

ROUSSEAU AND COLERIDGE: ANOTHER LOOK AT CHRISTABEL.

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In this paper I refer to CHRISTABEL the poem as the poem and to Christabel the character by name. The aim of this paper is to present the claim for a significant interpretation of the poem as a polemic of Coleridge's versus Rousseauism. Rousseauism is an awkward word but is used e.g. by Richard Holmes in his biography though curiously not indexed. Here the word is convenient short-hand. The implications of the claim if justified are probably sensational but I emphasise the claim is not one of exclusivity. The poem remains conspicuously rich in its culture and sources.

It must be common ground that appraisals of the poem are subject to one or more reservations about its status as a masterpiece. Misgivings are variously expressed, exasperation is one harsh judgment, but for this paper the countless details are not at issue. In my view the claim if justified is a total repudiation of all misgivings.

The claim receives no support from any direct statement by Coleridge, and none as far as I know from any commentator to date. A word about Coleridge's preface of 1816. I suggest it should be treated with great reserve with its near bizarre denial of any allegation of plagiarism, and its interesting but peripheral reference to metre. Like KUBLA KHAN and THE ANCIENT MARINER the poem has an aura of reticence and furtiveness about its meaning but with a wealth of potential explanation.

In this paper I first give attention to Rousseauism in England, and then to the impact on Coleridge of Rousseauism. Next to comparisons as evident to Coleridge himself I argue between Rousseau's JULIA OR THE NEW HELOISE and the poem. I call Rousseau's work for short THE NEW HELOISE. Then I turn to comparisons between Rousseau's EMILE and the poem. In conclusion I list some of the great advantages for Coleridge and for us assuming the claim is justified.

ROUSSEAUISM in England: It heavily influenced the culture of the intelligentsia. [1] I mention as very favourably impressed Erasmus Darwin, Joseph Wright, Josiah Wedgwood the 2nd, Henry Fuseli, and Wordsworth and Southey. A lot of such commitment is well documented. There were also the strong opponents. Dr. Johnson spoke of Rousseau talking nonsense and knowing he was talking nonsense! One thinks of Burke and other political figures in the centre and on the right. There were important thinkers who tried to come to terms with Rousseauism, partly agreeing, partly disagreeing, such as Priestley, Woolstonecraft, Paine and Godwin, but acknowledging the importance of Rousseau's works.

Evaluating Rousseauism I assume most of us will think primarily of his well-known and highly controversial theories of society and the human condition. These were publicised for the forty years beginning, say, about twelve years before Coleridge's birth. However, I emphasise there was not only the intellectual impact, formidable as this was, but also there was generated a huge passionate feeling for a new vision of humanity and society. Though we may incline to see the theories as arid, Rousseau's own presentation of them, or many of them, was very emotional and in literary form. Thus the assessment of Rousseau as a founder of Romanticism. His two outstanding literary works, *THE NEW HELOISE*, a novel in letter form, and *EMILE*, simultaneously a novel and a treatise on education, are highly charged with emotional appeal. Likewise the famous *CONFESSIONS*.

Supplementing in England literary output in translation was the magnetic newsworthiness of the man himself. I refer to *THE GENTLEMAN'S MAGAZINE*. [2] The G.M. was cognisant of its readers' tastes. The November 1776 issue is dominated by the awful row between Hume, the Scottish philosopher and historian, and Rousseau, Hume labelling Rousseau "a serpent". The May 1767 issue strongly suggested Rousseau suffered from what we may call persecution mania, having the previous year assured its readers perhaps unctuously that Rousseau would not be persecuted in England on account of his opinions. While the King of Prussia was well-known to be Rousseau's great protector abroad as the G.M. informed its readers, Rousseau was on occasion alleged to be anti-Christ and he was alleged to insist women had no souls. Rousseau and Voltaire had of course become bitter enemies. After Rousseau's death in 1778 the G.M. had a long account, taken with due acknowledgement from *THE MONTHLY REVIEW*, about Rousseau's last few hours of life. Not long afterwards part of the *CONFESSIONS* was described as blasphemous. Nonetheless the G.M. for decades hailed Rousseau as a celebrity and justly famous author. As early as 1761 the G.M. had contained an excellent synopsis of *THE NEW HELOISE* and this during the Seven Years War. For decades, news items about Rousseau

were common.

