The Structural Truth
in Coleridge's Conversation Poems

In Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, the entry of "conversation pieces" carries this information:

> The c. piece or poem is relaxed and informal, but serious. Like Horace's epistles and satires, from which it probably springs, it is a genre intermediate between poetry and prose-*propriora sermoni*, which in Coleridge's case Charles Lamb translated as "properer for a sermon. " Not uncommon in the latter part of the 18th c., the c. poem is peculiarly a favorite with Wordsworth and Coleridge, doubtless because of its unique combination of unpretentiousness and depth, attributes given it by Cowper. Wordsworth's *Expostulation and Reply* and *The Tables Turned* are c. poems, though blank verse is the genre's most appropriate medium; the Lines *Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* might be thought of as a c. piece which got out of hand and burst its bounds. Coleridge's *Dejection: an Ode* is another such, but as a Pindaric ode it does not quite correspond to the type. Coleridge, however, is the great practitioner of the c. piece in *The Eolian Harp, This Limetree Bower My Prision, The Nightingale, To William Wordsworth,* and a number of other poems. We have nothing quite like this genre today, but W. H. Auden and perhaps Theodore Roethke might be mentioned as poets who have written in its spirit. (153)

This information suggests at least the following points. First, a conversation piece is but another name for a conversation poem, and vice versa. This point is construed in many other books of similar nature, although in *Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature* it is said that a conversation piece refers to "a piece of writing (such as a play) that depends for its effects chiefly upon the wit or excellent quality of its dialogue," while the term "is also used to describe a poem that has a light, informal tone despite its serious subject" (269).

Second, the conversation piece/poem is "relaxed and informal" in tone, just as an ordinary conversation usually is. The tone refers, of course, to that of the speaker in the work. But since in a Romantic poem like Coleridge's it is hardly necessary to

distinguish the speaker in the poem from the poet who has written the work, we may well equate the speaker's tone with the poet's. Anyway, it is agreed that the speaker or the poet adopts a "relaxed and informal" tone in a conversation piece/poem, although in actual description "light," "chatty," etc., may be used to replace "relaxed" and "informal," and "style" may be used to replace "tone" in other dictionaries of literary terms (e.g., see Cuddon's *Dictionary*, 157).

Third, although a conversation piece/poem is relaxed and informal (or light and chatty) in tone, it has quite "serious" subject matter. That is, it often "talks" about some "important thing," unlike most chats or gossips (which are about trivial things). But the question is: What is serious or important? Is the subject in a conversation piece/poem really "properer for a sermon"? Or is it actually not sermon in the modern homiletic sense but rather "discourse" or "conversation" with an addressee and some element of serious satire as in Horace's works? (Harmon & Holman 118)

Fourth, the conversation piece/poem takes its origin probably in the Roman Period from such works as Horace's epistles and satires. But the genre did not flourish until the Romantic Period with such successful practitioners as Wordsworth and Coleridge. Today, very few poets have written in that tradition (Auden and Roethke are among the rare examples). Yet, if we gather information from more sources, we will find that in the history of this genre, such poets as Pope, Cowper, Browning, and Frost have also been mentioned.

Fifth, certain poems of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's are on the list of famous conversation pieces, but no complete list has as yet been made for the two poets, and there is some doubt regarding certain poems (such as "Tintern Abbey" and "Dejection: An Ode") because they cannot be assigned to the genre without any problem.

With the above understanding, we are now in a position to discuss the structural truth in Coleridge's conversation poems. We know Coleridge himself used the term "conversation poem" to call one of his poems only: namely, "The Nightingale," which appeared in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. In actuality, however, scholars have agreed that seven or eight other poems of his can take the same label. According to Donald A. Stauffer, for instance, the list of Coleridge's conversation poems includes these eight poems: "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," "Lines Written in the Album at Elbingerode, in the Hartz Forest," and "To William Wordsworth." And according to George

McLean Harper, "Dejection: An Ode" can be added to the list because it is "an ode in form only; in contents it is a conversation," as it is "not an address to Dejection, but to William Wordsworth" (198).

