

# The “Strange Self-power in the Imagination”

Epilepsy, Fancy and Disbelief in the Writings  
of Coleridge, Erasmus Darwin and Thomas Beddoes  
KIMBERLEY PAGE-JONES

*Abstract: This paper will focus on Coleridge’s writing of epileptic signs in the light of contemporary debates on the physiology and psychology of the brain. By examining the medical narratives of epilepsy, widely debated at a time where both evangelical movements and consumer behaviors were threatening the nerves and brains of English society, I intend to explore the cultural components and meanings attached to epileptic fits in order to understand Coleridge’s dreadful fear of epilepsy and its relation to fanciful imagination. I will argue that his fear of epileptic seizures may have laid the ground for his theory of fancy: body and brain could create against the will of the poet thus acting as moral alibis for his more radical poems.<sup>1</sup>*

In a letter to Daniel Stuart written in May 1816, Coleridge sketched his famous theory of the “willing suspension of disbelief” that he would later develop in *Biographia Literaria*. Images and thoughts, he wrote, “possess a power in, and of themselves, independent of that act of the Judgment or Understanding, by which we affirm or deny the existence of a reality correspondent to them” (Griggs 4: 641). Drawing from the experience of dreaming, he explained that at times, we could not believe or disbelieve images because the “comparing power” had been suspended, namely the ability to compare dream images to other external stimuli (Griggs 4: 641).

As it has been widely acknowledged, Coleridge drew this theory from his own experience of being “acted on by stories” (Griggs 4: 641). The “willing suspension

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<sup>1</sup> A revised version of this essay will be published in the special issue of *Essays on Romanticism* dedicated to Romantic-era literature, culture & science.

of disbelief” principle was first and foremost a recognition of his own “febleness” of nature that he generalized to man’s nature and then theorized to distinguish illusion from delusion; as such, he aptly managed to invent “the true theory of stage illusion.” His own struggle with visions, reveries, trance-like experiences, nightmares born from bodily affections that he painstakingly detailed in his letters and notebook entries paved the way for “a theory which [...] w[a]s most important as the ground and fundamental principle of all philosophic and of all common-sense criticisms concerning the drama and the theatre” (Griggs 4: 641).

To be “acted on” by images, feelings and thoughts weaved by a fanciful process recalls his 1803 poem “Pains of Sleep,” written to his friend Robert Southey while touring Scotland on foot. This narrative of anxiety and dispossession staging Coleridge the dreamer pursued and tortured by a “fiendish crowd / Of shapes and thoughts” has become emblematic of his dreadful nights; sleep being the moment when the power of volition is suspended and thus when man can fall prey to those feelings and images which Coleridge ardently believed did not belong to the dreamer (Griggs 1: 982). His concern with dream visions, feelings and their moral meaning began in the early 1790s as his body started showing signs of disorder; his diseased body is connected to an amazingly rich range of concerns, from idealism to materialism, from poetry to sensibility. He developed, scattered among his notebooks, letters and essays, a theory of feeling, a theory of dream, a theory of the mind, which stem partly from this necessity to doubt those dream visions and to interrogate the pathology of the mind: “He never truly believed, who was not made first sensible and convinced of unbelief” (Beer 107). Belief was to be weighed and evaluated by the scientific mind: “Men that know nothing in sciences, have no doubts” (Beer 107).

Coleridge tested as much his bodily affections as his thoughts with the scientific breakthroughs of his time. A close friend of Humphry Davy, Thomas Beddoes, Tom Wedgwood as well as other physicians and scientists, he was at the very forefront of the latest discoveries, whether scientific or physiological, and well versed in the medical writings of that time that could help un-riddle the mysterious connections between mind and body. Having embraced enthusiastically Hartley’s theory of neural vibrations in his early years as poet, Coleridge had little doubt about the “corporeality of the thought” (Griggs 1: 137). Yet, as his bodily struggle against disease and opium became more intense, Coleridge recoiled from this idea of a mind located in the brain and of a fluid, whether galvanic, electric, animal or ethereal,

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that could connect the various powers of the mind. In 1817, as he published *Statenman’s Manual*, *Sibylline Leaves* and *Biographia*, his belief would lie in the presence of a divine “unseen Agency” (Shedd 359); the bone, the brain, the flesh and blood were simply the visible work of this divine presence, “the translucence of the invisible energy” (Shedd 359). The thought, no longer corporeal, was to grasp, through the faculty of imagination, the intuition of this Agency. Thinking about the mind for Coleridge was a molten process that would never be cooled into dogma or doctrine. Readings and debates influenced the shaping of his theory but probably more than anything else, the working of his own body steered his understanding of the mind.

