

‘The Picture *or*, The Lover’s Resolution’

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THE MAIN AIM of this paper is a simple one; it is to draw attention to a poem of 1802 which has been consistently neglected, undervalued or misread, and to suggest that *The Picture or, The Lover’s Resolution* belongs firmly to the central canon of Coleridge’s verse.¹ I argue that, in spite of Coleridge’s later placing it in the section entitled ‘Love-Poems’ in *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), it is best read as a blank-verse meditation, and may even be thought of as a kind of conversation poem, even if the conversation is entirely with himself. It is in fact a ‘*Oneversation*’, and makes only coded reference, if at all, to a single member of his intimate circle, that person being Sara Hutchinson.²

This poem first appeared in the *Morning Post* on Monday 6 Sep 1802, and was reprinted soon after in *The Poetical Register for 1802*, but was not republished by Coleridge until a revised and much expanded text was included in *Sibylline Leaves*, in 1817. It has been neglected for a variety of reasons. An earlier generation adhered to a view of Coleridge’s verse as following a simple biographically based trajectory of early poetic promise followed by decline, as JCC Mays has recently so comprehensively demonstrated.³ Thus R C Bald, the distinguished Australian scholar, wrote in 1944 of what he called Coleridge’s ‘essential poetic sterility of the last thirty-two years of his career’ after *Dejection* with the exception of *To William Wordsworth*.⁴ And even Heidi Thompson, writing as recently as 2008, suggests that ‘The brilliance of “*Dejection*” may have contributed to a certain neglect of Coleridge’s contemporary (ie *Morning Post*) publications.’ She then categorises somewhat dismissively *The Picture* as among his ‘sentimental and mock-sentimental poems’.⁵

Coleridge himself is partly to blame for this neglect. In his letter to Thomas Wedgwood of 20 October 1802, he writes of his *Morning Post* verse of September and October of that year self-deprecatingly as, ‘merely the emptying out of my desk’ (CL II 876). He did not even publish most of them under his own name, but under a pseudonym, explaining to Thomas Sotheby in a letter dated August 26, ‘I need not say that the greater number of verses signed ‘ΕΣΤΗΣΕ’ [ie his initials transliterated into Greek capitals] will be such as were never meant for anything less but the *peritura charta* [‘perishable paper’] of the M. Post’ (CL II 857). Most negative of all is the comment in his own annotation to the poem in a copy of *Sibylline Leaves* which he sent to Francis

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper originally given at the Coleridge Summer Conference at Cannington in July 2014. I would like to thank the editor, Graham Davidson, for his encouragement and Edward Shepherd for his comments and advice in preparing it for publication.

² Richard Holmes, *Coleridge. Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1996), xxvii. This term has been attributed to Hazlitt, but I have been unable to verify this.

³ J. C. C. Mays, *Coleridge’s Experimental Poetics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 15–40.

⁴ R. C. Bald: *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* Vol. 43, No. 1, (Jan.; 1944), 135–137.

⁵ ‘Coleridge about Wordsworth in the Morning Post of 1802’ in *The Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 31, Summer 2008, 74.

Wrangham in 1819. In this he says that the poem lacks the '*one Spirit*' which, by then, he had come to believe was essential for a true poem. The whole annotation is exceptionally full and is expressed in the idiosyncratic theologico-philosophical language of the Coleridge of *Biographia Literaria* and the 1819 Lectures, with a late swerve towards *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*:

I do not recollect any Number of Lines under the name of a Poem, that more strikingly illustrates the nature and necessity of some *one Spirit*, a Unity beside and beyond mere connection, a Life in and over all, as the Light at once hidden and revealed in all the Colour that are the Component Integers of the Vision. – ...but there is no under-current, that “moves onward from within” – the *one Spirit* is absent, “*and it is he, That makes the ship to go.*” (PW 1, 2, 711)

A further reason for the neglect of *The Picture* is the whiff of the suspicion of plagiarism which hovers around it. It is now accepted that Coleridge's poem owes something at least to a German prose pastoral called *Der feste Vorsatz* ('The Fixed Resolution' or 'The Firm Resolve') by the Swiss poet and painter Saloman Gessner (1730-88), a fact first noted by E H Coleridge in his 1912 edition.

