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Coleridge at 250

A Poet for the Twenty-First Century

His genius at that time had angelic wings, and fed on manna. He talked on for ever; and you wished him to talk on for ever. His thoughts did not seem to come with labour and effort; but as if borne on the gusts of genius, and as if the wings of his imagination lifted him from off his feet. His voice rolled on the ear like the pealing organ, and its sound alone was the music of thought. His mind was clothed with wings; and raised on them, he lifted philosophy to heaven. In his descriptions, you then saw the progress of human happiness and liberty in bright and never-ending succession, like the steps of Jacob's ladder, with airy shapes ascending and descending, and with the voice of God at the top of the ladder. And shall I, who heard him then, listen to him now? Not I! That spell is broke; that time is gone for ever; that voice is heard no more: but still the recollection comes rushing by with thoughts of long-past years, and rings in my ears with never-dying sound.

(*Hazlitt, Lectures on the English Poets* (1818); Howe v, 167)

To his contemporaries, Coleridge was the most extraordinary man of his age – a genius of unmatched capacity – but one who had failed to deliver the great works that seemed always to be in prospect. In Charles Lamb's words, he was 'an Archangel a little damaged' (Lamb's letter to Wordsworth, 26 April 1816; *LL* III, 215). Published 250 years after his birth, this *Companion to Coleridge* gives today's readers an opportunity to explore why his peers thought him so surpassingly brilliant, and to ask what, in his multifarious and often unfinished works, may excite and astonish us now as his talk did Hazlitt then. In many ways, we are more privileged than those who read and heard Coleridge while he was alive: thanks to the efforts of twentieth-century editors, we can read the intimate and incomplete writings that were not published at the time. Coleridge's notebooks are, collectively, one of the great nineteenth-century texts – a demonstration of the growth of a brilliant, self-reflective mind that is worthy of comparison with Wordsworth's *Prelude*. They possess an immediacy that the literary autobiography that Coleridge did publish – *Biographia Literaria* (1817) – cannot

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match, even if its commentary on poetry did raise literary criticism to a new level, essentially founding it as an intellectual discipline. Coleridge's marginalia – running to six large volumes and also unavailable to his peers – is an unparalleled record of a writer formulating a new, dialogic discourse by thinking in tandem with the author he is reading. His lectures – political, philosophical and literary – have also been restored to modern readers and reveal him, among other things, as one of Shakespeare's best critics. Even his huge philosophical/theological project – the incomplete *Opus Maximum* – has been rescued from manuscript and published. Unlike Hazlitt, twenty-first-century readers have a vast array of Coleridge's writings, as well as his exhilarating conversation, to explore. This *Companion* aims to guide readers as they thread the labyrinth of Coleridge-in-print, by featuring every major aspect of his oeuvre.

Coleridge, Ecological Destruction and Climate Change

Some aspects stand particularly proud in today's context. In our era of ecological destruction characterized by the pollution of the air with gases, of water with sewage and plastic, and of the earth with toxic chemicals, 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' reads as an all too prescient parable of the destruction of both society and nature by extreme weather events caused by human exploitation of the planet:

All in a hot and copper sky,
 The bloody Sun, at noon,
 Right up above the mast did stand,
 No bigger than the Moon.

Day after day, day after day,
 We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
 As idle as a painted ship
 Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, every where,
 And all the boards did shrink;
 Water, water, every where,
 Nor any drop to drink. (CPW I, i, 381; lines 111–22)

A ramped-up logic of deliberate disproportion between cause and effect gives the poem its nightmarish instructiveness: if in the real world climate change is death by a billion cuts – the cumulative result of two centuries of countless unremembered acts of environmental degradation – in the Mariner's world it occurs in response to one thoughtless, casual deed – the killing

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of a single albatross. ‘We receive but what we give’ (‘Dejection: An Ode’; *CPW* I, ii, 699, line 47), Coleridge wrote, and the Mariner ‘gives’ violence and receives, in return, a nature so violated and disturbed that it becomes unbearably hostile to human life:

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
 That ever this should be!
 Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
 Upon the slimy sea. (*CPW* I, i, 381; lines 123–26)

Today’s toxic algae blooms, lethal to animals, are pre-imagined here in images that attain astonishing graphic power because they are so economically expressed. They are resonant because they are simple, colloquial and stark – unqualified, unadorned, unexplained. Held within the short ballad lines, strongly stressed, they gain a searing intensity by accumulation: one after another strange sight appears, obeying no pattern the Mariner or the reader can understand or predict. The result is haunting to a degree neither Coleridge nor anyone else ever matched again: no other poem in the English language possesses the imagist surreality of ‘The Rime’.

