

In Defense of Coleridge as Prophet: Holy Matrimony or a Poet's Sacred Word

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As late each flower that sweetest blows
I pluck'd, the Garden's pride!
Within the petals of a Rose
A sleeping Love I spied. (STC's 'The Rose' 1796)

‘A piece of Gallantry,’¹ writes Samuel Taylor Coleridge to his brother George in July 1793 shortly after his departure from Salisbury. He composed the above lines as the opening stanza of an ode celebrating his own gallant behavior with a lady. ‘I presented a moss rose to a Lady—Dick Hart [George Coleridge’s brother-in-law] asked her if she was not afraid to put it in her bosom as perhaps there might be Love in it,’² Coleridge continues. ‘The Rose’ was published in 1796, and as Coleridge described these poetic lines, a little ode of the ‘namby-pamby genus.’³ Coleridge’s display of chivalry may seem a playful illustration of the young poet’s romantic sentiments but would later emerge in the form of a ballad expressed through the persona of an ‘ancyent Marinere.’ Just as the ‘sleeping Love’ lies ‘within the petals of a Rose’ so does the Marinere’s tale lie within the frame of a marriage feast, both eager to be awakened within the listener’s conscious mind. In ‘The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere,’ first published in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798,⁴ Coleridge describes the Bride as a rose as she makes her entrance into the hall led by a group of musicians:

The Bride hath pac'd into the Hall,
Red as a rose is she; (37-38).

Following the procession comes the wedding guest whose attention is quickly diverted from the wedding music to the alluring voice of the Marinere, who commands him to, ‘Listen, Stranger!’ (45). At the entrance to the wedding celebration, the ancyent Marinere stops the unsuspecting guest, mesmerizes him further with ‘his glittering eye,’ and not until the Marinere’s entire tale is told does he release him. They walk together back towards the church, the kirk, only after the wedding feast has concluded, as they pray. Framing his dramatic tale with this wedding scene, Coleridge encourages the reader of the ‘Rime’ to question the significance of this setting which both provides the Marinere with his audience, while at the same time, restrains the guest from the

¹ E. L. Griggs, ed. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. 1785-1800. Vol. I. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) 57; abbreviated as *CL I*.

² *CL I*, p. 57.

³ *CL I*, p. 58.

⁴ For the purpose of this article all references to ‘The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere’ will follow the original version of 1798 published in *Lyrical Ballads* as it appeared without the marginal glosses which Coleridge later added in the 1817 version published in *Sibylline Leaves*. This poem appears in *Coleridge: Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 528-46.

marriage festivities. The juxtaposition of a joyous scene of socialization in contrast with the foreboding atmosphere of a ship's isolation at sea permeates the entire structure of the poem and raises philosophical and religious questions about a mystery, the sacred or holy mystery of matrimony, vital to the Christian sacraments and to the poet's sense of his own integrity.

This paper will examine Coleridge's emphasis on matrimony as a sacred element revealed in the 'Rime' and as an integral part of his poetic theory of organic unity, reconciling nature and God. Coleridge brings to the idea of marriage its mysterious nature, its secrecy from a neoplatonic source, discerning the religious essence of an internal union with God and an external isolation from human nature. A close analysis of this poem illustrates Coleridge's method of synthesizing his system of the imagination with his explication of reason, as he wrestles with the ambiguities that pervade his writings and religious beliefs.

'A poem like the 'Rime' encourages... the most diverse readings and interpretations,'⁵ states Jerome McGann, who identifies the difficulties critics faced in discerning the meaning and even the value of the poem in the early nineteenth century.⁶ He acknowledges that the earlier interpretations during Coleridge's time relied predominantly on 'symbolic and allegorical' approaches with 'a religious or visionary significance'; however, later critics rejected the hermeneutic models established by mid-Victorian readings on the basis of a new shift in critical thinking. McGann explains, 'Thus E. E. Stoll and Elisabeth Schneider deny that Coleridge ever 'intended' his poem to be read symbolically or allegorically;⁷ on the other hand, Irving Babbitt, William Empson, and David Pirie reject the entire Christian-symbolic schema not because it is unintended but because it is trivial.'⁸ Nevertheless, McGann's recommendation to re-examine the poem from 'a human—a social and a historical—resource' rather than as 'an object of faith,'⁹ points to a singular and isolated perspective that would tend to separate Coleridge's poetic expression from his religious convictions, an act certainly inconceivable for the poet. I will argue that Coleridge's own definition of the imagination embraces a human and a divine coincidence that is made evident in his systematic approach to understand the relationship of God to nature and man. While McGann agrees in part with M. H. Abrams that High English Romanticism pursued the Christian legacy of 'traditional concepts, schemes, and values,'¹⁰ he recognizes that this is not true for all forms of Romanticism. McGann, however, does emphasize that Coleridge's work is a paradigm for Abrams' explanation that characterizes High English Romanticism with dominant

