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Two Poems—S. T. Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" and Kitts Mbeboh's "Reflections on a Face"—as Antithetical Archetypes

"The Child is the Father of Man," Wordsworth declared, and in that declaration he seemed to have chiselled out a monumental truth for man at all times. Putting Wordsworth's own poetry aside, the statement seems, from the Romantic point of view, to be most dramatised in S. T. Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight." The very title of the poem suggests first the typical romantic motif of awful beauty and regeneration, cast, in the second suggestion, against a time background of transitional activity at midnight, the appropriate time setting for the Romantic mystery.

On the other hand, Kitts Mbeboh may not pretend any illusion to the Wordsworthian tradition¹ not only because of the yawning gap and attendant changes that separate his period from the first, but also because of the very introspective nature of his poetry, void of fantastic speculations. Introspection, no doubt, is an important ingredient of romantic poetry exhibited in the contemplation of, and meditation in Nature, but Mbeboh's is uniquely personalised; he pays allegiance not to a consciously desperate quest for cosmic harmony, not even in a suggestive poem like "The Wild Rose," but

¹ As a University lecturer, he is of course aware of Coleridge's poem but does not seem to make any conscious attempt in his poem to allude to "Frost at Midnight" even if this is implied.

to the “split sign” that constitutes the soul and identity of the poet persona within uncertain atmospheres. In Mbeboh’s “Reflections on a Face²” therefore, one finds the desire for self-knowledge and self-identification as a means to socio-economic awareness, and not the other way round. It is a desire rooted in a profoundly personal experience, given that, as he revealed on the Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) *Poetry Time* programme, the poem was written just a few days after the birth of his second son and:

... looking at him—the beautiful one-day old baby—reminded me of my own life, reminded me of other people’s birth and other people’s life, and reminded me of my present life—how I look, how I live—and reminded me in anticipation of his own life as it will be in relation to mine, in relation to that of other people.

This is the truth of a revelation, the consequence of a flitting moment’s inspiration, revealed as in Coleridge too, with the parental bias, but unlike the former, tempered by a dose of objective pessimism which as will be seen later makes the poem more recondite than Coleridge’s even with his “abstruser musings.” Yet, Mbeboh’s use of the child archetype to ascertain the socio-political capitalism of his time betrays something of a romantic hankering in him. It is in this way that the two poems under study share a common harmony which, nevertheless, only helps to define their difference insofar as sketching the frontier of human endeavour from the roots of childhood, is concerned. This paper therefore focuses on the relationship between the two poems, as they seek refuge and meaning in childhood innocence against the inevitable prospects of a nightmarish adulthood, and concludes by showing how such a relationship develops a basic opposition between the two poets. This is essential in identifying and grappling with the manner in which such a challenge for life is analysed and focused.

In “Frost at Midnight” Coleridge celebrates a contemporary phenomenon in vogue—the consciously alienated lover of nature,

² The poem can be found at the end of this article.

feeding his alienation on the excesses of civilisation, and choosing the midnight hour for his meditative excursion for hopeful regeneration. In the "populous village" surrounded by "sea, hill and wood" time is suddenly frozen at midnight and all of humanity reduced to passive, slumbering lumps, a significant opposition to the otherwise "numberless goings-on of life" there, only saved indeed by the living heart of the poet persona which is alive in "abstruser musings" over his Babe. In typical romantic perception, the moment of the poem is one of extreme solemnity:

'Tis calm indeed! so calm that it disturbs
 And vexes meditation with its strange
 And extreme silentness.
 (lines 8-10)

