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SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

Poems selected by

JAMES FENTON

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Introduction

The reader of this selection of Coleridge's poems may be surprised that the first items presented should be fragments and drafts rather than finished poems, and that there is such duplication as well: two versions of 'Kubla Khan' and both the verse letter to Sara Hutchinson and the 'Dejection' ode, which Coleridge created as a public version of the private epistle. I would also have put in two versions of 'The Ancient Mariner', given enough space. But is it fair to Coleridge, would it be fair to any poet, to treat his work in this way?

Well, I like Coleridge very much, and I want the reader to like him too, otherwise the whole exercise would be a waste of time. I want the reader to like him for what he is, not for what he fails to be. He is not a perfect poet, in the way that, say, George Herbert is a perfect poet. That is to say, with Herbert you feel that the forms and the language are perfectly congruent with the purposes of the poet. He seems to achieve all that he desires, for he expresses his religious viewpoint in a comprehensive way. His work is all of a piece. It is not problem-strewn. If there were early drafts, one expects that they would point in the direction of the ultimately successful poem, not raise questions about the author's sincerity and purpose, or his veracity. Anyway there are no such drafts, no identifiable juvenilia, no censored passages: all we have is finished work of the highest quality.

Coleridge's poems, by contrast, bring with them all kinds of fascinating doubts. What is finished, and what is unfinished? 'The Pains of Sleep' looks finished, but is said by Coleridge to be a fragment. 'Kubla Khan' certainly looks like a fragment (which is what its author said it was) but has been suspected of being a complete work, cunningly passed off as a fragment. Coleridge's character has been roundly attacked and his veracity impugned, and it may seem naïve to today's reader to accept the story of the 'person on business from Porlock'

interrupting the composition of the work. What we are being regaled with, such a reader may feel, is a fable illustrating the workings of inspiration. The Person from Porlock, on this reading, is a fabulous beast.

He has certainly *become* proverbial, as have Xanadu and the Ancient Mariner, the Pleasure Dome and the Albatross. I give two versions of 'Kubla Khan' not because they differ in substance but because the poem takes on a subtly different character when *presented* differently: the first time around, the fragment (as it was privately circulated) seems something of a curiosity to do with the effects of opium; the manuscript appears to have been stuck in an album and valued as an example of the poet's handwriting. By the second version, the text as presented to the public, the poet has evidently become more interested in his own achievement, and, despite his protestation of diffidence, more confident that such a puzzling object could be of interest to the reader. Many years had passed since its composition and the poem had already earned the admiration of Byron, the poet of 'great and deserved celebrity' mentioned in the accompanying note. I would like today's reader to have the chance to think about either way of looking at the poem, and so it is convenient to have both texts with their full apparatus.

The two versions of the 'Dejection' material, by contrast, are very different indeed. The interest here is in the problem that will confront any poet. If I fall in love, am spurned, am loved in return, fall out of love – if any such great common experience befalls me, and I write a poem about it, whom am I addressing? Am I really only addressing the loved one? Or am I speaking to the general public in the guise of speaking to the loved one? If the first, would not my publishing the poem constitute a breach of trust? If the second, would I not be better advised (as a lover) to attend to the actual demands of this supreme relationship, rather than looking, as it were, over my lover's shoulder and addressing the rest of the room?

There are no general answers to these conundrums. If a man or woman is loved by a poet, and receives a poetic epistle, then he or she would be advised to become reconciled to the idea that there is something implicitly public in this form of address. Perhaps that thought will be welcome: the lover is happy and flattered to be chosen as Muse. Perhaps there will only be unease, in which case it might be best for the lover to show a clean pair of heels, to get away before any further damage is done.

From the poet's point of view, it may be possible to move effortlessly to and fro between myself-as-individual and myself-as-representative-man, or it may be hard. At the very least, the poet to whom it always seems insincere to reflect on passion while in passion's throes is going to have a hard time ever producing a love poem. And the poet whose private life is strictly off-limits to his poetry is going to have to work hard to find any subject which inflames him.

Coleridge wrote his verse letter for an intimate circle that included preeminently William and Dorothy Wordsworth. It is not even known whether he sent Sara Hutchinson, the addressee, a copy. He read the first version to William and Dorothy, thereby sharing not only his feelings for Sara but also such quite unprintable emotions as his occasional regrets that he had ever had children:

> Those little Angel Children (woe is me!)
> There have been hours when, feeling how they bind
> And pluck out the Wing-feathers of my Mind,
> Turning my Error to Necessity,
> I have half-wish'd they never had been born!
> *That* seldom! But sad Thought they always bring . . .

