This Lime-Tree Bower Our Seed

Scott Stevens

Two factors are required for the conception of art: the beauty of the outside world, and a human’s subconscious mind, primed for inspiration. For the Romantic poets, physical beauty chiefly remained contained within natural settings. These poets maintained that, after individuals delve into the turbid valleys of their minds, they are prepared for and open to the sublimity of their surroundings. The usual Romantic course of action thereafter is to bottle the encounter in a poem, which will propagate this sublimity to others. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote his poem, “This Lime-tree Bower My Prison,” after hot milk spilled on his foot, forcing him to sit under a garden's linden tree, while his friends left him for a hike to inspire their poetry. Without nature, Romantic poets like Coleridge would never have been inspired to forge their art. However, Coleridge reveals nature to be so infinite and accessible in its variations that the role of initiating inspiration falls not to nature, but to his individual subconscious, ultimately arguing that it is our duty to kindle similar sparks in others’ minds.

At first, Coleridge limits his view on what constitutes an appropriately Romantic nature scene, which he reverses to a more universal view by the end of the poem. He asks himself, “What will ignite my poetry, Mount McKinley, or the linden leaf?” The first portion of the stanza answers that. He posits in the title that the humble “lime-tree bower [his] prison,” (line 1) the simple, garden-variety garden and its lime-tree cannot offer him the sweeping landscapes the Romantics usually held as the ideal setting for inspiration. He believes the bower’s shade is a place where one “must... remain” (1) when the world bogs one down with such trifles as a hot milk spillage on the foot. Indeed, in linking his body’s impediment with being stuck under the bower, Coleridge associates this simple tree with the corporeal, which he and the Ro-
Romantics viewed as a hindrance, a diversion from the quest for perfection in the imagination. To miss out on the hike and stay under the bower is to lose the “beauties and feelings” of inspiration available on that hike, beauties stunning enough to outlive his “dimmèd [physical] eyes” by being recorded in his memory. On the hike are his friends, whom he believes, because they will be in contact with pristine nature, will embark on the archetypical Romantic journey from their subconscious, to a perfect nature scene, to insight, then to its dissemination through their poetry. Coleridge comes to his own satori moment later in the poem, but this portion counters that later perspective so that we may see clearly his journey towards a new view of nature’s role in inspiration. Immediately, the reader can tell from Coleridge’s use of blank verse that any change in him will happen steadily and with internal drama, as in a Shakespearean soliloquy, rather than the whirl-revelation of a sonnet’s volta. This journey through his blank verse towards a new understanding of nature mirrors his friends’ journey, the conversational form supporting the idea that the Romantic odyssey stems foremost from an individual’s introspection. With Coleridge’s poem paralleling his friends’ adventure, it is natural that he moves on to address the first stage of the expedition: the descent into the subconscious.

By imagining his friends stumbling upon the dell and equating it with their contact with their deeper minds, Coleridge demonstrates that access to the subconscious begins with one’s choice to reflect on one’s circumstances. First, it is clear that the dell represents the human subconscious. That it is “narrow, deep” (10), and “o’erwooded” with darkness signals to the reader that, like the deep mind, this enclosure is distinct from the outside world known in the poem as the “springy heath” (7) and later, the sea and hills. Only with the might of the “mid-day sun” (11), or the lucidity of an individual ready at the right time, may the symbolic “light” of one’s attention barely reach the floor of the dell/subconscious in “speckle[s]” (11). The dell and the mind are further separated from the outside world in that the foliage is “unsunnèd and damp” (14) and “ne’er tremble in the gale” (15). Rather, the ash, the weeds, and one’s inner brain are internally fed by the “[fanning]” (16) and “dripping” (19) of the waterfall, water being a classically Romantic symbol for deep thought.
The dell not only acts as a symbol for the subconscious, but also establishes the human subconscious as a mighty force, matching the notion that inspiration is dependent on a human's inner world, not the outer world. Most apparent in this portion of the poem is the repetition of the word “still” (9) (15) (19), signifying that the inner mind is always poised to “roar...” (9) out ideas, if only the ego descends into it. The dell and the subconscious are tough; they survive despite being starved of the outside world. There are hardy weeds that are “long [and] lank,” all in a healthy “dark green file” (17). Truly, it is “a most fantastic sight” (18) that these plants are independent enough to live, reflecting the amazing fact that our brains’ corridors are self-sufficient and can produce pathways to inspiration as brilliant as bioluminescence. And although the ash is “branchless” (13) and has “few poor yellow leaves” (15), like our brain, it can still with strength “[fling] arching like a bridge” to the next stage of the journey for transcendence, observation of nature. Yet the “slim” (12), slippery ash’s trunk, the bridge into the next stage, would be hard to cross; therefore this journey demands that people struggle to achieve transcendence.