In the context of Coleridge the G.M. may have a twofold importance. First, Coleridge presumably took from an early age an intense interest in journalism, which was later to prove a partly rewarding profession. Secondly, the Rev. John Coleridge, the poet's father, headmaster of a grammar school, contributed at least one letter at length, i.e. in 1757. [3] It was a level-headed if dogmatic view of the antiquity of elephant bones found in England and their possibly if not probably dating from before the Flood. I opine the intellectually precocious Coleridge would have read through many back numbers of the G.M.

I very briefly refer to the academic side of Rousseauism. It could be viewed as in succession to or in conflict with the philosophies of Bacon, Newton and Locke, or going into detail, partly one, partly the other. William Blake was very much aware of Rousseau's significance in this respect. [4] By 1793 the outbreak of war with revolutionary France and soon afterwards the intense domestic political repression rendered any defence of Rousseauism, straightforward or sophisticated, too risky for personal liberty; prosecution or at least persecution being likely.

Our great interest is Coleridge's interest in Rousseauism. Hazlitt in *THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE* [5] lists Rousseau among the authors whose books Coleridge had studied - no details are given. Then Coleridge was to describe himself as. having once been "an infidel," referring to his formative years at Christ's Hospital. I take this to mean Rousseauism in that no other source seems as eligible.

THE FALL OF ROBESPIERRE, a dramatic work, co-authors Coleridge and Southey, dates from the late summer of 1794, Coleridge not yet 22 years old. This was the period when Wordsworth was most enthusiastic about the French Republic: I refer to *THE PRELUDE*. Coleridge wrote the first act of the drama, Southey the second and third, but they agreed Coleridge was to be reputed as the author of the whole piece, though anyone interested was also to be told of Southey's co-authorship. So here was Coleridge identifying his own politics with

those of Southey...i.e. Rousseauism. In the final speech of Barriere, the spokesman of the Directory, which has just condemned Robespierre to death and has seen the sentence implemented, he, Barriere, refers to the liberation of the world as a principal aim of the French revolutionaries. This is the end of the short drama. Coleridge and Southey clearly shared this hope and interpreted the death of Robespierre as a step in this direction. Richard Holmes sees only a few lines of verse in the drama as being of quality and expressing Rousseauism. The famous though not long-lived, commitment to Pantisocracy follows. One source of inspiration may be the depiction in EMILE of an ideal rural community. [6] In 1797 there commenced the intimate friendship with Wordsworth, himself a foremost disciple of Rousseau. Wordsworth had been personally deeply influenced by the engaging Beaupuy a few years earlier... Beaupuy himself a disciple of Rousseau.

I turn to some of Coleridge's observations on the works of Rousseau. These include the ambiguous comment that he does not particularly admire Rousseau. Coleridge's pithy and hostile assessment of Rousseau's theory of education, as set out in EMILE, may be highly relevant to an understanding of Geraldine's personality. Coleridge was speaking to his friend Thelwall: "Thelwall thought it very unfair to influence a child's mind by inculcating any opinions before it should have come to years of discretion, and be able to choose for itself. I showed him my garden, and told him it was my botanical garden. 'How so,' said he, 'it is covered with weeds.' 'Oh,' I replied, 'that is only because it has not yet come to its age of discretion and choice. The weeds, you see, have taken the liberty to grow, and I thought it unfair in me to prejudice the soil towards roses and strawberries.'" (TABLE TALK July 27, 1830) In TABLE TALK of July 8, 1830 is the fascinating anecdote which is given so much point by a cross-reference to EMILE. [7] One may reasonably conjecture Coleridge's deep and persistent feeling about Rousseauism.

In 1817 Coleridge had in an essay compared Rousseau with Luther for historical impact. In THE FRIEND (Vol 1,p.34) there is his demolition of Rousseau's political theory of the general will. I also mention the distinctive lines from the poem "Behold! her bosom and half her side — are lean and old and foul of hue" (one version of poem). In the CONFESSIONS there is the outstanding episode where the young Rousseau in Venice at his appointment with a beautiful courtesan finds the absence of a nipple on her body absolutely repulsive. Coleridge may have loathed the book: Blake thought it not a confession but an apology and cloak for Rousseau's sins.

One may be reasonably certain that for some years Coleridge was profoundly and favourably impressed by Rousseauism, not exclusively but emphatically nonetheless.