One may ask, "What do these poems have in common, besides relaxed and informal tone, serious subject matter, and conversational style?" One thing we can easily notice is: although they are called conversation poems, they are actually monologues, not dialogues. To be sure, in each of the poems the poet (the speaker) is seemingly talking to someone. But the someone is actually only apostrophized in the poem. He or she never responds directly in speech or action. "The Eolian Harp," for instance, begins with the apostrophe "My pensive Sara!" And the same addressee (Sara Fricker) is subsequently apostrophized four more times: "my love!" (34), "O beloved woman!" (50), "Meek daughter in the family of Christ!" (53), and "heart-honored Maid!" (65). Nevertheless, despite the fact that there is some description of the addressee's response--"thy more serious eye a mild reproof/Darts ... nor such thoughts/Dim and unhallowed dost thou not reject,/And biddest me walk humbly with my God" (49-52), and "Well hast thou said and holily dispraised/Those shapings of the unregenerate mind" (54-55)--we do not, indeed, see the person react directly, nor hear her speak directly. All the lines are but the poet-speaker's descriptive and meditative soliloquies. So we can say the conversation poems are mock-conversations or pseudo-conversations because the apostrophized addressee (Sara Fricker, Charles Lamb, William Wordsworth, Sarah Hutchinson, Hartley Coleridge, etc.) are virtually no other than absentees.

If the conversation poems are actually not conversations, the interactions therein may not focus on person-to-person relations. As it is, we find each of Coleridge's conversation poems involves an interaction between an outer scene and an inner feeling, or to state it simply, between outer and inner worlds. Harper has rightly called Coleridge's conversation pieces "Poems of Friendship" because they are products of real friendship. But Stauffer is also right in saying that "the vast natural world also, with its soothing power and quiet, Coleridge treats as a friend" (xxi). Each conversation poem of Coleridge's is indeed a "conversation" between nature and man as "friends," if not one between two real persons. Take the poem, "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," for example. In it the poet/speaker at first feels himself deserted by his friends who in his imagination have roamed into several natural places in gladness. But then he feels in his solitude that he is himself also accompanied and befriended by nature in the bower which he regarded before as his prison:

Nor in this bower,
This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
Much that has sooth'd me. Pale beneath the blaze
Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd
Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree
Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay
Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
Through the late twilight: and though now the bat
Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
Yet still the solitary humble-bee
Sings in the bean-flower! (45-59)

The friendship of nature to man is a Romantic theme. But nowhere else is the theme more clearly embedded in the structure of the poem than in a Coleridgean conversation piece. According to John Spencer Hill's analysis, all conversation poems share a "tripartite rondo structure," beginning with the introduction of a particular situation, going through a middle part of the speaker's meditation, and ending with a return to the original situation after the speaker has some deepened insight (19). John Colmer's analysis has come to a similar conclusion. He says: "The structure consists of three main sections: an introduction in which the poet's situation is established and the atmosphere miraculously evoked through a few simple details; a central meditative section in which the subtlest modulations of thought and emotion are exactly communicated; lastly, a return to the original situation, but with 'new acquist of true experience'" (26). Let us look at "Frost at Midnight" for example. The poem begins with the speaker's description of his own situation:

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
Came loud-and hark, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.

'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, everywhere
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought. (1-23)

In this description, a calm atmosphere is rendered through such simple details as the frost performing its secret ministry unhelped by any wind, the owlet's cry coming loud, the inmates of the speaker's cottage all at rest, the cradled infant slumbering peacefully, sea, hill, and wood with the populous village inaudible as dreams, and the thin blue flame lying on the low burnt fire without quivering while the film is fluttering on the grate. The poem then comes to the middle part of meditation (lines 23-64), in which the poet first recalls his own school days and then thinks of his dear babe at present, foreseeing the Great Universal Teacher's (i.e., Nature's) influence on the child. With this presage, at last, the poet returns to the initial situation, but with a deepened insight:

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon. (65-75)

The typical structure of a conversation poem as explicated above actually contains two basic acts fulfilled on the part of the speaker: describing outward scenes and making inward reflection. The description always involves nature along with man in nature. The reflection or meditation always involves the poet-speaker's feeling (lyrical outpouring) and thinking, which then lead to what Wordsworth says in “Tintern Abbey”--the moment when we “see into the life of things” (13), that is, to the sudden awareness of certain “truth.” This “truth” or “insight” often has certain philosophical depth. Moreover, since it is located in the middle of the poem, hidden, as it were, between two layers of outward description, it seems to be, and surely is, the gist of the matter. Such a sandwich structure--or call it a “tripartite rondo structure” if you like--cannot do, indeed, without the meat or kernel, so to speak, lying inside it. That is why R. H. Fogle can say that the conversation poems “have a center and a centrality, which generally come from a central philosophical idea used as a counterpoint to the concrete psychological experience which makes the poem's wholeness and life” (106-7).

Certainly, the “truth” in a Coleridgean conversation poem is often clearly stated somewhere in the central part. We will examine all the poems concerned. First, “The Eolian Harp”states the one-life theme in line 26 (“O the one life within us and abroad”) and in lines 44-48:

> And what if all of 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?