Although the poem is now always read in the 1817 text, I would suggest that the poem is in fact best read in the *Morning Post* version of the poem. This 1802 text is essentially the same as that in Sara Hutchinson's handwritten anthology, which she self-mockingly titled *Sara Hutchinson's Poets* in humorous allusion to the massive fourteen-volume collection *The Works of the British Poets*, edited by Robert Anderson and known by the Wordsworth circle as 'Anderson's Poets'.⁶ This version is considerably shorter than the more familiar 1817 one, at 160 lines as opposed to 186. It is also clearer, mainly because the substantial later additions impede the forward impetus of a poem which is already as full of side-tracks, detours, doublings and re-doublings as the human mind itself. In brief, the *Morning Post* text is shorter, stronger and clearer.

The fact that this earlier version has been relatively inaccessible may be one practical reason why this poem has been neglected. Another is the tendency among those scholars who have followed up the original *Morning Post* context to lean towards political or biographical readings of *The Picture*. Political readings are understandable, given that the thirty-five items of miscellaneous verse, appearing on some sixteen different days in September and October, are scattered among ten substantial leading articles by Coleridge, mainly on France and Napoleon. These verse items include re-workings of some of the items from his 1798 quarto publication in the form of *France: an Ode* and an excerpt

⁶ Sara Hutchinson's handwritten anthology of poems by Coleridge and Wordsworth was probably started in early 1802 with the last poem added in 1811. For a detailed description and discussion of the volume, see George Whalley, *Coleridge and Sara Hutchinson* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955), 1-32. Robert Anderson, *The Works of the British Poets, with Prefaces Biographical and Critical* (14 vols., Edinburgh, 1792-1807) was the anthology most widely used by Coleridge and Wordsworth and their circles.

of sixty lines from *Fears in Solitude*. In comparison with these substantial pieces in verse and prose on public issues it is easy to fall into the trap of regarding *The Picture*, *The Keepsake* and *The Daydream*, as sentimental or mock-sentimental makeweights. However, this view rests on a simplistic distinction between public and private verse which Coleridge himself did not recognise. If we recall the *Fears in Solitude* quarto of 1798 we will remember that the third item was *Frost at Midnight*, whose Cottage and domestic setting took on a particular resonance in the light of the threatened invasion of England by Napoleon, which is the underlying context of the entire volume. I would suggest that the domestic settings of the three poems I have mentioned above play a similar role in the *Morning Post* sequence of prose and verse in autumn 1802. In them, Coleridge is presenting himself as a man and poet of feeling, rather than a mere political ideologue or polemicist. One recalls the editor of the *Morning Post*, Daniel Stuart's reasons for rating Coleridge the best of his leader writers: '...They were the writings of a Scholar, Gentleman and Statesman, without personal sarcasm or illiberality of any kind.'⁷

But what about the issue of plagiarism? What exactly is Coleridge doing in this poem, and what is the role of Gessner's piece? The epics, pastorals and prose idylls of Salomon Gessner, 'the Swiss Theocritus', enjoyed a great vogue in England in the second half of the eighteenth-century. He transferred the classical pastoral tradition into an alpine landscape and the language of 'sensibility'; his work is essentially Rococo in style. In the summer of 1802 Coleridge was commissioned to make a translation of his long prose idyll *Der erste Schiffer* ('The First Navigator') and, although that was never published, nor has survived, it was perhaps in the process of working on this project that he came across *Der feste Vorsatz* ('The Fixed Resolution'), which he drew upon in writing *The Picture*.

