

# ‘The Pains of Sleep’

Mary Wedd

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I am uncomfortably aware that great minds have spent lifetimes on the study of Coleridge and that it is an impertinence in me to try to talk about him but at the same time I find him fascinating. So I hope you will forgive me if I present a low-brow personal view, informed rather by sympathy than erudition. Nevertheless, I am grateful to have been asked to tackle this difficult assignment because it has made me re-read much worthwhile commentary, particularly in this context Molly Lefebure’s wonderful book *A Bondage of Opium*,<sup>1</sup> which I find triumphantly passes the test of time.

It would be easy to dismiss ‘The Pains of Sleep’ as a mere opium-dream and to ask what there is to say about this short grievous poem. Richard Holmes says these verses ‘do not present opium visions, as is often thought, but the night-horrors which accompanied withdrawal symptoms from the drug’.<sup>2</sup> But, whichever it is, it draws on pre-existing images, as Holmes says, ‘a ghastly outpouring of suppressed guilts and fears, the black stirred-up sediment of the unconscious mind erupting in the thin hours before dawn’. Hence, it seems to me to stretch out, to draw in and encapsulate vast areas of Coleridge’s life and character. As Grevel Lindop wisely states in relation to De Quincey, ‘Experience we cannot bear to live through with the mind fully awake will find its way back into consciousness by unexpected paths’.<sup>3</sup> That said, it is interesting that Coleridge’s nightmares predated his addiction to opium, starting when he was ill at the age of seven, and that even before that, at the age of six, he used to look at his copy of *The Arabian Nights* with ‘a strange mixture of obscure dread and intense desire’ —‘Desire and loathing strangely mixed’—so that, he said, ‘I was haunted by spectres whenever I was in the dark’.<sup>4</sup> No wonder his father got rid of the offending volume. Coleridge, in one of his letters to Poole, tells how as a child he would exorcise the ‘armies of ugly Things (note the capital letter!) bursting in upon me’ by reciting ‘the old prayer’

Matthew! Mark! Luke! & John!  
God bless the bed which I lie on.  
Four Angels round me spread  
Two at my foot & two at my head.<sup>5</sup>

This was still extant in my childhood as a comforting protection. At the beginning of the poem Coleridge remembers the early ritual of prayers before bedtime kneeling down and putting his palms together as he silently mouthed

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<sup>1</sup> Molly Lefebure *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium*, Victor Gollancz 1974

<sup>2</sup> Richard Holmes *Coleridge: Early Visions* Hodder and Stoughton 1989 pp.354-5

<sup>3</sup> Grevel Lindop *The Opium-Eater A Life of Thomas De Quincey* J.M. Dent & Sons 1981 p.11

<sup>4</sup> Holmes p. 11, quoting *The Friend*

<sup>5</sup> *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* Ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, I p348

the words of his petition. In our age, we cannot help being reminded of Christopher Robin! But now the boy has grown up and no longer has this mechanical and verbal vision of prayer.

A much more adult and spiritual form of communion is appropriate now.

Ere on my bed my limbs I lay,  
It hath not been my use to pray  
With moving lips or bended knees;  
But silently, by slow degrees,  
My spirit I to Love compose,  
In humble trust mine eye-lids close,  
With reverential resignation,  
No wish conceived, no thought exprest,  
Only a sense of supplication;  
A sense o'er all my soul imprest  
That I am weak, yet not unblest,  
Since in me, round me, every where  
Eternal Strength and Wisdom are.

This seems to me to be a most beautiful, touching and gentle description of a human soul, aware of its own inadequacy, relaxing and submitting with complete trust to a higher power. It suggests the entrance to a state of meditation, a consciousness of 'the one life'. Robert Barth in his recent book quotes from Coleridge's notes on the Divine Ideas the wonderful phrase 'the effort to connect the misery of Self with the blessedness of God'.<sup>6</sup>

It is as if Coleridge is describing the state which in 1813, after years of 'abstruser musings', he was to say he prayed to achieve, 'a living instead of a reasoning faith'.<sup>7</sup> In 1814 he was to write, 'I now see that what is spiritual can only be spiritually *apprehended*—*comprehended* it cannot be',<sup>8</sup> though, as Molly Lefebure points out, he 'was still inclined to adopt an intellectual approach to religion, as his theological letters to Joseph Cottle amply demonstrate'.<sup>9</sup> They do indeed. For example, in his letter of late April 1814 written only a few weeks before the one just quoted, he says he accepts the doctrine of the Trinity 'not as deduced from human reason, in its grovelling capacity for comprehending spiritual things, but as the clear revelation of Scripture'.<sup>10</sup> He then goes on for numerous pages employing his reason to attempt to elucidate the idea!

