

“And what if all of animated nature/Be but organic harps diversely framed?” Coleridge poses this question in lines 36-37 of the earlier version of “Eolian Harp” (Anthology 620). He approaches the metaphor by way of a description of a concrete harp (“that simplest lute/Placed lengthways in the clasping casement – hark/How by the desultory breeze caressed!” [ln. 12-14]). The harp’s melodies are compared to “birds of paradise,/...hov’ring on untamed wing” (24-25).

But if we human beings, being part and parcel of “animated nature,” are indeed “organic harps,” still it seems we are a long way from “paradise,” that our wings may be decidedly tamed. Granted, Coleridge’s speaker begins the piece by describing his and Sara’s cots as “...o’ergrown/With white flowered jasmine and broad-leaved myrtle” (4). The speaker calls the flowers “emblems of innocence and love” (5), and the anthology’s footnotes point out that in *Paradise Lost*, “Adam and Eve’s ‘blissful flower’ also contains jasmine and myrtle. In this light, Coleridge’s image makes the tacit claim that the cot itself and the nature that surrounds it form a kind of Eden; the auditory “birds of paradise,” then, would fit right in.

But the speaker’s Eden of metaphor is wracked by doubt in stanza three when his lover’s “more serious eye a mild reproof/Darts...” Sara’s rejection of the speaker’s “dim and unhallowed” thoughts (42-43) engenders something of a resignation in the speaker (“never guiltless may I speak of Him,/Th’ INCOMPREHENSIBLE” [50-51]). Thus, the speaker himself is acknowledging some degree of limitation and weakness in his own harp metaphor; this doubt, this acknowledgement of the unbridgeable separation between human language and the Divine, juxtaposed as it is with the Eden imagery of the opening lines, might represent a kind of fall from grace. In a more literal sense, the final stanza depicts the speaker’s “coming down” from a temporary ecstasy. Knowing what we know about Coleridge’s opium use, and considering such images as that of “twilight elfins...Voyag[ing] on gentle gales from fairyland,” it is not hard to imagine the final stanza as the speaker’s sobering up after an opium nod.

Whatever the case with regard to the speaker’s drug use (or lack thereof), whatever clouds of doubt the speaker may cast upon his own metaphor, the harp metaphor itself remains preserved in the pages so many hundred years later and, if the reader wishes, he can set aside the speaker’s doubts and evaluate for himself the merit and the shortcomings of the metaphor. This particular reader finds the figure to be an exquisite embodiment of the Romantic idea of Genius inherited from Blake. The music of the harp derives from its receptiveness to the wind, just as, for Blake, the harvesting of poetic genius requires an openness to the universal laws that govern us. Like the Poetic Genius, the “intellectual [spiritual, according to a footnote] breeze” is “at once the soul of each and God of all” (39-40). That final line of stanza two offers a wonderfully concise representation of the notion of internal divinity which figures so heavily in Blake’s theology. (Incidentally, Blake’s idea in this regard can be found in one form or another in most of the world’s major religions, including Hinduism [see “paramatma”] and Christianity [see “holy spirit”]).

Still, the human condition, or perhaps the social *conditioning* which removes us to some degree from our inherent Humanity, pries us away from our instinctive connection to the divine within us, i.e. Blake’s Poetic Genius. Wordsworth’s speaker in “Intimations on Immortality” gets so pried away, as does this speaker of “Eolian Harp.” But even as the latter speaker takes such pains to distance himself from his own Transcendental metaphor, he does not retract it entirely—it remains available to the reader. And if reading poetry is genuinely an action, an “earnest grasping” (in Keats’ sense) after truth, then part of reading the Eolian Harp involves a reader’s taking possession of the harp image, putting it in his chest, and making his own effort to answer the speaker’s question: What *if* all organic nature/Be but organic harps diversely framed? Were that the case, how would I discover it? How would I responsibly conduct myself?

By framing the piece’s central image as a question, Coleridge achieves the dual, almost paradoxical end of both casting doubt upon the image (for a question, of course, is far less declarative

than a statement) and inviting the reader to investigate the question himself (insofar as a question paves the way toward an answer).