In December 1804, Coleridge wrote in his notebook:

I do not understand the first sentence of the above—I wrote them after that convulsed or suffocated by a collection of wind in my stomach & alternately tortured by its colic pangs in my bowels, I in despair drank three glasses running of whisky & water [...] how strange that with so shaken a nervous System I never had the Head ache!—I verily am a stout-headed, weak-bowelled, and O! most pitiaibly weak-hearted Animal!<sup>2</sup> (*The Notebooks* 1: 2368)

Coleridge’s entangled note reflects contemporary debates on the connections between bodily affections (“colic pangs”) and nervous disorders (“Head ache”). This wrangling question whether bodily disease could affect the working of the mind is certainly one that steered Coleridge away from the “mind-in-the-brain” precept. Brain disorders, such as mania, melancholy, stupor, giddiness were also discussed in relation to the changing society, to the emergence of a middling-class indulging, according to some physicians, in the accumulation of goods and comforts. As Roy Porter writes in *Doctor of Society: Tom Beddoes and the Sick Trade in Late-Enlightenment England*:

This “coming-out” of the hypochondriac and hysteric marks an important cultural juncture, the pathologization of Enlightenment individualism. Polite society encouraged a certain narcissism.

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2 The notebook entries will be referred to as *The Notebooks*, the number of the volume and the entry reference.

Within the permitted degrees of conventional polish, the literati were expected to dazzle, be different, even a touch prima donna-ish.

Madness, delirium, masturbation, nymphomania and other symptoms were reconfigured as “nervous disorders” and “mental treatment” could cure patients from those disorders. Thomas Beddoes, among others, debated this issue in his essay *Hygëia*, encouraging the valetudinarian, the weak and sick body, to discipline mind and body and make them “terror-proof” as:

[...] in this jarring and boisterous world, the poor sensitive human plant will be utterly at a loss to find an asylum. Wherever he retires, the occasional causes of his paroxysms, be they epileptic, hysterical, *cephalgic*, or anomalous, will pursue and hunt him out. (Beddoes 201)

Tremors and convulsions were the most distinctive signs of the pernicious effects of this “polished society,” suffering from an excess of sensibility and prone to dread. Coleridge himself recorded in a notebook entry his propensity to feel terror and act faultily under its spell:

It is a most instructive part of my Life[,] the fact, that I have been always preyed on by some Dread, and perhaps all my faulty actions have been the consequence of some Dread or other on my mind / from fear of Pain, or Shame, not from Prospect of Pleasure. (*The Notebooks 2*: 2398)

Dread from the alienation of friends, fear of sex, deficiency of bodily feeling, unrequited love are listed alongside “mental agitation,” “almost epileptic night-horrors” and “the Dread of these bad most shocking Dreams.” Coleridge’s poetic and personal writings reflect a dreadful fascination for these anomalies of the mind and for what imaginative writing could make out of them.

This paper will focus more specifically on Coleridge’s writing of epileptic signs in the light of contemporary debates on the physiology and psychology of the brain. By examining the medical and cultural narratives of epilepsy, widely debated at a time where both evangelical movements and consumer behaviors were threatening the

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nerves and brains of English society, I intend to explore the cultural components and meanings attached to epileptic fits in order to understand Coleridge’s own pathography writing in 1802 and 1803. I will show how his own understanding of epilepsy has influenced his theory of a poetic mind creating involuntarily stories and fictions that could be disbelieved and thus disavowed.

