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What is the ‘medicated atmosphere’ in *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 18?*

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I

There is a passage in the *Biographia Literaria* in which Coleridge speaks about the effect of metre:

As far as metre acts in and for itself, it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention. This effect it produces by the continued excitement of surprize, and by the quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited, which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence. As a medicated atmosphere, or as wine during animated conversation, they act powerfully, though themselves unnoticed. Where, therefore, correspondent food and appropriate matter are not provided for the attention and feelings thus roused, there must needs be a disappointment felt; like that of leaping in the dark from the last step of a staircase, when we had prepared our muscles for a leap of three or four. (Chapter 18)

The phrase which I marked with an underline, 'a medicated atmosphere,' is far from obvious in its meaning. The meaning of the whole passage is clear enough in spite of the lengthy sentences that constitute it — so clear that, even if we ignore the phrase in question, it is possible to grasp what Coleridge is saying. Therefore, my question is trivial in a way, dealing with a negligible thing. But at the same time it makes us a little uneasy to find an obscurity in the midst of such a clear statement of such a superb idea.

That Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is a hard book to read need not be repeated. Difficulty seems to be almost a hall-mark of Coleridge's prose writing. The reason is that his brain was too full of ideas, brilliant ideas as they were. Thus once he sets about explaining some subject, he cannot help including more matters which need explanation in their turn. He is always fighting a losing battle. Every time he explains, he drags upon him more things he must struggle with. His alternative is either going on digressing for ever, or, by ignoring every necessary explanation, ending up in an unintelligible statement. The best example of the latter is the famous definition of imagination in the 13th chapter of the *Biographia Literaria* — that passage which comprises 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.' A superb statement, indeed. But how crippled!

When we say, 'Such and such is difficult to understand,' our meaning is, of course, that it is difficult to guess the writer's intended meaning. This is obvious from the fact that we will stop bothering about meaning at all as soon as we realize the text before us is 'a tale told by an idiot.' Such an obvious fact, however, seems quite forgotten in recent ideological criticism. The New Criticism, in spite of its motto of the 'intentional fallacy,' did not forget it, but after that many theories were produced and in all of them we must say that the author's meaning has been especially

unpopular. I cannot but say that this is a strange phenomenon, for once we stop taking account of the author's meaning or intention, we will be faced with the need to interpret even an idiot's tale. We bother about meaning only when we know that some new insight will be given to us by the author if we overcome the difficulty. Any utterance void of intention has no meaning.

The reason of the unpopularity is easy to guess. Some people say that the intentionalist interpretation will limit the free activity of interpretation on the part of the reader. To such an objection, a simple answer will suffice: that freedom is not always a good thing. Just consider what will happen if we cancel all the traffic regulations in order to give freedom to car-drivers.

Others say that the author's intention is unreachable. It is true. The author's intention is unattainable. It is there only as a hypothesis. All that we can do is to approach it as far as possible by the help of circumstantial evidence. We cannot get to the final conviction because intention is a thing that finally belongs to the author's subjective world. Even if we bring forth a living author's explanation, it will not do, for the author may not be conscious of what he has done in the moment of inspiration. This is the point emphasized by New Criticism. However, to say that it is unattainable is one thing, and to say that it is worthless to pursue it is another. In the same way, the secrets of the universe will not totally be disclosed to human beings; some secrets will always remain unsolved. But we do not for that reason think that scientific research is meaningless. We are impelled to it, regardless of its possibility or impossibility.

Also some specious theory says that interpretation is an act of finding one's own self in the literary text. It is true that we find ourselves through reading. But the discovery will only be possible through an

encounter with other eyes than ours. To restore as faithfully as possible those other eyes than ours is essential before any such discovery is made at all. That is to say, we cannot help being bound first by the author's intended meaning.

Now, from such an intentionalist point of view, difficulty in Coleridge's prose can be divided into three types. First is such as can be overcome by reference to its immediate context however laborious and demanding it may be to follow Coleridge's discourse. That is to say, the immediate context supplies us with a strong circumstantial evidence. The underlined part of the following passage is an example.

During the first year that Mr Wordsworth and I were neighbours our conversation turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination. The sudden charm which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature.
(Chapter 14)

We call Wordsworth a poet of nature, that is to say, a poet who took his subject matter from natural landscapes. The 'poetry of nature' can be taken in that sense, if we pluck it out from the context. But here the context demands us to imagine nature first as a painter, and then, through the classical association of painting and poetry as sister arts, as a poet. What the writer means to say is the 'poetry written by nature.'