I turn to THE NEW HELOISE, first translated into English in 1761, and rely on the Edinburgh translation of 1794 — three volumes, 1141 pages. The GENTLEMAN'S MAGAZINE of 1761 wrote: "There has lately been published in French by the celebrated M. Rousseau a work in six volumes in twelve entitled THE NEW ELOISA as letters of two Lovers dwelling in a village at the foot of the Alps in which the various subjects the most interesting, in private life are treated in a masterly manner, and the story which is simple is conducted with an air of truth and nature that is seldom to be met with in this kind of writing". The 1794 translation has a blurb of Rousseau's: "If any young girl should dare to read a single page of this, she is inevitably lost." The father of Julia, one of the two lovers, is the Baron d'Etange. Remarkably, the family name is Vaud . [\[8\]](#) The Baron compares with Sir Leoline — "the Baron rich". Julia's father is a retired army officer, an aristocratic and haughty person who dotes on his daughter and refuses to permit a marriage of Julia and her lover, St. Preux. Julia's mother has procured from Julia her promise to break with her lover. Shortly afterwards Julia's mother dies leaving the baron grief-stricken. the Baron is further grief-stricken when, at the end of the book, Julia dies.

Before Julia's death, St. Preux becomes the tutor of her children, Julia's husband having learned of his wife's previous love affair and having forgiven her. This husband is a much older, worthy, but unexciting person. Julia plans a marriage between St. Preux and an intimate friend of her now widowed. This venture fails. Voltaire commented on the book: "Never has a whore preached more and never has a valet seducer of girls been more philosophic." [\[9\]](#)

The correspondence of the book includes letters of other persons, and here I have given only a most rudimentary idea of its contents, but I refer to a few more prominent features for the claim.

Julia and indeed Rousseau opens her heart on the topic of children laughing and leaping about, feeling happy and free:” Who can engage a father to trust the feelings of nature when he embraces his child.”[\[10\]](#) Remember the conclusion of part 2 of the poem. Then Julia displays her intellect on the topic of educating children. Julia, in defiance of Rousseau’s own philosophy in the slightly later EMILE, insists on the need to pluck out weeds from the environment which forms part of a child’s education.

The last sixty pages or so centre on Julia’s death. While rescuing one of her children from drowning in a lake, she contracts a fatal illness. She writes and is written about copiously on her deathbed. She is inclined to a belief in tutelary spirits and recalls her mother in this connection. She dies a devout Protestant about to enter Heaven.

Sometimes the letter writers in the book break into verse, and Romantic love and passion are never far away. The book’s remarkable romanticism is primarily a literary expression of, and secondly a powerful and engaging argument for, Rousseauism.

Although the later book EMILE has a romantic content it has a much more intellectual approach and commands more respect than HELOISE. The greatness of EMILE as a book both of philosophy and fiction is beyond doubt. [\[11\]](#) In Coleridge’s day its reputation was no less. It is reasonable to suppose he had read the book carefully, probably years earlier than the composition of Part 1 of the poem.

EMILE relates to the growth to adulthood of Emile, virtually an ideal male person in terms of Rousseauism, and ultimately after a prolonged and virtuous courtship he and Sophie, an ideal girl, marry. They are of course in love. The book ends with the birth of their first child, a son. Emile, even in manhood, is impossibly closely tutored by a devoted Rousseau personally. Emile’s parents have a diminished status. The book contains the theories and accounts of practices of education for which Rousseau is himself responsible as the boy’s tutor. Sophie’s parents are responsible for her. The superiority of the male is assumed by Rousseau as natural. Sophie’s fondest pastime is needlework.

The disciples of Rousseau looked on Emile as a new and superior sort of man. The fictitious Emile had Rousseau's independence of mind and spirit, without Rousseau's vices. That Coleridge would have been deeply impressed for some years cannot be seriously doubted. There are, I believe, correspondences

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between the book and the poem on the basis mainly of principles, intellectual principles.

