

# Resisting the Silence: Coleridge's Courtship of the Sublime

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The subject of this paper is Coleridge's self-declared death as a poet and how this announcement of retreat from poetic utterance relates to his growing interest in the Logos principle. '[T]he sublime metaphor...of "THE WORD"', says Coleridge in a marginal note to Jakob Böhme's *Works*, 'is the sublimest Thought, that ever entered the Soul of man, the purest Form of Intuition' (CM I 568). As from 1805, the Logos features emphatically in Coleridge's writings, and is, as Mary Anne Perkins states, the 'unifying factor' or 'decoder' of his system.<sup>1</sup> Coleridge's preoccupation with Unity is, however, older than this. In 'Religious Musings' (1794-6), for instance:

'Tis the sublime of man,  
Our noontide Majesty, to know ourselves  
Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole! (l. 127-9)

The introduction of the Logos principle, then, marks an important turning point in Coleridge's thinking. The very act of naming or re-naturing the ground or key of that Unity, caused the Sublime to undergo a shift of meaning. From an awareness or intuition, the pinnacle of sublimity is promoted to a literal statement or pure act (CM I 568). The centrality of the Logos, however, runs counter to his lifelong struggle with his muse, and a preoccupation with the limitations of language. Despite being a divine gift, language cannot adequately convey Divine Truths, and is thus also a source of vexation to Coleridge. The sole and necessary means to transcend this division between 'Man & his Maker' (CN III 4017) is prayer. '[T]he absolute Necessity of Prayer', writes Coleridge in his notebook, rests on its connection with Faith, and on 'the transcendency of religious Intuitions over Language, which only by balancing of contradictions can represent or rather re suggest them' (CN III 4183). He thus regards prayer as the gateway to a participation in the sublime state of blessedness, or to the dissolution of self which he advances in an early notebook entry as the fifth stage of prayer, that is:

Self-annihilation—the Soul enter[ing] the Holy of Holies. (CN I 257)

This paper seeks to examine, firstly, the evolution of Coleridge's relationship with the Logos as the pinnacle of sublimity in terms of courtship turned struggle; and secondly, the strategies which Coleridge deploys in the face of the inadequacy of language and the suspension of his poetic impulse. My argument is that Coleridge's later verse serves as a counter-text to the prose writings and system-building which earned him the title of 'sage of Highgate' or high-priest of transcendence. Coleridge was all too often confronted with the disjunctiveness of this world, and had to reconcile himself to the idea that

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Anne Perkins, *Coleridge's Philosophy: the Logos as Unifying Principle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 5.

he could not practise or experience what he preached. This is the Coleridge, 'the Arch-angel a little damaged', whom we encounter in the private space of the later verse and notebooks, where he questions his faith, explores the limits of expression, and laments his exclusion from what he calls the state of 'Joy, Gaudium, [or] the Peace of God that passeth all understanding' (CN III 3558). The later poetry which I will refer to in the second part of this paper could be seen as the testing ground for the principles he so forcefully put forward in his philosophical and theological writings, and the locus where he confronts these principles with his own life-experience—where he, in the words of Morton D. Paley, confronts the 'abyss within'<sup>2</sup>.

I borrowed the term 'courtship' from Raimonda Modiano,<sup>3</sup> who uses it in connection with Coleridge's relationship with nature, to highlight the fickleness of his relationship with his muse. Among other things, courtship entails seduction, attempts at persuasion, the need for a strategic approach, and even some measure of deception, both of oneself and one's object. Jean Baudrillard<sup>4</sup> suggested that seduction is a two-edged sword in that the dynamics of persuasion are reversible: he who seeks to seduce, must of necessity already have fallen under the spell of the object of his desire. The hunter becomes both prey and victim, or prisoner, of his own obsession.

