *thy* *Taste*,
 Hence, *what* *Didst* *do*?— *Thy* *the* *Price* *was* *paid*,
 That *perishing* *Priest*, *the* *Lord* *of* *Heaven*,
 While *Fast* (*ye* *Gods!*), *tho'* *cleans*, *must* *be* *kill'd*,
Entrin'd *the* *Dance*, *on* *the* *Latin* *Sheet*;
 (Such *is* *the* *Fate* *of* *honest* *Franciscan*!)
 And *poor* *Magdalen* *is* *flung* *to* *Death*,
 Hence, *just* *Reformation*, *Indignation*, *ho!*—

FIGURE 13. Night VIII, page 50



FIGURE 14. *Europe*, plate 5

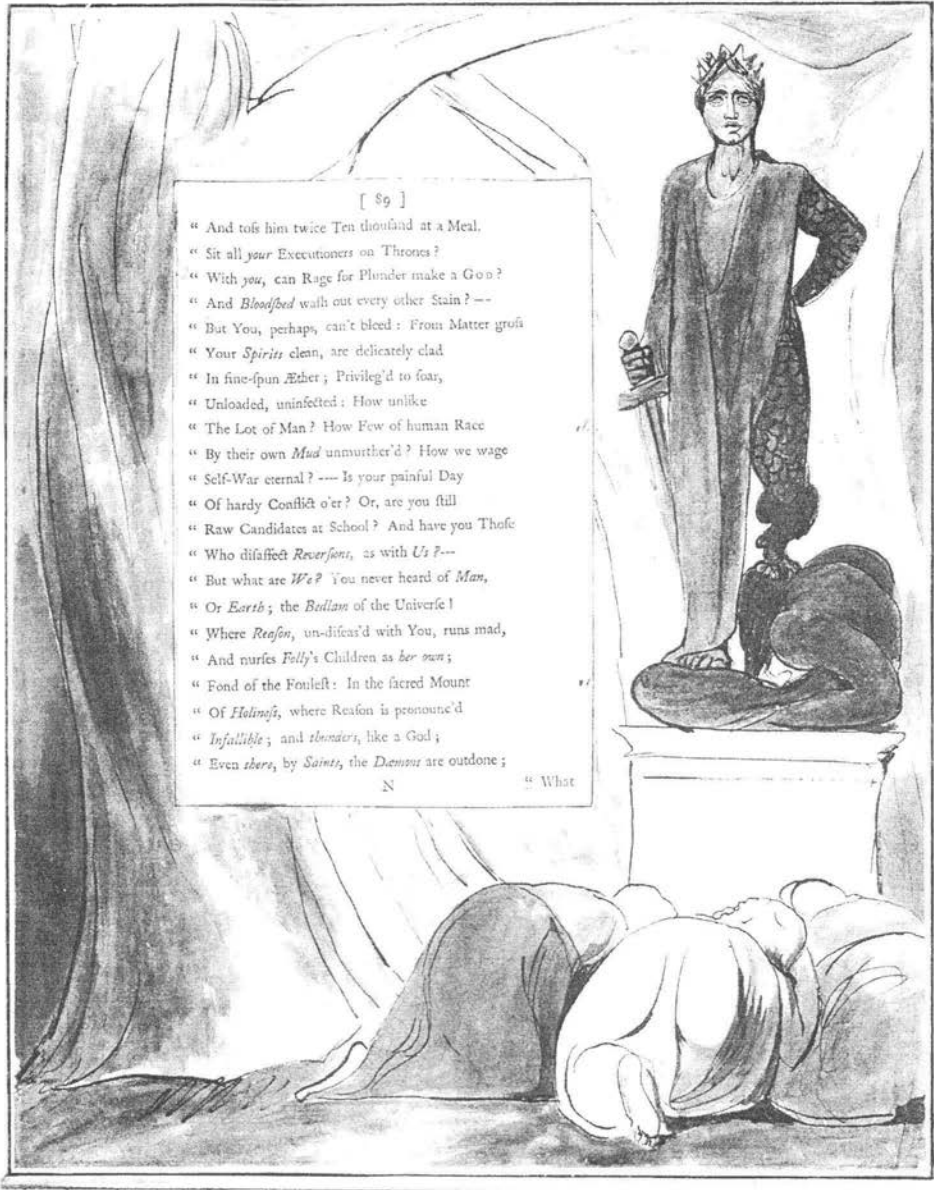


FIGURE 15. Night IX, page 89



FIGURE 16. Biblical typology (1799)

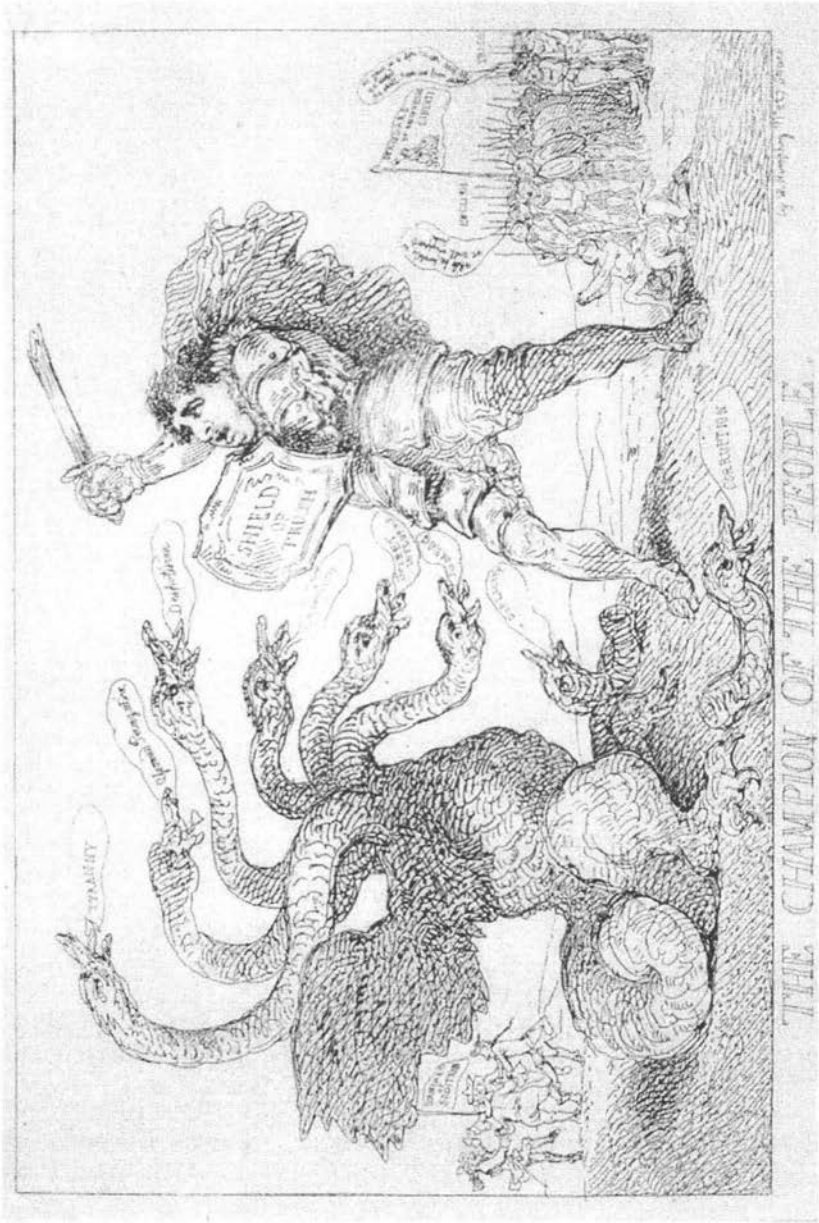


FIGURE 17. Biblical typology (1799)