### EPILEPSY, REVERIE AND THE “CATENATION OF IDEAS”

Coleridge was probably one of the most eloquent sufferers of his time; and his private and epistolary writings have been copiously used in medical and neural studies to gain insight into the symptoms and diagnosis of nervous disorders (see Michael Trimble, Alice Flaherty for instance), but also on their cultural components: namely, what did it mean to have epilepsy at that time? Was it purely psycho-physiological or was the brain disorder related to class? To gender? To religiosity? Phenomena of “nervous disorders” were rather a *terra incognita* when Coleridge started connecting his bodily diseases, tooth-aches, scrofula, and rheumatic pains with frightful dreams, hypochondria, giddiness, head-aches and other symptoms. As it has been well-documented, he elaborated, while still concerned with poetry writing, a theory of poetic creation that stemmed from these Eye-spectra or “facts of minds”:

[...] but overpowered with the [? emotion] Phaenomena I arose, lit my Candle, & wrote—of figures, even with open eyes / of squares, & & of various colours, & I know not what / How in a few minutes I forgot such an Assemblage of distinct Impressions, ebullitions & piles of golden colour & thence to think of the Nature of Memory. So intense / & yet in one Minute forgotten! the same is in Dreams / *Think of this / if, perchance, thou livest—ALAS!* (*The Notebooks* 1: 1750)

It is often assumed that Coleridge wrote this type of hallucinatory entries when intoxicated, whether with opium or other stimulants. In *Coleridge and the Doctors*, Neil Vickers has traced in Coleridge’s 1796 to 1804 letters and notebooks his interest in nervous symptoms and, from 1802, the signs of his belief of having suffered from epileptic auras. Could this entry then be connected to some kind of nervous seizure or stupor, both being epileptic auras, Coleridge had, or at least believed he had?

As Neil Vickers underlines, it is extremely challenging to explore Coleridge's writings on brain disorders as he rarely mentions his sources. Yet, from Coleridge's close connection with the Bristolian physicians and from the allusions and lexicon used in his letters and notebooks to describe his ailments, we can infer the influence of two major works on nervous disorders: Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia* from 1794 and volume 3 of Thomas Beddoes's *Hygëia*.

Coleridge's profuse writing on body-mind connections and dysfunctions came at a time when the publication of their work was much discussed and debated. Darwin, as a nosologist, classified diseases according to physiological criteria and connected epilepsy and hysteria to a deficiency in the power of volition. According to Darwin, four faculties belonged to the "spirit of animation": irritation, sensation, volition and association. The ideas (the "sensual motions") were usually excited by irritation (bodily reactions or external stimuli) but could occasionally be produced by sensations (hunger, pain, pleasure, thirst, etc.), volition (desire or aversion) or association (the involuntary calling up to the memory of ideas or images).

For Erasmus Darwin, what distinguished human creatures from mere brute creation was the power of volition; language, prayer, tools were products of the power of volition and could bring either human bliss or human misery. This logical sequence was disrupted during sleep due to the absence of volition and of external stimuli. In sleep, he argued, we dream under the influence of sensations which still depend upon bodily affections (posture of the body, pain in a muscle, etc.); images (ideas of the imagination) then arise with "terrible vivacity" since, with the suspension of the power of volition, the dreamer loses the capacity to compare ("comparing power") those ideas of imagination with acquired knowledge or external objects (Darwin 54).

In Darwin's nosology, sleep is as much a disease as reverie, vertigo, drunkenness or epilepsy and in those states, because the power is not equally distributed between the four faculties, association and sensation thus act with "greater vigour": man becomes then a "much less perfect animal" (Darwin 285). If the flow of ideas during sleep becomes too important, it excites inflammation; either volition is exerted violently in the form of an epileptic fit to relieve the pain; if not, delirium or nightmares seize the dreamer.