A number of attributes of courtship and seduction apply very well to Coleridge's unremitting advances to, and troubled relationship with, sublimity as a source of creative genius. First of all, there is the matter of the convergence of passivity and activity in both subject and object, or as Wordsworth would say, a 'Willing[ness] to work and to be wrought upon'.<sup>5</sup> Fascination may lead to a response or counter-act of seduction. Coleridge's love of the transcendental dates back to the dawn of his youth. From his early reading of fairy tales and romances, Coleridge says, his 'mind had been habituated to [or seduced by] *the Vast*' (CL I 210). As he contends in his third autobiographical letter to Thomas Poole, he fell in love with " 'the Great', & 'the Whole' " (CL I 210) before the age of ten. Other aspects of courtship which apply to Coleridge's attitude towards poetic imagination are idealization, irritation and even jealousy at the object's inconstancy or lack of attachment—his muse seemed at times to favour his friend and rival Wordsworth over himself in the creative arena—, and finally hopelessness, despair or even poetical suicide when his muse makes motions of withdrawal and becomes a devious siren.

As the subject of this paper is Coleridge's hovering between poetic life and death, it may be interesting to call to mind the context in which he uttered his first word. Speech, as the exclusively human endowment, says George Steiner in his essay 'Silence and the Poet', allowed 'the human person... [to break] free

<sup>2</sup> Morton D. Paley, *Coleridge's Later Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 36.

<sup>3</sup> Raimonda Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature* (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1985) 4.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *De la séduction* (Paris: Galilée, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> *The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind*. By William Wordsworth (*Text of 1805*). ed. Ernest De Selincourt (London: Oxford UP, 1949) Book XIII, 100.

from the great silence of matter'.<sup>6</sup> This coming of the word to man is 'both miracle and outrage, sacrament and blasphemy', an act of 'rivalry to God' that culminates in the poet.<sup>7</sup> 'The poet', says Steiner, 'makes in dangerous similitude to the gods.'<sup>8</sup> Around the age of two, the infant Coleridge, having momentarily escaped his nurse's wakeful eye, 'ran to the Fire... [to] pull... out a live coal' (CL I 312), burning himself dreadfully in the act. This Promethean theft of fire can be read both as myth of his nascent poethood, or as a reproof for lack of attention—a behavioural pattern which would recur in his later relationships. Immediately following this snatching at fire, Coleridge, so he claims, performed his first speech act, not by the usual naming of a parent, but by a defiance of authority. Coleridge broke into speech with a curse, an articulate expression of hatred towards the man who was binding his wounded hand. 'Nasty Doctor Young', were the first words he claims to have spoken. Another unlikely story in Coleridge's (auto)biography, but as the focus of this paper is his mythopoetic self-image as a poet, one could not have wished for a more fitting prologue.

From here I will take a leap forward in time to 1800, when Coleridge announced his decision to 'snap his squeaking baby-trumpet of poetic utterance'. In a letter to James Webbe Tobin, he declares that he would henceforth 'abandon Poetry altogether', and leave the real work to Wordsworth and Southey (CL I 623). If the announcement of the end of his poetic career is to be read as a promise that he would versify no more, this is one promise we should be thankful he did not keep. As often as he proclaimed his retreat into poetic silence, Coleridge receded from his intention.

The decline of Coleridge's poetic output is variously situated between 1800 and 1807, with 'Dejection: An Ode' (1802) and 'To William Wordsworth' (1807) as the two major contenders for the title of either his adieu to poetry, final major poem, or, in a more positive perspective, threshold-piece or transition from his early to his later poetry. Several diagnoses have been adduced in connection with his so-called 'poetical death', both by himself, his contemporaries and the critics. In a letter to Sotheby in 1802, he writes that he was forced beyond his will into '*downright metaphysics*' through 'Sickness & some other & worse afflictions' (CL II 814)—the aetiology also featuring in 'Dejection', or what Morton D. Paley calls 'the metaphysical explanation'.<sup>9</sup> Wordsworth, on the other hand, gives a contrastive interpretation by promoting the symptom (metaphysics) in Coleridge's own analysis, to the status of disease. In Wordsworth's view, Coleridge's German studies ruined the poet in him,<sup>10</sup> and his interest in metaphysics was thus not a recourse from, or a sign of, disease, but rather the disease itself. A third diagnosis is grafted onto the primacy of reading and Coleridge's flair for poetic genius in others.