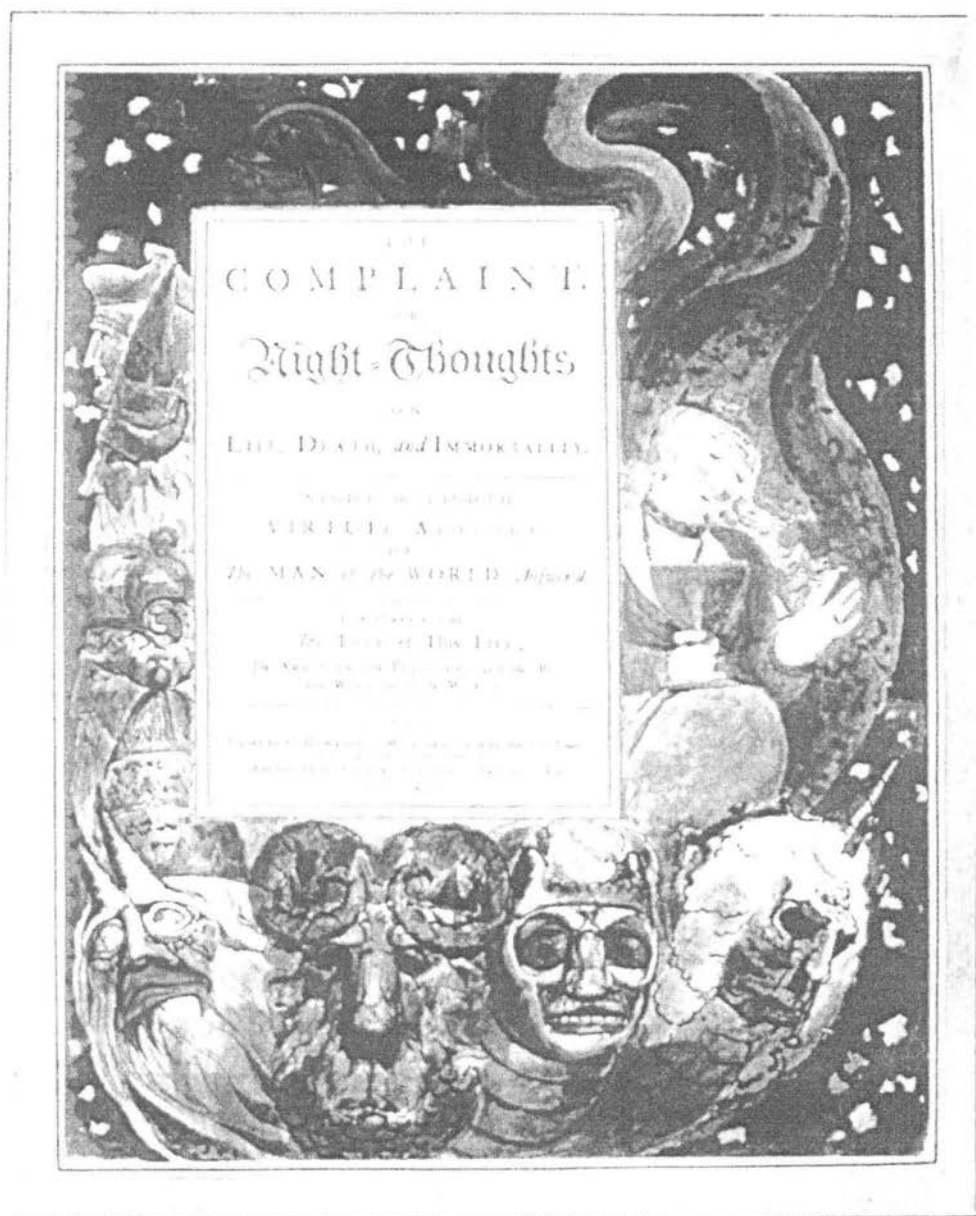


FIGURE 18. Night VIII, title-page



FIGURE 19. Night VIII, title-page (close-up of upper left figure)

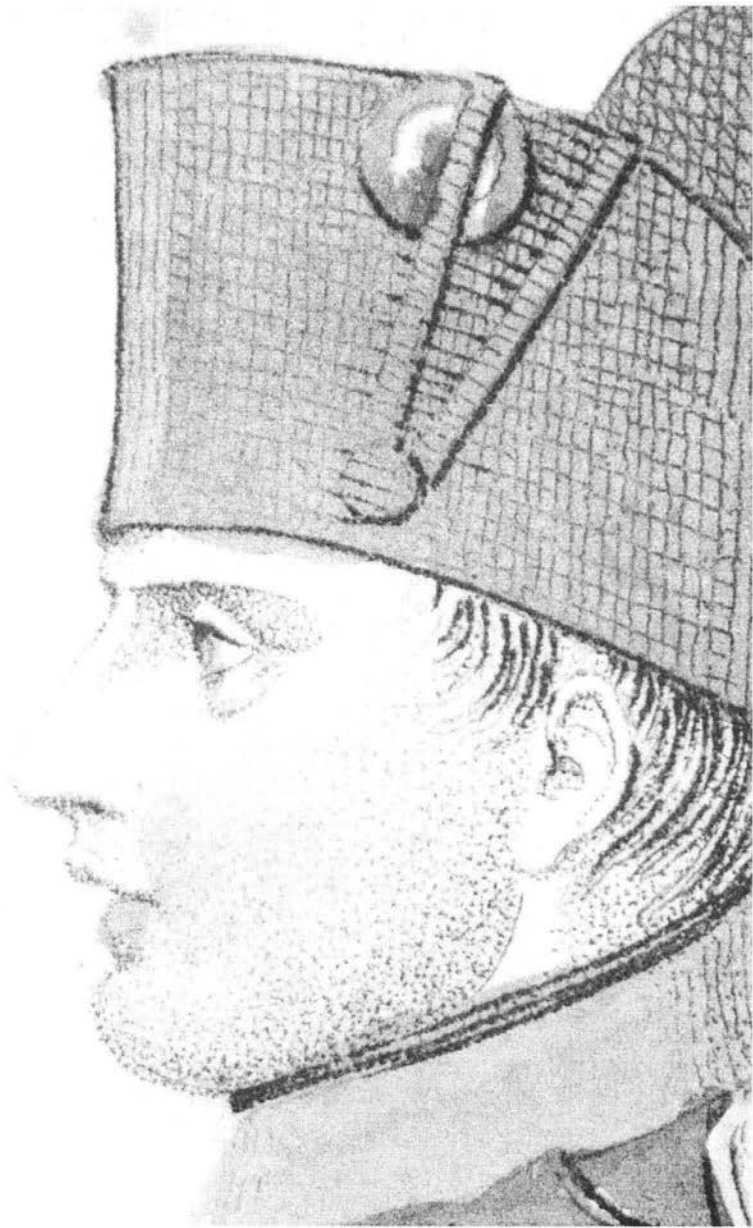


FIGURE 20. Caricature of Napoleon (close-up)



