SMALL COMPASS, WIDE RANGE

Thoughts on ‘Reply to a Lady's Question’

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1. pure simplicity

I HAPPENED TO BE READING A REVIEW of the *Poems of Coleridge*, edited by Derwent and Sara Coleridge, published by Moxon in 1854, that appeared in the *Quarterly Review* CXXV (July 1868) on pages 78-106. It is unsigned but was written by John Rickards Mozley: the first of two he published on nineteenth-century poets in which Clough emerges as the central figure a year later. What he says about Coleridge in a review of contemporary poets is consistently favourable but surprisingly unspecific and I will quote it before I am through. Enough now to say that it remains a muddle of generalities that mean something if you happen to agree, and mean nothing if you don't. One of the reasons why this is so may be because Mozley was writing for a group of Cambridge writers who already held Coleridge in high esteem — namely, John Grote, Henry Sidgwick, Alfred Marshall, and others like.

Mozley's argument concentrates on the poem I call ‘Reply to a Lady's Question’ in *Poetical Works* no.656 (PW I 1106-07), because that is the title of the version Coleridge most properly finished. It is also known as ‘Love, Hope, and Patience in Education’ in Ernest Hartley Coleridge's volumes (EHC I 481-82) and elsewhere. I will print my version here with line-numbers and a few notes on the rhyming pattern.

O’er wayward Childhood would’st thou hold firm rule,		a
Yet sun thee in the light of Happy faces,		b
LOVE, HOPE and PATIENCE—-these must be *thy* GRACES,		b
And in thy own heart let them first keep school!		a
For as old Atlas on his broad neck places	5	b
Heaven’s starry Globe and there sustains ìt: so		c
Do these bear up the little World below		c
Of **Education**—-**Patience**, **Love** and **Hope**.		d/c
Methinks, I see them group’d in seemly shew,		c
The straiten’d Arms uprais’d, the Palms aslope,	10	d above
And Robes that touching as adown they flow		c
Distinctly blend, like snow emboss’d on snow.		c
O part them never! If HOPE prostrate lie,		e
LOVE too will sink and die.		e
But Love is subtle and will proof derive	15	f/e
From her own life, that Hope is yet alive:		f/e
And bending o’er, with soul-transfusing eyes		g/f/e

And the low murmurs of the Mother Dove, h
Wooes back the fleeting spirit and half-supplies: g/f/e
Thus Love repays to **Hope** what **Hope** first gave to **Love**! h

Yet haply there will come a weary day, i
When overtask'd at length j
Both **Love** and **Hope** beneath the load give way. i
Then with a Statue's smile, a Statue's strength j
Stands the mute Sister, **Patience**, nothing loth, k
And both supporting does the work of both. k

Mozley claims without offering any reason that the 'Reply' is Coleridge's greatest poem. This is a view shared by only one other critic, George Craik in 1834. As far as I know, no one else has described why they should think as he does — that the poem is filled with

> distinctive merits … that] are blended in the harmony of that wide experience which comes with declining years … Wordsworth, having done his task, had nothing more to say; Coleridge's task never approached completion. (80, 94).

The words were a challenge to pay more attention to this poem than I had hithertofore, when I passed over it as a dutiful exercise. I'll begin with the obvious.

First, I would note the skill with which the pace of regular 10-syllable lines is varied. The movement is contrived by subtle variations that occur in lines 2 and 3, 5 and 6, 10, 14, 19 and 20, and 22. So, to take each of these variations in turn, the extra part-syllable (in 'faces' and 'graces') added onto lines 2 and 3 has a simple purpose: it draws some slight attention to the major players in the conundrum presented by the poem. While the continuation of the same feature at the beginning of the second stanza (line 5), which repeats the b-rhyme from stanza 1, underlines the same point. Line 6 also has eleven syllables, the last one beginning an explanation that is destined to overtake the argument we thought we were reading. Coleridge calls attention to the pause with the backward-leaning accent he places on the ì of 'ìt,' in case you missed it.