<sup>6</sup> George Steiner, 'Silence and the Poet', *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967): 55.

<sup>7</sup> Steiner 55.

<sup>8</sup> Steiner 56.

<sup>9</sup> Paley 2.

<sup>10</sup> *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser, 3 vols. (London: OUP, 1974) III 469.

His idolatry of poets such as Wordsworth, Shakespeare and Milton, as Harold Bloom suggests, may have resulted in his finally succumbing to the anxiety of influence.<sup>11</sup> A fourth scenario could be suggested on the basis of Coleridge's statement in *Biographia Literaria* that 'No Man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher' (BL II 25-26). Poetry is, he says, 'the most intense, weighty and philosophical product of human art' (BL II 126). Maybe Coleridge's venture into metaphysics was neither disease nor symptom, but rather an attempt to cure the poet in him.

Whatever the cause was, however, two things are indisputable. Firstly, his declaration that the poet in him was dead was a feigned obituary. Perhaps the most telling piece of proof of his continuing belief in the viability of his poetic genius, or that he never ceased to think of himself as a poet, is to be found in a late poem, 'Epitaph' (November 1833), where he writes that 'Beneath this sod/ A poet lies' (l. 2-3). Secondly, the rupture in his self-image and his subsequent 'limbic condition' left an indelible mark on his work. 'The Ancient Mariner' can be seen as a blueprint for his afterlife or life-in-death existence as a poet. His narrow escape from poetic death is also an instance of the Burkean Sublime, with its emphasis on self-preservation or the need to maintain a safe distance from what Burke calls 'the king of terrors'<sup>12</sup> or death.

Coleridge's later crisis-poems explore the poles of ecstasy and despair, and centre on the problem of identity and a representation of the poet as a struggling prisoner or exile. The poet features alternately as shipwrecked by the siren-song of the true sublime poets, as in 'To William Wordsworth', or as exiled from the group of elect, which, especially in Wordsworth's case, he helped to create. In 'The Visionary Hope', the poet is represented both as an 'alien', and as a 'captive guest' or 'royal prisoner'. In the poem 'Limbo', the tranquillity of 'the steady look sublime' or 'silent sight' is contrasted with the image of a prisoner in 'a spirit-jail secure'. Another version of the poet who made a narrow escape from death, features in a notebook entry of February 1807, where he pictures himself as a wingless eagle whose words are 'but articulated Sighs of a Prisoner heard from his Dungeon! powerful only as they express their utter impotence!' (CN II 2998). Coleridge's poet in exile is like Charles Baudelaire's swan in 'Le Cygne', a homeless creature driven by an unrelenting desire. Significantly, in Baudelaire's poem the figure of the desperate bird raising its head to heaven, 'Comme s'il adressait des reproches à Dieu'<sup>13</sup>—as if to reproach God—, is like all exiles both ridiculous and sublime. Apart from expressing a sense of exclusion, however, the struggle that pervades Coleridge's notebooks and later confessional conversation poems with God, is also what defines him as a religious person, or as the poet wrestling like Jacob with the angel.

<sup>11</sup> Harold Bloom, 'Coleridge: The Anxiety of Influence', *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (New York: Columbia UP, 1972) 247-267.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 36.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 2 vols. (Brussels: Editions La Boetie, 1948) I 80-82.

I would like to suggest the following strategies as part of Coleridge's discourse of seduction. A first strategy consists in converting weakness into strength. In dramatizing his loss of poetic imagination, weakness becomes a source of creativity. The image of the doomed exile, while puncturing the myth of the poet as seer or creator next to God, marks him off from those strong poets whose creations could never equal the sublimity of the archetypal text. In a letter to John Thelwall, he wrote that after reading the Scriptures, 'Homer & Virgil are disgustingly *tame* to me, & Milton himself barely tolerable.' (CL I 281) By disavowing his identity as a poet, Coleridge recasts himself as a protean, Mariner-like figure without a solid identity, a figure, like Baudelaire's swan, both sublime and ridiculous.

