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Coleridge's Poetic Ally—Sir William Rowan Hamilton

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FEW OF COLERIDGE'S BIOGRAPHERS have referred to Sir William Rowan Hamilton (1805-1865), an Irish mathematician, Professor at the Trinity College, Dublin, and later President of Royal Irish Academy, though some of Coleridge's editors have noted him as one of Coleridge's young followers and as one of those who left records of Coleridge as a talker.¹ Hamilton was one of the leading figures in the development of mathematical science in Great Britain, and one of the modern scientists who built a mathematical foundation for the future development of quantum mechanics in the early 20th century. This prominent mathematician, as a devoted Coleridgean, remembered his meetings with Coleridge until his final years, stating that Coleridge had been his "Master."² Thomas L. Hankins, in his biographical and philosophical study, examines Coleridge's influence on Hamilton, focusing on Kantian ideas as its prime aspects.³ Coleridge's influence on Hamilton was not limited to a philosophical sphere, however; rather, it pervaded his work. Hamilton wrote to his fond sister Eliza, a poetess: "My love of the supernatural, exceeding that of most is one cause, doubtless, of my singular fondness for Christabel" (Graves, I, 448); he also claimed that he wrote a poem in a dream, which could be read, according to him, "perhaps with some curiosity";⁴ While stating that he admired "Keats, Shelley, Coleridge and Wordsworth," he also criticized Wordsworth's use of the word "mariner" in *The Brothers*, except that he liked "the sound of the word 'mariner,' were it only for Coleridge's *Ancient*" (Graves, II, 133). Moreover, he did not stop composing verses until he was in his fifties, though he remained a mediocre poet. His passion for poetry had impelled him to seek an outlet for it, which in turn had become his romantic narrative concerning the woman he loved, Catherine Disney Barlow. In a word, Hamilton was one of the last Romantics who had preserved his ideals of the unity of poetry and science in a secret yet persistent way. Hamilton wrote that he had "always aimed to infuse into my scientific progress something of the spirit of poetry, and felt that such

¹ See Richard W. Armour and Raymond F. Howes (eds.), *Coleridge the Talker* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), 231-235, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press,) I, lxi-lxiii. Hereafter cited as *TT* in the text, accompanied by references to volume and page numbers. Woodring comments that "The ideal listeners [to Coleridge's talk] were men trained in the sciences but interested in a broad range of humanistic subjects and feeling no rivalry with the white-haired sage" (lxi). Hamilton was one of these listeners.

² Robert Perceval Graves, *Life of Sir William Rowan Hamilton*, 3 vols., (1882-1889; New York: Arno Press, 1975), III, 145. Hereafter cited as Graves in the text, accompanied by references to volume and page numbers.

³ Thomas L. Hankins, *Sir William Rowan Hamilton* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), which is the best, and probably the only thorough study of Hamilton in his biographical and philosophical contexts. In the area of history of science, Hamilton has been best remembered as the inventor of the 'Hamiltonian formulation,' which had developed analytical mechanics and then quantum mechanics, as well as the discoverer of the 'quaternion,' a hyper-complex number of the form $w + xi + yj + zk$, where w, x, y, z are real numbers and i, j, k are imaginary units that satisfy certain conditions.

⁴ National Library of Ireland, Dublin, 5764, 171; Graves, II, 63. This reference is in his letter to his friend, Aubrey de Vere written in September, 1833. His use of the term "curiosity" apparently suggests Coleridge's prefatory note to "Kubla Khan."

infusion is essential to intellectual perfection” (Graves, I, 354); even in his later years, Hamilton, it was said, was used to saying, “I *live* by mathematics, but I *am* a poet” (De Morgan, 132).⁵