This is the ideal time in which only the romantic mystic and/or initiate can commune with the cosmic spirit and be fulfilled therefrom, in a kind of ritualistic pause. From "this hush of nature" the poem then slips into a characteristic fancy, namely romantic nostalgia for childhood humours against the meddling call for academic responsibilities. Lapsing from the cosmopolitan school environment to his "sweet birthplace," the poet recalls rural riches perceived before he was nine—and which he can only faintly recall—since in the city he "saw nought lovely but the sky and the stars." It is not surprising then, that such nostalgic recollections "hypnotise" him into sleep so that in his confessional dedication "To William Wordsworth" Coleridge again recalls the "keen pangs of Love awakening as a Babe/ Turbulent, with an outcry in the heart" which such reminiscences can provoke. But such fancies, left undeveloped—or rather underdeveloped and consequently, by implication, maimed—by the tyrannies of the social superstructure and symbolised in "Frost at Midnight" by "the stern preceptor's face," are finally not defined in the poet beyond a strong hope for kin re-union, wherein his "heart leaped up."

Such is the abortive desire of the typical romantic heart to be confronted by the implicating experiences of life. Desperate in his desire for "the *stranger's* face," the poet persona still has to

confront the “swimming book” and conversely banish his “prolonged dreams” of childhood. But the typical romantic heart refuses to be bent even in the extremity of alienation and so, logically, the grey poet seeks solace and escape (which is also the affirmation of his regeneration) in the “cradled infant” in peaceful slumber: the hopes which he nurses for the child are revealingly regenerative considering his own adult frustrations, all the more so as romantic escapism always solicits childhood innocence to justify the inevitable doom of experience.

In the final movement of the poem therefore, the poet addresses himself directly to the child: he is destined, if not doomed, to assume and fulfil responsibilities of the father’s own misplaced and ultimately abortive childhood. The generation shift implies a similar change in the nature of responsibility with an overt bias for rurality. In other words, the child is looked upon not only as a successor who will inherit the father’s chequered estate and endeavour to make good of it, but also as a more organically “complete” being who, from the natural richness of his nursery—the “Great Universal Teacher,” that is—will understand the “eternal language” of the genesis, unadulterated and pure. This is the excess of romantic optimism wherein abundance breeds more appetite, and which, as will be suggested later, dooms its adherents by failing to grapple with a dramatically contrasting realism.

On the other hand Mbeboh’s title saves the reader from too hasty a reading of the poem by already alerting him to what he only discovers when reading through Coleridge’s poem: the mood and subject of the poem are announced right from the beginning and we are led into the reflections of an adult who, apparently without bearing, still seeks identity no matter how brittle. His thoughts become a quest for meaning in an otherwise meaningless world—or, at best, a world in which meaning has been abused—at the end of which even the committed individual realises how much he has been cheated in an endeavour for what he calls life. The pathos of his thoughts in old age recalls that of T.S. Eliot’s *Gerontion* where in Mbeboh’s poem; for instance, the man seems to degenerate from respectable fatherhood to a menial baby-sitter. Even then he can

only remember “the simplest lullaby” up the road of what should have been a full life for him and consequently cannot pass as a dignified “subject for poetry.” He is indeed the dregs in the cup of life and can only await the final spill-over into the gutter. But while waiting he must attempt to weave and establish meaning in the child symbol, as a consolatory complement to his own woes.

Like in Coleridge’s poem, we are faced here with the pseudo-confessions of an aged parent, attempting an account (pathetically objective nonetheless) of his past and bodying forth his hopes for the future in his child. The past/future dichotomy is reflective of the youth/adult, innocence/experience duality which must nevertheless be accommodated by the present. It is in this way that the parent, “shorn like sheep to the fouled inner crust” can neither be inspired by spring nor undergo a creative reflection in the season’s night, for a nurturing self-affirmation. Rather, his contemplation of the child is one of a “violating gaze,” translating as it were his awareness of an “impotence” in his vision and desires. If for Coleridge there can be a clean split between the two components of life, the beauty of nature divorced from the “cloister din” of civilisation, Mbeboh sees such a divide as impossible; the one is implicated in, and defines the other, and therein lies the conflict of experience, whether as Child or as Man, with the passage of time:

Was there ever a face
 From which God does not flee?
 Yet here is the face that life
 Will pull, break and teach it how to hate?
 (“Reflections” 10-14)

This for Mbeboh, is the paradox of life’s duality and of man’s implicated aspirations. The ultimate celebration of childhood as divine innocence cannot ignore the certainty of contamination and ruin in the vulnerable reality of experience. Such imminent corruption is the tragedy of human faith and desire, awaiting “the sacred plant shoot/ shot into manhood” (“Birth-day line” 71) which will bloom not with Edenic promise of the beginning, but with the bitter truth, from hindsight, of a world that was never to be “a

child's world filled full with love" ("Birth-day" 71). In "Reflections" however, the father realises this and accepts it with a dose of heroism that is redemptive in its confessional resignation:

The knee that rocks you now
 the last wine from the felled palm tree
 was once a flame.
 The once swift masquerade now scuttles
 to empty stands.
 (15-19)

A terrible silence attends these lines, a darkness looms over the life they conjure, marking the final movement of a passage through life, but above all, attesting to the ultimate futility of human hope and endeavour when the balance sheet of an erstwhile boisterous and heroic life is reviewed in a retired posture from the stands of a deserted arena. It is the feeling of hope betrayed in life's vicissitudes in which man ultimately feels cheated; the sense of a lack of fulfilment is bitter and ingrained in the adult psyche on the edge of the grave. This accounts too for the rather ironic religious tone in which the poem rounds up; the father in what from the logic of the poem should be his own final hour "with Leviathan heavily shielded" abandons the child to fare on his own, on the uncertain waves of life. A comparison with Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" is necessary here to show how in the eleventh hour of adult existence, any sense of parental responsibility is superseded by the greater quest for eternity. The two poems, from this point, resemble each other in the degree of religious and transitional solemnity, but whereas Tennyson's hope is fostered by his censure against the "sadness of farewell," culminating in the "hope to see [his] Pilot face to face," Mbeboh's solemnity instead casts a shadow over whatever hope there may be behind, when "He [God/Pilot] will give him [the father] both his hands/ And flee from you [the child] like he never/ were." Thus, from the postures of his own generation gap, the father, exhausted in his ritual strides, is reluctant or uneasy to usher in the athlete-child—as he must do—and watch him face the inevitable tack of life in his own turn.

It is easy to confess a strong bias for Mbeboh's use of the child archetype, compared with Coleridge's, in relation to the evolution of society especially as determined by the Western mind. "Life is far too simple and far too/ complex," Mbeboh admits ("On the Fact of Being Sentimental") and with this knowledge the whole drama of life is already charted out and enacted in anticipatory ambiguity. But the realism of Coleridge is affected by his own belief, escapist in essence, which is affirmed with a conscious attempt not to look beyond the romantic halo. It is an essentially dream paradise of abundant and ever renewed love where, as suggested in "The Eolian Harp": "... the one life within us and abroad/... meets all motion and becomes its soul" (6-27) with "joyance everywhere" (29) and wherein, ultimately, it is "impossible/ Not to love all things in a world so filled" (30-31). Coleridge wishes then for his child, the romantic paradise in which the child

... shal[^l] wander like a breeze
 By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
 Of ancient mountains, and beneath the clouds,
 Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
 And mountain crags.
 ("Frost," 54-58)

This is characteristically Wordsworthian not only from the suggestive freedom of the breeze image that is reminiscent of the opening lines of "The Prelude," but also in the natural images that authenticate the Romantic vision of the late 18th century. But by this time, the land—for that is where paradise must inevitably be found, visualised in "Biographia Literaria" as "the sudden charm, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape" (Coleridge, "Biographia." 436)—was already being abused by the neophyte onslaughts of excess materialism so that the industrialised landscape was bound to antagonise the longing spirit of the poet. And this is not only in the physical, but also in the psycho-spiritual senses. The tendency, therefore, of wishful thinking, emanating from the romantic "disease" of near fanatical idealisation, and embodied in a desire "to procure for... shadows of [the] imagination that willing suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge,