Secondly, faced with '[t]he exceeding Difficulty... of Prayer' (CN III 4183), or as in 'The Visionary Hope', the utter inability to pray, Coleridge uses poetry as a stage to summon this redemptive, self-dissolving medium. Prayer used to come upon him unaware, as in 'Hymn Before Sun-Rise', or 'To William Wordsworth'. Again, like the figure in Baudelaire's 'Le Cygne', Coleridge never ceased to be consumed by an unrelenting desire to seek an 'Eternal [addressable] Thou' (l. 6), as in the poem 'My Baptismal Birth-day'.

A third strategy consists in turning the limitations of language to his own advantage. His deep yearning for the Absolute was born of his reading of the Bible. A recurring subject in his later verse is the unreadability of that other book of God. Significantly, in the lines entitled 'Coeli Enarrant', Coleridge's response to the indecipherability of the universe is a pure cry of pain, both lamentation and warning without referent, an echo of the 'Beware! Beware!' in 'Kubla Khan', or a counter siren-song in that other sense of the word. Apart from referring to 'women or winged creatures... whose singing was supposed to lure... sailors to destruction on the rocks', a 'siren' is also the high-pitched signal or alarm, which, in the OED, is defined as 'a sound to warn of danger or to attract attention'. In the 'Coeli Enarrant' lines, Coleridge harks back to the inarticulate language of the infant. Like the alluring siren-song, the cry of pain at the close of the poem is the shrill, female or child's voice. The abstract cry of pain of the 'child beneath its master's blow' (l. 8), a most sublime act of poetic utterance, is the production of pure noise, a negative presentation of the abyss or warning sign on the brink of the precipice. This ties in with Coleridge's statement in *The Friend* 'that there are Sounds more sublime than any Sight *can* be, more absolutely suspending the power of comparison, and more utterly absorbing the mind's self-consciousness in it's total attention to the object working upon it.' (F II 257) Coleridge's response to what is either blindness or inability to read, is an aesthetic of pure noise, the language of the Sublime which shatters the distinction between the human and non-human, and could thus be seen as a regressive motion or an alternative route to that self-annihilation which he seeks through prayer.

In conclusion, I would suggest that perhaps the greatest poetic influence in Coleridge's life-cycle as a poet emanates from his own creation, 'The

Ancient Mariner', his own universally recognized 'strong poem'. The threshold-figure of the Mariner combines the characteristics of the chameleon or protean poet, as well as of the man struggling with faith and despair, and thus unites those qualities which were the crucible and the cross of Coleridge's life as a poet. I chose the term 'courtship', with its characteristic going round in circles, as a template for his relationship with the Sublime, and as an alternative to concepts such as quest, spiritual pilgrimage or odyssey. Courtship is paradigmatic of Coleridge's cyclical habit of thought in that he always did return to his first childhood love, the Vast. His probing under the surface of the expressible was more of a Sisyphean struggle than a steady ascent. It has been suggested by Harold Bloom that his unrelenting hunger for the Absolute disabled Coleridge as a poet. Yet, in view of his statement that struggle and difficulty are an integral part of religion (CL II 1008)<sup>14</sup>, I would like to turn this round and say that the Absolute, or the Sublime, was the 'honey-dew' on which he fed both as a religious man and reader of the Bible, and as a poet and philosopher.

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<sup>14</sup> In a letter to his brother George Coleridge, he writes that 'horrid Dreams... might have been sent upon me to arouse me out of that proud & stoical Apathy, into which I had fallen—it was Resignation indeed, for I was not an Atheist; but it was Resignat[ion]—witho[ut] religion because it was without struggle, without d[iff]iculty' (CL II 1008).