FIGURE 21. Caricature of Napoleon

[91]

And if he finds, commences *more than Man*?
O for a Telescope His Throne to reach!
Tell me, ye Learn'd on *Earth!* or Bleft *Above!*
Ye searching, ye *Newtonian*, Angels! tell,
Where, your Great *MASTER's* Orb? His Planets, where?
Those *conscious* Satellites, those *Morning-Stars,*
First-born of *DEITY!* from Central Love,
By Veneration most profound, thrown off;
By sweet Attraction, no less strongly drawn;
Aw'd, and yet *raptur'd;* *raptur'd,* yet *serene;*
Past Thought, illustrious; but with borrow'd Beams;
In still *approaching* Circles, still *remote,*
Revolving round the Sun's eternal *SIRE?*
Or sent, in Lines direct, on Embassies
To Nations -- in what Latitude? -- Beyond
Terrestrial Thought's Horizon! -- And on what
High Errands sent? -- Here *human* Effort ends;
And leaves me still a Stranger to *His* Throne.

FULL well it might! I quite mistook my Road,
Born in an Age more Curious, than Devout;
More fond to fix the *Place* of Heaven or Hell,

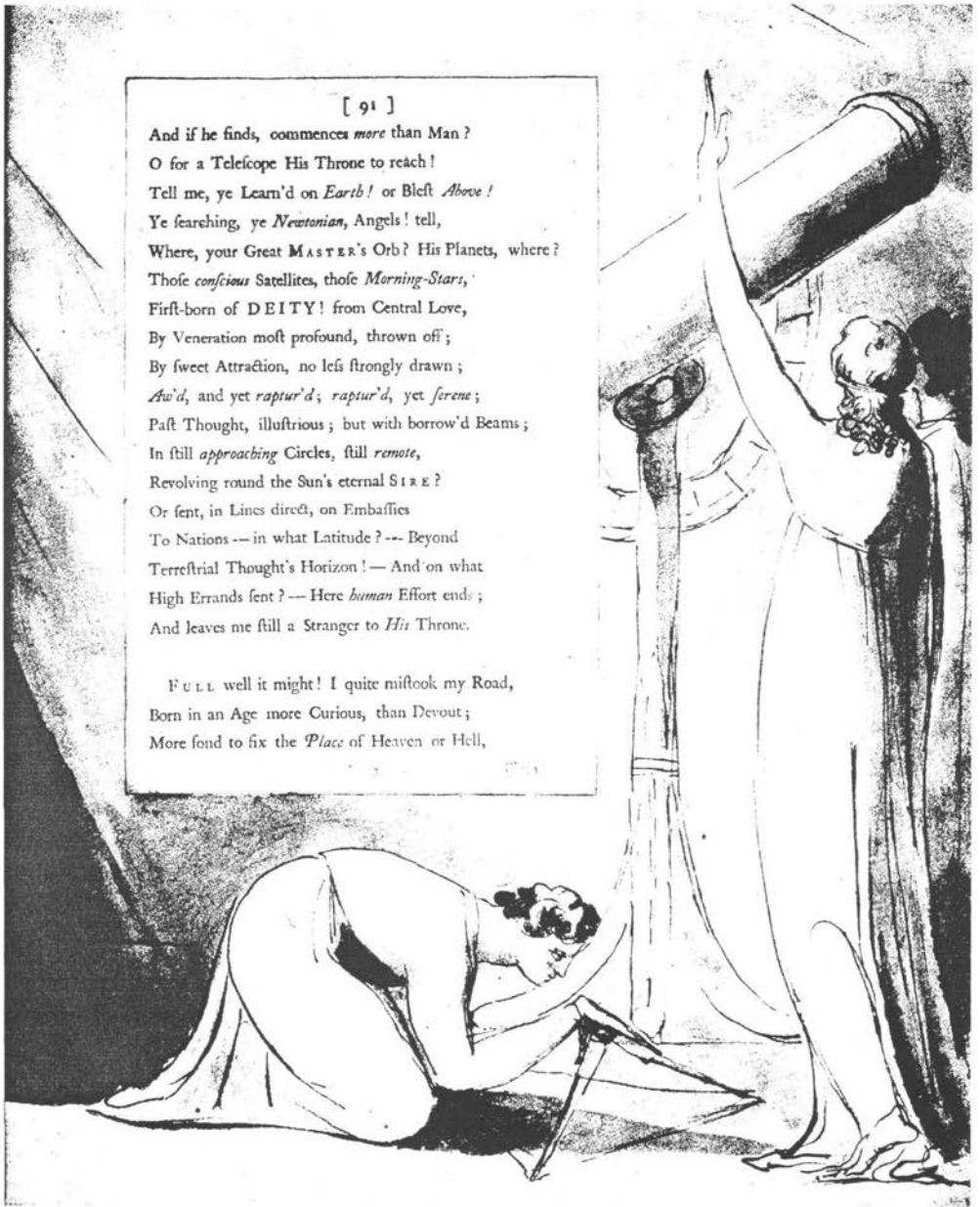