Before the emergence into nature, however, Coleridge shows his brain’s autonomy in action as he narrates his friends’ entrance into their subconscious dells. Even when injured and pinned to the bower, Coleridge is performing the necessary navel-gazing for transcendence, albeit vicariously through his friends. What shows us that he has forced his way into his own deeper mind is that he understands the contours of the brain’s dark recesses, explained in the previous paragraphs; and that he understands he “never more may meet again” (6) his friends, since he gathers that they will have returned changed and with more insight into the sublime than him. To the prepared traveller of the mind, accidents are simply spontaneous fissures in the fabric of reality, from which one can smell the sleeping artist letting out hot storms of breath and hear the roars in snores. The traveller’s will to art and to enter the cave determines whether this accidental opening will lead to transcendence or not. If the traveller mopes and avoids this intimidating, unexpected opening, transcendence and art will not happen. Coleridge
supports this by representing his own accident, his burned foot, in the encounter he imagines his friends have with the dell. His friends are merely “wander[ing]” and “wind[ing] down” (8) to the dell, emphasizing the accidental nature of their entrance, as is the case with Coleridge and this poem. Being the opportunistic artist he is, Coleridge chooses to dwell in “the dell” of his head and take his injury as an occasion for imagination. Starting in this portion and continuing through the poem, he reminds us with parentheticals; “perchance” (8), “(a most fantastic sight!)” (18), and “perhaps” (24); that he is imagining his friends’ passage all by himself, evidence that he has independently begun the Romantic journey into his mind.

Drawing out from the dell, his friends face the hills and the sea, which undoubtedly appear to form an ideally Romantic scene, except that the scene only gains meaning through the power of the poets’ thoughts. Before Coleridge uses any other poetic devices, we see that the line of the previous stanza has trickled into the next, reminding us again that, despite being stuck under the bower, Coleridge still slides into inspiration on his own volition.

The seaside is a sufficiently picturesque scene to serve as a cathedral for the poets, the priests of imagination conducting the mass. At once, the sky is a “wide wide Heaven” (21), the hills form “[many steeples]” (22), and the heath is alight with purple (35), the color of royalty and of the Vatican’s bishops. Coleridge is associating nature with a church, and since he believes in the idea of the poet as a prophet, he would imagine that his friends are the inheritors of nature’s beauty and are the priestly conduits by which others will experience that beauty. Yet even beside the bower, he undergoes his ordination to behold the ecstasies of this nature scene in his imagination, illustrating his independence from the scene itself, and the strength of his poetic will. However, the church of nature is alive; it is the body and bread of art.

A human being’s spirit is the chief generator of inspiration, says Coleridge, for even nature must mimic a person in order to gain meaning. The seascape is personified as a body that “veil[s] the Almighty Spirit” (42), the sort of perfected soul Romantic poets wish to reach
with transcendence, if and only if Coleridge's friends (and, of course, Coleridge, since he is the one imagining this scene) “gaze” (39) (40) discriminatingly at the “wide landscape” (40) until it becomes this symbolic body (41). Thus, though perfection in nature is already present physically, its spiritual perfection can only be unlocked with the eye of an art-seeking individual. This subordination of nature's physicality to the will of the spirit is furthered in Coleridge's symbol of the sun as a soul. Only when the “slant beams” (34) of the sun seep into and pierce the flowers, clouds, groves, and the ocean (35-7) will they “richlier burn” (35) with more meaning, “live in the yellow light” (36) of perfection, and “kindle” (37) their potential for inspiration. But before he moves on to appreciate the more immediate nature around him, he addresses one of his friends on the hike, Charles Lamb.