One might also notice here the o-sounds that link '**Hope**' and 'aslope' in lines 8 and 10 with the more clipped 'loth' and 'both' at the very end of the poem (lines 25 and 26). But going back now to line 13, it protracts its ten syllables with a strong medial hiatus, while line 14 seems to enlarge its six syllables in a matching way as it articulates the heavy consequence. The following lines replay the action more slowly over again by building the same argument to the same conclusion. Line 19 has an extra syllable, and line 20 — 'Thus Love repays to **Hope** what **Hope** first gave to **Love**!' — has an extra two syllables, which make it the longest line in this short poem. Line 22 matches line 14's six syllables but is heard in a wholly different way: it points upward and outward, on a rising rhythm, towards a surprising conclusion that was not anticipated before. Inevitable collapse has given way to a new promise

that, finally, 'both supporting does the work of both.' The disappearance of two graces makes way for a third, Patience, in which the earlier ones appear to be born anew.

There are of course other forces at work, although I must admit that when one lingers over Coleridge's choices they seem the more powerful for being instinctive. He thought of his poem from the outset as a whole and projected it as such. The unity and development of the first three stanzas is subtle: lines 1 to 14 make a perfect sonnet. The mirrored construction of the last two stanzas, in which two matching quatrains are wrapped within symmetrically-placed couplets overall (I mean, setting 'derive-alive' against 'loth-both'), which delivers a complicated but perfect turnaround. Coleridge manages the syllables to foreground the collapse of the Hope and Love duet, and then the survival of 'the mute Sister, **Patience**.' The entire ensemble, working together in stanzas 2 and 3, plays on o-sounds ('Hope' and 'aslope' being overtaken by the cascade of 'so,' 'below,' 'shew,' 'flow,', 'snow'): all this with lines 13 and 14 contrasting 'lie' and 'die' with the variant o-sounds in the closing lines ('loth' and 'both.')

Notice how in all this the enclosed pattern of rhyme is taken up and worked forward; and then varied afresh as it repeats the opening pattern; and is further turned completely around with your memory resting on 'Hope' alone. What is utterly lost is surmounted by the gain: what was invisible before emerges from nowhere to become the unexpected reward. The two shortest lines in the poem (14 and 22) provide the energy on which the case will rest: 'LOVE too will sink and die' writes an elegy on a broken cause, while 'When overtask'd at length' points towards its successor, whose roots lie deeper.

Of course, it is easy for a anyone who 'studies' English to read a poem in this way. It frequently comes back to a teacher as a dull exercise in which a conscientious student ticks off the scansion as if it held a magical property in its own right. I do hope that what I have provided does more than this to draw attention to the poem's signal properties. What I would stress as almost miraculous is the way all Coleridge's arrangements, with their checks and hesitations and balances, are construed as parts of a total enterprise. The whole poem moves forward as a living, interconnected thing, as if he had worked out the total sonic structure before he fitted words to it. Perhaps he indeed did do something like that, and there is every reason to think so.

One can get carried away by Coleridge's facility with matters of sound. Remember Wordsworth's words to Justice Coleridge. 'He said, that when he {Coleridge] was intent on a new experiment in metre, the time and labour he bestowed were inconceivable; that he was quite an epicure in sound.'[1] Every occasion was a fresh challenge; every poem presented a new problem to be solved, and very few poems repeated the pattern of previous occasions. One might note a similar variation of movement and inter-connection of closed quatrains in 'The Improvisatore,' but here in the 'Reply' the linkages are precise

[1] *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (3 vols. London: Edward Moxon, 1876), III 427.

and tailored absolutely to the job in hand.

Among other things to be mentioned, I've taken for granted the most important. That is, that the scriptural associations of the words on which this poem is built are central, and one would be foolish not to be aware of what St Paul and others wrote about them. Patience is for Paul the quality that underlies Love and Hope. It does not have to do with other persons (Love), nor with the Self (Hope), but with God: it underlies the two other qualities and sustains them. Patience means more than tolerance, or resignation, or forbearance. It involves trusting God that if things do not happen in your time they will happen in His. Many Biblical sources profess the same thing. 'I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry' (Psalms 40:1); 'Be ye strong therefore, and let not your hands be weak: for your work shall be rewarded' (2 Chron 15:7). All this and more: 'But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it' (Romans 8:25).

The word 'patience' thereby connects with God's Grace and makes the Classical Graces something more than a version of the three daughters of Zeus. One might also note that 'grace' in the Old Testament often translates a Hebrew word meaning bending or stooping in kindness: that 'both supporting does the work of both.' Alternatively, one might notice the 'low murmurs of the Mother Dove' in line 18. Mozley mistakenly reads 'Mother Love,' while one should instead be thinking of the Biblical Dove, which communicates God's will and is one of the forms the Holy Spirit takes when it communicates God's will to man (e.g. Matthew 3:16-17). Seen in this way, Coleridge paints the reciprocal relationship between Hope and Love in stanza 5 for what it already is: a product of God's grace, like Patience. This poem of Coleridge's, read slowly and with one's wits about one, turns out to be wonderfully simple, as well as complicated, although I repeat that I didn't see the point at first.