Coleridge's inability to live without philosophical or theological theorizing is often entertainingly illustrated in his notebooks: for example, in the midst of many pages recording his Scottish journey and describing the scenery, suddenly the 'picturesque tour' is interrupted by 'Descartes Proof of Deity discovered by

<sup>6</sup> J Robert Barth, S.J. *Romanticism and Transcendence* University of Missouri Press 2003 p.90

<sup>7</sup> Griggs III Letter 908 p.462

<sup>8</sup> Griggs III Letter 933 p.499

<sup>9</sup> Lefebure p.480

<sup>10</sup> Griggs III Letter 922 p.480

Anselm Archbishop of Canterbury', who died in 1109, followed by a note on Spinoza.<sup>11</sup>

I have not the intellect to share adequately Coleridge's theoretical thoughts, though I was interested in philosophy from an early age and raided my clerical father's book-lined study for theological works. I remember I was dissatisfied with the Church's elaborate version of the doctrine of the Atonement, which seemed to me to be too legalistic for God, a man-made doctrine expressed in a man-made judicial system. Perhaps indeed we do refine too much upon cut-and-dried theoretical concepts. After all, Jesus often spoke in parables, putting deep truths into stories taken from everyday life which the limited capacities of his hearers could recognize. So as well as taking into account the historical and cultural background of the time and place we should be aware of the function of metaphor and symbol and should not attempt to be too literal or to construct a rigid intellectual framework, so as to seem to be in command of a spiritual world which in reality we are not equipped to understand.

Nor could I reconcile a loving Creator with natural disasters and unmerited suffering. The question of the Trinity, on which Coleridge spent so many words, does not seem to have bothered me. As a small child I accepted St. Patrick's image of the trefoil and later saw the Three as aspects of the One. Later, at Oxford, I went with my fiancé to some of his Philosophy lectures, which were equally unsatisfying. Instead of the questions I wanted answered such as 'What is it all *for*?' or 'Why is everything so *unfair*?' we discussed whether it was one's duty to keep a promise to someone who has since died! To apply logical thinking to everyday life is a rare but highly desirable thing but one must conclude that not even philosophers or—dare I say it?—not even scientists can by intellectual effort know the unknowable. Coleridge, who understood this, though he could not resist trying to codify, expressed his understanding at the beginning of this poem. In the inadequacy of reason to answer the real questions I am reminded of a small boy at Summerhill who asked me, 'How does fire burn?' I gave a long scientific explanation, after which he thought for a while and then said, 'Yes, but *how* does it?'

However, if I am ill equipped to walk the philosophical heights with Coleridge the man, I can identify completely with Coleridge the child. At the age of seven I had rheumatic fever and for some months was bedridden or in a wheel-chair unable to walk. I recovered, but every time a doctor examined my heart after that the inevitable question would come, 'Have you ever had rheumatic fever?' Thereafter my educational career was disastrously interrupted by intervals of illness. In spite of this handicap it is notable that neither Coleridge in his highly adventurous way nor I in my lowly humble one was prevented by a rheumatic heart from enthusiastic fell-walking!