These are terrible confessions to make, and they are only a part of the anguished situation evoked by the poem. Coleridge was emotionally estranged from his wife and in love with Sara Hutchinson. Wordsworth was in love with Sara's sister Mary, whom he intended shortly to marry. Before he could do so he

had to make a definitive break with his former mistress Annette Vallon, by whom he had a child. Coleridge could encourage Wordsworth to marry Mary, but for himself he could not contemplate divorce. Inextricable from his feelings about his marriage and Wordworth's was a sense that his poetic powers were deserting him.

Between the first composition of the verse letter and the final version of the 'Dejection' ode fall numerous attempts at reusing the material. Coleridge cuts the name Sara and substitutes a fictional Edmund, before turning the work into an address to William (Wordsworth), and publishing it as such, in the *Morning Post*, on Wordsworth's wedding day. Then he reverts to the female figure as addressee, but now she is plain 'Lady'. There were also numerous, no doubt highly edited, showings of the verse letter to different friends, and in one case Coleridge pretended that he had written it for one of his correspondents.

All this radical reshaping of his material may give us a sobering view of the romantic poet as lover, but it is highly characteristic of Coleridge both in his human situation and in his working practice. Whom was he addressing in the first version of the poem? His loved one. With whom was he in love? That's a good question, for he seems in a sense (I do not mean a sexual sense) to have been in love with Wordsworth, or to have been in love with a group that included Wordsworth. He addressed the poem, as written, to Sara Hutchinson, but he *read* it (addressing it in another sense) to William and Dorothy. Then he turned it into a public wedding-present for William and Mary Hutchinson. One way or another, he involved everyone in his plight.

> It was as calm as this, that happy night
> When Mary, thou, & I together were,
> The low decaying Fire our only Light,
> And listen'd to the Stillness of the Air!
> O that affectionate & blameless Maid,

> Dear Mary! On her lap my head she lay'd –
> Her Hand was on my Brow,
> Even as my own is now;
> And on my Cheek I felt thy eye-lash play.
> Such Joy I had, that I may truly say,
> My Spirit was awe-stricken with the Excess
> And trance-like Depth of it's brief Happiness.

They are listening to the silence together. Mary, who is to marry William, has Coleridge's head on her lap and her hand on his brow. Then he feels Sara's eyelash play on his cheek. And this beatific moment he writes up, and he reads his account to William and Dorothy. This is a poetry that has not yet detached itself from the situation it is decribing: it is pushing matters further.

In choosing to offer the original 1798 text of 'The Ancient Mariner' I am not saying that the later version, with its modernised spelling and marginal annotations, ruins the original idea. I am simply imagining that the reader may well own some other book with the more conventional text. The earlier version is nearer the original idea for the poem: that it be a ballad written in the old English style, as found in collections of early verse such as Percy's *Reliques*. The poet Anna Letitia Barbauld told Coleridge, perhaps soon after its first publication, that 'the only faults she found with the Ancient Mariner were – that it was improbable, and had no moral.'

Coleridge's reply to these criticisms, which would have been common at the time, is rightly held to be a key to his aesthetic:

> As for the probability – to be sure that might admit some question – but I told her that in my judgment the chief fault of the poem was that it had too much moral, and that too openly obtruded on the reader. It ought to have had no more moral than the story of the merchant sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well and throwing the shells aside,

and the Genii starting up and saying he must kill the merchant, because a date shell had put out the eye of the Genii's son.

In another account of the same incident, Coleridge says to Mrs Barbauld, whose intentions had been complimentary, that

> the only fault in the poem is that there is *too much* [of a moral]! In a work of such pure imagination I ought not to have stopped to give reasons for things, or inculcate humanity to beasts. The 'Arabian Nights' might have taught me better.

And he goes on to retail the same story.

The reply to Mrs Barbauld is very spirited, and it might just as appropriately have been made to Wordsworth who, having first printed 'The Ancient Mariner' in *Lyrical Ballads*, later appended a note acknowledging that many people had been 'much displeased' with the poem and that Coleridge had wanted it suppressed. Wordworth goes on:

> The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the control of supernatural impressions might be supposed to partake of something supernatural: secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon: thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated.

With egregious complacency, Wordsworth congratulates himself on having nevertheless refused to suppress the 'Ancient Mariner' by dropping it from *Lyrical Ballads*.

The complaint that the Mariner does not act but is acted upon reminds us of another unfair *obiter dictum*: Yeats's 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry'. Indeed it is the same

capricious objection. As it happens the Mariner does act: he shoots the Albatross, and this action, like the throwing of the date shell, involves him in a guilt that he could not have predicted, for there is no way that the merchant could have known that throwing date shells aside might cause the death of a genie's son (in the original story, the son has been killed, which is why the merchant must die).