FIGURE 22. Night IX, page 91

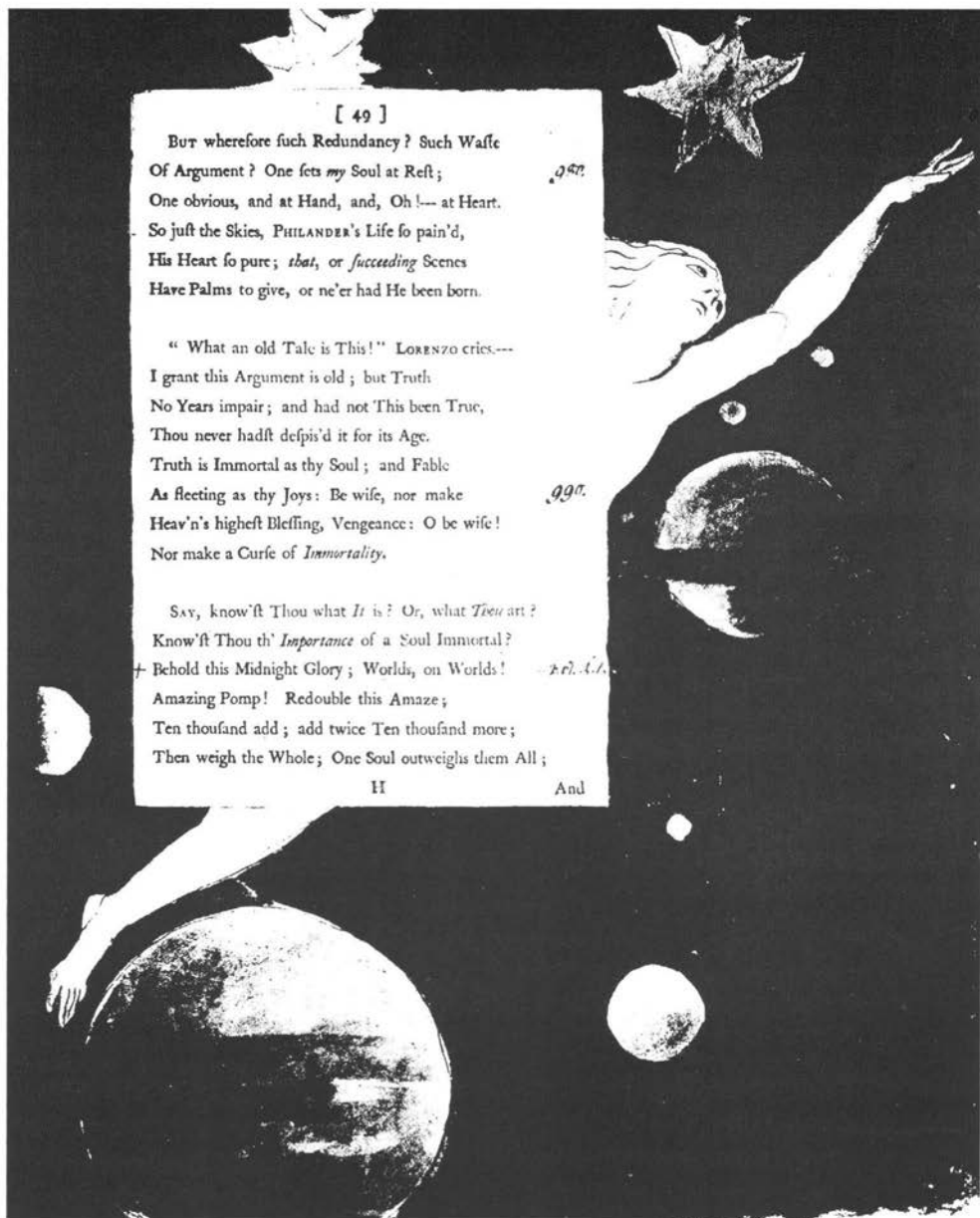
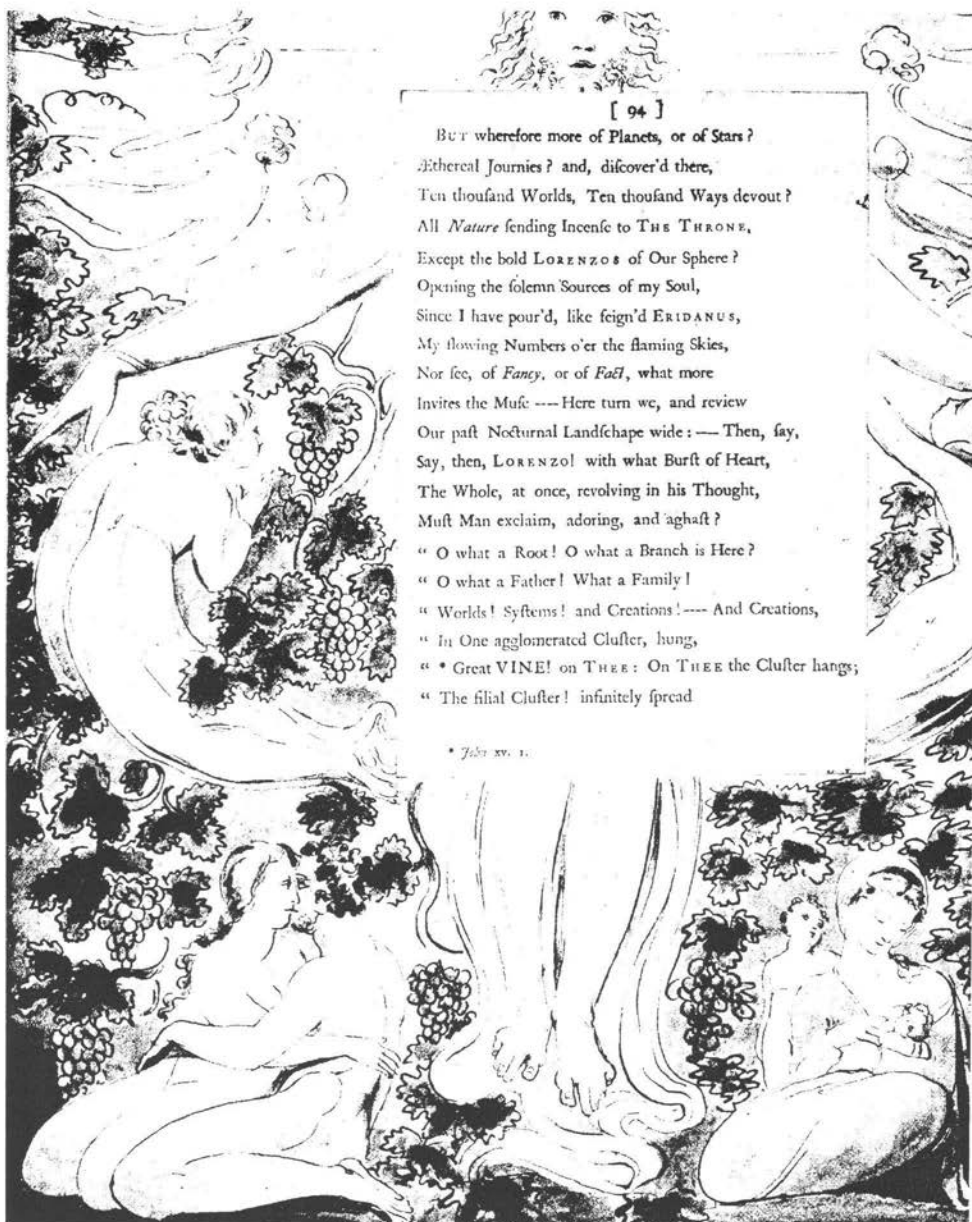


FIGURE 23. Night VII, page 49



[94]

BUT wherefore more of Planets, or of Stars?
 Æthereal Journeys? and, discover'd there,
 Ten thousand Worlds, Ten thousand Ways devout?
 All *Nature* sending Incense to *THE THRONE*,
 Except the bold *LORENZO*s of Our Sphere?
 Opening the solemn Sources of my Soul,
 Since I have pour'd, like feign'd *ERIDANUS*,
 My flowing Numbers o'er the flaming Skies,
 Nor see, of *Fancy*, or of *Faël*, what more
 Invites the Muse --- Here turn we, and review
 Our past Nocturnal Landſchape wide: --- Then, ſay,
 Say, then, *LORENZO!* with what Buſt of Heart,
 The Whole, at once, revolving in his Thought,
 Muſt Man exclaim, adoring, and aghaſt?
 " O what a Root! O what a Branch is Here?
 " O what a Father! What a Family!
 " Worlds! Systems! and Creations! --- And Creations,
 " In One agglomerated Cluſter, hung,
 " * Great *VINE!* on *THEE*: ON *THEE* the Cluſter hangs;
 " The filial Cluſter! infinitely ſpread

* *Job* xv. 1.