Coleridge and Cancel Culture: Trauma, Shame and Guilt

Surreal because what the Mariner perceives is driven by experiences so traumatic in their mixture of fear, guilt and shame that they cannot be spoken directly. He is, he feels, enthralled by feelings he cannot consciously articulate: cursed to silence. His perceptions, and their later telling in the story that his body wrenches out of him, are a form of dream writing, his worst nightmares coming true, as when he sees himself crewing the ship with the zombie men – some of them his own family – whose deaths he feels responsible for:

The mariners all ’gan work the ropes,
 Where they were wont to do;
 They raised their limbs like lifeless tools –
 We were a ghastly crew.

 The body of my brother’s son
 Stood by me, knee to knee:
 The body and I pulled at one rope,
 But he said nought to me. (*CPW* I, i, 396; lines 337–44)

These zombie figures, compelled to work but deprived of free will, have been seen by several critics as dramatizations of Coleridge’s horror at slavery, while the Mariner’s ship has been compared to a slave ship.¹ Indeed, Coleridge’s brother-in-law and collaborator Robert Southey read them this

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way when he adapted the poem into his 1798 ballad ‘The Sailor Who Served in the Slave Trade’ – reworking the Mariner’s guilt and anguish as results of involvement in torturing a captured African to death.²

In ‘The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere’, guilt and shame also relate to the effects of what today we term ‘cancel culture’. The Mariner is blamed for a single, brief, unthinking action that the social group within which he functions retrospectively decides has offended against its approved practices. He is ostracized as a ‘Jonah’ who brings bad luck and avoided as a pariah who is unclean and must not be touched. Having been made a non-person, he internalizes his shipmates’ blaming and cursing as his own guilt and shame; he accepts that the horrors which destroy ship and crew are his fault. Self-disgust overcomes him:

The many men, so beautiful!
 And they all dead did lie:
 And a thousand thousand slimy things
 Lived on; and so did I.

I looked upon the rotting sea,
 And drew my eyes away;
 I looked upon the rotting deck,
 And there the dead men lay.

I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;
 But or ever a prayer had gusht,
 A wicked whisper came, and made
 My heart as dry as dust.

I closed my lids, and kept them close,
 And the balls like pulses beat;
 For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
 Lay dead like a load on my weary eye,
 And the dead were at my feet. (CPW I, i, 391; lines 236–52)

In the face of exclusion and rebuke, what began as terror persists as trauma; the Mariner becomes fixated on the dead, obsessively replaying their indictment of him:

All stood together on the deck,
 For a charnel-dungeon fitter:
 All fixed on me their stony eyes,
 That in the Moon did glitter.

The pang, the curse, with which they died,
 Had never passed away:
 I could not draw my eyes from theirs,
 Nor turn them up to pray. (CPW I, i, 405; lines 434–41)

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Stressed beyond belief, he cannot help himself; mind and body become worn out by his alienation. To the Pilot and Hermit who rescue him, he is a revenant:

I moved my lips – the Pilot shrieked
 And fell down in a fit;
 The holy Hermit raised his eyes,
 And prayed where he did sit.

I took the oars: the Pilot's boy,
 Who now doth crazy go,
 Laughed loud and long, and all the while
 His eyes went to and fro.
 'Ha! ha!' quoth he, 'full plain I see,
 The Devil knows how to row.' (*CPW* I, i, 415; lines 560–69)

Memories as vivid as when they were first experienced possess his mind and body until they force their way, distorted, into speech. His act of telling is a symptomatic relief of traumatic energies rather than a chosen communication of information (still less an enlightening or entertaining story).

Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched
 With a woful agony,
 Which forced me to begin my tale;
 And then it left me free.