The second type is when reference to the immediate context does not decrease the difficulty. In order to overcome it, we must refer to differ-

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ent sections of the same work or to different works by the same author. In Wordsworth's short poem "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," the poet says nothing about who 'she' is. However, we guess that she is Lucy, after connecting this poem with other Lucy poems. The following is an example from Coleridge.

In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*; in which it was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. (Chapter 14)

What is 'poetic faith'? Of course, we may explain, like a nasty dictionary, that it is 'that willing suspension of disbelief,' because the sentence says so. But then we are tempted to ask what that willing suspension is. The answer is, again, 'poetic faith.' The problem is that we never heard of 'poetic faith.' It is difficult to conceive a faith which can be called poetical, because faith is faith whatever its aesthetic quality is. This difficulty can be overcome if we pay attention to similar expressions which appear in Chapter 22 of the *Biographia Literaria*, and also in Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare. They are 'poetic analogon of faith,' 'negative faith,' 'temporary faith,' as well as 'historic faith.' From these we can gather that Coleridge had in mind three kinds of faith: (1) religious faith, which is all in all and the true meaning of faith, (2) historical or materialistic faith, which believes things are there before us just because they are there — a belief that constitutes our common sense as against David Hume's sceptical view of the materialistic world, and (3) poetic faith, which believes the existence of objects only when we are in the

midst of the illusion evoked by artistic work.

Lastly, the third type of difficulty is that which will not be overcome however widely we search around other discourses made by the author. A typical example is the definition of imagination in the 13th chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*. If that immortal *Logosophia* had been finally written by him, that passage would have belonged to the second type. But as it is, it typically belongs to the third type. For example, it will be difficult to explain satisfactorily the meaning of such an easy looking sentence, which Coleridge added after the definition: 'all objects (*as* object) are essentially fixed and dead.' In what sense can our living body, for instance, be called 'essentially fixed and dead'? To understand it we will need the whole system of Coleridge's ideas which were left unfinished.

The 'medicated atmosphere,' which is my topic here, though not philosophical at all as the definition of imagination, equally belongs to this third type. No circumstantial evidence can be found through all of Coleridge's discourses. We must step out of discourses and go into the details of a biographical fact.

II

Now, to repeat, my question is: what is the 'medicated atmosphere' that appears in the following passage (that is, what did Coleridge mean by that phrase)?

As far as metre acts in and for itself, it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention. This effect it produces by the continued excitement of surprize, and by the quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-

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excited, which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence. As a medicated atmosphere, or as wine during animated conversation, they act powerfully, though themselves unnoticed. Where, therefore, correspondent food and appropriate matter are not provided for the attention and feelings thus roused, there must needs be a disappointment felt; like that of leaping in the dark from the last step of a staircase, when we had prepared our muscles for a leap of three or four. (Chapter 18)

If the answer is obvious for most of the people, my discussion will lose half of its meaning. So, let me assume for the moment that the answer is not so obvious, that the phrase is obscure and curious.

The first thing I must say is that the whole passage is a marvellous passage, the best statement ever made about the effect of metre and rhyme. We sense a powerful mind working, and at the same time the superb control over language.

And this leads me to another characteristic of this passage. Though the phrase in question is curious and obscure, the meaning of the whole passage is clear enough, in spite of its lengthy sentences. Even if we strike off the simile of the medicated atmosphere, another simile — that of 'wine during animated conversation' — functions very well and conveys what the author wants to say. Therefore, my question is very trivial in a way; it concerns what we can dispense with. But this question entails another question: Why did Coleridge insert this simile in such a mystifying way, when it appears quite unnecessary?

Now, Coleridge says, the effect of metre is like that of wine during animated conversation. That is to say,

(1) *it is not noticed while being taken in*, and yet

(2) *it has a strong delayed effect.*

I think we can take it for granted that the medicated atmosphere, whatever it is, shares these two conditions. Some friends of mine suggested to me answers about what it might be. They say it might refer to the now out-moded practice of fumigating the room of a patient. Daniel Defoe mentioned, in his *Journal of the Plague Year*, the burning of pitch and sulphur and gunpowder when an infected person left the room. If it kills the disease germ, its effect is strong, indeed. But such an effect will be invisible, whereas here we need some palpable effect, felt physically, like the intoxication by wine. And the smoke coming from the burning will be far from unnoticed. It can be called a medicated atmosphere, but it doesn't satisfy the two conditions mentioned above.

Another answer is that Coleridge had in mind the fumes from an opium pipe. While admitting its strong effect, how can we say that its fumes are unnoticed. Even for by-standers, the fumes will be offensive, as is clear from the fact that heavy-smokers are disliked everywhere. And in Coleridge's days, opium was most commonly taken in the form of laudanum, mixture of opium and alcohol. Then it can't be called atmosphere at all.