FIGURE 24. Night IX, page 94

PRISON: SARA

Tilottama Rajan argues that in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, reality-effects (such as specific details about the place and the circumstance of composition, and the address to an auditor transforming writing into speech), as well as the references to real people refigure fiction as life.¹⁸ Coleridge's conversation poems, apart from being preceded and followed by concrete references to real life, are also framed by a realistic scenery: they begin with the establishment of a physical setting and conclude with a return to this setting as if transfigured by the creative imagination. Kathleen Wheeler suggests that scenes like cot, cottage and bower at the beginning of the poems equal unimaginative perception, conventional language and dead metaphor,¹⁹ but Rajan also notices, in an analysis of *This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison*, that the bower, for instance, represents a "stimulus to creativity."²⁰

In *Effusion*, Sara's bodily presence seems to belong to the realistic scenery which physically encloses the speaker. The touch of her cheek on the speaker's arm reinforces both the speaker's sense of the physical world and of the corporeal boundaries of his self. It necessarily contrasts the hearing of the sound, which, in turn, will entail the visionary experience. The feeling of touch goes together with allegorical discourse (language drawing attention to its own status as an artificial construct – "Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love"), which latter returns, together with the sense of physical boundaries and reality-effects, in the second part of the poem (from line 41), where the speaker is mirrored in Sara's eyes as a "sinful and most miserable man." The listener's piercing look and her inescapable corporeality disrupts inner vision and triggers an explicitly allegorical mode of discourse restating temporality.²¹

Meanwhile, though Sara's emphatic presence could be interpreted solely as a kind of prison confining the speaker to temporality (or, as we will see later, as a warning against the disruptive effects of time on any effort to unify an ephemeral matter, or the materiality of signs, with an eternal idea), it also provokes the need for communication. Thus, both stimulating and marking the end of poetic

¹⁸ Cf. Tilottama Rajan. "Displacing Post-Structuralism: Romantic Studies after Paul de Man." In: *Studies in Romanticism* 24 (Winter 1985), p. 454.

¹⁹ Wheeler. *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry*, p. 142

²⁰ Rajan. *The Supplement of Reading*, p. 114.

²¹ See also Shaw, pp. 33–34 and Paul de Man. "The Rhetoric of Temporality." *Blindness and Insight*. London: Routledge, 1993, p. 207.

activity, it can also be linked to the subtitle (“composed August 20th...”) stressing both that composition originates at a specific time and place and that the poem itself is finished.

Hence, the title “Effusion” (a pouring forth, an unrestrained utterance, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*) that seems to challenge the primacy of the object over the subject,²² does not only exhibit the movement of “phantasies” (or of “vain Philosophy’s aye-babbling spring”)²³ but also stands in opposition to the subtitle and to the listener’s bodily presence. However, the questions why effusion turns out to be inadequate to maintain the communication with the listener and, ultimately, what makes it impossible for poetic language “to realise itself” remain to be answered.

EFFUSION: THE LUTE

Firstly, I would like to expand what has already been argued by Tilottama Rajan concerning the deconstruction of the symbol by allegory in an analysis of *The Eolian Harp*. Doing this, I will try to demonstrate that the efforts made for the construction of the symbol in the later versions of the poem might be considered as a rescue against the allegorical and ironic nature of language laid bare by *Effusion*. However, since the reading of this early poem and the remark on its successive rewritings might indeed appear to be the mere justification of some late 20th century theories, what I would like to show is that Coleridge’s “defensive strategy” might not be rooted in “self-mystification”²⁴ but in an account taken of the dangers inherent in language.

In her analysis of *The Eolian Harp*, Rajan claims that the image of the harp which is meant to suggest the modulation from an explicitly allegorical language to the true voice of symbolic feeling is in fact a “rather artificial personification ..., which marks a reversion to the eighteenth-century poetic diction eschewed by Wordsworth and Coleridge in their attempt to create a more natural, more ‘real’

²² As Rajan puts it: “The original title ‘Effusion XXXV’ suggests an outpouring of sentiment not grounded in the object onto which it is projected” (Rajan. “Displacing Post-Structuralism,” p. 470).

²³ I will try to avoid the use of the word “imagination” on the one hand because Coleridge, in the 1790s, was still under the influence of Hartley’s associationism, and on the other because the concept is so charged with “romantic ideologies” – also rooted in Coleridge’s later writings – that it would be impossible to use it without further clarification.

²⁴ De Man. “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” p. 208.

language.”²⁵ Though one could object that the word “hark!” addressed to the listener suggests that the language is *not* purely figural, and *is* based on perception,²⁶ we will see later that the traces which reveal writing *counterfeiting* oral communication also point to the artifice of the harp image – of the trope for natural sound. To this, we could add that since both the subject matter of the passage translating the sound of the lute into language, and language itself exhibiting the spread of similes and metaphors reach their climax in the image of Paradise, lines 12–25 do not only reveal but also explicitly thematise the desire, in poetic language, to achieve a natural source where the sign can coincide with its object, that is, where it can “partake of the Reality which it renders intelligible.” However, the fact that no poetic words can be “natural” is unveiled again at the very moment when the poetic image itself seems to suggest the contrary.

As it is well known, Plato’s *Ion* exerted a great influence on Coleridge. Critics tend to interpret *Kubla Khan*, for instance, as an example of that influence and see in Coleridge’s poet the representative *par excellence* of the poet Socrates describes in *Ion*. Similarly, the “twilight Elfin” in *Effusion* and in *The Eolian Harp* who

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 untamed wing...

might also be reminiscent of Plato’s poet: a “light and winged thing” whose “melodies (...) are gathered from rills that run with honey, out of glens and gardens of the Muses [that] they bring as the bees do honey, flying like the bees.”²⁷

Thus, desire is endless: firstly, language can never be “natural” since it can reach nothing else but a text, secondly, it can never be “original” since they can never be anything else but the *repetition* of an always already existing prior text. These quite general claims, at the same time, do not explain why the proliferation of signs imply the risk of remaining incomprehensible, and/or disapproved not

²⁵ Rajan. “Displacing Post-Structuralism,” p. 471.

²⁶ Cf. De Man’s comment on the allegorical language of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*: “Rousseau does not pretend to be observing. The language is purely figural, not based on perception” (De Man. “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” p. 203).

²⁷ E. Hamilton & H. Cairns eds. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978, p. 220.

only by the traditional community represented by Sara, but also by the speaker himself.