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
 That agony returns:
 And till my ghastly tale is told,
 This heart within me burns. (*CPW* I, i, 417; lines 578–85)

This 'strange power of speech' (line 587) holds hearers against their will, hypnotizing them – the Wedding Guest is horrified because it, like the Mariner himself, bespeaks the world of the dead and embodies ineffaceable anguish. The Mariner is Life-in-Death, the one zombie of the crew who managed to return to shore.

Coleridge's astonishing narrativization of mental torment, self-blame and self-hatred not only renders what we now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with intense force but also declares the fundamental value, and awful precariousness, of life. The lives of the sailors, the life of the albatross, the lives of the water snakes are revealed as precious in the face of their destruction – when it is too late, or almost too late, to save them. It is by an unconscious act of recognition of life's value, no matter in what form, that the Mariner lifts at least some of his self-hatred. 'I blessed them unaware' (*CPW* I, i, 393; line 285), he says of the water-snakes – an unknowing deed that contrasts

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with his thoughtless shooting of the albatross. The poem, that is to say, finds a story that dramatizes in extremis what is otherwise taken for granted – the value of life, and of love of life. In this respect it resembles the terrible scenes on the heath between the mad King Lear, Gloucester and Poor Tom.

Coleridge, Confession and Mental Health

Coleridge's capacity to imagine human vulnerability, suffering, guilt and shame so vividly emerged from, and rebounded upon, his own insecure, unreliable, addictive selfhood. Exiled from his family to boarding school after his father's sudden death, Coleridge carried into his adult life a need for a strong, reliable brother-figure (essentially a surrogate father) who would preside over an intimate domestic circle in which he could nestle (essentially a surrogate family). In 1794 he was drawn to Robert Southey and to a scheme to live communally with Southey and others; he, Southey and another friend, Robert Lovell, married three sisters to this end. In Bristol and Somerset, the friendship, the scheme and the marriage frayed as (among other things) Coleridge lacked staying power and others grew to resent his unreliability (and he to resent their disapproval). In 1797 he replaced Southey with Wordsworth and substituted Dorothy Wordsworth (platonically) for his wife. This new domestic circle buoyed him and he produced, over the next year, many of his greatest works. The three travelled to Germany together and then moved to the Lake District. There, in 1802, the domestic community became still more intense as Wordsworth brought Mary Hutchinson into it as his wife. Coleridge, though still married, then fell deeply in love with Mary's sister Sara, as if repeating his 1794 choice of the sister of Southey's fiancée to be his partner. In 1802, though, he was not free to complete the fraternal/sororal circle by marrying, and so Sara remained his platonic muse, placing on her – and on Coleridge himself – an ultimately intolerable emotional load, to the Wordsworths' increasing disapproval and Coleridge's own distress. Neglecting his wife and children, Coleridge had recourse to increasing amounts of opium and, in 1804, left the Lakes for Malta, alone, for the sake of his physical and mental health. He returned in 1806, more deeply addicted, more desperately in love and, because crippled by shame at his own weakness in the face of Wordsworth's strength, still more incapable of completing his projected publications. The once reassuring circle had become poisoned – in Wordsworth's view by Coleridge's drinking and drug-taking, in Coleridge's by Wordsworth's unsympathetic rectitude. Tensions broke in 1810, after which Coleridge never lived with the Wordsworths again. Repeating

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himself in a minor key, in 1811 Coleridge moved into the domestic circle of an old Bristol friend (John Morgan) and his wife and sister-in-law, an arrangement that enabled him to prepare *Biographia Literaria* and old manuscripts such as ‘Kubla Khan’, ‘Christabel’ and *Osorio* for print. His addictions and his developing feelings for the sister-in-law led again to breakdowns in the circle. It was not until 1816, when he went to live in Highgate with a surgeon and his wife, that he found a circle that could support him long-term, albeit at a lower level of emotional involvement. There, his drug habit was stabilized and he was treated as a favoured but supervised son. He stayed in this circle until his death in 1834 and was able to complete and publish some of his writings, though few of them ventured the kinds of emotional and spiritual exposure of his earlier poems.