Unlike Coleridge, I was fortunate in not being prescribed any opium. Indeed, I was not given any medicine at all. Instead, fortunately, my father's

<sup>11</sup> CN I 1500

two sisters each gave me a tiny book which proved a great solace. I kept them under my pillow so that I could take them out at intervals and read them as a relief from my seven-year-old staple of fairy-stories. They were 'Songs of Innocence' and 'Songs of Experience'. Whenever I was seriously ill I was sent away to medical relations, who were wonderful, but I could not help the feeling that I had been off-loaded, as Coleridge must have been thinking at his uncle's. I was sent, undoubtedly for my own good, to boarding school at the age of eight. There I got an admirable education, as Coleridge did at Christ's Hospital, but where I felt abandoned and unloved. Unlike Coleridge, I did regularly go home for holidays but, after my first long term, when my parents met me at the station, I had forgotten what they looked like. As Lamb said, 'O the cruelty of separating a poor lad from his early homestead!' He understood Coleridge's plight. 'My parents and those who should care for me were far away.' The pathos of 'I would wake weeping...' is heart-rending. I have commented here before on how Coleridge in 'Frost at Midnight' gives the most touching description of home-sickness.

But O! how oft,  
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,  
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,  
To watch that fluttering stranger! and as oft  
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt  
Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,  
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang  
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,  
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me  
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear  
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!  
So gazed I, till the soothing things I dreamt  
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!  
And so I brooded all the following morn,  
Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye  
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:  
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched  
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,  
For still I hoped to see the stranger's face,  
Townsmen, or aunt, or sister more beloved,  
My playmate when we both were clothed alike!

How familiar I am with that 'swimming book'. When I was first at boarding-school my class-room faced out towards the entrance and I would gaze through the window trying by the strength of my wish to see my parents walking up the drive. This is an experience that is never quite resolved.

The early insecurity and sense of rejection and isolation haunted Coleridge ever after and affected his inner life and his relationships. For example, it is noticeable how often in his writings he speaks of the child crying and trying to

make his mother hear. He wanted a woman who would cosset him and give him the mothering he had missed. How fortunate he was in those who did! One must feel the greatest admiration, for example, for the Morgan sisters, as indeed for the long patience of Sara Hutchinson, not to mention Mrs. Gillman. But Holmes surely shows the other side of this nursing picture when he aptly refers us to Lamb's essay 'The Convalescent',<sup>12</sup> from which my choice of quotations in this context is as follows. 'To be sick is to enjoy monarchical prerogatives', and 'Supreme selfishness is inculcated upon him as his only duty'. What a splendid excuse illness is for self-indulgence and opting out! Coleridge criticized Wordsworth for self-absorbtion but provided him with worthy competition in that respect. His letters are full of descriptions of his bodily ills.

Part of the mind-set that Coleridge and I shared from our childhood experiences is a strong sense of injustice and a resentment against authority combined with powerlessness to resist.

Sense of intolerable wrong,  
And whom I scorned, those only strong!

My mother, when her patience ran out, would give me 'a good spanking', as the custom then was, 'to teach me a lesson'. It didn't, as I never made the connection between the crime and the punishment and merely felt impotent rage. No doubt Boyer's beatings would have had the same effect on Coleridge, indeed Crabb Robinson reports that, in his lecture on Education on 3rd May, 1808, referring to Christ's Hospital Coleridge 'spoke with great indignation and declared that even now his life is embittered by the recollection of ignominious punishment he suffered as a child'. Admittedly he came, in time, to see qualities to admire in his old schoolmaster and to be able to joke about him, as Lamb reports. 'Poor J.B.!—may all his faults be forgiven; and may he be wafted to bliss by little cherub boys, all head and wings, with no *bottoms* to reproach his sublunary infirmities'.<sup>13</sup>

We cannot know what bullying or homosexual acts may have taken place at Coleridge's all-male school and one would not wish to traduce it.

Deeds to be hid which were not hid  
Which all confused I could not know  
Whether I suffered, or I did: ...

He certainly had commerce with prostitutes at Cambridge, the time of his 'unchastities', as he said. One of his Notebook descriptions of terrifying dreams tells of sexual persecution both by 'a fat sturdy Boy' and 'a university harlot', of both 'a little weak contemptible wretch offering his services' and

<sup>12</sup> Holmes p.15 note

<sup>13</sup> Charles Lamb 'Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago', from *Essays of Elia*, ed. Jonathan Bate, Penguin 1987, pp. 15 and 23