Epilepsy was located at the crossroads of sleep and reverie in Darwin's theory and he envisaged it as a relieving discharge, something necessary to liberate the mind and body of the sufferer or the dreamer. Darwin illustrates his point on

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epilepsy using different cases that share similarities. All of them are women, suffering similar epileptic and post-epileptic symptoms: convulsion of limbs, hiccoughs, “efforts to vomit,” followed by “convulsions of ideas” that Darwin describes as “talkative delirium” or “drunken delirium” and usually triggered by Darwin’s remedy: large doses of opium (Darwin 32). Darwin, unlike Thomas Beddoes, believed that opium, rubbed on the body and ingested, could cure, or at least reduce those convulsions and the trance-like state that followed—“the convulsion of ideas”—was preferable to the convulsions of the body. Opium-induced reverie following an epileptic paroxysm was thus fashioned by Erasmus Darwin as an escape-valve for the mind. Opium reverie did not relinquish volition and even carried mysterious powers: one lady is described as “repeating whole pages from the English poets” or singing “music with accuracy” with no external stimuli being able to disunite her ideas (Darwin 320). Similarly, a somnambulist could write “from line to line regularly,” even “correcting some errors” without being distracted (324). Darwin thus entertained the idea that the post-convulsive state, the “reverie,” produced a “catenation”—a blending of ideas and motions—guided by the voluntary power (13); yet upon awaking, this network of ideas and motions would be lost and impossible to recollect. Darwin described those networks of swarming ideas and connected clusters of images, wrought by memory and experience, in *The Temple of Nature*:

Last, in thick swarms Associations spring,  
Thoughts join to thoughts, to motions motions cling;  
Whence in long trains of catenation flow  
Imagined joy, and voluntary woe. (Darwin 27)

The “Assemblage of distinct Impressions, ebullitions & piles of golden colour” quoted above from a notebook fragment hints at this idea of an involuntary self-organizing composition, poetic but not erratic, induced by opium reveries or state of stupor. The creative potentiality of a diseased mind, when volition is suspended, or external stimuli blocked, is suggested more than once by Coleridge in his notebooks and other writings:

Strange Self-power in the Imagination, when painful sensations  
have made it their Interpreter, or returning Gladness from

convalescence, gastric and visceral, have made its chilled and evanished Figures & Landscape bud, blossom, & live in scarlet, and green, & snowy white. (*The Notebooks* 3: 3547)

“From the analogy of Dreams during an excited state of Nerves, which I have myself experienced, and the wonderful intricacy, complexity, and yet clarity of the visual Objects” (Whalley 403).

The notebook image of the flight of starlings projected on the natural world this Darwinian swarm of ideas, impressions and thoughts always in motion. Yet the image is an ambiguous one, fluid yet fragmented, glimmering yet blackening and suggests Coleridge’s shifty position regarding the creative role of a mind bereft of volition:

Starlings in vast flights drove along like smoke, mist, or anything misty (without) volition—now a circular area inclined (in an) arc—now a globe—(now from a complete orb into an) ellipse & oblong—(now) a balloon with the (car suspend)ed, now a concaved (sem)icircle& (still) it expands & condenses, some (moments) glimmering & shivering, dim & shadowy, now thickening, deepening, blackening! (*The Notebooks* 1: 582)

“BREEZES OF TERROR BLOWING FROM THE STOMACH”:

EPILEPTIC AURAS IN BEDDOES’S *HYGËIA* AND COLERIDGE’S *NOTEBOOKS*

As underlined in his 1816 letter quoted above, the absence of volition was very much on Coleridge’s mind when he shaped and reshaped his theories of poetic creation and reception. But from 1803, he questioned with greater anxiety in his letters and notebooks this idealized “Eolian Harp” connection between reverie and poetry. The medical works of the Brunonian school, which influenced his friend the physiologist Thomas Beddoes, provide a fruitful lens through which to read and evaluate Coleridge’s pathography writing. Thomas Beddoes had translated and published the work of John Brown, *The Elements of Medicine*, in 1795. Unlike the nosologist approach of Darwin and Cullen, John Brown considerably simplified the approach to health and disease, connecting them to a vital force stored in the nerves and muscles, namely excitability:



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To every animated being is allotted a certain portion only of the quality or principle, on which the phenomena of life depend. This principle is denominated EXCITABILITY. (Brown 127)