“Biographia.” 436), embraces a foreshortened vision of social change which is implicated in, and exhibited by, cheque-book-and-bank-statement priorities that were to become the dominant characteristic of the 19th century. So, the English child of Hartley Coleridge’s generation (bearing in mind that “Frost” was written on the eve of the Industrial Revolution when Hartley was barely two, and to die in 1849) was to be victimised not only by the spill-overs of a chronic crusoeistic lust in enclaved reaches in the service of Her Majesty’s Empire, but above all by the excess of faith manifested in Romantic forecasting. No wonder then, that the Romantic period in English Literature formally ends in the latter part of the 19th century (Furst 38) and from thence poets and writers in general who pretended to any romantic zeal, like Rupert Brooke, were to serve and worship a romantic dream that ironically bloomed into both the ostentatious Empire of material conquest and the consequential trenched and barricaded atmosphere of World War I. Even Yeats was soon to discover what for him at least, was the shocking puerility of his potentials into romantic adventures, thus serving, in his awareness, as a significant antecedent of the romantic ego. And in re-asserting his vitality Yeats was obsessed with the possibility of a world-to-be beyond the lake-bred faeries of his Celtic world, formulating evolutionary theories and approximating an alternative and far more realistic Byzantine paradise, consequently.

This slight deviation is meant to illustrate the fact that the Romanticism from which Coleridge drew his archetype was wholly a religion of the heart, blinded by excess faith, and soliciting a wholly emotional approach and response, and for its faithfuls, it excluded the possibility of the antithetical realism of contemporary English society as a defining principle.

The exclusion was fatal in justifying and sustaining the hypothesis of a romantic elixir, because romantic practitioners recognised the encroaching materialistic instinct from a merely exclusive stand-point, castigating that is, rather than assessing the inevitability of accepting the new spirit for what it was. In the consequent fatality of neglect, the whole of English and Western culture, perceived through the romantic eye, was compromised.

Mbeboh however recognises the possibility, if not the necessity, of a complex perception of life within a social context from a similar, yet diametrically different angle, like childhood regeneration:

A true artist expresses, spontaneously, the soul and identity of his society. He is an impartial observer of that society. His interests are bound up with those of that society, not separate from them. His struggle is the struggle of that society, his dreams its dreams. (Mbeboh, "Literature" 38)

From the above evidence, and considering the focus of this paper, it will be more convincing to refer to "a realistic" rather than to "a true" artist, in which case Mbeboh vindicates the artist's vision from Platonic apologists, served by the Coleridge approach. The above quotation is relevant as far as a perceptive evaluation of individual and social values is concerned. The one is implicated in, and defines, the other. The manner in which "the soul and identity of his society" wriggle themselves out must be realistically presented, trimmed of fantastic cravings that can no longer be realised—if ever they were realisable. So that, finally, for a permanent and more convincing social identity, the writer's excursions into the past must not be sentimentalised into a good-old-days liturgy:

The writer must conceive the past not as a refuge into which he escapes to avoid the harsh realities of the moment but as a foundation of a continuous history. In other words [he] must rehabilitate the past without sentiment and without disparagement. (Mbeboh, "Literature" 39)

This is the context from and in which the realism of "Reflections on a Face" is rooted, extending its feelers into a compromised future. "The mind," it is obvious from the poem, may be "drained of peace and driven by a temper," while "the one man chatter must go on" in(to) old age; but the poet persona does not complain, nor is he even really bitter: he simply presents what is as a refraction from what was and shall possibly be and in such transitional mood, his bitterness is only implied, if pathetic, from

which he finally defines himself and his society: his hopes for the child are tangled in the definition and therefore gain greater significance insofar as man's contemplation of life and the hope of living are based on the very uncertainty of what life is:

the very fact that we are human beings in a universe which we did not create, as well as human beings who have not created themselves means that we are part of the human mystery and when we are true to this recognition we discover a whole world—a vast inner world—which we often run from. (Mbeboh, *Poetry Time*)