In my opinion, the only thing that fits in well with those two conditions is nitrous oxide, or laughing gas. As I learnt from my medical colleague, this gas is entirely colourless and odourless. The colleague told me he inhaled the gas when he was a student. He said, we can't distinguish this gas from ordinary air, and yet the effect of inhaling it is strong.

The history of laughing gas started with Humphry Davy: he discovered it at Thomas Beddoes' Pneumatic Institution in Bristol in 1799. Later in the same year Coleridge returned from Germany and stayed briefly in Bristol. He became most enthusiastic about the genius of this newly

acquainted young man, yet unknown to the world. Coleridge participated in his experiment with nitrous oxide. Other well-known people joined it; Robert Southey, Joseph Cottle (publisher), Thomas Wedgwood (from the potter's family), Peter Roget (of Roget's *Thesaurus*), James Watt (of steam engine). They have left their written record of their impression and the effect of it. The experiment was not dangerous. The dangerous part of it had already been tried by Davy himself. He was just entertaining his friends by his new discovery.¹

In fact, in those days, laughing gas was applied solely for a recreational purpose. It was regarded as a good substitute for alcohol — or better, because it didn't entail an uncomfortable hang-over. It took nearly half a century before its anesthetic potentiality was taken up seriously. In 1840s in the U.S., one dentist noticed, at such a laughing gas party, an intoxicated person hitting his leg against a chair, bleeding, and yet showing no sign of pain. Then he thought of using this gas for his treatment.

The year 1799 is the time when Coleridge and Davy rapidly became intimate with each other. It was the time also when the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* were being prepared. Printing of it was made in Bristol. Davy was requested by Wordsworth to overlook its printing.

This connection is important, because the subject of discussion in our passage concerns the problem of poetic diction. Coleridge calls it a long-continued controversy. The problem dates far back to the time of the publication of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* with its famous preface.

He had long entertained an objection to Wordsworth's statement there. The target of his criticism was the following statements of Wordsworth's:

1. 'the language of these men [i.e. men in low and rustic life] I propose

to myself to imitate, and as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men.’

2. ‘Between the language of prose and metrical composition, there neither is, nor can be any essential difference.’

Of course, in stating in this way, Wordsworth didn’t mean that if we carry a tape-recorder to the countryside, take rustic people’s conversation and coming back write it down, then it will become a good poem. The same is true with that famous statement that poetry is spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. If we stamp on the tail of a cat, the cat will cry. That will be indeed a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. But Wordsworth, of course, didn’t mean that.

Wordsworth was not much interested in theoretical distinction. He stated his theory quite in a commonsensical way. But the situation was different with Coleridge. He had been entrapped by the problem of artistic imitation with its long history beginning with Aristotle. Taking over this problem from Adam Smith,² Coleridge was fully aware of the essential difference between imitation and objects imitated. One result of this is his desynonymization of ‘copy vs. imitation.’ A photographic imitation is copy, and the use of the word imitation he limited to artistic imitation. That is why he questioned Wordsworth’s statement that ‘between the language of prose and metrical composition, there neither is, nor can be any essential difference.’ Coleridge thought that something is wrong with Wordsworth’s statement in the Preface, and he long entertained this objection. And the result is the passage we are discussing.

The use of metre is, Coleridge says, one of the essential differences between prose and poetry. We don’t pay special attention to metre while reading, but its effect is considerable. As I said, the time is around 1799. It is natural that Coleridge called back to his mind his recent experience at Davy’s laboratory. The gas is colourless and odourless, so we don’t

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feel we are inhaling something special. Yet the effect of it is powerful. Thus it was that he says metre works on our mind as a medicated atmosphere.

Here a number of questions arise. If he meant laughing gas, why didn't he say laughing gas or nitrous oxide articulately, instead of mystifying readers by such an obscure phrase? This is only a guesswork, but he may have thought that if he said 'laughing gas,' it would damage the dignity of the whole passage, which is indeed a superb sample of English prose. Also nitrous oxide is too technical to be incorporated in this kind of discourse.

The most important question is why 'medicated atmosphere?' Let me take this up as my last point. The hey-day or the honey-moon days of the friendship between Coleridge and Davy is the last months of 1799. I am here following Molly Lefebure's biographical observation in *The Coleridge Connections*.³ Coleridge was staying in London with his family, and Davy came up to London to find a publisher for his book. Davy brought his manuscripts.