Just after he was appointed Andrew’s Professor of Astronomy at Trinity College in June, 1827, Hamilton visited Wordsworth at Rydal Mount with his friends. Hamilton wrote to his sister Eliza that Wordsworth and he “were taking a *midnight walk* together for a long, long, time, *without any companion* except the stars and our own burning thoughts and words” (Graves, I, 262). After this, they maintained their friendship with mutual respect, exchanging letters, and visiting each other.⁶ It should be noted that the 1810s and the 1820s, when Hamilton spent his early days nourishing his taste for poetry, was a time when, following the Act of Union in 1800, the Anglican political ascendancy in Ireland had succeeded in establishing an ascendancy of British culture among the ruling classes of Ireland. It is true that Hamilton was born in the early stage of the age of Union in the history of Ireland, and by the time that Hamilton became a Professor at Trinity, Wordsworth and Coleridge had already become distinguished British authors, a fact which might have had a strong appeal to Hamilton who had probably wanted a cultural milieu to which he could be emotionally attached. But Hamilton’s emotional attachment to Wordsworth and Coleridge, and especially to Coleridge, was something more than mere youthful enthusiasm. Hamilton’s visits to the Lakes continued until the death of Wordsworth, and their friendship was warmly maintained through their actual conversations and exchanges of letters. In a word, Hamilton’s memory of the old poet always bore a touch of his physical presence.⁷ In the case of Coleridge, on the other hand, Hamilton only met him on two occasions, yet Coleridge gave him philosophical inspiration ever after, as an oracular voice whose resonances were constantly heard. The influence of Kant on Hamilton was indeed important for the development of his metaphysics in relation to mathematics, yet it was Coleridge whom Hamilton considered more significant than other factors in his involvement with Kantian philosophy as well as his philosophy of mathematics. Wordsworth was said to have remarked many times that Hamilton reminded him of Coleridge. Hamilton’s speculative tendency to abstraction and his idealism were distinctly Coleridgean. And with intellectual power and idealistic visions, Hamilton’s way of taking hold of Wordsworth’s attention was probably similar to what

⁵ This is in the anonymous obituary of Hamilton in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* of 1866, pp. 128-134, which is attributed to De Morgan. See Graves, III, 216-219. De Morgan adds a comment to these words of Hamilton: “Such an aphorism may surprise our readers, but they should remember that the moving power of mathematical *invention* is not reasoning, but imagination,” and “We no longer apply the homely term *maker* in literal translation of *poet*: but discoverers of all kinds, whatever may be their lines, are *makers*; or, as we now say, have the creative genius” (132).

⁶ Hamilton asked Wordsworth to visit Dublin, and Wordsworth went on an Irish tour with Dorothy in 1829. See Graves, I, 310-317 and Juliet Barker, *Wordsworth A Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 410-412. See also *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years, 1821-1853*, ed. E. De Selincourt, revised by Alan G. Hill, 4 vols., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978-1988), II, 114-126. Hereafter cited as *Later Years* in the text, accompanied by references to volume and page numbers.

⁷ Yet Hamilton continued to visit Rydal Mount and Grasmere even after Wordsworth’s death, which Hankins calls his “rituals”; on one occasion he “kissed Dora Wordsworth’s gravestone by moonlight” (351).

Wordsworth experienced when he first befriended with Coleridge in 1797.⁸ Later Hamilton's friend, Aubrey de Vere, wrote to Coleridge's daughter, Sara: "I have been lately reading a letter from my great scientific friend, Sir William Rowan Hamilton, Astronomer Royal of Ireland, of whom Wordsworth told me that he was the only man of genius to whom he would apply the title of 'wonderful' except your father."⁹

From 1830, Hamilton became busy with the idea of visiting London. Hamilton said, with an emphatic tone, that "notwithstanding the number of points of scientific and other interest connected with that great metropolis, my highest hope and inducement in visiting it was the prospect, or at least the chance, of seeing and listening to Coleridge" (Graves, I, 477). In this period, Hamilton not only read Coleridge's poems, but also attentively studied his philosophical works, including *The Friend*, and *Aids to Reflection*. It was quite natural for him to have a wish to see Coleridge. It might also have been truly helpful for Hamilton if Wordsworth gave him a letter of introduction to Coleridge. But Wordsworth's information was rather discouraging. Wordsworth wrote about his last meeting with Coleridge as follows:

You are interested about Mr. Coleridge; I saw him several times lately, and had long conversations with him. It grieves me to say that his constitution seems much broken up. I have heard that he has been worse since I saw him. His mind has lost none of its vigour, but he is certainly in that state of bodily health that no one who knows him could feel justified in holding out the hope of even an introduction to him as an inducement for your visiting London.