2. so is it all so simple?

I confess that I did not see the point because I knew so many poems which rehearsed the changing places in Coleridge's mind of Hope and Love. The two characters act out a drama in his mind throughout the second half of his life, and indeed he returned to the dialogue at the very end of his writing days. (I refer here to 'The Improvisatore' and 'Alice du Clós.') The introduction of Patience into the 'Reply' seemed unexplained and anomalous. And what cemented this obstruction in my response was that 'The Improvisatore' appeared to trace a heartfelt story of 'HOPE keeping LOVE, LOVE HOPE alive,' in which HOPE was 'struck dead' and 'left CONTENTMENT in her stead' (lines 31, 65, 66).

Contentment is not a word with the Biblical overtones of Patience. And so it was left unexplained, or at best I supposed it a secular term that fitted the context of 'The Improvisatore.' In his 'Ode on the Departing Year,' Coleridge. had been able to

recentre my immortal mind

> In the long sabbath of high self-content:
> Cleans'd from the fleshly Passions that bedim
> God's Image, Sister of the Seraphim (167-70);

and later, in 'Dejection: An Ode,' he had been able to foresee a future in which he would be 'still and patient, all I can' (line 88). In other words, the 'CONTENTMENT' of 'The Improvisatore' is not a mistake. This poem does not reach the 'high self-content' and 'patience' of Coleridge's much earlier poems: it appears to be a short-term solution to a different kind of poem, which is an answer to Letitia Landon's *The Improvisatrice* and the fashion it established.

Setting the parallel narrative of 'The Improvisatore' to one side, then, I first assumed that in the 'Reply' Coleridge was describing the end of his dreams: that it signalled resignation and abandonment of a lifelong, life-giving fantasy. It seemed a poem without an answer, because it appeared to state an unequivocal giving-up: a retreat to a different place, something like but more stark than Contentment. In short, the ending appeared to be too truncated — too implausible — to carry the larger part of the poem, describing loss, to look anything like success. I read the 'Reply' as an inexplicable failure: a failed attempt to overwrite Patience onto a failed dialogue of Love and Hope. Indeed, a kind of 'Work without Hope.'

But there is a precedent for the kind of ending Coleridge supplies, and I only saw it when I realised his model was George Herbert. Herbert wrote numerous poems that end in such a way: that move for several stanzas in a single inevitable direction only to recover in their closing lines with an appeal beyond the human terms they have taken for granted. Take for example Herbert's second 'Jordan' poem, that bustles through two stanzas describing the poet's efforts to articulate his religious belief, only to realise at the last that

> There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:
> Copie out only that, and save expense.[2]

The same manoeuvre is repeated in 'The Collar.' The speaker asserts his right to do as he pleases for the better part of the poem:

> But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
> At every word,
> Me thought I heard one calling, *Child!*
> And I reply'd, *My Lord.* (*Works*, 153-54)

Or again in 'Redemption,' where the tenant-speaker turns this way and that to find his rich landlord to pay his rent; until, having given up, he hears

> a ragged noise and mirth
> Of theeves and murderers: there I him espied,
> Who straight, *Your suit is granted*, said, & died (*Works*, 40)

[2] *The Works of George Herbert*, ed T. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, corrected edition 1959), 103. References hereafter incorporated in the text as *Works*.

One could continue the list, and they are all poems that became familiar to Coleridge in his later years, although he had earlier read Herbert's poetry only for its 'quaintness—in short, only to laugh at.'[3] That is, while he earlier thought them 'a riddle of words.' they afterwards appeared more of 'an enigma of thoughts,'[4] and he came to recognise the trope as one in which the usual voice of the poet is overtaken by another, that of God. In fact, as Herbert scholars point out, it was adapted by Herbert from Philip Sidney, who used it to great effect in the first sonnet of his *Astrophil and Stella* sequence (1591). Sidney's well-known sonnet opens with 'Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,' and ends after thirteen more lines of increasingly frustrated effort with "Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart, and write."' The Patience that ends Coleridge's 'Reply' has similarly always been there, although this might seem as counter-intuitive as it did to Sidney.. We do not have to suppose it has been inserted and supercharged by sleight of hand. It is like all the elements that fuse and go towards making Herbert's poem, 'Prayer [no.1]':

> Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,
> The land of spices; something understood. (*Works*, 51)

So Love and Hope are present at the close, 'supported' but very much alive. Patience may be silent for the moment but the job of teaching and learning continues. One might also note that Love and Hope continue very much alive in their different ways in 'Alice du Clós' and 'The Garden of Boccaccio.' I mean, Alice's hopes are raised and muddled by 'Ovid's mazy tale of Loves' she has just been reading; and, in the other poem, 'Ovid's *Holy Book of Love's sweet Smart!*' is prominent among Boccaccio's possessions. Patience is bonded to the other Graces from the beginning like 'snow emboss'd on snow' (line 12).[5]

This is so, but then why should we believe that '**Patience**, nothing loth,' holds the power to turn this 'Reply to a Lady's Question' around? Why should we take the assertion that the strength to suffer without complaining should actually replace the live dialogue that has given the poem its life? We are told that Patience is willing, she is strong, she is cheerfully mute, and we are only told in addition that she is 'nothing loth.' Coleridge's list sounds like a repetition of silent qualities in a situation that demands proof of active strength to succeed. Is Patience in this poem just a statue, manufactured by an artist like the sculptor Sir Francis Chantry?[6] Does it merely 'stand' in an ensemble to support the exhausted principals? Or can it — like the solitary, stilled figure of the blind 'Old Man' of 'Limbo, 'Lip touching Lip, all moveless' (*PW* I 883) —

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[3] To William Collins, 6 December 1818: *Collected Letters*, ed. Griggs, IV 893.

[4] *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (2 vols. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), II 94.

[5] And compare 'A Snow-drop in a tuft of Snow!' in 'Alice du Clós' line 24

[6] As Coleridge once considered. See my edition of *Poetical Works* -- Reading Text and Variorum Text -- for the reasons why this possibility was quickly rejected.

save this other poem, Nicodemus-like, from disaster?[7]

3. the unique space in which the poem moves

I suggest we look again at the parenthetical phrase, 'nothing loth,' and ask what it means. It occurs in a fraught passage of *Paradise Lost*. Adam

> forbore not glance or toy
> Of amorous intent, well understood
> Of Eve, whose eye darted contagious fire.
> Her hand he seized, and to a shady bank,
> Thick overhead, with verdant roof embowered,
> He led her nothing loth: flowers were the couch,
> Pansies, and violets, and asphodel,
> And hyacinth, earth's freshest softest lap. (IX 1034-41)

What could 'nothing loth' mean but sex in a different way than the pair had experienced it before? 'Work without Hope' and 'The Improvisatore' both describe a world of fallen grace which is about to be lost — where 'Passion's flowers all fall or fade.' But, at the same time, in 'The Improvisatore,' the Eve who departs this scene is again described as 'sinless.' This is not a mistake, and in the 'Reply' Coleridge transfers Milton's phrase describing the recently fallen, amorous, joyous Eve to Patience, of all characters. I make the assumption that he must have known what he was doing; it must have been deliberate. The word '**Patience**' here is stretched beyond its conventional passive meaning. So we are forced to ask why?

The poem, as I read it, pivots first on the central lines—

> O part them never! If HOPE prostrate lie,
> LOVE too will sink and die.

—with the following stanza repeating the point, while opening the possibility that LOVE and HOPE might one day die. And when one moves on, through the last lines where this does not happen as has been threatened, it is made to seem absolutely correct by Coleridge's provocative reference to Eve, the first sinner, and God's Patience with her. The shift from picturing Patience as a doughty Atlas is a risk whose generosity is elevating. Only Eve, with that reminder 'nothing loth,' would suffice. She will not be excluded from the scheme: indeed, she will rescue it. The balance of the poem suddenly tilts forward to overtake what might have been an elegy, and makes it a celebration. When PATIENCE steps into the breach at a critical point in the situation she is a willing, active and essential part of the tripartite unity, a key element in the dynamic of the whole. This is a very different figure from the "next to Best" CONTENTMENT at the end of 'The Improvisatore' (*PW* I 1062).

[7] Peter Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 326-28 cites Angus Fletcher and Henry Vaughan on Nicodemus, in addition to Harold Bloom on this moment as 'one of the great and genuinely difficult passages in Coleridge's poetry.'

