Chapter 3

“Not a Man, But a Monster”: Organicism, Becoming, and the Daemonic Imago

Writing to Southey on July 17, 1797, Coleridge enthused about the arrival in the Quantocks of “a very great man”: “I had been on a visit to Wordsworth’s at Racedown near Crewkherne—and I brought him & his Sister back with me & here I have settled them” (CL I 334). They had known each other since Autumn 1795, and were already literary correspondents: writing to Thelwall in May 1796, Coleridge refers to Wordsworth as “a very dear friend of mine”—and with precipitous confidence, as “the best poet of the age”—citing Wordsworth’s praise of “Religious Musings” (CL I 215). Friendship with William and Dorothy enabled Coleridge to detach himself further from theological allegiances he now found limiting; freed from both financial anxiety and the deleterious effects of doctrinal commitment by the Wedgwood annuity, he immediately planned to spend the spring and summer of 1798 with Wordsworth (CL I 377–78). Most of all, Wordsworth’s passion for the beauty and mystery of the natural world reflected and encouraged his own.

Coleridge had originally been attracted to Unitarianism by the prospect of “a Religion, of which every true Christian is the Priest, his own Heart the Altar, the Universe its Temple” (LPR 67–68). Coleridge’s admiring description of the “supreme God” of the “ancient Germans” in The Watchman reveals the direction of his mind by 1796, and his increasing identification with the Gothic

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imagination:

To erect statues to this Deity, or to think of confining him within the inclosure of walls, was held absurd and impious: “it was only within woods and consecrated forests that they could serve him properly. There he seemed to reign in silence, and to make himself felt by the respect which he inspired.” (W 91)

Coleridge locates this exemplary spirituality outside the sanction of religious institutions; the forests and their pregnant silence form the only authentic living temple. In Wordsworth, he found a corresponding impulse, drawn from a different perspective, towards “Religious meanings in the forms of nature” (“Fears in Solitude”; PW I.1 470). The poets’ mutual delight in nature mirrored shared political beliefs deeply rooted in English notions of liberty, including (in Simon Schama’s words) “the mythic memory of greenwood freedom” (Schama 140). Their mutual commitment to “that small but glorious band” of “thinking and disinterested Patriots” (LPR 12) alienated them both from the prevailing political climate of 1796–1797, when it had become increasingly difficult for either man to sustain their optimism. By the end of 1796, Coleridge’s public poetry reflected the bleak mood among reformists. In his “Ode on the Departing Year,” as Morton D. Paley’s notices, the “world is seen as almost wholly given over to destructive anti-libertarian forces,” and the poet is “no longer one of a band of brothers but an isolated figure” (1993, 15). The Anti-Jacobin was launched in November 1797, and explicitly targeted political and religious dissent in the “new school” of poetry it lampooned. In their post-Pantisocratic fraternity in the Quantocks, Coleridge and Wordsworth found a vital source of support.

To write about Coleridge, then, is to write about Wordsworth, and their relationship plays a crucial part in my theme, because Wordsworth too is caught up in the drama at its core. As Perry notes, “Wordsworth is widely known as the poet with ‘two voices’: by his own diverse admissions, he is both ‘simple’ and ‘visionary’” (1999a, 263), but this familiar doubleness also betrays a moral as much as an aesthetic dilemma in Wordsworth’s poetry, of which Coleridge was the stimulus and at times, the subject. Wordsworth casts Coleridge’s insight into the “higher power” he exercised “Upon the vulgar forms of present things” (Prelude XII. 363, 361) as a defining moment in his personal mythology, and indeed “The Poem to Coleridge” can be read as a proof and demonstration to his friend of how thoroughly Wordsworth had been “quickened, rouzed, and made thereby