

COLERIDGE'S GUARDIAN ANGELS

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O there is a form which seems irrelative to imprisonment of Space

CN II

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I. Introduction

In Notebook 26 Coleridge sketches in three sentences what he calls the ethical, metaphysical, theological and, we may add, the psychological "Cornerstone" of his system

the priority, namely, both in dignity and in order of generation, of the Conscience to the Consciousness in Man. No I without a Thou; no Thou without a Law from *Him* to whom I and thou stand in the same relation. Distinct self-knowledge begins with sense of Duty to my Neighbour: and Duty felt to, and claimed from my Equal supposes and implies the right of a Third, Superior to both because imposing it on both. N26 f39v

Depending on one's cast of mind this may sound either like a standard exposition of Christian thought more systematically treated by later theologians; or the statement of an ideal that has little or no basis in experience, and which thus demonstrates the hiatus between Christianity and truth. The sceptical mind is bound to ask, Do we really have no notion of self prior to our sense of duty to someone else? Rather, is not the opposite true; does not our conscience come after and control those wishes, desires and purposes by which we define ourselves? Is not the function of the conscience thus to conform the individual's behaviour to a common and public end, preventing the anarchy that might arise if we claimed those wishes as our private good and sought to exercise them? We adjust the freedoms we claim for ourselves to the freedom we permit to others in order to create a society. But the basis of our claim, the knowledge we have of our self, precedes our recognition of another, of a thou or of a him. Thus it would not be difficult to dismiss Coleridge's cornerstone as simply wrong, as untrue to experience, and to say, the cornerstone crumbling so easily, what hope can there be for the rest of the edifice, were it ever to

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be rescued from the ruins of the notebooks?

No-one could carry a study of Coleridge very far with the cloud of this kind of thought hanging over him. But far from this "Cornerstone" being an example of Coleridge's running before the storm of experience into the safe haven of Christianity, or evidence of his failure to meet the empiricism of his day (and ours) on its own terms, my intention is to show that this statement is the natural outcome of a method of feeling and thinking that may be traced back at least as far as the early Conversation poems, probably has its roots in his childhood, (he himself said that he could detect the influences forming his "*particular mind*" as early as his fourth year) and represents not a contradiction but a profound analysis of his experience.

II. Early Separation

In his autobiographical letters to Tom Poole, which take his life no farther than the age of ten, Coleridge attributes his life-long willingness not to let the information of his senses constitute the criteria of reality to his reading of "Romances, and Relations of Giants & Magicians, & Genii" (CL I 354). This was the only way he knew of giving the young mind "a love of 'the Great', & 'the Whole'".

About a year after his father's death he was sent to Christ's Hospital, first in Hertford and then in London. This separation from his family at the age of eight may have encouraged a similar method of thinking in respect of people. Certainly later in life, on his journey to Malta he was to feel that his consciousness of a few, deeply loved people was heightened because they were absent, because he did not have to cope with the confusing and often inconsequential sensations ensuing upon their presence. Conversely, that his thinking of people he loved might in some way conjure up their presence was characteristic of the young school-boy. In "Frost at Midnight" he speaks of how, day-dreaming at his desk, he looks up as the door opens,

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and hopes to see "Townsmen, or aunt, or sister more beloved/My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!" This is primarily the heart-felt Wish of a home-sick child. It was in his aunt's "*every-thing* Shop" in Crediton that, still less than six years old, Coleridge used to "read thro' all the gilt-cover little books that could be had at that time, and likewise all the uncovered tales of Tom Hickathrift, Jack the Giant-killer, &c", (CL I 347) -- those stories which first developed his belief in the Vast and the Whole. But the poem was written when Coleridge was 25 or 26, some six or seven years after his sister Anne had died. In recalling this hope of his boyhood he may have recognized its continuity with his maturer belief that consciousness of a person is purest when independent of sense impressions.