It is a merit of "Reflections" that man's attempt, even in old age, to ignore this recognition is as futile as his attempt to understand it; it is the very uncertainty of a moment's life which spans the whole horizon of existence. And, ironically, such uncertainty is an invaluable spice to life itself and the very nature of man. But on the other hand, Coleridge's poem damns the hopes it nurtures in the poet's inability to be realistically perceptive given the mad rush of industrial chauvinism that was being ushered in by the end of the 18th century. This typifies the Romantic savage who was blind and deaf to the lights and echoes of the civilising world, and thought that man's dreams, healthy and insidious alike, could be altered and stopped altogether at his bidding, contemplating life from the safety of his caves or woods. He could not acknowledge the eventuality of those dreams being modified even ironically, by the "fractured" age. The hope of Romanticism commemorated in childhood innocence was thus a self-consuming flame fed by the faggots of its emotions and condemned therefore by the energies of the flame but not, however, like the phoenix's to be born again. Hope that is built only on a wish is vulnerable to the onslaughts of disaster unacknowledged by too much of desire. That is probably why even in its desire for rebirths, the phoenix grants the necessity of incineration.

The Romantic idealism of wholly worshipping nature in an age when it was becoming increasingly evident that daily life was to be stereotyped into a bargain across the counter, illustrates the limits of prioritising the values of childhood on a windy plane of experience. The difference is dramatised when Coleridge's prophecy

for the child at the end of the poem is one in which “all seasons shall be sweet” whereas for Mbeboh the very future of the child is defined by the ironic conspiracy of God and the adult parent, when “He will give him both his hands/ And flee from you like he never/ were.” In this light, therefore, one can safely say Coleridge’s poem is, essentially, the mystification of childhood innocence, availing it with attributes which finally cannot place it within a complex contemporary context; whereas Mbeboh’s envisions and provides a demystification of such fancy. The weakness of Coleridge’s poem (to use Mbeboh’s own words) may be the consequence of “our own very capacity to be false to ourselves” (*Poetry Time*) in trying to approximate daily experience. Yet the basic difference between the two poets in confessing a common feeling lies in the fact that as “prophets” of contemporary experience Coleridge assumes too definite a stance which he invests with the draperies of a confident psyche. Mbeboh however becomes philosophical and his own prophetic assumptions are compromised by man’s inability to be ultimately certain about his very fears and hopes:

I think the beauty reflected on the face of . . . a baby . . . is something which you cannot communicate to somebody; you need to see it for yourself. . . . The peace on the face of an infant is something which throughout life we may never reflect again on our own faces; we may never achieve within ourselves because it is a reflection of an inner peace. . . . it is a purity which life is literally going to tear from us. (Mbeboh, *Poetry Time*)

“Reflections” can thus be read in this light as a confessional monologue to which the reader barely eavesdrops and is expected to take it for what it is, and not—as in “Frost”—a conscious statement meant to evaluate and make a preference between two views of life.

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NOTES

Reflections on a Face

To live is to split the symbol in you,
drop the sari in the wind.
When a man up the road barely remembers
the simplest lullaby
he is no subject for poetry,
shorn like sheep to the fouled inner crust.

In this spring night
under my violating gaze
my infant so fragilely lies
an indifferent peace.
Was there ever a face
from which God does not flee?
Yet here is the face that life
will pull, break and teach it how to hate?

The knee that rocks you now
the last wine from a felled palm tree
was once a flame.
The once swift masquerade now scuttles
to empty stands.

The mind drained of peace and driven by a temper?
the one man chatter must go on.
And when it is time on the shore
with Leviathan heavily shielded
He will give him both his hands
And flee from you like he never
were.

Kitts Mbeboh

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