‘The Harlot in white with her open bosom’ who ‘certainly was the Cambridge Girl (Sal Hall)—’<sup>14</sup> Some cryptic entries also suggest resisted masturbation. For example, ‘a completed Night-mair, as it gave the idea and *sensation* of actual grasp or touch contrary to *my* will, & in apparent consequence of the malignant will of the external Form.../an *abstract touch* /an *abstract grasp*—an *abstract weight*...’ This, he says, ‘though a true Night-mair was however a mild one. I cried out early, like a scarcely hurt child who knows himself within hearing of his Mother.’<sup>15</sup> Or there is the occasion when he awoke in the small hours. ‘I arose & as I past by the last window of the Room made *a vow* aloud /O me! that I ever should have had need to make such a Vow!’<sup>16</sup> He explains later in this entry that ‘I rose for this cause/I felt myself in pleasurable bodily feeling half-asleep...’ and earlier he had coined a word for it, ‘*narcissine*’. Guilt about sex, except in marriage, would doubtless have been inculcated into the boy as a matter of course in his upbringing, with tales of how the sin of masturbation would be punished by madness, as still used to be affirmed in the early years of the twentieth century.

The sense of unworthiness, first in what seems to the child to be indicated by the parent’s rejection of him and, secondly, in his guilt at not being able to live up to Draconian standards, must result in very low self-esteem. Coleridge often demonstrates this with the added self-reproach of his opium-drained will-power. In one of those 1814 letters to Cottle he writes,

O if to feel how infinitely worthless I am, how poor a wretch, with just free will enough to be deserving of wrath, & of my own contempt, & of none to merit a moment’s peace, can make a part of a Christian’s creed; so far I am a Christian—<sup>17</sup>

One way of dealing with an inferiority complex is to over-compensate by showing off. We see this in Coleridge from the time of his being his uncle’s pet prodigy, via Lamb’s picture of him in the cloisters of Christ’s Hospital discoursing on ‘Jamblicus or Plotinus... or reciting Homer in his Greek, or Pindar,’ to his later interminable monologues. Another way is to fall into despair. The great relief for man’s troubles is that each night he can forget them as he sinks into oblivion. ‘Oh sleep! it is a gentle thing,/Beloved from pole to pole!’ But what if one is deprived of that ‘Care-charmer Sleep’, that ‘innocent sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care?’ What if one has to say, ‘O sleep, O gentle sleep,/Nature’s soft nurse, how have I frighted thee?’<sup>18</sup> One of the most horrifying moments in De Quincey’s *Pains of Opium* is when he says, ‘And I awoke in struggles, and cried aloud—“I will sleep no more!”’<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> CN I 1726

<sup>15</sup> CN II 2468

<sup>16</sup> CN II 2495

<sup>17</sup> Griggs III Letter 920 p.478

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Daniel *Sonnets to Delia* liv, *Macbeth* II 1, *Henry IV Part II*, Act III i

<sup>19</sup> Thomas De Quincey *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* ed. Grevel Lindop World’s Classics, O.U.P. 1985 p.77

So, after the gentle beginning of the poem, what a shock when the reader is faced with the next section.

But yester-night I prayed aloud  
 In anguish and in agony,  
 Up-starting from the fiendish crowd  
 Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me:  
 A lurid light, a trampling throng,  
 Sense of intolerable wrong,  
 And whom I scorned, those only strong!  
 Thirst of revenge, the powerless will  
 Still baffled, and yet burning still!  
 Desire with loathing strangely mixed  
 On wild or hateful objects fixed,  
 Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!  
 And shame and terror over all!  
 Deeds to be hid which were not hid,  
 Which all confused I could not know  
 Whether I suffered or I did:  
 For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,  
 My own or others still the same  
 Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame.