What is clearly evident is that Anne became more of a force in his consciousness after she died: except for one letter written when he was 12, Coleridge does not mention her until her death in 1791, when he wrote two sonnets (PW I 20-1), one the effect her death had on him, and another on her angelic qualities. They were not of much merit in themselves -- Coleridge was only 18 -- but behind the stilted Augustan language there is a genuineness of feeling. Speaking of that transition from siblings' unquestioned acceptance of each other to their more conscious love as adults, he says "Scarce had I lov'd you ere I mourned you lost". Here we see one pole of that creative force which governed much of Coleridge's intellectual development -- his need to love and be loved. The other pole, the belief that a person is inadequately defined as an object of sense, and much more accurately as an idea, is not yet present in his writing. Anne is lost to him, and though we may see that this loss has impelled her into his consciousness, this is no part of his own feeling. Indeed, remembering in her death both that of his brother Luke less than a year before, and of his father, he writes "How are ye gone, whom most my soul held dear!" He feels himself abandoned on "Life's wide cheerless plain ... My woes, my joys

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unshared!" (PW I 20) This last sentiment is typical of the mature Coleridge, and may presage in our minds what he felt to be another kind of death, one of the worst effects of his unhappy marriage, the inability of his "coarse domestic Life" to make in him any "Habits of heart-nursing Sympathy", any "Hopes of its own Vintage" which could give him the "Fair forms and

living Motions" to share In the mourning or the rejoicing of the Wordsworth household—activities characteristic of "the Natural man".

Anne is also recalled in two lines of verse in the second of the autobiographical letters to Tom Poole:

Rest, gentle Shade! & wait thy Maker's will:
Then rise *unchang'd* and be an Angel still (CL I 311)

The italics are his, and reflect his willingness to believe in her perfection, her at-oneness with her Maker, a characteristic of all his future angels.

Coleridge's fullest thoughts about Anne come in a blank verse letter to Charles Lamb (a Conversation poem to all intents and purposes), who at the time was nursing his sister Mary:

I too a Sister *had*, an only Sister—
She lov'd me dearly, and I doted on her!
To her I pour'd forth all my puny sorrows
(As a sick Patient in a Nurse's arms)
And of the heart those hidden maladies
That e'en from Friendship's eye will shrink asham'd
O! I have wak'd at midnight, and have wept,
Because she was not! (PW I 78 9)

Much of what he says of his sister here finds an echo in his relationship with Sara Hutchinson as recorded in the verse-letter to her, and from whom he accepted separation, albeit with a profound struggle. He calls Sara a "Sister and Friend of my devoutest Choice"; in thinking of her he combines the images of sorrow, sickness and of nursing—though he is the putative nurse, not the patient; his waking at night and weeping, might be compared to the "Scream/Of agony" which the tortured lute sent forth, and is representative of Coleridge reaching a psychological impasse, unable, at

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this stage of the poem, to resolve his sense of separation. That the sister he lost, and the wife he never had, should be spoken of in such similar terms is consistent with another aspect of Coleridge's thought: in a lecture on *Romeo and Juliet* he said that "the wife has already learned the discipline of pure love in the character of a sister"—and we presume that a husband learns the same in the character of a brother (LL I 332). Purity of love is free from the engagements of sense.

Again in the verse letter to Sara Hutchinson, he records his early association of love with truths or hopes beyond sense. It was his habit, he tells us, to lie upon the "leaded School roof" of Christ's Hospital, and gazing upon the sky, the only image of beauty he could find in the city, he would say to himself,

There does not live the Man so stripp'd of good affections
As not to love to see a Maiden's quiet Eyes
Uprais'd, and linking on sweet Dreams by dim Connections
To Noon, or Evening Star, or glorious western Skies —

a form of day dreaming which he says "became a kind of Vision" to him. Coleridge consistently associated "sky" with "heaven", and a looking upward as a looking to a world

not this world. The blue skies of Malta strengthened this association natural to him, and speaking of marriage as that state in which "all the grand and sublime thought of an improved state of being dawn upon" man, he suggests that its only true resemblance in nature is to "the blue sky of heaven" (LL I 334).