The poem “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” has its truth stated likewise in the middle part:

> Henceforth I shall know
> That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
> No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
> No waste so vacant, but may well employ
> Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
> Awake to Love and Beauty! (59-64)

This truth is also a typical Romantic theme: the close relationship between nature and man. The truth in “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement” takes the form of likening “a goodly scene” to a divine temple, suggesting at once the one-life theme and the relationship between nature and man:

> It seem'd like Omnipresence! God, methought,
> Had built him there a Temple: the whole World
> Seem'd *imag'd* in its vast circumference. (38-40)

The truth in “Frost at Midnight” comes from contrasting the poet-speaker's rearing in the great city with his son's chance of learning “far other lore ... in far other scenes”:

> So shalt thou see and hear
> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
> Of that eternal language, which thy God
> Utters, who from eternity doth teach
> Himself in all, and all things in himself. (58-62)

This, obviously, touches on the one-life theme again and the relationship between nature and man. The poem “Fears in Solitude” states that a humble man would love “a quiet spirit-healing nook” (12) and could find “religious meanings in the forms of Nature” (26). But most of the middle section of the poem is a long meditation on and accusation of human follies and vices associated with the alarm of an invasion, which culminates in the prophecy that “evil days/Are coming on us” (123-4). Nevertheless, the relationship between nature and man is also emphasized in such lines:

> O my Mother Isle!
> How shouldst thou prove aught else but dear and holy
> To me, who from thy lakes and mountain-hills,
> Thy clouds, thy quiet dales, thy rocks and seas,
> Have drunk in all my intellectual life,
> All sweet sensations, all ennobling thoughts,
> All adoration of the God in nature,
> All lovely and all honorable things,
> Whatever makes this mortal spirit feel
> The joy and greatness of its future being? (182-92)

Finally, the poet-speaker sums up this relationship by saying that the “divine and beauteous island” has been his “sole and most magnificent temple” (193-4).

In “The Nightingale,” Coleridge introduces at first the truth that “In Nature there is nothing melancholy” (15), and finally he says he deems it wise to make his dear babe Nature's play-mate (96). In “Lines Written in the Album at Elbingerode, in the Hartz Forest,” the poet has found the truth that “outward forms, the loftiest, still receive/Their finer influence from the Life within” (17-18), which naturally leads to his feeling that “God is everywhere” (37). The truth in “To William Wordsworth” is: “The truly great/Have all one age, and from one visible space/Shed influence” (50-52). This truth does not touch on the relationship between nature and man, of course. But it has some connection with the one-life theme, since it claims that the truly great have all one age and shed influence from one visible space. Finally, if we take, as some critics do, “Dejection: An Ode” as a conversation poem, we will see that the pronounced truths may be in such utterances as “we receive but what we give,/And in our life alone does nature live” (47-48), and “Joy ... is the spirit and the power,/Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower” (67-68). Thus, the one-life theme as well as the relationship between nature and man is again brought into focus.

If we compare Coleridge's conversation poems with Browning's dramatic monologues, we will soon find that Coleridge's purpose is clearly to tell truths while Browning's aim is to portray characters, although both conversation poems and dramatic monologues are similarly pseudo-dialogues in which the speaker carries on his soliloquies without allowing the listener to make any direct response. If we compare Coleridge's conversation poems again with Robert Frost's poems of natural description and meditation, we may find that both poets, indeed, intend to tell truths through meditation in nature. Yet, unlike Coleridge, Frost often begins with describing scenes and ends with the truths discovered in the meditations, never returning to the described scenes to make a sandwich structure of description-meditation-description, or nature-man-nature, or outer-inner-outer, or detail-truth-detail. From this fact we can conclude that Coleridge, as Wordsworth's best friend, is a typical “poet of nature” like Wordsworth. They live close to nature, maintain nature's friendliness to man, and see one life among nature, man, and society. Just like Wordsworth's “Expostulation and Reply,” “The Tables Turned,” “Tintern Abbey,” and *The Prelude* (which is indeed a quite extended conversation piece addressed to Coleridge), Coleridge's conversation poems, as discussed above, have all contributed to the Romantic gospel of one life in the universe while stressing the beneficial influence of nature on man. But what is most significant is: such

conversation poems have told their truths not only in words but also in their structure. Such a genre is therefore probably the best example of what many critics assert in claiming that the form is the content. Or to put it in another way, a Coleridgean conversation poem can best exemplify the slogan of "Structure is truth, truth structure" (to amend Keats's "Beauty is truth, truth beauty").

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