⁵ Jerome J. McGann, 'The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner,' *Critical Inquiry* 8.1 (1981): 66.

⁶ McGann, p. 35.

⁷ Anthony J. Harding further explains that Robert Penn Warren also identifies the clarity of Christian symbolism in the poem which E. E. Stoll 'scathingly attacks as a mere mystification,' in *Coleridge and the Idea of Love* (London: Cambridge UP, 1974) 58-59.

⁸ McGann, p. 37.

⁹ McGann, p. 67.

¹⁰ McGann, p. 60.

Christian values.¹¹ With such a variety of interpretations at hand, this paper will attempt to focus its interpretative methods on Coleridge's own critical systems and religious faith which cannot be understood without a symbolic approach. From the writings of John Beer, Anthony Harding, J. Robert Barth, Tim Fulford, and others, Coleridge emerges as more than just a contributor to the hermeneutic tradition of literary criticism. He reveals himself as a prophet whose poetic form of linguistic expression intermingles with his own desire for salvation, faith fused with poetry.

In his preliminary essay to Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (1840) written in 1829, four years after *Aids* was published,¹² the Reverend James Marsh establishes a central point of connection between faith and reason, spirit and nature, doctrine and inspiration. As he clarifies the instructive purpose of the text, Marsh also emphasizes an underlying principle to the understanding of *Aids*: 'In vindicating the peculiar doctrines of the Christian system so stated, and a faith in the reality of agencies and modes of being essentially spiritual or supernatural, he [Coleridge] aims to show their consistency with reason and with the true principles of philosophy, and that indeed, so far from being irrational, CHRISTIAN FAITH IS THE PERFECTION OF HUMAN REASON.'¹³ Coleridge's absorption with the study of the conscious mind and his desire for and duty to acquire self-knowledge permeate the pages of this work and reveal his prophetic intentions.

The systematic approach Coleridge outlines in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1840) further elaborates on the Scriptures as inspiration, the inspired word, rather than, as Coleridge acknowledged, the handiwork of human activity piecing together the sacred text of the Old and New Testaments. Connecting the word of the Scriptures as 'thesis', Coleridge defines Christ, or the Word (with a capital W) as 'prothesis', the Holy Spirit as 'mesothesis, or the Indifference', the preacher as 'synthesis', and the Church as 'antithesis' in his preface to *Confessions*. He denotes this system as The Pentad of Operative Christianity which he then explains in seven subsequent letters. From his study of the Scriptures Coleridge maintains, '... I have met every where more or less copious sources of truth, and power, and purifying impulses;—that I have found words for my inmost thoughts, songs for my joy, utterances for my hidden griefs, and pleadings for my shame and my feebleness.' (AR 294) He remains 'stirred by the Holy Spirit,' as the ancient prophets also claimed, while he rebukes an historical approach to understanding the Scriptures. He remarks, 'Rather, such inquiries are altogether alien from the great object of my pursuits and studies, which is, to convince myself and others, that the Bible and Christianity are their own sufficient evidence.' (AR 300) Therefore, Coleridge has claimed for himself the role of prophet but only as his prophesying rests on the faith that 'subsists in the *synthesis* of the Reason and

¹¹ McGann, p. 60-61.

¹² Coleridge compiled selections from the writings of Archbishop Leighton with his own editorial notes which he wrote in 1825 under the title *Aids to Reflection*. This text was published along with *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* in an edition of 1840, and subsequently published in 1913, the edition referred to in this article.