The exposure of those poems had taken a toll – and takes a toll on the reader. In the ‘Dejection’ verses that he wrote in the form of a letter to his beloved Sara Hutchinson, Coleridge achieves a searing revelation of his feelings of depression and misery in the face of Sara’s absence – an absence that stands for her unavailability. The manuscript poem is confessional to an extraordinary degree: it not only relates several of the tender occasions in their intimate relationship but also reveals, in detail, Coleridge’s complex blend of thoughts and feelings – including the startling statement that he has sometimes wished his children had never been born. Exposing not just love and yearning but also shame and guilt, it verges constantly on self-embarrassment and self-pity, but is saved from self-indulgence by Coleridge’s determination both to analyse the causes of his mental state and to struggle towards a remedy. What results is a profound and moving memoir-in-verse of how it feels to be depressed and anxious, how those feelings grew in response to irresolvable life situations and how a tentative form of self-therapy might be sketched out. It is by imagining another, not as a prospective partner or possession, but as a person in her own right and with her own relationships, and then by offering this act of imagination to that other – to Sara – that Coleridge begins to lift his self-sealed sadness, just as the Mariner began to escape from feeling cursed when he blessed the water-snakes. The poem ends with Coleridge offering this act of imagination to Sara, its addressee, as his blessing: as he thinks of her he has become sufficiently restored, active and altruistic to give a gift and lift himself out of torpor:

Sister & Friend of my devoutest Choice!
 Thou being innocent & full of love,
 And nested with the Darlings of thy Love,

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And feeling in thy Soul, Heart, Lips, & Arms
 Even what the conjugal & mother Dove
 That borrows genial Warmth from those, she warms,
 Feels in her thrill'd wings, blessedly outspread –
 Thou free'd awhile from Cares & human Dread
 By the Immenseness of the Good & Fair
 Which thou see'st every where –
 Thus, thus should'st thou rejoice!
 To thee would all Things live from Pole to Pole,
 Their Life the Eddying of thy living Soul –
 O dear! O Innocent! O full of Love!
 A very Friend! A Sister of my Choice –
 O dear, as Light & Impulse from above,
 Thus may'st thou ever, evermore rejoice!

(letter of 4 April 1802, *CL* II, 798, lines 324–40)

As a gift, this final scenario renews the giver because it demonstrates his renewed capacity to care for another's happiness. For the receiver, though, it is a double-edged sword, for while it kindly testifies to Coleridge's care for Sara's independent happiness, it nevertheless binds her back to him, as the grateful recipient of a portrait that not only evinces his best wishes but also makes her the object of his imaginings, however well intended. The terms of her absence from Coleridge are set by Coleridge; his letter, once delivered (and circulated in their family circle), presents her in his words. An act of blessing someone's independence may also be a tour de force of reclamation from the margin.

Coleridge was not unaware of the mixed motives that come from loving, yearning and craving, or of the blurred lines that come from writing to the beloved. As his own unsatisfied longings came to contrast more and more starkly with the contentment of a Wordsworth who was supported not only by the doting Dorothy but also by the devoted Mary, he turned again to confessional and self-analytic verse. 'The Pains of Sleep' (1803) engages us today for its vivid portrayal of psychological torment and for the acuity of its understanding of dreams as products of a divided self that tries to repress its shameful desires and guilty fears. Coleridge wrote it in the fallout from a walking tour of Scotland he had begun with the Wordsworths. 'I soon found that I was a burthen on them', he wrote, '& Wordsworth, himself a brooder over his painful hypochondriacal Sensations, was not my fittest companion / so I left him' (*CL* II, 1009–10). Self-exiled from his companions of choice, Coleridge 'walked by myself far away into the Highlands', consuming large amounts of opium and walking prodigious distances. Reaching Edinburgh, he sent 'The Pains of

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Sleep' in letters to friends as a report on his mental state. It described terrifying dreams in which the dreamer felt utterly helpless:

Desire with Loathing strangely mixt,
 On wild or hateful Objects fixt:
 Pangs of Revenge, the powerless Will,
 Still baffled, & consuming still,
 Sense of intolerable Wrong,
 And men whom I despis'd made strong
 Vain-glorious Threats, unmanly Vaunting,
 Bad men my boasts & fury taunting
 Rage, sensual Passion, mad'ning Brawl,
 And Shame, and Terror over all!
 Deeds to be hid that were not hid,
 Which, all confus'd I might not know,
 Whether I suffer'd or I did. (CL II, 982–83; lines 18–30)