(*Later Years*, II, 364-65).

By the end of 1831, Hamilton, when he sent many of his poems to Wordsworth, had to write that "London project is broken off for the present" (Graves, II, 486). Although he said that he gave up "all hope of seeing Coleridge," it was just "for the present" (Graves, I, 486), but he was determined sometime to visit the old sage. Wordsworth's reply started with the words, "You send me Showers of verses, which I receive with much pleasure" (22 November, 1831; *Later Years*, II, 454). But as far as Coleridge was concerned, Wordsworth's remark was still not a happy one: "It would have grieved me had you been unfurnished with an introduction from me to Mr Coleridge, yet I know not how I could have given you one—he is often so very unwell" (*Later Years*, II, 455).

It was not until March the following year, 1832, that Hamilton set out for

⁸ See Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 355; Graves, I, 269. Terry Eagleton in his *Scholars and Rebels in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), considers this was "a dubious compliment at best" (88). Eagleton seems to neglect the change of mood in Hamilton, who in his youth was cheerful and lively, but in his later years rather sullen and difficult. Considering the fact that Wordsworth knew him from his youth, the energetic, imaginative, and sometimes explosive talk of Coleridge seems to have had something in common with Hamilton's talk in his youth.

⁹ Aubrey de Vere, *Recollections of Aubrey De Vere* (New York: Edward Arnold, 1897), 200.

London, and on this occasion he seemed not to have asked Wordsworth to write a letter of introduction to Coleridge. Instead, he went his own way. After landing at Liverpool, Hamilton visited the Grange, close to Liverpool, where the Miss Lawrences who ran a girl's school lived. The eldest of the sisters was named Arabella, and Hamilton was introduced to her by Maria Edgeworth in 1825, and since then Hamilton and his sisters had all become acquainted with her, exchanging letters. This visit seems to have been planned in order to procure a letter of introduction to Coleridge, as Arabella Lawrence was a former governess in the Crompton family, and Dr Crompton was an early supporter of Coleridge's plan of establishing a school for young people in some of the growing industrial cities in 1796;¹⁰ in those years, Coleridge's esteem for the Cromptons was so high that he remarked that "Mrs Crompton is an Angel: & Dr Crompton a truly honest & benevolent man" (*CL*, I, 305). After Wordsworth modestly declined to give him a letter of introduction to Coleridge, Hamilton might have tried to use all his intelligence relating to Coleridge. On his visit to the Miss Lawrences, he wrote however to his sister Eliza: "I had the pleasure of hearing many anecdotes of the early life of Coleridge [which included the story of Mary Evans], and of getting, what I had not all expected, a letter of introduction to him which may be very useful" (*Graves*, I, 535). It would surely have seemed impolite to the elderly ladies who welcomed him so much if he revealed this secret, yet the prime purpose of the visit was just to get a key to open the gate to the sage at Highgate.

Arabella Lawrence's letter of introduction exerted an influence on Coleridge, as it was almost entirely unexpected, but it triggered a chain of recollections and thoughts in his mind. Coleridge's reply to Arabella Lawrence starts with moving words: "You, and *dear*, DEAR, DEAR Mrs Crompton, are among the few Sunshiny Images that endear my past life to me—" (*CL*, VI, 890). Coleridge promised her that he would welcome her young friend, saying "I shall endeavor to see Mr Hamilton" (*CL*, VI, 891). After receiving the letter from Miss Lawrence, however, he continued to brood over "Unitarianism" as he considered it "the very *Nadir* of Christianity" (*CL*, VI, 893), while the Lawrence family, in Coleridge's view, had so far suffered the disease of Unitarianism. On 18th March, Hamilton called on Coleridge, saw Mrs Gillman, and found him not well, but on 20th he was able to have "an interview with him of an hour and a-half" (*Graves*, I, 538). The second visit was on 23rd, and they met for about two hours. According to Hamilton, Coleridge "spoke with great animation, and, . . . great eloquence" (*Graves*, I, 552). Coleridge continued talking to Hamilton in spite of being served dinner, and Hamilton even felt that "in modesty [he] wished to [go]" (*Graves*, I, 541). Moreover, when Coleridge spoke about his own poem—the title of which was "Time, Real and Imaginary,"—with some satisfaction, it might strongly have suggested to Hamilton a topic for his metaphysical speculation; his idea of

