

Coleridge's Magnetism

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HOW DID IT HAPPEN THAT MY SHELVES SAG with *The Collected Coleridge*, *The Collected Letters*, *The Notebooks*, and books by all the Coleridgeans equally smitten with one or another aspect of his thought? That I have been having ideas about him in classes and on paper and in conferences since I was 25 and now am a grandmother of seven, the oldest a philosopher writing about Deleuze? That a student once told me Coleridge should have married me?

It was all because of Tom McFarland, the grand master of Coleridge, and stalwart leprechaun of the Lakeland and Somerset trails. Professor Thomas McFarland got me going on STC in a small seminar at the Graduate Center of The City University of New York in Fall 1965. Fresh from studying with Joseph Campbell as an undergraduate and thus receptive to multiple religions, I came to Columbia to study Romantic poets. I was told that Carl Woodring's Romanticism seminar was full and that I had been relegated to the Scottish Chaucerian seminar. I finished a master's thesis called 'Supernaturalism in the Medieval Breton Lai,' but that was not where I wanted to go. In search of Romantic poets I moved south in Manhattan to the Graduate Center, where Tom had us ploughing through texts and discussing them vociferously. He was nearing the completion of his great book *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* and all of us felt the excitement of his discoveries. Tom was happy at that time in his life, laughing his marvelous laugh, and entertaining his friends, colleagues, and students including me and my husband Mark, who was writing his dissertation on George Herbert (*George Herbert: The Soul in Paraphrase* [Mouton, 1975]), in a big apartment along Greenwich Avenue.

I will forever be grateful to Tom for welcoming me and the others in the class into the Coleridge world that soon consumed my professional life and guided many issues that turned out to be personal as I lived through them. Despite Tom's attention to the publishing details of his hundreds of citations, he was communicative and timely in his reading of our work. With me he was particularly concerned with smoothing my transitions. Because I was already tinged with faerie from my master's program, I noticed 'magic' in Coleridge's prose and poetry. I was also studying with the fine formalist poet and Renaissance scholar John Hollander who asked us to write about one poetic form. The spell popped into my mind. He shouted, how did you come up with that? From then on in Romantic poetry I was struck by spells, charms, incantations, forms with distinctive sounds and deliberate purposes to effect change, to ensnare or liberate. Tom directed my dissertation, 'Magic and the Spell in Coleridge and his Tradition' and sent me off to read Jamblicus, Proclus, Psellus, Pico della Mirandola, Ficino, Agrippa, Michael Scott. (After long readings, revisions, and rejections by other presses, *Magic and English Romanticism* was finally published in 1979 by University of Georgia Press, thanks to Tom and also to a kindly intervention by Charles Patterson.)

The English program at the Grad Center was very social and familial. We all

drank too much. In fall, 1966, I took a week off from Alan Mandelbaum's Yeats seminar to give birth to my first son Andy. Alan sent a giant bouquet. Andy was a welcome visitor to the grad center offices. The august director and medievalist Helene Newstead was keen on him, and also on my second son, whom she prophetically referred to as 'hende Nicholas.' I finished courses, orals, and dissertation while teaching composition part time at Lehman College and City College. I was offered an assistant professorship at the newly created John Jay College of Criminal Justice. I enjoyed the strenuous work load and collegiality. Coleridge wormed his way into most courses. In one composition class I spent a day on the first sentence of 'Dejection: An Ode':

Well! If the Bard was weather-wise, who made
 The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,
 This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
 Unrous'd by winds, that ply a busier trade
 Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes,
 Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes
 Upon the strings of this Aeolian lute,
 Which better far were mute.

After finding the subject and verb—not quite as tricky as the first sentence of *Paradise Lost*—, the class communally parsed it with all its participles, clauses, and phrases and appreciated this grand slalom of a sentence that whooshes along and stops still on a quiet, self-deprecatory, landing. Provocative short poems and prose statements would dot the classes and provide topics for writing. In my third semester I was extremely pregnant. No maternity leave being available, and up for tenure, I took a week off to deliver my beautiful second son Nick. Blessedly, Mark had an alternate day schedule and was happy to do his share of child and house care. Teaching at John Jay in these early years, I organized a conference on Romanticism and the Occult with numerous Coleridgeans speaking and contributing to a special issue of *The Wordsworth Circle* (John Beer, Aileen Ward, Howard Brogan, Charles Patterson, Coleman Parsons, Jane McLellan and George Mills Harper). Later I organized another conference on Romanticism and Criminal Justice with more Coleridgeans—Lawrence Lockridge, Judith Plotz, Paul Magnuson, William Heffernan, Donald Reiman, and David Erdman—speaking and contributing their essays. I published several essays on forms of occultism in Coleridge and Shelley and two on crime and Coleridge. I see that current Coleridge scholars Gregory Ledbetter and Paul Cheshire are exploring new aspects of the occult in Coleridge. Magical emphasis on purposeful sounds spilled over into my teaching of poetry to students from New York City public schools. Most of them had rarely had exposure to verse, so we spent several days stomping and shouting out poems, including STC's emphatic and variegated rhythms. Poems should make things happen. Only then did we get to discussions of ambivalent meanings, a good way to learn to present evidence for an argument.

