

## THE ALCHEMY OF MEMORY

Long ago & far away there once lived a young man you may know who was a contemporary of Edgar Allan Poe, & who also wrote about the sea under the initials S.T.C. In the 1828 edition of his famous sea shanty, said S.T.C. provided us with a marginal gloss of a somewhat enigmatic nature, namely :: 'No twilight within the courts of the sun.' The poem in question being Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," which he continued to annotate & revise for another 40 years in the Wake of its initial publication. Here are four well-known lines therefrom for your delectation :: "He prayest best who lovest best, / All things both great & small: / For the dear God, who lovest us, / He made & loveth All." Where this tale of yesteryear gets a shade more interesting is that the author of this latter-day prose poem lived in North Devon for a memorable winter in the mid-1970s, & has tramped the very trails that inspired Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' & Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality.' By way of a reminder :: "Our birth is but a sleep & a forgetting: / The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting, & cometh from afar: / Not in entire forgetfulness . . . / But trailing clouds of glory do we come . . . / O Joy! that in our embers / Is something that doth live, / That Nature yet remembers / What was so fugitive! . . . / Our Souls have sight of that Immortal Sea / Which brought us hither, / And can in a moment travel thither . . . / Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory & the dream? . . . / To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." (From Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality' Ode) "Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive / But to be young was very heaven . . ." (From Wordsworth's "The Prelude"). On that 'note,' let us reflect on the centrality of memory in this collective endeavor by drawing back the curtains of our memory closet, & recall a beloved childhood playground, a favorite seashore or barn-loft, our grandmother's garden with its beehives, roses, & sunflowers, alive with butterflies & the fragrance of ripe raspberries. The holiday trunk stored in the attic with dolls & teddybears keeping watch in the corner, the candlesticks & china on the dresser, etc.

Having presumably nudged your far memory, let us continue to eXplore this Activated Imagination via its ecstasies & travails on the high seas of philosophy & poesy. Meanwhile, one of the greatest constellations of genius in history was revolutionizing philosophy, poetry, & science in the smallish German university town of Jena ca. 1800. Among the players there foregathered were the likes of Goethe, Hegel, Schiller, the Bros. Schlegel, Schelling, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Holderlin, & Novalis. The ripples outward from this remarkable epicentre powerfully affected not only the English Romantics Coleridge, Wordsworth, De Quincey, Hazlitt, Keats, Shelley, & Byron, but also the American Transcendentalists Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Poe, Whitman, & Melville. Should this Jena phenomenon intrigue you, Andrea Wulf's "Magnificent Rebels: The First Romantics & the Invention of the Self" (Alfred A. Knopf, NYC, 2022) is a marvel! And this Romantic current is far from dried up; the mid-20th century Malcolm Lowry's "Under the Volcano" (1947), generally regarded as one of the greatest novels of the century, being yet another instance of this tradition. In this conTeXt, the comparably disturbing "Nightmare Alley" (1946) by William Lindsay Gresham, the dipsomaniacal & dissolute former husband of the Joy Davidman Gresham of "Shadowlands" who married C. S. Lewis in 1956, has much in common with Lowry's magisterial novel, both authors having been born in 1909, & in their tUrns were centrally influenced by such quasi-underground streams as the Kabbalah & the Tarot, T. S. Eliot's 'wicked pack of cards.' I likewise find it curious that Lowry was something of a 'strange pilgrim' to the Romantic poet-haunted Lake District shortly before his death in 1957. Also meriting mention in this late-Romantic milieu is Conrad Aiken, Lowry's 20-year-older literary & spiritual mentor, who Malcolm Cowley & Harold Bloom regarded as among the greatest English poets of the 20th century. Here are a few lines from Aiken's 'When You Are Not Surprised' :: "When you are not surprised, / nor leap in imagination from sunlight into shadow, or from shadow into sunlight . . . / Or the wood-thrush speaking its holy, holy / far hidden in the forest of the Mind, / while slowly, slowly, the limbs of light unwind / and the world's surface dreams again of Night." I trust you've enjoyed this tantalizing view of the cloud-hidden peak of Malcolm's Mount Analogue. "No se puede vivir sin amar/It is not possible to live without love."