III. Early Love

This heavenward gazing, and a willingness to think of people apart from their immediate circumstances, are native to Coleridge's mind. But his natural and generous idealism was perhaps a flower forced into bloom earlier than might have otherwise been expected though it is an established feature of English middle class culture, addicted as this class has been to sending its sons away from home at the age of eight. As a result, rather

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than taking the desires and aspirations of adolescence and creating a resolution of opposites, Coleridge found himself in a conflict of contraries. He says (CN II 2398) that though at one time he had a fear of sex, the fit was short-lived—cured no doubt by his early marriage. But what that fear represents in a more general sense, the fear of involvement, a pedestrianization or enchaining of his heaven bent Christ's Hospital vision—which to such a mind is like life itself—seems to have caused him considerable difficulties and consequent suffering in his relationship with Mary Evans.

She was the sister of a school friend, and to Southey Coleridge says of her what she said of him: "We formed each other's minds—our ideas were blended". (CL I 123) And to her he writes that he awoke from the delusion that he was attracted to her solely by her moral qualities, "and found that I had unwittingly harboured a Passion which I felt neither the power nor the courage to subdue ... I thought of you with the purity of a Brother. Happy were I, had it been with no more than a Brother's ardour". (CL I 130) Why could he not admit the basis of his love as that of a man for a woman and so hope to be united with her "by the most perfect means that nature permits, and reason dictates"—as he defined love when thinking about *Romeo and Juliet*? (LL I 314) It is possible that he proposed to Mary Evans, and that she rejected him; but had not Coleridge himself in some way determined the inevitability of their estrangement, it seems unlikely that she would have done so, so warm and sympathetic is the extract he has recorded of her letter attempting to dissuade him from the pantisocratic venture (CL I 112). And narrating that strange episode in Wrexham, when they glimpsed each other twice, but never spoke, Coleridge records his own panic-struck emotions, and her turning pale on seeing him in the church. (CL I 87-8) In the same letter he tells Southey, "I never durst even in a whisper avow my passion, though I knew she loved me"—in such a situation

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surely a piece of cowardice only possible to someone suffering deeply ambivalent emotions. He follows this immediately with what seem specious reasons for his lack of courage: "Where were my Fortunes? And why should I make her miserable?" These are not reasons repeated when he came to marry Sara Fricker a little more than a year later, when neither his fortunes nor his prospects were significantly improved, and when he had better reason to believe that they were bound to make each other miserable. Such glimpses as we have of Mary Evans reveal her to be an impressive person, singularly in tune both with Coleridge's cast of mind and his personality; and it is a depressing thought that both she and Coleridge had notably unhappy marriages.

What seems a more substantial cause of Coleridge's painful ambivalence appears in another letter to his moral guardian: "Southey! my ideal Standard of female Excellence rises not above that Woman. But all Things work together for Good. Had I been united to her, the excess of my Affection would have effeminated my Intellect. I should have fed on her Looks as she entered into the Room—I should have gazed on her Footsteps when she went out from me" (CL I 145). I doubt that many husbands would fear to be so much in love, or many wives to be that much adored. It seems to me that Coleridge is here testifying to a real difficulty—that a complete and immediate attachment will prevent the free working of the intellect, that exploration of all that lies beyond the domestic circle, and which ends, ideally, in the mind bringing all feeling, thought and perception into a harmony, a unity of emotion. He is saying very much what D. H. Lawrence says in *Kangaroo*, that a man has to have his own work, free and apart from the relationship with his spouse, the centre of his world though that may be. What exactly Mary Evans was to him, it is difficult to say, but in his earlier letter to Southey, he says that "her Image is in the sanctuary of my Heart, and never can it be torn away but with the strings that grapple it to