The fact that Coleridge never publically acknowledged his debt to Gessner and that the poem which follows *The Picture* in the *Morning Post* series is *The Hymn Before Sun-rise*, which was used as key evidence for the plagiarism accusations made by De Quincey on Coleridge's death, may suggest to some readers that he was indeed lapsing into 'sterility' and needed to lean on other people's work for inspiration. However, this is a misconception. For *The Picture* is not a translation or imitation of Gessner's piece, any more than *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* is of Burger's *Leonora* or *The Waste Land* of Baudelaire. Frederick Burwick in his illuminating recent discussion of Coleridge's translations draws upon Coleridge's own distinction between 'translated' and 'transferred' (LL 2, 402-3).⁸ In reality, Coleridge here writes what is to all intents and purposes a new poem and, although the basic situation and one or two details have clear parallels in *Der feste Vorsatz*, Coleridge's much longer and much more ambitious poem is better thought of

⁷ Quoted in EOT I, lxvii.

⁸ Frederick Burwick, 'Coleridge as Translator' in *The Oxford Handbook to Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 412-432. This chapter also includes a close examination of *The Picture* in relation to Coleridge's ideas concerning translation, 419-423.

as a critique of Gessner's prose piece rather than as a version of it. It is as if the situation of the lover's failed attempt to escape from his feelings by withdrawing in solitude to a wood, which he came across in Gessner, resonated so powerfully with Coleridge and his situation at the time, that he was stimulated into writing what is essentially an anti-pastoral, in which real feeling and a real experience of Nature replace the pastoral idyll of *Der feste Vorsatz*. In his poem the summery pastoral setting of Gessner is replaced by an almost autumnal, and much tougher forest setting; the Rococo eroticism is replaced with a chaste, Miltonic conception of love; an essentially shallow portrayal of temptation and desire is replaced by an intensely self-aware and psychologically penetrating exploration of the drama of the mind; and, finally, Coleridge's poem, rather than being a trivial anecdote, which is essentially all that Gessner's piece amounts to, explores the nature of truth and illusion; reality and art; mind and Nature. In that sense it is a continuation of the issues explored in the verse *Letter to Sara Hutchinson* of the spring of that year and, above all, in his letters to Sotheby of the summer and autumn of 1802.

For Coleridge was not only struggling with his personal life during that summer of 1802 when he wrote *The Picture*, but was also going through a period of intense thought about the nature of poetry and the imagination, and the role of metre, which are the subjects of some of the most important letters he ever wrote: the series to his new friend Thomas Sotheby from July 1802. It is these which provide the most helpful intellectual context for *The Picture*. His thinking about these issues was stimulated partly by his increasing reservations about Wordsworth's revised 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, but also by his own work on translating *Der erste Schiffer*. For in the process of translation, he came to see for himself exactly what was wrong with Gessner. Writing in July he says, 'On my return to Keswick I reperused the erste Schiffer with great attention; & the result was an increasing disinclination to the business of translating it...the Poem was too silly' (CL II 809). He goes on to define more precisely the sources of his objections. The first is Gessner's treatment of mythology: '...the machinery is so superlatively contemptible & commonplace...'. This objection is fundamental to Coleridge's thinking about poetry and the imagination. Indeed in the important letter of the 10th of September to Sotheby, a *locus classicus*, it is his objection to what he calls 'the Godkins and Godesslings' of Greek poetry which, he says, are 'inserted in otherwise dead Nature', in contrast with the Hebrew poetry of the bible and the great English poets, which gives rise to his first explicit formulation of the Fancy/Imagination distinction:

In the Hebrew Poetry you find nothing of this poor stuff—as poor in genuine Imagination as it is mean in Intellect/—At best it is but Fancy or the aggregating Faculty of the mind—not *Imagination* or the *modifying* and *co-adunating* Faculty. (CL II 865-6)

His second basic objection is to Gessner's inability to create real characters. He

comments in an earlier letter that the girl's thoughts are not truly girlish, but:

...exactly such as a boarding school Miss whose imagination, to say no worse, had been somewhat stirred and heated by the French and German pastorals, would suppose her to say.' (CL II 810)

In fact he objects to Gessner's treatment of sexuality *tout court*: 'I am a homebrewed Englishman, and tolerate downright grossness more than this coy and distant dallying with the Appetites' (CL II 813).