¹³ *Aids*, p. xxxi.

the individual Will' (AR 349) rather than relying on a social or psychological interpretation. Essentially, Coleridge brings closure to his understanding of God when he recognizes, 'The will of God is the last ground and final aim of all our duties, and to that the whole man is to be harmonized by subordination, subjugation, or suppression alike in commission and omission.' (AR 348) For Coleridge, Reason is Faith and Faith is Light, 'a form of knowing, a beholding of Truth'. (AR 349)

In order to behold any form of truth, there needs to be a witness and an event which bears witnessing. Coleridge chooses a most significant and symbolic event of the wedding in his poem the 'Rime' to frame out another symbolic event, the Marinere's killing of the albatross which incurs a supernatural response; both events demand the presence of a witness, both comprise sacred elements and both symbolize Christian unity even though some critics find the central action of the tale to be trivial, such as Babbitt, Empson, and Pirie.¹⁴ If understood merely as a moralistic tale through an interpretation of Christian symbolism, the marriage frame would become insignificant, and the wedding-guest would lose credibility as a witness.

Moreover, to interpret the poem as an instruction of Christian morality alone ignores the Platonic essence Coleridge discovers in transcending the social custom of marriage. The obvious symbol of the albatross as the Christ image dominates the narrative and supplies the opportunity for Christian forgiveness and mercy to free the Marinere from his burden once he has learned to love God's creatures. As Tim Fulford suggests, 'The difficulty of assimilating the mariner's exhilarating imaginative imagery to a moral resolution was understood by Coleridge, and is shown within the poem to make the reconciliation of imaginative experience to worldly explanations and social structures almost impossible.'¹⁵ However, incorporated in Coleridge's definition of the imagination is a means to unify the two elements of the poem, the frame and the tale, and also to synthesize Coleridge's religious beliefs with his poetic expression, faith once again fused with poetry. Coleridge explains:

The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify.¹⁶

¹⁴ Anthony J. Harding elaborates on Jerome McGann's presentation of the idea that the central action of the poem is 'trivial' in more detail. He identifies Irving Babbitt as 'Coleridge's arch-inquisitor' and further explains Babbitt's argument which suggests that 'the poem thus lays claim to a religious seriousness that at bottom it does not possess' in *Coleridge and the Idea of Love*, (London: Cambridge UP, 1974) 59-63.

¹⁵ Tim Fulford, *Coleridge's Figurative Language* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) 69.

¹⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 304.

The first part of Coleridge's definition addresses the creativity of the human mind as an act of God and links the inherent Christian value of the poem to the conscious mind.

For Coleridge, the wedding-guest witnesses an act of faith that elevates the significance of the wedding festivities to a moment of eternal unity—ultimately transcending the human experience and, along with it, the social custom of marriage.¹⁷ This would account for how Coleridge personally transcends the unhappiness and disappointment he experienced in his marriage to Sara Fricker. Seeking completeness in his life as well as his work, Coleridge establishes a spiritual union with Sara Hutchinson to fill the emotional vacancy in his affections. As Anthony Harding notes, 'The most complex and longest-lasting manifestation of the idea of spiritual unity, however, is in the succession of notes relating to Sara Hutchinson.'¹⁸ While on the other hand, J. Robert Barth suggests that Coleridge's feelings of frustration may arise from his relationship with William Wordsworth as much 'as in his frustrated love for Sara Hutchinson,' a topic which has been debated as a source of his 1802 poem 'Dejection: an Ode.'¹⁹ As Barth explains, 'As Coleridge's spiritual divorce from his wife is reflected in his divorce from nature, from 'the one Life within us and abroad', the 'sympathy between his soul and Sara Hutchinson's looks forward to a new wedding of his soul to nature'.²⁰

The mode of human love can be said to echo divine love as Coleridge defines the secondary imagination to echo the primary but differing in 'the mode of its operation.' From Coleridge's Malta notebooks Harding determines, 'It appears that, as love similarly to religion reveals the permanent inner pattern, and calls the individual self out of itself to be re-created in a higher form, love can be not only analogous to religious experience but an advancement of it.'²¹ Coleridge's struggle to join the poetic expression or imagination with a divine influence echoes his personal struggle to reconcile human love and spiritual unity. As Kristine Dugas notes, 'But the central problem for a writer trying to achieve the systematic completeness [unity] Coleridge desired and yet finding himself so attuned to possibilities observed in the moment, possibilities which could frustrate and challenge that completeness, arose from the experience which resulted: that of being pulled in opposing intellectual and emotional directions.'²²

Coleridge's challenge to accomplish this sense of completeness in his poetry can be addressed by the following question: how does bearing witness, a

¹⁷ Coleridge's daughter, Sara, mirrors her father's attitude toward marriage as a restrictive experience that needed to be transcended in a spiritual union with God as she explains, 'She who had once called marriage the type of death, now heard the summons to the heavenly Marriage Feast with no startled or reluctant ear' in *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, ed. Edith Coleridge (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874) 63.