¹⁰ See *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-1971), VI, 890n. Hereafter cited as *CL* in the text, accompanied by references to volume and page numbers.

“algebra as a science of pure time,” might be poetically expressed as time, real and imaginary, since that idea was formulated as follows: time in algebra consisting of real numbers and imaginary numbers. This meeting was stimulating even to Coleridge. While still in London, Hamilton received a letter from Coleridge in which Coleridge said that “... be assured I have been comforted by the fact you have given me, that there are men of profound science who yet feel that *Science* even in its most flourishing state, needs a *Baptism*, a Regeneration in Philosophy” (April 6, 1832; *CL*, VI, 897). Soon after this meeting, Hamilton sent a letter to Wordsworth, writing about his visits to Coleridge. Wordsworth’s response to Hamilton’s report this time was rather moving:

It gives me much pleasure that you and Coleridge have met... He and my beloved Sister are the two Beings to whom my intellect is most indebted and they are now proceeding as it were *pari passu* along the path of sickness, I will not say toward the grave but I trust toward a blessed immortality. (*Later Years*, II, 535-36)

Wordsworth continued to worry about Coleridge’s health, saying, in February in the following year, that “I fear that Mr Coleridge is more than usually unwell” (*Later Years*, II, 590). However, Hamilton had one more chance to see Coleridge at Cambridge in June 1833, at the annual assembly of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Suddenly the plan to attend the meeting was fixed, and Coleridge went there, escorted by James Gillman and Joseph Henry Green. Coleridge was warmly welcomed by men of science including Hamilton, and he was very pleased. He talked about his experience at Cambridge to Henry Nelson Coleridge as follows: “My emotions at revisiting Cambridge were at first overwhelming. I could not speak for an hour; yet my feelings were upon the whole very pleasurable, and I have never, of late years at least, passed three days of such great enjoyment, and healthful excitement of mind and body” (*TI*, I, 392-93). It is clear that Coleridge’s youthful emotion was agitated by the sight of Cambridge, but the revolutionary years he spent there had passed far away, and he could enjoy staying at Trinity College with other gentlemen. Hamilton later remembered the night at the Cambridge meeting which he spent with Coleridge as follows: “I said to Coleridge... at Cambridge, that I had read most of his published works: but, by way of being very honest, I added, But, sir, I am not sure that I understand them all” (Graves, II, 623). Coleridge replied, “The question is... whether I understand them all myself” (Graves, II, 623).

Hamilton’s strong wish to be a poet, or to have an ideal vision for poetry, did not result in a fine piece of poetry. Instead, while his poetic emotions sought their object ever after, in the mean time he began narrating the story of his love for Catherine as a romantic tale. Hamilton first met her on August 17th, 1824, and she married a clergyman named Barlow the following year. Many of his romantic narratives remain in his unpublished letters. Hamilton