A third objection was to Gessner's prose which, he contended, is not true prose but is full of echoes of metre, 'little more than slovenly Hexameters'. This matter of the sharp distinction between prose and verse was another of the major themes of the summer. He found Wordsworth's comments on metre in the *Preface* disturbingly shallow. For Coleridge, metre was absolutely fundamental to poetry. As he wrote in the July letter:

Metre itself implies a Passion...Indeed we have lately had some little controversy upon this subject—& we begin to suspect that there is, somewhere or other, a radical Difference on our opinions. (CL II 812)

Coleridge's version was emphatically to be in verse. As he wrote, 'My translation will be just so much better than the original, as metre is better than prose.' No doubt he had very similar reservations about *Der feste Vorsatz*, which was also in the same vaguely rhythmical German prose.

Each of the criticisms of Gessner outlined above find their response in *The Picture*. *Der feste Vorsatz* can be briefly summarised as follows: a man wanders aimlessly in a wood, resolved to have no more to do with love; he follows a stream, where he finds a footprint in the sand of a girl and immediately decides to follow her, convinced that he will get an enthusiastic response. The condensed version might be: 'Boy resolves to give up girls, but falls at the first fence.'

Coleridge's poem and Gessner's piece share the basic situation of a man in a wood seeking solitude and escape from love. But the differences are far more striking. In Coleridge's poem, the love is for a particular woman, 'the passion that consumes me', but in Gessner there is a wholly generalised concern with 'love'. Coleridge's lover is smarting from rejection, but Gessner's lover is merely satiated by his numerous dalliances. Whereas Gessner's narrative is of childlike simplicity, Coleridge's folds in on itself in a highly complex manner, featuring a series of stories within stories, figures and their doubles, and at least two extensively developed visual images, one an imagined reflection in the surface of the pool, and the other a picture or sketch left behind on the ground. A further significant difference is that Coleridge's setting has a detail and Lake District specificity entirely missing from Gessner's conventionalised treatment of a sylvan setting. Finally, the conclusion of Coleridge's poem is not the triumph of Eros so much as the recognition of an inescapable, if

unreciprocated, love. A condensed version of *The Picture* might be: 'There is no escaping true love, even if it is unrequited'.

I have already suggested that *The Picture* can helpfully be regarded as a blank-verse meditation, even though Coleridge himself placed it third in the section entitled 'Love-Poems' rather than in the section he titled 'Meditative Poems in Blank Verse' in *Sibylline Leaves*. But the real difference is to be found in the manifold doubling of figures and images in the poem. This is the work's distinguishing feature and it is linked to the poem's central concern with the difficulty of knowing what one really feels. The piece is in fact a penetrating meditation on the psychology of desire.

Take, for example, the 'poor youth' in the poem who is fixated on the reflection of the Virgin in the surface of the pool in the brook. She disturbs the reflective surface of this watery mirror by throwing flowers into it, and when it returns to stasis and 'once more the Pool becomes a Mirror', he cannot tear himself away, even though she has departed. He stares so long that he recreates a shadowy version of her from his own fantasies:

Till sickly thoughts bewitch thine eyes, and thou
Behold'st her Shadow still abiding there,
The Naiad of the Mirror! (PW 300 109-11)

What is this if not a parable of a false, self-projecting and ultimately Narcissistic love? False feeling goes hand in hand with self-delusion, the triumph of dream over reality. Little wonder that Coleridge drew on this passage when writing the prose preface to *Kubla Khan* and quoted it:

Then all the charm
Is broken—all that phantom-world so fair
Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,
And each mis-shape the other. Stay awhile,
Poor youth, who scarcely darest lift up thine eyes!
The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon
The visions will return! And lo, he stays:
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more
The pool becomes a mirror. (PW 300 91-100)