It is the discovery in these dreams of the inextricability of desire and loathing that causes a paralysing 'Horror, Guilt, & woe ... / Life-stifling fear, Soul-stifling Shame!' (lines 31, 33). But, compared with the 'Dejection' verse of the previous year, there is now less release from anguish in the articulation of the experience in poetry: the ordering process of writing is unable to prevent the recurrence of trauma. Release from night terrors seems possible only by another route:

Thus two nights pass'd: the Night's Dismay
 Sadden'd and stunn'd the boding Day.
 I fear'd to sleep. Sleep seem'd to be
 Disease's worst malignity.
 The third night when my own loud Scream
 Had freed me from the fiendish Dream,
 O'ercome by Sufferings dark & wild,
 I wept as I had been a Child. (lines 34–40)

Weeping like a child, an action of innocence and tenderness in which the responsibilities and authority of manhood are lost, proves Coleridge's best escape route, allowing him to subdue 'my anguish to a milder mood'. Neither reason nor will but an admission of vulnerability and a request for love offer the only hope for a free and stable self: 'To be beloved is all I need' (line 54). Presumably, the regular gentle stimulation of loving intimacy – lost on the walking tour when Coleridge and the Wordsworths separated in irritation and resentment – would replace the depression that was deepened by excessive doses of laudanum, restoring the balance between inner and outer worlds. Such stimulation, however, remained a forlorn hope, not a plan of action, a hope likely to be subverted by nightly imprisonment in the mental theatre of desire and loathing.

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‘The Pains of Sleep’ leaves the reader with an image of the poet as an isolated, terrified being, in a deeper crisis than he is able to repair. A comment of 1814 shows that Coleridge had come to see ‘The Pains’ as ‘an exact and most faithful portraiture of the state of my mind under influences of incipient bodily derangement from the use of Opium’, ‘a Slavery more dreadful, than any man, who has not felt it’s iron fetters eating into his very soul, can possibly imagine’ (*CL* III, 495). That derangement – psychological as well as physical – occurs through the breakdown of the boundaries between sleeping and waking: the pains of nightmare extend into the fully woken daytime self, rendering it doubtful whether self-control and self-knowledge can be achieved. And yet the poem, if not cathartic and curative, does stave off chaos: it achieves at least a provisional aesthetic order: controlled rhythm, rhyme and figuration allow Coleridge at least to know, and hold in check, the power of the forces that possess him. Poetic form brings some relief and also brings his troubles home to others. Readers vicariously share his grappling with trauma, a process that engenders sympathy for him: they will provide the loving support that he needs so as to keep the demons at bay. The poem exists to invoke an intimate, consolatory hermeneutic circle that might compensate for the loss of a real circle of friends; as such it offers an example that is applicable beyond Coleridge himself of how writing and reading may suspend mental anguish. A practical lesson in therapy.

Coleridge on Slavery and Race

Coleridge’s imaginative insight into vulnerability and suffering – his capacity to dramatize, in figures such as the Ancient Mariner and Christabel, states of fear, loathing, guilt – states, too, of thralldom to other more powerful people – echoes in the insistence throughout his political writings of the value of personhood. This insistence is accompanied by vehement opposition to ideologies that ignore personhood so as to enable exploitation. While still a student he had written a Greek ode against the slave trade. As a radical lecturer and journalist in Bristol (a city enriched by the trade) in 1796 he asked Britons to put their own vulnerable and precious lives imaginatively in the place of Africans’ – to bring the injustice of slavery home:

Would you choose, that a slave merchant should incite an intoxicated Chieftain to make war on your Country, and murder your Wife and Children before your face, or drag them with yourself to the Market? Would you choose to be sold? to have the hot iron hiss upon your breasts, after having been crammed into the hold of a Ship with so many fellow-victims, that the heat and stench, arising from your diseased bodies, should rot the very planks? Would you, that others should do this unto you? (*Watchman*, 138)