A predisposition to bad dreams and allied imaginative fears in early childhood was terribly reinforced by opium, first given to him at Christ's Hospital when he had rheumatic fever. It was, of course, the universal panacea in those days and was as common and easily available as aspirin is now. Whether his night out-of-doors by the River Otter before his father's death contributed to his rheumatic disorders or not, it certainly did to his sense of being lost and separated from his parents. In a letter of February 1801, even the Night Wind 'pipes it's thin doleful climbing sinking Notes like a child that has lost its way and is crying aloud, half in grief and half in the hope to be heard by it's Mother'.<sup>20</sup>

In a terrible Notebook entry on his way to Malta in May 1804, only eight months after this poem was written, Coleridge speaks of

Sleep a pandemonium of all the shames and miseries of the past Life  
 from early childhood all huddled together, & bronzed with one  
 stormy Light of Terror and Self-torture/ O this is hard, hard,  
 hard...<sup>21</sup>

In May 1814 Coleridge sent to Henry Daniel some lines he called 'Diseased Sleep'. He wrote that they were 'a fragment from a larger poem, composed 1803, written as a letter & of course never intended to be published, and

<sup>20</sup> Griggs II Letter 377 p.669

<sup>21</sup> CN II 2091

which, I trust, never will be.<sup>22</sup> This was more than ten years after his letter to Southey of 1803 enclosing the poem 'Pains of Sleep' and only a couple of years before it was published in the volume we are remembering to-day!

O if for such such sufferings be,  
 Yet why, O God, yet why for me?  
 From low desires my Heart hath fled,  
 On Beauty hath my Fancy fed;  
 To be beloved is all I need,  
 And whom I love, I love indeed.  
 My waking thoughts with scorn repell  
 Loveless Lust, Revenge(ful) spell:—  
 O why should Sleep be made my Hell.

In this letter he calls the lines 'an exact and most faithful portraiture of the state of my mind under influences of incipient bodily derangement from the use of Opium, at the time that I yet remained ignorant of the cause, and still *mighty proud* of my supposed grand discovery of Laudanum, as the Remedy or Palliative of Evils, which itself had mainly produced...' If his memory is correct here the line, 'To know and loathe, yet wish and do' cannot relate to opium. But, of course, his testimony is not always reliable. Earlier, in a Notebook entry of December 1806, by which time he was no longer thus ignorant, he writes of the 'deleterious Action of *Fear*—fear of horrors in *Sleep*, driving me to dreadful remedies & stimuli, when awake, not for the present Sensation, but to purchase daily a wretched Reprieve from the torments of each night's Daemons/ selling myself to the Devil to avoid the Devil's own visitations & thereby becoming his *Subject*?'<sup>23</sup>

The interesting thing about the verses in the letter to Daniel is in their relation to the poem sent to Southey. What became the final couplet of the poem is present and was, indeed, the only part quoted in the letter to Thomas Wedgwood of September 16th 1803. But the other lines emphasize the fact that Coleridge has put behind him any of his past failings that might deserve punishment. 'From low desires my Heart hath fled.' His conscious mind is now blameless. 'My waking thoughts with scorn repell/ Loveless Lust, Revenge(ful) spell.' So why is he haunted by them in his sleep?

One of the consequences of what seems to the child to be rejection by the mother in banishing him either to relations elsewhere or to boarding-school is the conclusion that he must be worthless thus to be thrown out and to this Coleridge felt the added guilt of opium addiction. In a touching letter to Cottle in 1814 he says, 'I have prayed with drops of agony on my Brow, trembling not only before the Justice of my Maker, but even before the Mercy of my Redeemer. "I gave thee so many Talents. What hast thou done with them?"'<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Griggs III Letter 931 p.495

<sup>23</sup> CN II 2944

<sup>24</sup> Griggs III Letter 919 p.476

A couple of days later he speaks of ‘how infinitely worthless I am’.<sup>25</sup> Whatever one may think of the doctrine of the Atonement, one can see why Coleridge was shocked that Wordsworth should say that he did not feel the need of a Redeemer.<sup>26</sup>

Alongside the sense of his own failure went what could almost be called a strategy of evasion, grandiose schemes for future work nullified by apparently valid reasons for not carrying them out. When he decided that he had lost ‘what nature gave me at my Birth/ My shaping spirit of Imagination’, he fell back on abstract theory, which had always fascinated him but which was in itself a kind of escapism. As he says in *Biographia*, ‘I have sought a refuge from bodily pain and mismanaged sensibility in abstruse researches which exercised the strength and subtlety of the understanding without awakening the feelings of the heart...’ For a wonderful example of evasion by ratiocination let me recommend his discussion on Habit and Desire in the Notebook entry 1421. I was going to read part of it to you but feared that if I tried to do so I should be bewildered and you would be asleep! But I’ll have a try. Here goes. Picture in your mind that all the main nouns begin with a capital letter. I’ll try to indicate words that are emphasized in the text.