The poem itself is a letter to Charles Lamb, who at the time worked as a clerk at the London “India House” (poem's opening) for the British East India Company. For an artist such as Lamb, it was not so much a love affair with deep stacks of paperwork, but a matter of sustenance. His spiritual survival in the city is yet more proof that the human imagination is robust and the key factor in inspiration, not nature nor the external world. Despite “pin[ing]/And hunger[ing] after nature [many] a year” (28-9) and being “pent” (30) up in London’s even more artificial prison than Coleridge’s lime-tree, Lamb has “[won] his way” (30) and has sustained the strength to write, using his “patient soul” (31) to take advantage of “strange calamity” (32) in the same way Coleridge does with this poem. Lamb exerts his patience in taking care of his mentally unstable sister, Mary, and together they complete the celebrated children’s book, Tales from Shakespeare, in addition to his poetry. Yet he does this without the help of nature scenes, rather, with his own mind’s mettle. In fact, the “fair bark” (24) on the “smooth clear blue” (25) ocean, the textbook symbol of an individual seeking out introspection, can represent Charles Lamb’s perseverance in this case. Coleridge docks Lamb like a ship in his “slip” (25) of a note “betwixt two Isles/ Of purple shadow” (25-6), the “Isles” being the descriptive purple patches before and after the note to Lamb. In other words, the structure of the stanza — --; nature, then Lamb, then nature — --; is identical to the symbol of the ship between the islands. Hence, Coleridge subtly
renders Lamb as an admirable ship persevering in the city that, though suffering scurvy for nature scenes, is able to create his own inspiration. Coleridge praises his “gentle-hearted Charles” (28) for possessing this strength, but we see in the final stanza that Coleridge can perform this feat of independent imagination as well under the bower.

Coleridge finally emerges out of his contemplation to appreciate the natural inspiration already in his vicinity and comes to the conclusion that because nature is able to replicate its beauty in any size, it is up to him to find transcendence. Again, the stanza continues the thread of letting the last line run into the first of this stanza, that Coleridge’s stream of thought culminates in an expectedly spontaneous “delight... sudden on [his] heart” (43-4). Now that he has fallen into his subconscious by imagining his friends’ journey “as [he himself] were there” (45), he is ready to “[mark]” (46) what inspiration the “little lime-tree bower” (46) can offer him. Now that he is willing to see the “blaze” (47) of the sun, his mind is “transparent” (48) and lucid enough to see the connection between the “[dapples]”(51) of sunshine with the “[speckles]” (11) of the dell. They are one and the same on the floor of his mind; nature manifests itself in both small and big ways. He continues to praise the luminance of the garden in the evening, which he notices to be caused by the “walnut-tree” (51) and the “ancient ivy” (53). Walnut trees are known for their intricately textured bark, and ivy is a twining plant that makes complex nets even around tall trees like “fronting elms” (54). By invoking these two plants, Coleridge points out that even the humble parts of nature can gleam with inspiration. Though they are smaller, they are all the more dense in meaning, as dense as the furrows of a walnut. Moreover, Coleridge fires off in succession three prominent animal symbols for inspiration in the Romantic canon: the bat, the swallow, and the “solitary humble-bee” (56-8). There are even purple flowers, the “bean-flower” (59), similar to the heath flowers in their royal, holy color, but smaller and more inwardly folded. If nature’s beauty can be found in “[narrow plots]”(61) and seemingly “[vacant wastes]” (62), then it matters not where one is, but that one is “wise and pure” (60) and strong enough to be “[a]wake to Love and Beauty” (64). Coleridge goes out and explicates that one
does not need “the promis’d good” of a grand nature scene to “lift the
soul” (66) and make art; one can simply “contemplate” (66) the situa-
tion, thereby independently performing transcendence.

The rook flying over Coleridge ends the poem as a symbol of the imagi-
native power he and Lamb share, both bonding over distances through
their shared feat of releasing nature’s inspiration by their will. First, the
rook is a social animal, preferring to travel in packs. Coleridge picked
a rook, which has flown over both the sea and the bower, to “[cross]
the mighty Orb’s dilated glory” (72) in order to show that the two poets
have both “gaz[ed]... still” (73) to access the “charm”(74) of the rook,
that is, the imagination’s power to fly above and use any form of “life”
(76) to produce art, whether it be mountain range or bower. Coleridge
also comments that the rook is “[n]ow a dim speck, now vanishing
in light” (71), possibly meaning that the rook flies to other people in
the distance, that the imagination’s mission to extract inspiration from
nature is a mission for all.

The two poets’ shared experience leaves the reader feeling that artistic
inspiration has hopscotched from Lamb, to Coleridge, and now, to the
reader. As Coleridge’s poem argues, we must unfortunately do all the
heavy lifting for inspiration; nature is so vast in its beauty that it falls
to us to find meaning from it. But this is a celebration of the triumph
of our imaginations, that though we may not determine our outer sur-
roundings, we may still influence our own art and ideas through dis-
cipline and willingness to enter the subconscious. Therefore, in this
celebration it is our duty to spread the hope that the imagination may
prevail. Of course, there is already a vehicle with which we can spread
this hope: poetry. A poem is a guiding push for other people to “find
the dell” in themselves. ●