¹⁸ Harding, p. 88.

¹⁹ J. Robert Barth, 'Coleridge's *Dejection*: Imagination, Joy, and the Power of Love,' *Coleridge's Imagination*, eds. Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, and Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 179.

²⁰ Barth, p. 189.

²¹ Harding, p. 89.

²² Kristine Dugas, 'Struggling with the Contingent: Self-conscious Imagination in Coleridge's Notebooks,' *Coleridge's Imagination*, eds. Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, and Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 55.

clearly integral part of the marriage ceremony, suggest the kind of synthesis between reason and the individual will that Coleridge identifies in his explanation of the imagination? Peter Larkin addresses a similar question in his discussion of Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode' where he recognizes the problem of synthesizing or connecting the poetic and theoretical modes of Coleridge's writing. Larkin posits, "The question of how the different modes of Coleridge's writing (poetic or theoretical) relate to each other is closely bound up with their author's sense of personal vocation, or with how an authorial voice distributes itself between overtly critical, poetic or philosophic texts."²³ As the 'Rime' focuses on the wedding-guest as a witness, the voice of the poet can be found both in the persona of the wedding-guest, a symbol of a religious mode of thinking, and the persona of the Marinere, a symbol of the poetic mode. Consequently, these voices struggle to unite in their differing roles, symbolically and imaginatively.

Returning to the structure of the wedding frame, it becomes apparent that the inherent nature of a frame encircles and could also be said to embody the dramatic action of the poem. This perspective demonstrates Coleridge's intent to unify the concept of marriage with the dominant action of the tale. To securely bind these two events, the wedding-guest must act as a witness, a witness of faith and not of custom. The presence of the wedding-guest²⁴ serves to unite but also to idealize the relationship between man and God as he becomes the one who can testify to the religious beliefs experienced by the Marinere and who can also observe the activity of faith in the moment of blessing the water-snakes, thereby connecting God and nature and man. The Marinere witnesses or watches the water-snakes as they appear in the rising light of the moon:

The moving Moon went up the sky,
And no where did abide:
Softly she was going up
And a star or two beside. (255-58)

The moon comes to shed light on the horrible scene of 'the rotting Sea' (line 232) as a powerful image of nature and, according to John Beer, as 'a symbol of reconciliation.'²⁵ Beer continues, 'For in this vision of the snakes interweaving harmoniously beneath the light of the moon can be discerned the wished-for harmony between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. The snakes

²³ Peter Larkin, 'Imagining Naming Shaping: Stanza VI of *Dejection: an Ode*,' *Coleridge's Imagination*, eds. Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, and Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 193.

²⁴ Another explanation of the wedding-guest framework for the poem suggests that Coleridge dissociates the 'sociability' of the wedding event from the idea of love. Anthony J. Harding states, "The whole point of the Wedding-Guest framework to the story is, it seems to me, to bring out the uncomfortable truth that 'sociability' is not the same as love, and that the jolly party to which the Wedding-Guest was bound is one of those ego-worlds which can be inward-looking, exclusive, and therefore a misuse of gifts not in themselves evil,' in *Coleridge and the Idea of Love*, (London: Cambridge UP, 1974), 63-64.

²⁵ John B. Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (New York: Collier Books, 1959) 169.

and the moon are for the Mariner a revelation of the inner, ideal harmony of the universe. . . .²⁶ The Marinere observes the movement of the water-snakes ‘in tracks of shining white’ where they emerge ‘Beyond the shadow of the ship’ (line 269). As these creatures encircle themselves (like ‘the snake with it’s Tail in it’s Mouth’), their activity unifies nature and man in the awakening of the Marinere’s spiritual feelings (*CL*, IV, 545). As they swim near the Marinere, their movements appear as flashes of light: ‘. . . every track/ Was a flash of golden fire’ (line 272).