The poem's main title is *The Picture* and it is towards the finding of the sketch that the poem's narrative moves. This is the climax. Of course on one level, this device is simply a reworking of Gessner's footprint in the sand. However, the very fact that it is 'transferred' into an artwork is significant. For, as we have seen, that summer of 1802 Coleridge had been thinking more than usually intensely about the imagination and its relationship to reality. His view, which he famously later developed in *Biographia Literaria* and also in his 1819

Lectures was that Plato had got it wrong.⁹ Poets do not deliver a reflection of reality, nor do they merely give form to their own fantasies and desires. They 'represent' reality rather than mirror it. And, furthermore, when readers, viewers and spectators encounter this 'representation', they are not duped into believing that they are actually looking at reality; they are not like the figures in Plato's cave looking at shadows on the wall imagining them to be real. No, they have to willingly and consciously suspend their disbelief in order to gain access to something real. They are not deluded but consciously collude in the illusion, entering into a 'What if?' contract. Although a full formulation of all this had to wait until *Biographia Literaria*, these concerns are already there in *The Picture*, not as critical prose but as images and 'representations'. Thus the narrator himself is fully aware that he is looking at a picture or modified 'representation' of the Cottage, and is fully conscious of its relationship to the actual Cottage, which he has just seen for himself. The additions of the child and the dog in the sketch may or may not be coded allusions to the Hutchinson's home at Gallow Hill but they are certainly symbols of domestic harmony.¹⁰ Unlike the 'poor youth' with his watery Mirror, the Lover in Coleridge's poem is not deluded and, unlike Gessner's Lover, he is not looking at a weak imprint of reality. His feelings of love are real and are not to be denied. And it is the picture, the artwork, which reveals this truth to him, uncovering his deepest feelings and changing the direction of the narrative.

I would like to conclude with a glance at the poem's ending.¹¹ For *The Picture* differs in one important respect from many of Coleridge's other major poems: what he called, in an annotation to *Frost at Midnight* in Sir George Beaumont's copy of the 1798 folio, 'the rondo, and return upon itself ...' at the end is missing (PW 1, 1, 456 note). Instead of resolution, there is disruption, mounting emotional disturbance, and we are finally left with a sense of starting out again on a compulsive and never-to-be concluded search. We are reminded of other restless wanderers: the mariner perhaps, or even the poor youth in *The Foster Mother's Tale*, who disappeared in the New World and was last seen all alone, setting sail 'by silent moonlight up a great river, great as any sea.../ And ne'er was heard of more;...' (PW 152 77-81). *The Picture* is a poem in which the reader is led to share in the psychological drama of the narrator's own doomed struggle to free himself from 'that passion which consumes him.' It is as disturbing as it is profound.

⁹ For a useful account of Coleridge's thinking on mimesis, imitation and copy see Matthew Scott, 'Coleridge's Lectures 1808-1819' in *The Oxford Handbook to Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 194-202.

¹⁰ Coleridge later movingly recalls evenings at Gallow Hill in a notebook entry of March 1810 and specifically mentions children and a dog: 'The Fire/Mary, you & I at Gallow-Hill/—or if flamy, reflected in children's round faces—ah whose children?—a dog—that dog whose restless eyes oft catching the light of the fire used to watch your face...' (CN III 3708).

¹¹ I am conscious that the interpretation of the ending depends on gauging its tone, as indeed is the case for the poem as a whole, concerning which there are widely differing views. On the one hand one can read the ending as a wryly ironic, almost humorous, portrayal of the narrator's half-knowing self-deception, or, conversely, as I argue here, as a portrayal of a man hopelessly in thrall to his own deepest feelings of love, unreciprocated as these are. This latter reading, naturally, invites the reader to conflate the narrator and the author, in view of Coleridge's feelings for Sara Hutchinson in 1802.