Take the geographical setting of the book. Basically there is a rural environment, not Paris, viewed by Rousseau as a centre of vice. In the poem there is the castle, the physical bastion and manifestation of feudal power. For Rousseau, feudalism was anathema and he envisaged a society mainly of free peasants, similar perhaps to a perceived image of the Helvetian Republic. Rousseau tried to persuade his readers of the validity of his ideal for society. Coleridge in the poem emphasised the archetype of feudalism. Recall the beliefs of some 19th century ideologists: Scott, Carlyle, the Pre-Raphaelites, the young William Morris, and Disraeli, whose wisecrack of as late as 1872 is quaint. [\[12\]](#) For Coleridge his knowledge of World History could intelligibly have led him to select a feudal society as representative, given the need for a choice as such for the poem.

Yet there are subtle distinctions. The castle has been and no longer is a fortress. The guard dog is superannuated. the populace, obviously producing a healthy agricultural surplus, is contented. There is no threat to security, Geraldine excepted. The Church as such has only a secondary influence. Bard Bracey is almost the sole member of the intelligentsia, and is presumably Christabel's tutor. The aesthetics of castle life are far from derisory. The sacristan whose job it is to look after Church treasures has to toll the bell! Here is an ironic comment on the failings of the Church. But Christabel's Christianity remains impressive.

In Rousseau's book there is a classic at length in its own right - the creed of the Savoyard vicar. This exposition motivated bigots to call for the book's censorship, and for Rousseau's imprisonment. The Savoyard vicar is dedicated to the well-being of his parishioners but the authenticity of his faith is nil. He is a deist.

Godhead is the prime mover. Even this tenet is a result of a process of elimination. Christianity is pragmatism, virtually only social control. No wonder the book was placed on the index and incurred the wrath of some Protestants.

Rousseau does not testify to the existence of the preternatural, whereas for Coleridge awareness of its presence may be essential for faith. Tutelary spirits may be surmised basically intuitively, if at all, and have to be distinguished from the fiction of the supernatural. Both Coleridge and Rousseau are against superstition which leads one away from an interpretation of the poem as centering on witchcraft, despite some consideration of that sub-cultural tradition by Coleridge. Emile is entirely practical and of course humane, but faith in the preternatural forms an integral part of Christabel's own identity.

Now for the apparent confrontation in the poem between good and evil. In the book the essential goodness of Emile, Sophie and the tutor Rousseau himself tells. In the poem the near saintliness of Christabel derives from her obedience as a daughter, her religious faith and her place in feudal society. She prays and worships and by implication in the poem is educated by Bard Bracey. In the book there is no evil presence save for the threat of intrusion by social influences hostile to human progress as seen by Rousseau. In the poem Geraldine may be as vital as Satan in *PARADISE LOST*, but significantly her role may also be seen as a manifestation of Rousseauism in practice in the France of the stormy 1790s. So Geraldine is like a weed in the garden - of course, flourishing after her fashion! Her own fiction of how she came to be near the castle offers an introduction to her warped personality. That she will have suffered profoundly is clear but not exactly as she says. However, her dynamic of mischief and trickery may be no worse morally than the life-style of the knight to whom Christabel is betrothed, who presumably is a crusader in the worst sense. Rousseau believed a woman to be a man's plaything. Geraldine treats others as her playthings. What is remarkable about her is her proficiency. In the same class as Odysseus at Troy, Joan of Arc perhaps, or Napoleon Buonaparte campaigning victoriously from May 1796 and himself a proud disciple of Rousseau. Geraldine acts bloodlessly - a genius in the field of conquest.

In the Conclusion to Part 1 of the poem: "the blue sky bends over all". It is a recognition of the persona as all alive and a repudiation of a solipsist interpretation of life, attractive as Bishop Berkeley's philosophy was to Coleridge. Rousseau had had no doubts on that score and I quote from the book: "Is not the wicked my brother?" [\[13\]](#)

I summarise the claim in this way. Coleridge made a profound emotional investment in the poem. Its

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exceptional meticulousness and exquisiteness both of verse and content point to unusually intense and sustained motivation. If Coleridge's deep inner conflict over the validity or invalidity of Rousseauism is postulated, as I believe it ought to be, then the poem as his own catharsis or purging or even exorcism is absolutely intelligible. One can imagine sensibly an inner drive, or compulsion to write the poem: to evaluate Rousseauism conclusively in the dynamic process and product of the poem.