This life force could be disrupted by external stimuli (air, food, wine, opium, heat) or internal stimuli (bodily functions, muscular activities, thinking processes, feelings, passion). All diseases affecting both mind and brain could be explained by this disturbed balance between exciting powers and excitability. Epilepsy belonged to *asthenia*, its pre-convulsive symptoms being “heaviness of intellect, dullness in the exercise of the senses” followed by “various convulsions of the body” terminating with “foaming at the mouth” (Brown 274). The “debilitating noxious agents” responsible for epileptic fits were both external and internal and extremely varied: “excess in ventry, such passions as fear, terror, assiduous and intense thinking in persons of great genius” (274). Although Beddoes would distance himself from this over-simplistic approach to health and disease, the notions of “exciting powers” and of sympathy between the body and the mind were important components of his moral and medical approach to epilepsy: “Do not states of distant part, by sympathy, produce such changes in the brain, as to call up ideas vivid enough for madness?” (Beddoes 72).

As suggested by a letter to Southey, Coleridge had read the third volume of Beddoes’s *Hygeia* published in 1803: “I admire Dr Beddoes’s part of the Pamphlet very much. It is far superior to the Hygeia 1 in Style, & Reasoning. And yet with the exception of the Essay on Mania the Hygeia is a valuable & useful work” (Griggs 936). As Beddoes’s book, tagged “Essays, moral and medical on the causes affecting the personal state of our middling and affluent classes,” was composed of only three essays, one on epilepsy, the second on mania, and the third on contagious disorders, we may safely conjecture that he had read the first one on epilepsy. Beddoes’s approach, as the title suggests, was radically different from Darwin’s *Zoonomia*. He did not discard the physiological approach, influenced by the radical brain science, but his purpose lay elsewhere.

Nervous disorders, as a reviewer suggested in 1804, were becoming increasingly fashionable yet “little did they know of the origin and progress of this extensive tribe of fashionable complaints” (Aikin 741). *Hygeia* was thus concerned as much with epileptic symptoms as with medical and societal causes since, according to Beddoes,

epilepsy affected “three out of ten in every genteel circle” (Beddoes 78). The “exciting powers” that destabilized the body were not restricted to bodily organs, food or even liquor; mental depression, as well as anxiety, disappointment in life, a reliance on commodity goods, an excess of comfort, or too much fictional reading, could all predispose a body, especially a female one, to epileptic fits. Beddoes was quick to conclude that the Englishmen and women were inevitably prone to suffer from epilepsy as “in no country perhaps has the pursuit of gold occasioned so much anxiety” (Beddoes 30).

As Beddoes’s aim was clearly to cure the British population of this commodity culture disease, the picture he draws of convulsions and seizures is far less fascinating and alluring than Darwin’s opium reverie state. Beddoes’s conclusions on pre- and postictal symptoms were mostly drawn from the journal of illness of a young man who scrutinized and partly recorded for 7 years 65 epileptic fits and over 7,000 nervous seizures. The prefiguring signs of epilepsy, according to Beddoes, were numerous: “Flashes of light before the eyes,” “headache of various degrees,” “dizziness,” “excessive sensibility,” “suspension of the intellectual powers” were aboding symptoms “felt by persons who afterwards become subject to epilepsy” (Beddoes 48). Coleridge’s 1803 letters scrutinize, as Beddoes’s patient’s journal does, the bodily symptoms of nervous seizures:

[...] distortion of Body from agony, profuse & streaming Sweats, & fainting—at other times, looseness with griping—frightful Dreams with screaming—breezes of Terror blowing from the Stomach up thro’ the Brain / always when I am awakened, I find myself stifled with wind / & the wind the manifest cause of the Dream / frequent paralytic Feelings—sometimes approaches to Convulsion fit—three times I have wakened out of these frightful Dreams, & found my legs so locked into each other as to have left a bruise—/ Sometimes I am a little giddy; but very seldom have the Headache/ (Griggs 3: 975)

The “aura,” the Greek word for “wind” or “breeze” first mentioned by the Greek physician Galen, referred to the physical sensation experienced by epileptics just before a seizure: a cool breeze running from the abdomen up to the brain. This