In Coleridge's poem, there appears to be something evil, something wicked in temptation and desire – as well as in the quasi-androgynous unification of the harp (imagination) and the breeze (inspiration):

How, by the desultory breeze caressed,
Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,
It pours such sweet upbraidings, as must needs
Tempt to *repeat the wrong!*

(my italics)

In the same way, the “twilight Elfins” make a “witchery of sound” and the birds’ wings are “untamed,” devoid of mastery. Furthermore, when the harp image is transposed to the speaker (whose gender becomes also confused), the “thoughts uncalled and undetained” traversing his “indolent and passive brain” are “wild and various as the random gales...” It seems that the poet Plato describes in *Ion* does not only serve as a pre-text for Coleridge’s poet as for the melodies he gathers from the “gardens of the Muses,” but also concerning his state of being “possessed,” of being “in ecstasy.”

For what we can read here, on a narrative level, is that the speaker who tries to persuade his wife about the existence of some “intellectual breeze, / At once the soul of each and God of All” becomes in fact possessed by the tempting maids of his imagination, and, engaging in “idle flitting phantasies,” unites, in language, with an emphatically female principle. The caress of the breeze or the half-yielding maid which make one think of a still unsatiated desire and, necessarily, of the ideal, platonic love, might even be considered as an ironic hint at the opening scene of the conjugal love where Sara’s cheek is “reclined” on the speaker’s arm. As a result, Sara’s reproof might not only suggest that she is not an understanding, “ideal” listener but also that the speaker’s pretension to become “a naked spirit”²⁸ is in fact related to the “wrong”: in the concluding part of the poem (“A sinful and most miserable man, / Wildered and dark”), the adjective “wildered” might refer back to the “wild and various” phantasies, as well as to the

²⁸ In his letter to John Thelwall, on December 31, 1796, after having remarked that this is “the favourite” of his poems, Coleridge claims that he has made up his mind that he is “a mere apparition, a naked spirit” (quoted in I.A. Richards ed. *The Portable Coleridge*. London: Penguin Books, 1950, p. 254).

“footless and wild” melodies of the imagination, while the word “sin,” though it can indeed be taken ironically, can also be read literally: the speaker was possessed by a ‘female’ principle enticing him into escaping his wife conjugal love and earthly morality. Sara’s disapproval, therefore, has *both* a comic and a serious effect.

As far as language is concerned, it is the attempt to *express* the Eternal and the Ideal (“the soul of each, and God of All”) which, from the perspective of a second, reflective self appears to be sinful and vain: poetic language can rescue itself neither from temporality (it cannot be but the repetition of anterior signs), nor from the semantic ambiguities which permit that the frivolous outdo the sacred in one and the same discourse.

All the more so, since in the 1796 version of the poem, the passage from the speaker’s “phantasies” to the affirmation of the “one intellectual breeze” is not without a hitch:

As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject lute!
Or what if all animated nature
Be but organic harps...

(my italics)

“Or” changes into “And” only in the later versions, where the symbolic power of the first part becomes underpinned by the addition of the “one life” theme, and, as it was mentioned above, the footnote is already withdrawn.

Hence, *Effusion* seems to lay it bare that being possessed by one’s own imaginings might not only imply the loss of the mastery of language and of the self in the proliferation of connotative signs: the loss of the unity of meaning might challenge the belief in the unity of Being as well.

Consequently, the (re)possession of Sara and the stress on a traditional religious faith goes together with the regain of control over language: the connotative, semantically ambiguous discourse becomes denotative, the distance between sign and its object acknowledged, and language, instead of enacting the insatiable desire to reach its source, resists temptation and renounces originality. On the other hand, however, the surrender to Sara also suggests a choice: as if her eyes, considered as a figure of self-reflection demystifying the workings of the mind, did not only remind the speaker of his fallen state or of the dangers of “ecstasy” (of a possible proliferation of language that he might become powerless

to control) but also reassured him of the existence of physical boundaries which could render the mastery over language possible.

SPEECH AND WRITING/PRISON AND EFFUSION

Coleridge, in Chapter XXIV of *Biographia Literaria* will clearly point to the advantages of the physical presence of the speaker.

[B]ut lastly and chiefly, for the excitement and temporary sympathy of feeling, which the recitation of the poem by an admirer, especially if he be at once a warm admirer, and a man of acknowledged celebrity calls forth in the audience. For this is really a species of Animal Magnetism, in which the enkindling reciter, by perpetual comment of looks and tones, lends his own will and apprehensive faculty to his auditors. They *live* for the time within the dilated sphere of his intellectual being. It is equally possible, though not equally common, that a reader left to itself should sink bellow the poem, as that the poem left to itself should flag beneath the feeling of the reader.²⁹

This passage suggests that only the presence of a speaker can render writing transparent, since “the poem left alone” might be misunderstood in the absence of a reciter who could make it unambiguous. Interestingly, the extract also bears the impact of Plato’s *Ion*, but, as opposed to *Effusion*, it does not comment on Plato’s poet, but on Plato’s rhapsode, the declaimer of the poet – who is the central figure of the dialogue having such a great impact on Coleridge.³⁰

Though Nigel Leask,³¹ for instance, alludes to a possible similarity between Plato’s poet and Coleridge’s own image of himself as a poet, we might

²⁹ Coleridge, Vol. 2, Ch. XXIV, pp. 211–212.

³⁰ In *Ion* Plato stages a dialogue between Socrates and the winner of the contest of rhapsodes, Ion. The rhapsode is a declaimer of poets who “understands the poet’s thought,” whose “gift,” according to Socrates, is neither art (in the sense of *techné*) nor knowledge (in the sense of *episthémē*), but “a power divine.” This impels the rhapsode “like the power in [...] the magnet”: the magnet attracts a chain of iron rings, by imparting to the first ring a force that enables it to attract another ring, so that a chain of rings be formed. To the magnet Socrates compares the Muse, to the first ring the poet, “possessed” by the Muse and brought to “ecstasy,” to the middle ring the rhapsode, “possessed” by the poet, and to the last ring the audience, who, in turn, is brought to “ecstasy” and is “possessed” by the rhapsode (Hamilton & Cairns, pp. 216–228).

³¹ Nigel Leask. “Shelley’s Magnetic Ladies: Romantic Mesmerism and the Politics of the Body.” In: S. Copley & J. Whale eds. *Beyond Romanticism*. London & New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 60–61.

suppose that *Effusion* actually suggests a different problematic: that of the impossible desire of being the poet and the rhapsode at the same time. For in this conversation poem, language meant to share the poetic experience is far from mesmerising its auditor. Silence, murmur, pouring, sound, music and babbling escape the listener and language translating them into images only discloses its own semantic ambiguity. Conspicuously, the inarticulate sounds transform into speech (“speak of him”), bidding (“biddest me”) and praise (“praise him”) only in the second part of the poem, with the resumption of an explicitly allegorical mode of discourse, and with the renewed accent on corporeality and oral communication (“possess / Peace and this cot, and *thee*”). The rhapsode is missing, since while in the first part of the poem the translation of music into language fails to take “possession” of the listener, speech, in the second part, abandons the attempt to express the “poet’s thought.”³² Thus, if we reconsider all that has been said about “effusions,” we might conclude that in this conversation poem, silence, babbling and the “witchery of sound” cannot be associated with speech, but can rather be considered as a kind of *writing* that escapes the unity of meaning.³³

All the more so, since in spite of the apparent reestablishment of oral communication in the second part of the poem, the speaker does “repeat the wrong” (with all its connotations discussed above) just in the middle of passing a sentence upon it: the index alluding to the ambiguous writing of a French woman – attached as a note, as a supplement to the poem – unexpectedly disrupts the oratory, and the poem’s being *as if* it was oral communication suddenly reveals itself. Meantime, the footnote does not only escape the posited listener’s hearing but also her Medusa-like eyes, the very gaze which, having reminded the speaker

³² Cf. note 30.