The verse form gives the poem the edge over Rousseau's prose. The verse form more than compensates for Coleridge's aversion to physical warfare against the disciples of Rousseau, the Republicans of revolutionary France. The utility of the poem is enhanced by its borrowing Rousseau's own method of fusing philosophy and fiction. Some features of Rousseau's works are borrowed by Coleridge. However, Coleridge was totally aware of his own identity and independence, and places two women in the forefront of the poem - Christabel may be deemed as heroic as Emile. The indeterminacy of the poem and its apparent unfinished state so far from being weaknesses, which until now we may all have assumed, turn out to be great sources of strength. The poem, if the claim is justified, ought to end in uncertainty. Will Geraldine succeed in her bloodless coup and take over the castle and trap Sir Leoline in marriage? Will Christabel recover and overcome Geraldine howsoever with or without her betrothed's help? Will the mission of Bard Bracey, undertaken because he fulfils his feudal duty against his better judgment, end in disaster? Certainly Europe 1797-1800 faced a most uncertain future. No victory in the years of warfare after 1792 had turned out to be decisive. It was entirely uncertain whether the cause of Republicanism, (i.e. Rousseauism in practice), would triumph or collapse.

The conclusion to Part 2 of the poem takes us further. Coleridge regrets "a World of sin" and its apparent consequences ("O sorrow and shame should this be true"),

an emotive and contrary attitude towards Rousseauism. This is almost the end of the poem.

The refusal of Coleridge, if such it was, to admit, let alone to publicise, the poem as his own polemic against Rousseauism is capable of explanation.

(1) On principle, because no poet is under a duty to explain his or her poem, and may legitimately feel an overwhelming disinclination to do so.

(2) Until well past 1800 it would have been foolhardy to have spread the view that Rousseau's works were worthy of consideration, even with an aim of refutation. The sophistication of any such disclosure by Coleridge would foreseeably have been unacceptable.

(3) After the establishment of the Holy Alliance though the true explanation would probably have been safe from the point of view of the establishment, Coleridge by then had lost any motivation to reveal his past so ruthlessly. However, opposition from radicals and the left could have been highly embarrassing to Coleridge as he would have foreseen.

If objection be taken to the choice of Rousseau as a key figure in preference to other eminent and controversial persons and themes, Coleridge's failing marital relationship for one example, I answer in terms of magnitude and duration of impact: Rousseauism far outstrips anything else in sight. Other influences certainly were of weight to Coleridge, but were not in the same class for deep and sustained inspiration for poetry at length and in depth, i.e. for Coleridge's verse at its supreme - multidisciplinary, profound and integrated.

I have tried to make a case for the poem *CHRISTABEL* as greater than hitherto supposed. However, I assess my own effort more as a first step than a thorough exploration, although I am confident it points towards the latter as feasible.

[1] See e.g. Benedict Nicholson's "Joseph Wright of Derby - Painter of Light", 1968; Darwin's poetry, "Concise Oxford Dictionary of Eng. Lit.", 1939; J.Wedgwood II,

Gwen Raverat's "Period Piece", 1952, p.154; Fuseli, Frederick Antal's "Fuseli Studies", 1956, p.15.

[2] N.B. The index volume from years 1731-1786. I am indebted to Peter Larkin for the use of this volume and for much advice regarding research into Coleridge studies.

[3] Vol. xxxviii, p.299.

[4] See JERUSALEM, plates 52, 54, line 16, and 56, line 12.

[5] See chapter entitled "Mr. Coleridge".

[6] EMILE (Everyman edition) pp.317-8.

[7] Ibid. p.268.

[8] See Besterman's "Voltaire", Longmans, 1969, p.425.

[9] See Besterman's "Voltaire", Longmans, 1969, p.425.

[10] Vol. 2, p.195 of 1794 edition in English cited.

[11] See introductions to Everyman edition supra 1911 and 1955 editions (pagination identical).

[12] Excerpt from Disraeli's speech at Manchester, April, 1872:

"The Feudal System - it is all very well to talk of the barbarities of the feudal system, and to tell us that in those days when it flourished a great variety of gross and grotesque circumstances and great miseries occurred; but these were not the result of the feudal system; they were the result of the barbarism of the age. They existed not from the feudal system, but in spite of the feudal system. The principle of the feudal system, the principle which was practically operated upon, was the noblest principle, the grandest, the most magnificent and benevolent that was ever conceived by sage, or ever practised by patriot...."

[13] EMILE, supra, p.247.