As both a wanderer and a ‘mental traveler’ awaiting God’s blessings, Coleridge internalizes his own feelings in the guilt of the Marinere and in the trance-like observations of the wedding-guest. Beer points out that Coleridge identified with Moses ‘as endowed at times with a strange, glorious light’ and in whom Coleridge saw ‘his ideal of humanity.’²⁷ Furthermore, Beer explains that Coleridge’s identification connects multiple voices, the political leader with the inspired writer and prophet. His desire to ‘further the experience of Christianity,’ as Fulford explains Coleridge’s prophetic intentions, arose from ‘the intimations provided by symbol-making.’²⁸

The multiplicity of voices, spiritual, natural, and human, can be seen in the dialogue between the Spirit voices in Part VI of the ‘Rime.’ As Fulford notes, ‘. . . Coleridge’s emphasis [was] on unity in multiplicity, rather than by his occasional retreats into private discourses and idealised traditions.’²⁹ The First Voice is clearly concerned with the mysterious forces that underlie the action of the universe, while the Second Voice responds to the relationship between forces of nature. The First Voice questions: ‘What makes that ship drive on so fast?/ ‘What is the Ocean doing?’ The Second Voice responds:

‘Still as a Slave before his Lord,
‘The Ocean hath no blast:
‘His great bright eye most silently
‘Up to the moon is cast— (419-22)

These philosophical questions about existence and nature illustrate the poet’s concern with his own identity and connectedness. Searching for his personal unity with the divine, Coleridge examines all forms of relationships which pose opportunities for him to gain self-knowledge and achieve a more spiritual unity with God. As Harding observes, ‘Coleridge does not insist on retaining a dichotomy between human affections and religious faith, . . . he affirms that human affections can be prompted by that in us which is of God, and moreover that they lead us towards God, and are not merely ‘intensified’ or ‘elevated’ by religious faith.’³⁰

²⁶ Beer, p. 169.

²⁷ Beer, p. 104.

²⁸ Fulford, p. 160.

²⁹ Fulford, p. 161.

³⁰ Harding, p. 91.

The dominant voice of the Marinere that has captivated the wedding-guest throughout the poem yields to a new voice to tell his tale. Now that the wedding-guest is instructed on the importance of achieving spiritual unity, he learns that 'sweeter than the Marriage-feast,/ 'Tis sweeter far to me/ To walk together to the Kirk/ With a goodly company' (lines 634-37). Just as the Bride and Bridegroom enter into a holy union, so does the Marinere unite with the wedding-guest. The Marinere then prepares himself to relinquish his desire for human affection, even that 'goodly company' of the wedding-guest, for an eternal union. Barth explains that Coleridge viewed marriage as a sacramental rite: 'He soon set aside his early rejection of marriage as a sacramental rite ('spells uttered by conjurors'; *CL*, I, 306; 6 Feb. 1797), and for the rest of his life fairly consistently viewed marriage as a sacrament, having therefore both a personal and an ecclesiastical dimension.'³¹ Writing in *Aids to Reflection* Coleridge maintains this viewpoint: 'It might be a mean [sic] of preventing many unhappy marriages, if the youth of both sexes had it early impressed on their minds, that marriage contracted between Christians is a true and perfect symbol or mystery.'³² Coleridge further distinguishes the sacrament of marriage as a sacrament of the individual member, and 'not retained by the Reformed Churches as one of THE Sacraments, ...'; however, Coleridge explains that marriage is 'not a means of Grace enjoined on all Christians.'³³ For Coleridge, 'It is evident, however, that neither of these reasons affect or diminish the religious nature and dedicative force of the marriage Vow, or detract from the solemnity in the Apostolic Declaration: THIS IS A GREAT MYSTERY.'³⁴ Repeating his tale or prophecy, his 'commission' to rehearse the moral and spiritual lessons learned, Coleridge, like the ancient Marinere, the chivalrous knight, the prophet and the poet, reveals the sacred word again in the first stanza of his ballad the *Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie* written at Stowey in 1797 or 1798:

All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
 Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
 All are but ministers of Love,
 And feed his sacred flame.³⁵

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³¹ Barth, p. 131.

³² Barth, p. 131.

³³ *Aids*, p. 25.

³⁴ *Aids*, p. 25.

³⁵ Ernest Hartley Coleridge, ed. *Coleridge: Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 330.