The action is the starting point of the story. In Coleridge's view it is not to be questioned. It is something that happens, in the idiom of such stories. Neither the merchant, nor his wife, nor anyone else who hears about it doubts that the merchant has indeed caused the son's death. It is one of the givens of the story, which is a creation of 'pure imagination'. And that is also what, incidentally, 'Kubla Khan' might be thought to be. And I have often wondered whether the surprisingly long time Coleridge took to bring that 'fragment' before the public might not have been the result of some initial discouragement by William and Dorothy Wordsworth.

Still, Coleridge in his sly way managed to deal with many of the problems that beset him, and there is no possibility of reaching back into the past to help him out of those difficulties we do not think he solved in the best possible fashion. Printing the first version of the 'Ancient Mariner' enables us to preface the poem with the simple, geographically matter-of-fact 'Argument' in its original form, before the poet pointed up the mariner's guilt in the revised version of 1800:

> How a Ship, having first sailed to the Equator, was driven by Storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole; how the Ancient Mariner cruelly and in contempt of the laws of hospitality killed a Sea-bird and how he was followed by many and strange Judgements: and in what manner he came back to his own country.

If one approached the Arabian Nights story in this spirit, one would say that the merchant, cruelly and in contempt of the ancient anti-litter laws, threw away some date shells, thereby

killing the Genie's son. If the Mariner was being punished for cruelty to animals, what are we to say of the deity who kills the whole ship's crew, in order to underline His point?

This selection of Coleridge is perhaps the first to be able to rely on the monumental Variorum text edited by J. C. C. Mays, and I am extremely grateful for Professor Mays's permission to draw on his work. His text, which comes in four volumes, is the kind that most people would only want to consult in libraries. But any student of Coleridge who is trying to make a serious point in detail about any Coleridge poem will do well to use the Mays edition, since all previous texts are marred by odd little misreadings, on which the writer will have to take a view. For instance, in the description of the Netherlands, given here as item 11, Mays has 'The fly-transfixing Spires' where others have made us accustomed to 'The sky-transfixing Spires'. The Mays version may seem crazy, but we have to square up to it if that is what is in the manuscript. In item 12, the last line used to read 'Her loss was to my heart, like the heart-blood.' This made it seem as if the speaker in the poem was living off his sense of loss. 'Her Love was to my Heart, like the Heart-blood' makes a very important change.

Here are some 'tasting notes' on the fragments:

Item 1. Called by Mays 'Lines Written in a Dream', it evokes what is now called clinical depression. A characteristic Coleridge theme, in a nutshell.

Item 2. A cushat or cushit: a pigeon or ring-dove in North Country and Borders dialect. Mallarmé's advice to Degas, that poems are not made out of ideas but out of words, comes to mind. This is what a poem looks like in the egg.

Item 3. A line-and-a-half, from the notebooks, waiting for inclusion in 'Frost at Midnight'. This is how lines occur.

Item 4. Here is Coleridge 'borrowing' a good line from his extensive reading. The second line comes from Fulke Greville. The nineteenth century is here reading the seventeenth. The result is like a motto from an emblem book.

Item 5. Mays quotes the third stanza of the Percy ballad 'Waly, Waly, Love be bonny':

Marti'mas wind, when wilt thou blaw
  And shake the green leaves aff the tree?
O gentle death, whan wilt thou cum?
  For of my life I am wearie.

Line three in the Coleridge stanza is the one that dates it to the Romantic period.

Item 6. As Mays says, this reads like a fragment of a blank-verse drama. But the notebook page on which it is written is marked with anagrams and initials indicating that the situation in the fragment derives from the relationship between Wordworth and Coleridge and the women in their lives. A dramatic suicide threat.

Item 7. Another 'dramatic' line, but why? Because we do not think of Coleridge as vengeful and glorying in it? But here he is meditating on how to describe a spectacular revenge.

Item 8. Given the title 'Bo-Peep and I Spy', it is a sort of poem Coleridge thought appropriate 'For *Autographs*' – something to write on a page of an album. It illustrates the affinity between poetry and play.

Item 9. A song. Another poem for the autograph book. The unpleasant thought that love conceals a sword within a wreath of myrtle comes from a Greek tradition, which has Harmodius and Aristogeiton kill the younger brother of the Athenian tyrant Hippias, concealing their swords in this way.

Item 10. Characteristic of Coleridge's fascination with weather effects, these lines derive from his reading of Jean Paul.

Item 11. A description of the Netherlands. 'The fly-transfixing Spires' noted above. Previous editors thought they must be sky-transfixing.

Item 12. He's thinking in Italian grammar. 'Nor . . . Have I, to whom' – '*Non ho cui*'.

Item 13. An epigraph. Acknowledges conflict between the pull of Truth and that of Imagination (Fancy).