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symptom pointed at the fact that epilepsy could originate from the vital organs (“epilepsy by sympathy” to use Galen’s expression). In a notebook entry written a few months later, Coleridge restated this idea of something rushing from his stomach to the brain and giving birth to an excess of images:

Images in sickly profusion by & in which I talk in certain diseased States of my Stomach / Great & innocent minds *devalesce*, as Plants & Trees, into beautiful Diseases / Genius itself, many of the most brilliant sorts of English Beauty, & even extraordinary Dispositions to Virtue, Restlessness in good—are they not themselves, as I have often said, but beautiful Diseases—species of the Genera, Hypochondriasis, Scrofula, & Consumption! This was at first a Joke; but is now no longer so / for under the 3 Genera Hypochond., Scrofula, & Consumption (under Hypochondriasis implying certain sorts of Epileptic winds & breezes, gusts from the bowels of the Volcano upward to the Crater of the Brain, rushings & brain-horrors, seeming for their immediate proximate Cause to have the pressure of Gasses on the Stomach, acting possibly by their specified noxious chemical [...] all those Diseases which proceed from or produce, in one word, which *imply* an overbalance of the vital Feelings to the Organic Perceptions, of those Parts which assimilate or transform the external into the personal, or combine them thus assimilated (Stomach, lungs, Liver, Bowels, & many others, no doubt, the use of which is not yet known) over the Eyes, Ears, Olfactories, Gustatories, & the organ of the Skin. (*The Notebooks* 1: 1822)

Coleridge elaborates from his dysfunctional body a theory of poetic creation where images, “manufactured” from the diseased Vital organs, are rushed to the Brain through the epileptic breeze, the latter creating both the Dream, or “brain-horrors,” and the paralytic feeling. Those “images in sickly profusion” originate from this transubstantiating something that circulates in the body, from Gout or epilepsy—the two being interconnected in the Brunonian approach to disease—independently from the mind. Because they are rushed to the brain, the mind cannot choose but hear those strange tales of the “*devalescent*” mind.

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### EPILEPTIC THOUGHTS AND FANCIFUL CREATION

The poem “Pains of Sleep” was scribbled in a letter to Southey in a hysterical fit: “I do not know how I came to scribble down these verses to you—my heart was aching, my head all confused” (Griggs 2: 983). In a letter written three days later, Coleridge would ascribe those lines to a “wretched Stomach” affected by Southey’s pain: “I wrote mechanically in the wake of the first vivid Idea.” The profusion of verses and images and the compulsion to write them would today be called hypergraphia; Coleridge hints at this symptom in several notebook entries. Addressing Sara Hutchinson, he confides in his notebook:

Misery conjures up other Forms, & binds them into Tales & Events—activity is always Pleasure—the Tale grows pleasanter—& at length you come to me / you are by my bed side, in some lonely Inn, where I lie deserted—there you have found me—there you are weeping over me! (*The Notebooks* 1: 1601)

In a letter addressed to Sara in 1802, Coleridge would refer to this pleasure activity he named “fantastic pleasure” as resulting from the suspension of volition; connecting it to the poetic flight of starlings:

When the Reason and the Will are away, what remain to us but darkness and dimness and a bewildering shame, and pain that is utterly lord over us, or fantastic pleasure, that draws the soul along swimming through the air in many shapes, even as a flight of starlings in a wind. (Griggs 2: 841)

The diseased vital Organs and the epileptic breezes allowed him to construct a theory of poetic creation wherein the poet could disconnect from its intellectual self and from reality those internal fanciful artefacts. The body becomes an “artificial Brooding-machine” creating “wild poem(s) on strange things” (*The Notebooks* 2: 2334); the author does not have to believe them as they do not belong to his conscious and wilful self.