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Life" (CL I 88)—a statement to which he remained true, recalling in later years that her loss was one of the four "heart-wringing sorrows" of his life. His image of Mary Evans and his vision of life therefore seem closely connected, and it is this connection which may be at the root of his inability to think of her as a wife. Because Coleridge had habituated himself to thinking of Life as something beyond sense, as partaking of the Vast and the Whole, and because his hope of realizing his vision of life was then prospective, almost by definition, its limitation to a particular and tangible form was to him hardly conceivable. Mary Evans was a wonderful and inspiring idea, but Coleridge struggled to imagine how his vision of her could be realised domestically. As an aside in his notebook discussing dread, fear of pain, or shame as the cause of his lifetime's "faulty actions", this is more or less how he explained his relationship with her: he was then

struggling with madness from an incapability of hoping that I should be able to marry Mary Evans (and this strange passion of fervent tho' wholly imaginative and imaginary Love uncombinable by my utmost efforts with <any regular> hope—/possibly from deficiency of bodily feeling, of tactual ideas connected with the image) had all the effects of direct Fear (CN II 2398)

Of course, where there is no vision, there will *only* be "tactual ideas" or "bodily feeling", and the person will perish. And these feelings separate from that which seems like life will also appear to have nothing honourable in them. In the paragraph immediately following his assertion of Mary Evans as his "ideal Standard he protests at the course of action Southey is intent on forcing him to pursue:

To lose her!—I can rise above that selfish Pang. But to marry another—O Southey! bear with my weakness. Love makes all things pure and heavenly like itself:—but to marry a woman whom I do *not* love—to degrade her, whom I call my Wife, by making her the Instrument of low Desire—and on the removal of a desultory Appetite, to be perhaps not displeased with her Absence! (CL I 145)

IV. Early Marriage

To those not familiar with Coleridge's history it might come as a shock

to learn that he is here talking of the woman he was to marry in less than a year. It hardly seems propitious; but we should not be over-influenced by hindsight. Sara Fricker would have made a good wife, according to Dorothy Wordsworth, to anyone but Coleridge. At the time he set down these unhappy sentiments, he was clearly still in love with Mary Evans, and as would anybody in a comparable situation, he resists having his attentions directed to another woman, denying all possibility of an honourable interest in her. But what Coleridge wanted, a rest from his own emotions, a rest from that "madness" which struggled and failed to relate ideas associated with Mary Evans to a "regular Hope", Sara Fricker was quite woman enough to provide. When the agony of his loss had subsided a little, he began to pay his addresses to her again, and he discovered that he "met a reward more than proportionate to the greatness of the Effort. I love and am beloved, and I am happy" (CL I 164).

And there, for a moment, let us stay in the course of Coleridge's life. It does seem that at least for the first year or so, his marriage was a happy one, a time of peace and creative calm after the turbulence of his youth a "gloomy huddle of strange actions", as he put it to Josiah Wade (CL I 184). And why should Sara not have given him that kind of peace which would free his mind and enable his work? Her two sisters were engaged to or had married the poets Southey and Lovell. Sara seems to have been a woman of considerable personal attraction (her sister Edith prided herself on her figure), and she had enough zip to contemplate sharing in the far-fetched pantisocratic scheme. And though Coleridge was to revive the qualities of his relationship with Mary Evans when he met Sara Hutchinson in 1799, his present happiness is evident in a letter to Poole, which looks forward to the flourishing of his poetic powers:

The prospect around us is perhaps more *various* than any in the kingdom—Mine Eye gluttonizes—The Sea—the distant Islands! —the opposite Coasts! —I shall assuredly write Rhymes—let the nine Muses prevent it, if they can—(CL I 160)

Rather than preventing his poetry, the muses seem to have come to his aid. The months around his marriage produced a number of poems which celebrate his happiness at Sara's presence in his life—"Pity", "To the Nightingale", "Brockley Coomb", "Lines in the Manner of Spenser", "Shurton Bars", and of course "The Eolian Harp"—all mention her by name. The lines written at Shurton Bars reflect upon "the tumultuous evil hour/Ere Peace with Sara came", and in her absence speak of her as "ever present to my view". This last phrase, though in no sense an original sentiment among poets whose love is not sublunary, nonetheless typifies Coleridge's willingness to believe in the presence of a person physically absent, a willingness which is a significant feature of his development as a poet.