Is not Habit the Desire of a Desire?—As Desire to Fruition, may not the faint, to the consciousness *erased*, Pencil-mark-*memorials* or relicts of Desire be to Desire itself in its full prominence?—How far is Habit congenerous with Instinct?—/— If this were so, Why does Habit give facility? In order to understand this, I must first have understood the being of Difficulty—? May not the Desirelet, a, so correspond to the Desire, A, that the latter being excited may revert wholly or in great part to its exciting cause *a*, instead of sallying out of itself toward an external Object, B? <sup>27</sup>

Is that enough to give the flavour? There is considerably more before Coleridge gets to what is really preoccupying him, the awful thought that only his wife’s death, which his conscience will not allow him to hope for, could release him to enjoy ‘the greatest imaginable Happiness’. The truth is that ‘abstruse research’ cannot succeed in obliterating ‘the Natural man’. Suffice it to say that the entry that begins with this very abstract and theoretical passage ends with the words, ‘my Loneliness, my perpetual companion’. Does comparison of his philosophical and theological arguments with the first section of this poem perhaps demonstrate the contrast between cleverness and wisdom? Or is the mixture in his writings an example of what Seamus Perry delightfully calls ‘muddle’, a *desirable* state in which one can experience ‘the inability quiescently to respect the incompatibility of genuinely diverse kinds of

<sup>25</sup> Griggs III Letter 920 p.478

<sup>26</sup> HCR 24<sup>th</sup> May 1812

<sup>27</sup> CN I 1421

good’?<sup>28</sup> After his discussion of Habit and Desire expressed in an almost algebraic form, Coleridge has the honesty to admit to himself that the absence of his incompatible wife and the substitution of the other Sara would not reform his life. He would have to be ‘Self healed & renovated from all infirm Habits’ first—and of this he was incapable. As long as he was in the grip of opium he was helpless.

In his spoof letter of 1815 about Coleridge’s mock-death Lamb reported, ‘Poor Col., but two days before he died he wrote to a bookseller proposing an epic poem on “The wanderings of Cain”, in twenty-four books. It is said that he has left behind him more than forty thousand treatises in criticism and metaphysics, but few of them in a state of completion’.<sup>29</sup> How well he knew his friend! But it is not to be wondered at that Coleridge’s ‘reach should exceed his grasp’ if his days were overwhelmed by the experience of his nights.

So two nights passed: the night’s dismay  
 Saddened and stunned the coming day.  
 Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me  
 Distemper’s worst calamity.  
 The third night, when my own loud scream  
 Had waked me from the fiendish dream,  
 O’ercome with sufferings strange and wild,  
 I wept as I had been a child;  
 And having thus by tears subdued  
 My anguish to a milder mood,  
 Such punishments, I said, were due  
 To natures deepliest stained with sin, –  
 For aye entempesting anew  
 The unfathomable hell within,  
 The horror of their deeds to view,  
 To know and loathe, yet wish and do!  
 Such griefs with such men well agree,  
 But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?  
 To be beloved is all I need,  
 And whom I love, I love indeed.

We remember lines from ‘Dejection’,

‘Tis of a little Child  
 Upon a lonesome wild,  
 Not far from home, but she hath lost her way:  
 And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,  
 And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear.

Coleridge is asking my childhood’s philosophical question, ‘Why is everything

<sup>28</sup> Seamus Perry *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* O.U.P. 1999 p. 14

<sup>29</sup> *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb* Ed. Edwin W. Marris 1978 Vol. III Letter 310 p.205

so *unfair*?' He could understand if this night-time hell were a punishment for mortal sin but his transgressions were venial and long put behind him. Reading Graham Davidson's lecture from last year, in the *Coleridge Bulletin*, reminded me of the lines from 'Fears in Solitude' which he quotes:

The humble man who, in his youthful years,  
Knew just so much of folly, as had made  
His early manhood more securely wise.