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In 1803, Coleridge, while still embracing Darwin’s embodied thought theory, sketches a far darker picture of those wild enticements of the diseased body and mind and the resulting rush of thoughts and images:

Renew the state of affection or bodily Feeling, same or similar—sometimes similar / and instantly the trains of forgotten Thought rise from their living catacombs! (*The Notebooks* 1: 1575)

The journal of Beddoes’s epileptic patients similarly describes the symptoms of epileptic auras as “an excessive distension of all the veins” followed by an “involuntary whirl of ideas” (Beddoes 86). The “swarm of confused intruding images” is described in the very specific case of Dr Spalding of Berlin who suffered from a confusion of ideas “forced on him” and blocking speech and writing faculties:

For a good half hour, there was a tumult in part of his ideas. He could only recognize them for such as forced themselves on him without his participation. He endeavoured to dispel them to make room for better, which he was conscious of “in the bottom of his thinking faculty.” He threw his attention, as far as the swarm of confused intruding images would permit, on his religious principles, and said to himself distinctly that *if by a kind of death, he was extricated from the tumult in his brain, which he felt as foreign and exterior to himself, he should exist and think on in the happiest quiet order.* (Beddoes 61)

Those nervous seizures prefiguring the epileptic paroxysm strangely echo Coleridge’s “crowding of thoughts” forced on his mind:

I had only slumbered. I was in a dream at the moment, and my fancy continued too busy after waking. All at once I felt, while lying in bed, that suspicious crusade of a number of ideas against one another, which has heretofore preceded the most violent attacks. [...] a seizure immediately preceded by ideas of a kind that had not occupied him before. They hurried, as it were with violence, across the mind. (Beddoes 49, 48)

The “crusade” of ideas described by Beddoes has little in common with Darwin’s “long trains of catenation” releasing a body from an excess of vital feeling. Images and ideas are here forced violently onto the passive mind, broken, unconnected and those whirls of ideas and eddies of thoughts could be so overwhelming as to produce fainting: “What wonder that while idea reels against idea, we should so often experience an analogous unsteadiness of footing” (Beddoes 164)? Coleridge would make visible the processes of a suffering mind by projecting them onto the landscape. The swarm of unconnected and involuntary ideas, the ensuing feeling of giddiness and thus the threat to moral Virtue are thus translated in his poetic notebook images:

As he who passes over a bridge of slippery uneven Stones placed at unequal distances, at the foot of an enormous waterfall, is lost, if he suffer his Soul to be whirled away by its diffused every where nowhereness of Sound / but must condense his Life to the one anxiety of not Slipping, so will Virtue in certain Whirlwinds of Temptations. [...] The Sails flapped unquietly, as if restless for the Breeze, with convulsive Snatches for air, like dying Fish—May 8<sup>th</sup> (*The Notebooks* 1: 1706, 2: 2084)

Beddoes’s conjectures might even have led Coleridge to speculate on the origin of moral Evil:

[...] for Reason and Reality can stop and stand still, new influxes from without counteracting the Impulses from within, and *poising* the Thought. But Fancy and Sleep *stream on*; and (instead of outward Forms and Sounds, the Sanctifiers, the Strenghteners! they connect with them motions of the blood and nerves, and images forced into the mind by the feelings that arise out of the position & state of the Body and its different members. [...] All the above-going throw lights on my mind with regard to the origin of Evil. (*The Notebooks* 2: 2543)

For Beddoes, indulging in those waking dreams and fancies was as dangerous for the body as for virtue. Nervous disorders, he argued, are “shared among the luxurious and indolent, whose artificial modes are for ever destroying the balance

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of action in the system, and reducing one part to death-like torpor, while in some other, as if to make amends, they excite a mischievous activity, or kindle a spurious sort of inflammation” (Beddoes 165). Asthenia or sthenia preyed on the body that would take solace from those “exciting powers” vehemently condemned by Beddoes and other physicians: popular entertainments, “places of glitter” or novels that “kindled the tender Passion” were to be shunned so that the mind could regain stronger associations of ideas. Geometrical studies, botany, mineralogy, the contemplation of countryside scenes could discipline the mind and retransform it from a visual and passive organ to an active one.