Most biographies of Humphry Davy list his book as *Researches, Chemical and Philosophical* (1800), but the full title of it was much longer: *Researches, Chemical and Philosophical, Chiefly concerning Nitrous Oxide, or Dephlogisticated Nitrous Air, and its Respiration*

Now, thanks to John Livingston Lowes' work, *The Road to Xanadu*, we all know that linguistic alchemy so characteristic of Coleridge's genius. An enormous amount of reading is stocked and lie dormant in his memory for some time, and when some pieces come out of it, we find them clothed in superb expressions. To pick up a few examples from *The Road to Xanadu*:

- (1) Not only the Wake of a Ship produces this Light, but Fishes also

in swimming leave behind 'em *a luminous Track*; which is so bright that one may distinguish the Largeness of the Fish, and know of what Species it is. *I have sometimes seen a great many Fishes playing in the Sea, which have made a kind of artificial Fire in the Water, that was very pleasant to look on.*⁴ [Lowes' italics]



They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire. (*The Ancient Mariner*)

- (2) He says, there is a Tradition among them, that in November 1668, *a Star appear'd below the Body of the Moon within the Horns of it.*⁴ [Lowes' italics]



Till clomb above the eastern bar
The hornèd Moon, with one bright star
Within the nether tip. (*The Ancient Mariner*)

Is it too far-fetched to think that Davy's 'dephlogisticated nitrous air' has been submitted to the same transformational process and gave birth to the phrase of 'medicated atmosphere'?

Still one more question remains. It is: Why did he add this simile at all, if the simile of wine can fully convey his meaning? Why was it necessary for Coleridge to insert such an obscure phrase into the statement which is otherwise very clear in meaning? This is hard to answer. It belongs to the inmost part of the author's intention, and we have no other means than guesswork. However, some possible answers present themselves. First is a personal reason. Coleridge may have wished to record and immortalize his close friendship with Humphry Davy when they were young and hopeful. Such a personal element seems to have

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been strong in Wordsworth and Coleridge. *The Prelude* is a good example.

Or there may have been a deeper reason. That is, the simile of laughing gas may have added something that cannot be conveyed by the simile of wine. The intoxication by wine can only make our brain inactive and dull, while it appears that the laughing gas can bring about a quite different psychological condition. We have some glimpse of it by reading Davy's statement describing his own state of mind when intoxicated by laughing gas.

By degrees, as the pleasurable sensations increased, I lost all connection with external things; trains of vivid visible images rapidly passed through my mind, and were connected with words in such a manner, as to produce perceptions perfectly novel. I existed in a world of newly connected and newly modified ideas. I theorised—I imagined that I made discoveries. When I was awakened from this semi-delirious trance by Dr. Kinglake, who took the bag from my mouth, indignation and pride were the first feelings produced by the sight of the persons about me. My emotions were enthusiastic and sublime; and for a minute I walked round the room, perfectly regardless of what was said to me. As I recovered my former state of mind, I felt an inclination to communicate the discoveries I had made during the experiment. I endeavoured to recall the ideas, they were feeble and indistinct; one collection of terms, however, presented itself: and with the most intense belief and prophetic manner, I exclaimed to Dr. Kinglake, "*Nothing exists but thoughts! — the universe is composed of impressions, ideas, pleasures and pains!*"⁵

Coleridge must have read this passage and may have compared it

with his own response. If the intoxication by laughing gas has such a sharpening effect as reported by Davy, it is a more suitable metaphor here than wine to describe the effect of metre, for the effect of metre is that it will make us more sensitive to the beauty of images and ideas. True, ordinary readers don't have an experience of inhaling laughing gas; the simile will not help readers' understanding. Nevertheless, it is a more faithful description of the effect of metre. So, he decided not to delete it, in spite of its obscurity.

NOTES

- * The latter half of this paper was read at Wordsworth Summer Conference at Dove Cottage, July 31-August 14, 2004.
- ¹ As to Humphry Davy's discovery of laughing gas, see David Knight, *Humphry Davy: Science and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1972); Michael Shedlin & David Wallechinsky with Saunie Salyer (eds.), *Laughing Gas: Nitrous Oxide* (Berkeley: Ronin Publishing, 1973); Helen Reid & Sue Stops (ed.), *On the Waterfront: The Hotwells Story* (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 2002).
- ² Adam Smith, "Of the Nature of that Imitation which takes Place in what are called the Imitative Arts" (written 1777?), in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. by Wightman, Bryce & Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp.176-86.
- ³ Richard Gravil & Molly Lefebure (eds.), *The Coleridge Connection* (Macmillan, 1990), p.97.
- ⁴ John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (Houghton Mifflin, 1927), pp.40-41.
- ⁵ Humphry Davy, *Researches Chemical and Philosophical*, Research IV.