In a college whose aim was to 'humanize' the police through the teaching of

'The Humanities,' Coleridge's oeuvre provided rich matter. Coleridge's range of interests has been encapsulated recently in the magnificent edition by Fred Burwick of *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. In a more visibly vast array the thirty volumes of *The Collected Coleridge* and *The Notebooks* coming out volume by volume from 1957 on reveal Coleridge's involvement in many forms of human endeavor and forecast issues we still struggle with.

Thinking about my purpose as a teacher and about my interest in Coleridge's writings, I kept noticing variants of the word 'human' in his discussions of politics, history, life sciences, religion, crime and criminals, justice and injustice, ethics, marriage, family, love, his own 'warm' personhood. Noticeable were references to 'gaps' or 'chasms' between persons and things, humans and animals, spirit and matter, body and soul, reason and understanding, gaps that in a newly reciprocal natural and human world seem to be closing into a graduated continuum. Origination came by sudden bursts out of these gaps. Variants like 'dehumanization,' 'bestialization,' 'brutishness,' came up in the unpublished notebooks that I was transcribing in the British Library as well. Speculations on humanness cohered into my book *Coleridge's Defense of the Human* (1986) and prompted discussions in my literature classes. That book, caught in a transition between editors, had no publicity, but, after meeting me at the first Coleridge Conference in Nether Stowey in 1988, Professor John Beer read it, writing to invite me to edit a volume in his series *Coleridge's Writings*. Mine was to accumulate material on humanness for the volume *On Humanity* (1994). Working closely with this second great Coleridge scholar in my life, a man of good humor, tolerance, and wisdom, I realized that miraculous things happen. Even Norman Fruman, often skeptical of positive appraisals of Coleridge, was enthusiastic with the result: 'an important and illuminating collection...which could only have been assembled by a formidably learned scholar,' wrote he. From 1988 on alternate summers were enlivened by the Coleridge Conference in Somerset, where I and often my husband hiked and ate with scores of exciting Coleridge scholars too numerous to name.

An underside of 'humanness' is brutalization or bestialization (words that forty years on are considered insulting to animals). These lapses in the human led by winding ways into my work on alcohol and literature for an interdisciplinary Institute of Alcohol and Substance Abuse beginning at the college, for a course I taught for many years, and for a series of essays on alcohol in contemporary writing and in Coleridge and other Romantics. This pursuit led to a better understanding of patterns of alcohol use in the mid-western branch of my family. In Jim Mays's *Poetical Works* I found rousing drinking songs by Coleridge, reflecting 'an uproar of senseless mirth,' which set me looking through the notebooks and essays, finding that he worried more about his drinking than his drug taking.

He analyses the double nature of drunkenness from exultation to despair. He laments his excesses: 'I in despair drank three glasses running of whisky & water ... I verily am a stout-headed, weak-bowelled, and O! most pitiaibly

weak-hearted Animal! His thoughts about the danger of spirits are complex. Along with 'The Confessions of a Drunkard' by Charles Lamb, Coleridge's 'Spirits' was more admired in my classes than Fitzgerald's 'The Crack Up' or Jack London's *John Barleycorn*. For a course open to all New Yorkers (one wise old man lived in a shelter on the bowery), Coleridge's meditations on the divided being seemed more searching, ambivalent, and non-judgmental than Wordsworth's 'Benjamin the Waggoner.' Hard core AA students warned me not to circulate Coleridge's praise of the effervescence arising from wine and champagne for fear of reminding recovering alcoholics of that pleasure. These were different transformations than magical ones, connected to the will, or lack of it, and to deeper forms of exaltation and self-destruction. My book *Bacchus in Romantic England* (1999) came out of these experiences with real people and with a range of material in Coleridge's writings unnoticed by readers focused on his opium use. It expanded into Burns, Wordsworth, Byron, Sheridan, Keats, Charlotte Smith's *Old Manor House*, and some of Austen's shadowy subplots.