³³ It might be of interest to remark that in his later years, well after the publication of the well-known, exegetical passage of *Lay Sermons* (1816–17) in which he characterises the symbol as the “translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal,” (Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *The Statesman’s Manual, Lay Sermons*. Ed. R. J. White. London, Princeton: Routledge, 1972, p. 30) Coleridge seems to challenge again the idea of “translucence.” In *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1829), he asserts the subversive, evil force of the literal threatening the symbol – the symbols of the *Scripture*: “the understanding the same symbols in a literal i.e. phaenomenal sense, notwithstanding the most earnest warnings against it, the most express declarations of the folly and danger of interpreting *sensually* what was delivered of objects *super-sensual* – this was the rank wilding, on which ‘the prince of this world,’ the lust of power and worldly aggrandizement was enabled to graft, one by one, the whole branchery of papal superstition and imposture” (Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *On the Constitution of the Church and State*. Ed. J. Colmer. London, Princeton: Routledge, 1976, p. 120).

that ‘he does not only look but is also looked at,’ could exert a control over language.

MME ROLAND

Before turning to the interpretation of the footnote, it might be useful to make a brief summary on the structure of *Effusion*. We have seen that the poem exhibits the inter-relatedness of two semantic fields, one of them connoting finitude, composition, control and oral communication, and the other one connoting endlessness, proliferation, the state of being possessed and writing. The alteration of the two is also displayed by the structure of the poem: though it seemingly shows a return-upon-itself circular unity, the second, concluding part, is interrupted by a reference to the footnote, which actually appears at the very end of the poem.

The fact that the quotation opens an intertextual space already links it to the thematic field of effusion opposing all the implications of Sara’s presence. Furthermore, this quotation is taken from Mme Roland’s memories:³⁴ from a piece written in prison by a French woman, by an absent “stranger” – who was, by the way, a very good companion to her husband, again in contrast with Sara. Apart from the fact that both the footnote and lines 12–25 of poem figure language as fleeing from but confined by a (metaphorical or literal) prison, the note also mirrors the constant struggle in the poem between possessing (i.e.: “My pensive Sara,” “to possess thee”) and being possessed (i.e.: “Full many a thought uncalled and undetained, / ... / Traverse my indolent and passive brain”): it can either be considered as an extract that the speaker tries to appropriate incorporating it into his own text, or as an ambiguous supplement that escapes the main body of the poem.

The passage from Mme Roland’s *Appel à l’Impartial Postérité* reads as follows:

L’athée n’est point à mes yeux un faux esprit; je puis vivre avec lui aussi bien et mieux qu’avec le dévot, car il raisonne davantage, mais il lui manque un sens, et mon âme ne se fond point entièrement avec la sienne: il est froid au spectacle le plus ravissant, et il cherche un syllogisme

³⁴ Mme Roland, even more than her husband, was one of the moving spirits of the Gironde. She was arrested during the Jacobin Terror and wrote her memories in prison before being executed by the Revolutionary Tribunal, in 1793.

lorsque je rends une action de grâce. "Appel à l'impartial postérité par la Citoyenne Roland," troisième partie, p. 67.

The English translation of the memories, made by J. Johnson, was published in 1795, when the original appeared in France:³⁵

The atheist is not, in my eyes, a man of ill faith: I can live with him as well, nay better than with the devotee, for he reasons more; but he is deficient in a certain sense, and his soul does not keep pace with mine; he is unmoved at a spectacle most ravishing, and he hunts for a syllogism, where I am impressed with awe and admiration.³⁶

The wording of the footnote is not devoid of ambiguity. It is not evident whether the clause after "mais" [but] refers back to the "athée" [atheist] or to the "dévot" [devotee].

In her analysis,³⁷ Kathleen Wheeler argues that "the placement of the dependent clause suggests that it [the whole elaboration] is of the *dévot*." This claim, I think, is questionable. First of all, it is interesting to remark that both in Mme Roland's text and in its first translation, a semicolon is placed between "davantage" (more) and "mais" (but). This semicolon somehow became, in Coleridge's note, a comma. So Mme Roland's text, that Coleridge might have read, is the following:

L'athée n'est point a mes yeux un faux esprit; je puis vivre avec lui aussi bien et mieux qu'avec le dévot, car il raisonne davantage; mais il lui manque un sens, et mon âme ne se fond point entièrement avec la sienne: il est froid...

This semicolon suggests that it is the atheist, rather than the devotee, who is "deficient in a certain sense." Obviously, we cannot decide whether Coleridge's miscopying was intentional or unintentional. Not even whether the edition he had in hand was a good print or a bad one. All that we know is that the footnote makes an allusion to another text (differing from it only by a semicolon) and that this deliberate intertextual play activates two texts simultaneously. On the other hand, we might also regard the opposition between the devotee and the atheist as

³⁵ See Stillinger, p. 37.

³⁶ Marie-Jeanne Philipon Roland de la Platière. *An Appeal to Impartial Posterity by Citizeness Roland, Wife of the Minister of the Home Department*. London: J. Johnson, 1795, Part 3, p. 112. Quoted by Stillinger, p. 240.

³⁷ See Wheeler. *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry*, pp. 86–90.

an anticipation of the later distinction between the Platonists and the Aristotelians: in this case, it might also be difficult to associate syllogism, used in Aristotelian logic, with religious devotion. But even if we take neither the source nor Coleridge's later writings into consideration, the description remains, at least, ambiguous.

The whole passage which the sentence was taken from might also be worth taking into account:

Dans le silence du cabinet et la sécheresse de la discussion, je conviendrais avec l'athée ou le matérialiste de l'insolubilité de certaines questions; mais, au milieu de la campagne et dans la contemplation de la nature, mon coeur ému s'élève au principe vivifiant qui les anime, à l'intelligence qui les ordonne, à la bonté qui m'y fait trouver tant de charmes; lorsque des mers immenses me séparent de ce que j'aime, quand tous les maux de la société nous frappent ensemble comme pour nous punir d'avoir voulu son plus grand bien, je vois au delà des bornes de la vie le prix de nos sacrifices et le bonheur de nous réunir.

Comment? De quelle manière? Je l'ignore; je sens seulement que cela doit être ainsi.

L'athée n'est point a mes yeux...³⁸

Conspicuously enough, the subject matter of Mme Roland's text and the poem itself is very similar; it can either signal an early plagiarism of Coleridge's or the fact that plagiarism comes inevitably from the effusion of writing. But more importantly, the passage as a whole reveals that in the sentence which became Coleridge's footnote, the hierarchy between the devotee and the atheist is twofold.