married Helen Bayly in 1833, and they had three children. But Helen often became ill, and his household was liable to be in difficulties. Sooner or later, Hamilton found himself harbouring a secret love for Catherine.¹¹ In 1845, his college friend Thomas Disney visited the Observatory with his sister, Catherine, and after that, they exchanged letters, which Hamilton copied out by shorthand while burning the originals. Disturbed by her own emotion towards Hamilton, and by her own mental instability, Catherine attempted to commit suicide, but was saved. Her separation from her husband continued, though not legally. The reality of their relationship was not so romantic, but rather troublesome, and might cause a public attack on both. It may be true that they both retained their youthful feelings they had when they first met. Later he remembered that “it is almost curious to me to recall how ‘platonic’, how sexless, or at least how perfectly fraternal” his love to her was; it began “by a sudden burst of boyish admiration for a rare, but fading beauty”.¹² More than thirty years later, Hamilton vividly remembered the moment when he first saw her—it was his ‘spot of time.’ He had “since made pilgrimage,” according to him, “more than once, to the mansion where we first met, now fallen with much decay, & passed into other hands; and have kissed, in the twilight, alone, the spot whereon I first saw rest the feet of that Beautiful Vision!”¹³

When Catherine’s illness became worse, Hamilton went to see her several times. Regarding his interviews with her, he wrote to his friends in variety of ways. Mr and Mrs Hassell were among those friends. Just after Catherine’s death, Hamilton wrote to Mr and Mrs Hassell as follows:

The marriage of the lady to whom this letter relates, was a constrained one, & from the very first (as I long afterwards came to know) was not a happy union: yet during a long course of years she contrived (as I have heard and believe) to discharge, with the most exemplary propriety, all duties of a wife, a mother, & a Christian: and was, to the last, the idol of her own family, & a cherished favourite with all her acquaintances. At length her health of body, & (in some degree) of mind, broke down—.¹⁴

Hamilton continues to write about one of their last meetings:

Another time I asked her [Catherine], did she remember some little occurrence of almost thirty years ago: to which questions, with a sweet yet sad, & (as I thought) almost reproachful, but still celestial smile, she answered, “Do I?” and then, to prove to me that “her memory was better than I thought,” she repeated several lines of mine, not exactly what would be called love-verses, although (no

¹¹ Hankins gives detailed information about the relationship between Hamilton and Catherine, especially after the 1840s (347-358).

¹² National Library of Ireland, Dublin, 5765, 599. This is a letter to Aubrey de Vere, dated October 18th 1855.

¹³ National Library of Ireland, Dublin, 5765, 599. See also Hankins, 351 and Graves, II, 648.

¹⁴ “Obs Near D, Dec 30/53 [1853]”; Trinity College Library, Dublin, MS 1492, 123.5, (p.169).

doubt) inspired by love, which I had given (or repeated) to her, so long ago as 1824, & of which I have preserved no copy, but which sounded sweetly from her lips, though her voice was little more than a whisper. As verses, they are lost—but I am well content that they should now sleep for even in oblivion, after having been so long, & with such faithful affection, preserved, in my dear & sacred guardianship of her loving but innocent remembrance.¹⁵

Hamilton ended this series of letters by referring to the Ancient Mariner:

The Ancient Mariner of Coleridge is described as being under the impulse of a spell, which constrained *him* to talk his tale to some selected persons, & obliged *them* to listen.

“I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;...”

But even the Ancient Mariner at least released the Wedding Guest; and it is time for me now to release you & Mrs Hassell from the position of listeners to my own story.¹⁶

In his Introductory Lecture on Astronomy in 1832, Hamilton depicted the life of a mathematician as similar to that of the Ancient Mariner who is on a voyage: “as on this earth of ours must sometimes happen, he [a mathematician] has sent forth his wishes and hopes from that lonely ark, and they return to him, having found no resting-place: while he drifts along the turbulent current of passion, and is tossed about by the storm and agony of grief, some sunny bursts may visit him, some moments of delightful calm may be his, when his old habits of thought recur” (Graves, I, 643-644). This time, however, he was a mathematician turning into a poet, and the focus shifts into the time after the voyage; he was looking for a person who would listen to his own story. The act of telling his own story was for Hamilton that of sublimating his own passion. Indeed he was possessed by his own conception and images of love at the first sight, burdened with an inner passion which had ever sought for its outlet.

¹⁵ Trinity College Library, Dublin, MS 1492, 123.5, (p.163).

¹⁶ Trinity College Library, Dublin, MS 1492, 123.5, (pp.172-173).