Persistent and unrepentant criminals bring retribution to themselves, 'Such griefs with such men well agree/ But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?' The line 'To know and loathe, yet wish and do' is attributed to the really evil men who deserve such punishment but does it not recall the Notebook entry I quoted, though it is from 1806, several years after this poem was written, about 'selling myself to the Devil to avoid the Devil's own visitations'? Somehow I think Coleridge had a very good idea even in 1803 what it was 'To know and loathe, yet wish and do' in relation to Opium.

Yet one has to agree and sympathize with Coleridge about the unfairness of his fate. It is not just a case of maudlin self-pity. The drug made his life a hell and it is as though the cards were stacked against him from early days and in a continuing line from then on. Another of my youthful queries comes to mind. Why did the Creator, who was both omnipotent and omniscient, make Man who, He must have known, would be bound to fall? Why did the Creator give Coleridge such great gifts and then allow him, through no fault of his own, to become a slave to opium? As he says, in one of his letters to Cottle of 1814, 'I was seduced into the ACCURSED habit ignorantly'.<sup>30</sup> My youthful philosophical questions are childish because adults know that there is no use in asking them, but they will not go away and no amount of learned discussion of the exact nature of the Trinity or of whether Anselm anticipated by many years Descartes' Proof of Deity or whether, in Kathleen Coburn's words, 'Spinoza's idea of substance (God) is monotheistic or pantheistic'<sup>31</sup> can contribute one iota to the answering of them. All it can do is to distract the mind from depths of grief and failure by demonstrating the towering intellect taking on what seem to be profound and learned problems. For, of course, with due deference to Descartes and Archbishop Anselm, it is impossible to prove the existence of God—or to disprove it. Human minds are not programmed for such activity. Either way, it must be a matter of faith. Coleridge had committed himself to Christian belief, knowing that it can only be 'spiritually *apprehended*—*comprehended* it cannot be'. But no doubt it comforted him to apply his exceptional mind to theological complications knowing them to rest on a firm basis of belief in a loving and forgiving parent God.

Lamb could not equal Coleridge's gifts but he was no fool either. In their

<sup>30</sup> Griggs III Letter 919 p.476

<sup>31</sup> CN I 1500, note

only quarrel in the midst of a lifetime's friendship, he sent his friend 'Theses Quaedam Theologicae',<sup>32</sup> one of which asks 'Whether pure Intelligences can love?' The couplet that ends this poem asks only for love given and received. Only? and notice not in that order. Love received comes first. Anyone who has worked with difficult children recognizes the touching longing of the unlovable to be loved and the constant need, like the need for opium, by aberrant behaviour to make that love impossible. The initial reaching-out to give warmth and succour has to be all from one side.

To be beloved is all I need,  
And whom I love, I love indeed.

I suppose it all depends on what one means by love.

Yet, two hundred years later, here we all are, gathered to remember Coleridge with affection and respect. Despite the horrors—and let no one underestimate them—which, he told Southey, are 'a true portrait of my nights' and all the factors in his life which conspired against him, he achieved greatness. If he had, as half expected, died in Malta, he had already written enough superb poetry to keep his memory alive. But he seems to have carried out his duties in Malta efficiently and to have taken part in the necessary social life. After that, the miracle is the amount of work over his lifetime that Coleridge did achieve in spite of everything. It was as early as 1803 that he wrote in his Notebook, 'Seem to have made up my mind to write my metaphysical works, as *my Life*, & *in my Life*—intermixed with all the other events/ or history of the mind & fortunes of S.T.Coleridge'<sup>33</sup> So the idea of *Biographia Literaria* was born, though it did not begin to be implemented until 1815. Surely tribute should be paid to the long-suffering nobility of John Morgan who daily took Coleridge's dictation. His play *Remorse*, formerly *Osorio*, dating back to his Somerset days, was performed in 1813 and versions of his lectures as well as his other prose works are still in print. Thanks to Dr. Gillman, he became 'the Sage of Highgate', whose conversation Keats so delightfully recorded. Since then Lamb's joking reference to the tomes Coleridge left behind has not proved far wrong. . Now, with the *Magnum Opus*, I believe, about to make its full impact on an astonished public, we can suppose that, in a happy expression I recently heard applied to Joyce's *Ulysses*, there is enough to 'keep the professors wrestling forever'. With the publication of the last volume of the Notebooks Kathleen Coburn's wonderful work has been completed by Anthony Harding, who I think deserves a medal.