Coleridge's dynamic rhythms, his garrulity and humor, his perspicacity in examining himself and others, his range of interests revealed in his multiple volumes, excite his readers. Why, I had long wondered, do some readers persist in seeing him as a lugubrious indolent failure lacking joy and vitality? Again, as with spells and as with drinking songs, a number of love poems from his flirtatious youth started me thinking about his enthusiasm for women. These love poems teased and delighted the Evans sisters, the Brunton sisters, and the lovely Miss Nesbitt. He admires the glamorous women of his day like Mary Robinson, the Duchess of Devonshire, Laetitia Elizabeth Landon, and various opera singers. He defends girls who have been seduced and abandoned. Poems from his twenties such as 'Christabel' and 'The Dark Ladie' lament the absorption and seduction of young women.

His relations with his wife Sara Fricker were tainted to begin with by her earlier attachment to Robert Southey, and by her cold disapproval of Coleridge in contrast to Southey. Coleridge's passion for Sara Hutchinson came upon him on November 24, 1799. It was sudden, profound, and reciprocated, as shown by references to her many love letters to him in his 'Letter to Sara ...' (the first raw version of his 'Dejection: An Ode'). Her letters to him are embedded in that poem, though the real letters were burned after her death. Also revealing their mutual desire are poems of joy including 'Love,' 'After Bathing,' 'The Keepsake,' 'Answer to a Child's Question', showing him 'brimful of gladness and love,' and a newly discovered sonnet in his hand, taped into her copy of 'Christabel.' The sonnet is number 295 in Mays's *Poetical Works*, and begins 'Are there two things, of all which Men possess / That are so like each other and so near / As mutual Love seems like to Happiness?' Other proof of their love lies in the copy of Thomas Browne's *Works* which Coleridge annotated for Sara before he left for Malta, with a long love poem inside it. I gathered these glowing poetic and prose words in a chapter called 'Sara Hutchinson: Love and Reading' in my *Erotic Coleridge: Women, Love, and the*

Law against Divorce (2005), an exhilarating subject to research.

Startlingly contemporary and progressive are his late letters to Thomas Allsop and to the community of women he inhabits. Coleridge applies his philosophical meditations on personal free agency to choices young people should make in their early twenties, choices that eschew all kinds of dependency. He urges on them a 'liberal education': 'And what is a liberal Education? That which draws forth and trains up the germ of free-agency in the Individual. . . all knowledge that enlightens and liberalizes, is a form and a means of self-knowledge' (CL 6, 629-30). With self-knowledge comes free agency; young men and women should choose a mate with care or choose no one. In these letters Coleridge counsels them to save their personal integrity. He aims to protect young women in his community from dependency on unworthy men, or on men who may eventually turn out to be unworthy and then impossible to escape from. Some of the advice has to do with preserving one's fortune or dowry, and thus may sound materialistic, but is focused on preserving independence for the development of one's own soul, free from being polluted by a degraded partner. Coleridge writes to Susan Steel, 'you affirm the identity of your intrinsic Being by means of the Unity of Consciousness.' Wary, Susan Steel marries neither of her suitors.

These letters from his sixties show continuity with the poems of his twenties and give practical solutions for specific situations: predatory and careless men, greedy and petty women, dangers awaiting both women and men as they step out on their own in the precarious years between 19 and 25. How to judge another person in making an unbreakable decision? Though these decisions are no longer unbreakable, the pollution (in the form of bitterness, cynicism, materialism) still occurs and leaves heartbreak. I have been guided in my own ethics by his maxim: 'Reverence the *Individuality* of your friend. It is the religion of the delicate soul' ('Individuality,' *SWF* 2, 1336-8; [discussed in *Erotic Coleridge*, 166-85]). Fundamental to this maxim is the distinction between persons and things and the command to never treat a person as a thing. His emphasis on the integrity of the person includes persons male and female, young and old, upper and lower class. For me this is his core philosophical position. It has changed my dealings with others far more than my following Coleridge into the Episcopal Church for ten years. Coleridge's cultivation of his own soul is serious but piquant: he writes Elizabeth Aders that 'in this winter-time of my own Being, I resemble a Bottle of Brandy in Spitzbergen—a Dram of alcoholic Fire in the center of a cake of Ice.' Surrounded by his own and the world's multiplicity he is conscious of being a warm soul in a physical body 'aware of a peculiar warmth felt all over me' (CL 2, 467), as well as a winged spirit possibly headed elsewhere.

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STC at 39 to 40
George Dawe (1781-1829); crayon; 1811-12; (23 x 16 in.)
Wordsworth Trust; MP cat. 13