Interestingly, Beddoes also condemns poetry composition and reading as “exciting powers” that could have a morbid effect on the body. A patient is thus described: “On the approach of the disorder and at the period of the first fits, the perusal of poetry and poetical attempts, which were resorted to by way of salutary dissipation, had the reverse effect, for they excited a dangerous agitation of the nerves” (Beddoes 78). Coleridge may have hinted at this fact when he wrote in his notebook: “I wish I dared use the Brunonian Phrase—and define Poetry—the Art of representing Objects in relation to the excitability of the human mind” (*The Notebooks* 3: 3827). Fanciful poetic creation and poetry at large carried dubious undertones in Beddoes’s essays which might partly account for Coleridge’s disbelief in poetry as a sanctifier of the mind.

If Coleridge shied away from those radical materialist brain theories in search of this indivisible, divine and unseen Agency, he did not relinquish this theory of involuntary creation or authorship to which he gave the name of “fancy.” Whether Coleridge really believed in this “disbelieving process” is a matter of conjecture but his rebuff of fancy holds as much to his dysfunctioning body as to the cultural concepts attached to nervous disorders and epileptic auras during the revolutionary decade.

In *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, Alan Richardson has discussed the implications of radical brain theory in the publication of “Kubla Khan” and its famous preface some 20 years after its composition. As he underlines, we are looking back at a time where brain-based psychology flirted with unorthodox and radical politics. Coleridge publicly divorced from these two principles in 1816, although he had enthusiastically embraced them during his millennial hope. It is thus quite remarkable that, as Coleridge abandoned this idea of a mind located in the body and acted upon by bodily organs, claiming in *Biographia Literaria* that only an “infinite

spirit, an intelligent and holy will” could ensure human agency, he nonetheless continued to assert that poetic creation could be the product of a seething brain and not the reflection of the writer’s beliefs or the realities of his time. He would summon this disbelieving process for personal or political reasons. In *Sibylline Leaves*, published in 1817, he would thus justify the composition of “Fire, Famine & Slaughter,” a violent indictment of Pitt’s policies published in 1798 in *The Morning Post*, as “mere bubbles, flashes and electrical apparition from the magic cauldron of a fervid and ebullient fancy, constantly fuelled by an unexampled opulence of language” (Coleridge, *Poetical Works* 278). Though he disavowed his belief in materialist brain theories in his theoretical essays published at the same period, he still revived “fantastic pleasure” generated from an overexcited mind to rationalize the composition of those seditious lines. A twenty-page apologetic preface describes a dinner taking place at Sotheby’s where Sir Walter Scott recited “Fire, Famine & Slaughter” without revealing its author. Coleridge, according to his prefatory narrative, embarks upon a long monologue to convince his audience that there is no possible co-existence between those “vivid and fantastic images” and “a serious wish to realize them.” Real hatred or desire of revenge cannot find the words: “rooted hatred,” he argued, “is a sort of madness and eddies round its favourite object, and exercises as it were a perpetual tautology of mind in thoughts and words, which admit of no equal substitutes” (Coleridge, *Poetical Works* 276). In a self-defence of his own virtue, Coleridge concluded by drawing a portrait of the author:

Were I now to have read by myself for the first time the Poem in question, my conclusion, I fully believe, would be that the writer must have been some man of warm feelings and active fancy; that he had painted to himself the circumstances that accompany war in so many vivid and yet fantastic forms, as proved that neither the images nor the feelings were the result of observation, or in any way derived from realities. I should judge that they were the product of his own seething imagination, and therefore impregnated with that pleasurable exultation in all energetic exertion of intellectual power. (*Poetical Works* 276)



## THE “STRANGE SELF-POWER IN THE IMAGINATION”

Was Coleridge aware of the far-reaching implications of his fanciful rewriting of history? Coleridge went to such a length to disconnect those “creatures of imagination” from voluntary authorship and from actual events that, as a critic noted in *The Westminster Review* in 1829, we could even think that “perhaps there actually never was such an event as the French Revolution, nor such a man as William Pitt.”

Were there really no mothers and infants perishing with starvation? Was there never a cottage burned, nor a “naked rebel shot” in Ireland? We thought something of the sort had been matter of history. [...] It seems we were mistaken. But our mistake was nothing in comparison with that which Mr Coleridge makes if he thinks that his Apologetic Preface can do him any credit with any body, or give a particle of pleasure to any being in existence—except the Devil. (*The Westminster Review* 14–15)

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