Sara's presence here, marks the first appearance of that figure which, in various forms, can be found in all his major poems, and to which I would give the generic title "guardian angel". Geoffrey Yarlott has clearly demonstrated Coleridge's need of a "sheet-anchor"—Southey, Poole and Wordsworth all played this role at various times in Coleridge's life—and it seems to me that the figure we are to trace in his poetry is closely related to this concept—a person possessing moral or spiritual qualities which Coleridge does not find in himself, but which are necessary to enable, control or validate his vision. That it should be Sara Fricker

who first embodies this figure in his poetry is just one of those ironies that Coleridge's life was heir to.

The Eolian Harp

This poem was first drafted in late August 1795, a little more than a month before Coleridge and Sara were married. It is set outside their future home, and was perhaps inspired by a visit the couple made before they were married. Sara has two roles in the poem. With her soft cheek resting on his arm, the poet finds it "most soothing sweet to sit beside

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their cottage: this tranquility enables him to attend to the jasmine and myrtle, the clouds, the evening star, scent from the bean fields and the murmur from the distant sea. In earlier days these images from nature would have been overwhelmed by the turmoil of the poet's inner life, but now he is free to attend to what he called "the one mighty alphabet" of nature, all her images forming part of the language or discourse of God. Coleridge believed it characteristic of a poet to want to bring all one's perceptions, thoughts and feelings into a whole—and, he wrote later, such a hope marked the emergence of Reason in man. To realize this hope, it would seem obvious that the mind must act, that it must be the sun or moonlight casting shadows of wonder or strangeness over the habitual landscape of our thoughts and perceptions. On the other hand, it is from the turbulent activity of his mind that Coleridge has just made his escape, and so in all the Conversation poems, he emphasizes the necessary passiveness of the mind: if the poet is to discover the "religious meanings" in Nature, he must surrender "his whole Spirit" "to the influxes/ of shapes and sounds and shifting elements". The soul must seek to hear, the heart to listen. What seems a quandary between the mind's need to act and its need to remain passive, is partly resolved by realizing that the activity Coleridge actually seeks to put off is the self—no personal or private wish must profane the heart overwhelmed by the appearances of nature. And so he can say that it is a combination of nature's "sweet influences", and the poet's "many feelings" and "many thoughts" that go to make up a "meditative joy". But I think that this abandonment of self, and the resulting free activity of the mind, brings with it another kind of problem, as we shall see in a moment.

If the first part of "The Eolian Harp" is concerned with images immediately present to the couple, the second part deals largely with the movements of the poet's mind, and how these outer and inner worlds relate.

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Even in the first twelve lines there is an indication that Coleridge is trying to solve the problem of the significance of the external images he records, for the jasmine, myrtle and evening star are taken as emblems of innocence, love and wisdom respectively, and these are qualities peculiar to the human mind, ideas which it seeks to attribute to outward forms. Lines 12-25 are Coleridge's attempt to suggest what story or stories the aeolian harp is telling. But of course what his suggestions reflect are the predispositions of his own mind; it is hardly surprising, and quite appropriate to an engaged couple sitting outside their future home, that the harp, "by the desultory breeze caress'd" first sounds like the "sweet upbraiding" of "some coy maid half yielding to her lover". The subliminal sexuality of these lines might even be reasonably contrasted with the emblematic ideals of the opening lines. But the poem does not develop in this manner: the wind rises, and the harp's "long sequacious notes" inspire images in the poet which have no determinable relation to any previous image or idea—the music is compared to the sounds that might be made by "twilight Elfins" voyaging "on gentle gales

from Fairy-Land". These images stem from the free play of a mind that has forgotten its immediate surroundings, and it is far from easy to justify their place in the poem. At one time Coleridge clearly had doubts about their propriety, for in 1803 he left out the five offending lines. It would be interesting to know why they were first excised, and then restored. What is clear is that they do not materially assist the progress of the poem. It is rescued from the dead end it seems to be approaching by one of Coleridge's magnificent assertions; to us there is no apparent connection between the images that derive from the working of his mind and those external images of sense perception with which the poem begins. Coleridge therefore proclaims a connection:

O! the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where—

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It is interesting to note that these lines were not part of the poem until 1817, and the five lines excised in 1803 returned at the same time. It is as if Coleridge has solved a problem: he has proposed how mind and nature may co-operate in the creation of a whole, a unity which it is native to the mind to seek. He therefore feels relaxed and cheerful, finding it "impossible/Not to love all things in a world so fill'd" Both his burdens, of the tormented self, and of the need to make a whole out of disparate parts, have been removed.

I suggested, two paragraphs previously, that the free activity of an unburdened mind brought with it its own problems. Coleridge now describes to Sara how his mind works when he is thus unburdened. On a nearby hill alone—and this solitude is significant—he imagines that he lies at noon and

... through my half-clos'd eye-lids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquillity;
Full many a thought uncall'd and undetain'd,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain

which activity he compared to the action of the wind on the harp. The physical analogy leads him to the metaphysical supposition that all the objects of animate nature might be types of the aeolian harp, and the mind the breeze sounding forth their life, "the Soul of each, and God of all". This is of course pantheism latent, if not blatant, and in its formulation excludes the possibility of a presence mediating between the intellectual breeze or animating mind, and the various harps, the objects of nature. Coleridge probably understood his own temptations: in the Opus Magnum manuscript he wrote, quoting Wordsworth, but surely remembering his own youth, "But how often have I not observed men of ardent Minds in the early glow of self-thinking and the first supposed emancipation from the prejudices of popular faith shrink from the use of the personal as spoken of

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the Deity". Therefore the kind of speculations that we meet in "The Eolian Harp" would surely produce ambivalent feelings in someone who had already written a "Poem ... in blank

verse on the Nativity", ("Religious Musings"), whose answer to the question as to what the friend of the universal Equality should do was an unequivocal "Talk not of Politics—*Preach the Gospel*" (CL I 164), and whose poem "Pity" modeled the role of the family in society on "the Galilaean mild".

There are indications even within this part of the poem that Coleridge is uncomfortable with the direction his thoughts take—he calls them "idle flitting phantasies", which traverse his "indolent and passive brain" (though as I have indicated passiveness is a two-edged sword—necessary to that calmness preceding the feeling of one Life, but equally preventing the generative activity of the imagination); and finally he considers his thoughts as "wild and various as the random gales" that produce the music of the lute. It is as if Coleridge is telling himself, in the words of "Frost at Midnight", that he is making "a toy of thought"—that he is conscious here of what he said of himself in an earlier letter, "I have little *Faith*, yet am wonderfully fond of speculating on mystical schemes".

As a person wishing to bring the whole of his soul into activity, he could no more exclude faith, or the object of faith, than those images of nature with which the poem opens. And this prepares us for Sara's second role in the poem. It was only when Coleridge imagined himself apart from Sara, lying on "the midway slope" alone, that his thoughts ventured beyond the pale: in order to restore a proper balance between speculation and faith, he must return to Sara, and revive his consciousness of what she is, or what he hopes she is. In other words if his faith is to be activated, he must return to a person, to a consciousness of himself in relation to a person. The speculative heights Coleridge reached in lines 44-48 are deemed irresponsible in that they are unfocused in a person: he therefore turns to

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Sara, "But thy more serious eye a mild reproof/Darts, O belovèd Woman!"