Anthony Harding had mentioned an autobiographical passage in a notebook entry of 1832 and, when I saw him a couple of weeks ago, I enquired about it, wondering how Coleridge's memory at the end of his life compared with his statements to Poole and elsewhere of an earlier time. Knowing that I

<sup>32</sup> Marris I Letter 33 p.128

<sup>33</sup> CN I 1515

only possess the first three volumes of the Notebooks—all I need as a rule—Anthony very kindly sent me a copy of the entry the minute he got back to Canada and it arrived yesterday, just in time for Kilve. It *is* an interesting comparison. Basically the facts are the same but, apart from a natural difference of tone, there are one or two passages that stand out. For example, he describes himself on arrival at Christ's Hospital, 'O what a change!—Deprest, moping, friendless poor Orphan, half starved...' He speaks too, without diffidence, of his superiority in bookwork to his 'form-fellows' and goes on, 'At 14 or at 12 I should have made as pretty a juvenile Prodigy as was ever emasculated & ruined by fond and idle wonderment. Thank heaven! I was flogged instead of flattered—' It is quite something to see Coleridge being grateful for flogging. He does go on to say, 'However as I climbed upward in the School, my lot was somewhat alleviated...' Then he makes no secret of his drinking and sexual activities at Cambridge. 'Whatever errors, or single acts of transgression I may have incurred from 20 to 23—in my 23rd year there was an end—and from my 23rd year I have not knowingly offended, in intemperance or unchastity'

Of his illness Coleridge uses technical terms and Anthony comments in his letter to me:

It is particularly interesting that Coleridge slips so easily into using medical terminology—clearly this is partly owed to J.H.Green and to James Gillman—but also he recalls how as a Bluecoat boy he "trudged" to the London Hospital to work on a voluntary basis as assistant to Dr. Saumarez to whom he'd evidently been referred by Luke Coleridge. Having taken perhaps excessive pride in the medical knowledge gained from this experience and from consulting medical journals, he says that he diagnosed and attempted to treat his own chronic illness (swelling of the joints and "bowel complaints"), by taking laudanum while also applying it externally—thus starting the "curse and slavery" of his life.

Coleridge also runs through the errors in theology which he successively fell into after 'I sported infidel! for which Boyer flogged me soundly'. That's what comes of reading Voltaire! But Coleridge ends '(with my heart I never did) abandon the name of Christ'.

I'm sure there is much more food for thought in this autobiographical passage from 1832, but, as you can imagine, I didn't have time. But I am most grateful to Anthony for sending it to me and getting it here so quickly.

What, though, about that love which he so much needed? If he did not achieve an ideal relationship with a woman, well who does? He *was* loved. Indeed he seems to have inspired devotion and admiration to a remarkable degree. People were mesmerized by his conversation and it does not seem to have worried them at all when they could not understand it! Though he must have been in many ways an impossible person, the list of friends who put up

with and cherished him is very long.

You gave me a tough assignment to deal with this grievous poem and I hope my approach through empathy has not laid me open to Lamb's disapproval. 'He is a fine fellow in spite of all his faults and weaknesses. Call him Coleridge; I hate *poor*, as applied to such a man. I can't bear to hear such a man pitied.'<sup>34</sup> Though we are all very familiar with it, I won't apologize for quoting Lamb's tribute to him after his death, as it seems to speak for many and seems a fitting ending.

... His great and dear spirit haunts me. I cannot think a thought, I cannot make a criticism on men or books, without an ineffectual turning and reference to him... Never saw I his likeness, nor probably the world can see again...<sup>35</sup>

From *The Coleridge Bulletin* New Series 25, Summer 2005. © Contributor

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<sup>34</sup> Crabb Robinson 1811

<sup>35</sup> Charles Lamb 'The Death of Coleridge' *Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. E.V. Lucas pp. 406-7