On the one hand, they are compared on the basis of the question 'who is better to live with?' In this respect, the text favours the atheist which suggests

³⁸ Paul de Roux ed. *Mémoires de Madame Roland*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1966, p. 258. ["In the silence of the closet and in the dryness of the discussion, I would agree with the atheist or with the materialist upon the insolubility of certain questions; but, in the middle of the countryside and in the contemplation of nature, my heart overcome with emotion rises up to the life-giving principle that animates them, to the intelligence that organises them, to the goodness that makes me find so much delight in them; when immense seas separate me from the one I love, when all the wrongs of society strike us at the same time as if they punished us for having wished its greatest good, I can see beyond the boundaries of life the price of our sacrifices and the bliss of our reunion. // How? in what way? I do not know; I only feel that it must be thus. // The atheist is not, in my eyes a man of ill faith..." - my translation.]

indeed that the footnote alludes to Sara (the devotee) in a disapproving way. Furthermore, given that Sara cannot “hear” the footnote and that it is written in French (so she would probably not even understand it), the note can indeed be regarded as a wink at some ideal *reader*. In addition, both the “coy maids” of the speaker’s “phantasies” and Mme Roland can be considered as outcasts in a community represented by Sara and by (metaphorical or literal) imprisonment itself. As far as sensitivity is concerned, however, Mme Roland claims that the one who is “impressed with awe and admiration” “at a spectacle most ravishing” is better than the one who “reasons more.” Interestingly, the lines “For never guiltless may I speak of him, / Th’ Incomprehensible! Save when with awe / I praise him, and with faith that inly *feels*” are reminiscent of the source text or of its first translation: the faith in the “Incomprehensible,” “that inly *feels*” parallels Mme Roland’s “How? in what way? I do not know; I only feel that it must be thus,” while the words “with awe I praise him” call into mind Johnson’s (mis)translation: “I am impressed with awe and admiration.” Nevertheless, even if the similar wording suggests that the footnote supports the conclusion of the poem, the imprisoned Mme Roland musings on the beauties of nature links the note to the speaker of the first part. Since what the passage as a whole reveals is that though in some respects the devotee (Sara) is better than the atheist, the one who can feel the “one intellectual breeze” (or, with Mme Roland’s words: “l’intelligence qui les ordonne”) while contemplating nature is even better than the devotee. Consequently, the footnote seems to add something to our previous claims: the speaker’s “heresy” might be nothing else but his conviction of being able to fully comprehend the Incomprehensible, to express the ineffable.

On the other hand, the Incomprehensible shines through the words that “understand themselves better than those who use them.”³⁹ In a similar way that Plato’s pre-text engages in a dialogue with the poem, the footnote reinforces its ambiguity, disclosing the endless communication between signs. Both the ‘conversation’ with the deceased Mme Roland’s writing and the dialogue with the lute (translated first into the imagery of tempting *maids*) escape audible communication. Furthermore, the intertextual nature of all writing (betrayed by Plato’s text underlying the image of the “twilight Elfins”) which turns into a deliberate intertextual play with the insertion of the footnote brings the poem’s dependence on written traditions in any assignment of meaning⁴⁰ into the

³⁹ Schlegel, p. 33, see the epigraph.

⁴⁰ Cf. Jonathan Culler. “Presupposition and Intertextuality.” *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 103.

foreground. This meaning, however, undermines itself: the note used by the speaker as means to support the faith that “inly *feels*” comes from ‘outside’ (from Mme Roland’s writing and from outside the poem itself), the sound of nature comes from literature, and the imagery expressing the search for origins and originality derives from Plato.

IRONY AND READING

While the semantic ambiguity of lines 12–35 revealing the equivocal character of language, as well as the ambiguity of the footnote (who is better, the *athée* or the *dévot*?) and that of the poem (who is “wrong,” Sara or the speaker?) entailed by the juxtaposition of two different points of view bring – in Friedrich Schlegel’s words – “everything into confusion,”⁴¹ they also open up a ‘conversation’ with the *reader*. For the reader, left without a unifying voice, is forced to make and unmake decisions: to give an active, creative but also arbitrary response to the text. Hence, even if the evil silence of signs which challenges the unity of being and meaning endangers the authorial voice, it also ensures the survival of the text through the active reader-response it triggers.

Paul de Man argues that Friedrich Schlegel’s authentic language is “the language of madness, the language of error and the language of stupidity [...] It is such because authentic language is a mere semiotic entity, open to the radical arbitrariness of any sign system and as such is profoundly unreliable.” And he continues:

There is a machine there, a text machine, an implacable determination and total arbitrariness [...] which inhabits words on the level of the signifier, which undoes any narrative consistency of lines, and which undoes the reflexive and dialectical model, both of which are, as you know, the basis of any narration.⁴²

Effusion might be considered as the intertwining of an allegorical mode of speech engendering the narrative structure, and irony originating in the authentic chaos of language and subverting denotation. For the mirroring eyes of the listener do not only remind the speaker of his “authentic temporal destiny,” as it

⁴¹ Schlegel, p. 33, see the epigraph.

⁴² Paul de Man. “The Concept of Irony.” *Aesthetic Ideology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 181.

has already been argued, but also of the fact that during the process of translating ('endowing with a meaning') some inarticulate sounds, he fell prey to the evil spirit of self-differing signs. But the speaker's self-alienation triggered by the listener's gaze is also an ironic gesture: as if self-irony was a means to control and overcome the subversive force of irony inherent in language. However, as we have seen, no gods can ever "rescue us from all these ironies."⁴³

In the meantime, the reader might go through the same stages as the speaker does. Coleridge's surrender to Sara may come as a surprise to most of us who read the first part of *Effusion* as the confession of a Poet who has "drunk the milk of Paradise." Only the sudden shift of perspective makes us ask what can be wrong with the lute or the "aye-babbling spring" of the imagination. Subsequently, when we would accept a more traditional faith and the supremacy of conjugal love over the desire for some imaginary maids, the index, disrupting the linearity of reading, refers us to the writing of yet another woman: to *Mme* Roland. This inter-play of enthusiasm and detachment – the alteration between giving and withdrawing a meaning – suggests that the poem both re-enacts and makes the reader re-enact a possible process of reading which stands in clear opposition both to (ideal) listening characterised by enthusiasm without detachment and to mere gazing characterised by detachment without enthusiasm (cf. Sara, and the speaker in "Dejection, an Ode").

Coleridge wrote sixteen versions of the poem, and it seems that the revisions aim at rescuing language from "these ironies" and bringing it closer to speech. The alterations made in the 1817 edition, the change of the title from *Effusion* to *The Eolian Harp*, the insertion of the full passage on the "one life" ("O the one life within us and abroad") and the withdrawal of the footnote might all be considered as an act of faith in a poetic language in which "the figure, and the real thing so figured, exactly coincide."⁴⁴ At the same time, however, Sara's presence will always remind the readers of the heretic dangers in attempting to express the translucence of the Meaning.

⁴³ Schlegel, in "On Incomprehensibility," poses the question: "What gods will rescue us from all these ironies?" Cf. Wheeler. *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism*, p. 37.

⁴⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge. "On the Principles of Genial Criticism (1814)." *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. II, p. 233.