Rather than allowing ourselves to develop the faintly ludicrous notion of Sara as of a more serious disposition than her husband (who even at 23 owned to few intellectual peers, and only some of the great names of intellectual history as his superiors) we should pay close attention to what she represents for him, and to the language she is purported to use. Though she is constantly addressed in the course of the poem, and it is written as if spoken to her, in fact she doesn't get a word in edgeways; it is only in her silent but "more serious eye" that Coleridge reads "the mild reproof" she seems to administer. The language of this reproof is of a kind with lines 34-43 which, as we have seen, seem to undermine the seriousness of his speculations. So in whatever look Sara did give him (and we can imagine that her pensiveness had other causes than her husband's propensity to speculate) Coleridge's conscience admits that "such thoughts" are "dim and unhallow'd" "shapings of the unregenerate mind; /Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break/on vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring". Sara, not tempted by these metaphysical toys, therefore, represents the ideal order he does not always find in himself—she is a Meek Daughter in the family of Christ!"—that is, she is conscious of herself in relation to the person who is the object of Christian faith. And cruelly though he was mocked by Southey for this line, he never removed or altered it; this is adequate testimony to its rightful place in the poem, and to his allegiance to his own youthful emotions.

Once introduced, Christ, and the poet's consciousness of him, is maintained, and indeed forms the conclusion of the poem. How Christ should be thought and spoken of is directly contrasted with the "shapings of the unregenerate mind"; it is only possible to mention Christ guiltlessly "when with awe/ I praise him, and with Faith that inly *feels*". This last phrase points both to the hiatus between faith and feeling that has informed all

the poem's speculations, and of course to what Coleridge regards as the ideal order. And again it is worth emphasising that the ideal order ends, as does the poem, in consciousness of a person: Christ, Coleridge proclaims,

Who with his saving mercies healèd me,
A sinful and most miserable man,
Wilder'd and dark, and gave me to possess
Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honour'd Maid!

This is a better ending than many have supposed. John Beer has spoken (at the first Coleridge Summer Conference [\[2\]](#)) of the "droop of spirits" that many readers notice at the end of the poem. "But", he asked, "how else could Coleridge have concluded the poem?" By omitting the whole of the last section, lines 49-64, some critics would reply—disposing of Sara's sultry looks and Coleridge's unlikely interpretation altogether. Apart from being both irresponsible and impossible, this involves a misreading of the penultimate section, lines 34-48. The seeds of the change of mood are already evident here, in the modestly disparaging language. The sense of exultation as the poet's thoughts fly forward is tempered by hubristic fears that he is soaring too near the sun. To omit the whole of the last section would be to forget that Coleridge was always trying to "find" himself as much in people as in thought, and that he is trying to work out how these two forms of allegiance relate. And if one is tempted not to take seriously the self-proclamations of sinfulness and wretchedness by a 23 year old (and Coleridge's sufferings were to become much more severe, and last much longer, than anything he ever experience in his youth), nonetheless we should remember that his relationship with Mary Evans had caused him to suffer sufficiently for him to describe his state in later life as verging on madness. His sincere gratitude to Sara Fricker for giving him that peace needed to write poetry, the prospect of having his own home, and therefore the settled family life he had been deprived of for so long, all contribute to the strength of feeling behind these last lines. And substantiating it all, and making it all possible, stands the figure of Christ. Laugh it off

as a youthful fancy if you like, but as Basil Willey pointed out, it is as perfect a prophesy of Coleridge's future development as one could wish.

I have sketched Sara's role in this poem as that of a guardian angel to Coleridge's conscience. She is responsible for a re-orientation in the poet of thought in relation to feeling, and this orientation is presented as proper and ideal. That she was not to play this role for very long in his life, and never again, I think, in his poetry, should not blind us to the fact that the method by which Coleridge establishes a harmony between thought and feeling is dependent upon his consciousness of a person distinct from himself. However, we cannot separate this person from the workings of Coleridge's own conscience, and it is the gradual assimilation of one to the other that I believe to be an important feature of his poetic and intellectual development.

[1] *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 3 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957-73), hereinafter abbreviated to CN. other abbreviations in the text are: CL: *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71); PW: *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols (Oxford University Press, 1912); LL: *Lectures 1808-1819 on Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

[2] A collection of papers from the conference, including John Beer's, is available in *The Wordsworth Circle* XX (Spring, 1989).