I accept that God's patience passes understanding, and yet this inscrutability is Coleridge's point in Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit (*SW&F* 1111-71): our salvation depends not upon infallible proofs but human witnesses. To say it again, the book of Christianity is completed by personal testaments, not documented evidence. A lot of it is difficult to believe — is obviously unbelievable — but that was always the case. Coleridge's belief was beset by personal issues but the orientation of his pressing-on did not seriously waver after the pivotal crisis in Malta. Mozley was well aware of this — after all, he was the nephew of both Newman brothers: of the Cardinal who said yes to Coleridge's 'TRY IT' (*AR* 202), and his sceptical brother Francis who did so with negative results. The phrase echoes through the anthology in which Mozley's essay appears, although in the debased sense that John Sterling and Carlyle made famous.[8]

I will not press the point, other than to note that such a generous interpretation of Eve is not new. Milton laid emphasis on her innately human characteristics when he introduced her in *Paradise Lost* Book IV, yielding to Adam

> with coy submission, modest pride,
> And sweet reluctant amorous delay (lines 310-11).

Such a figure is the object of pursuit in Coleridge's love poems from early days where, in poems like 'Absence: A Poem,' his 'eye reverted' (line 80: *PW* I 102), he struggled forward in a difficult world. (A modern woman might be reluctant to identify with this ideal of "coy submission.") 'Reverted' might have been borrowed from Gray's description of Helen of Troy not knowing 'Whether she feared or wished to be pursued.[9] The word recurs through Coleridge's poetry at crucial moments (see e.g. *PW* 1 1105). The theme was complicated by his mother's apparent rejection of him, when she sent him off to Christ's Hospital ('like an orphan'), but the poem 'Love' reasserts the theme at a crucial moment:

> 'Twas partly Love, and partly Fear,
> And partly 'twas a bashful art,
> That I might rather feel than see,
> The swelling of her heart. (*PW* I 609-10, lines 89-92)

In later days, it became part of the blameless dream-psychology of Alice du Clós, who lost her life because of it, and it sweetens what might seem the rigorous masculinity of Coleridge's perichoristic logic.

When one meditates on Coleridge's poem with such a transition in mind, the daring interpretation sticks and I think it emerges a braver thing. The Miltonic citation draws attention to what the poem requires: this implant of charged, unstinting energy. It takes a way of ending poems learned from

[8] See C. R. Sanders, 'The Background of Carlyle's Portrait of Coleridge in *The Life of John Sterling*.' *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 55:2 (1973), 434-58.

[9] See my *Coleridge's Experimental Poetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 49 and 213 note 15.

Herbert to a further extreme; it asks one to remember the vital difference between an experience and a conceptualisation of the same — the character of moral agents and the rightness and wrongness of acts —, the difference between remorse and regret. Once understood, it is brilliant and nothing would suit better. So I'll return to Mozley's general words in praise of Coleridge in his essay, and I think they fit.

Mozley wrote: 'Can any other poem of this century be produced in which, with so small compass, there is so wide a range? It begins with the schoolroom, and ends with principles that are applicable to all men and all times. The truths which it expresses are seen at once to be true; yet they are new, if not individually, at least in the colligation, the unity which binds them together. There is no outcropping of intellectual effort, of conscious observation; yet the results of both intellect and observation are there. And the whole is not like a philosophical thesis, requiring time to understand it, but is impressed on the mind at once by the imagery with which it is conjoined, It is a sort of vision, flashing on the mind at once; and, undoubtedly, it must have so flashed on the mind of the poet; yet for such a vision to have presented itself to him, a long exercise of the faculties must have been necessary. This is what is meant by imagination.' (p.81)

The only other critic I know who has praised the poem so highly was George Craik, in an unsigned review of Coleridge's *Poetical Works* 1834. He called the poem 'the happiest and most perfect of this poet's compositions, and that which best exemplified all the highest and rarest attributes of his genius'.[10] But that was all he said. Craik was appointed Professor of English Literature and History at Belfast in 1849, and wrote books on Spenser and Bacon among others. He died in 1866 and, as far as I know, said no more about the poem

I would not go as far as Craik, but Mozley's more measured claims are not as outrageous as they first seem. The 'Reply' unpacks an extraordinary amount of meaning in its twenty-six lines that joins an important ongoing conversation in Coleridge's mind, and in turn connects with matters that are as alive now as they were long ago. Like the third servant in the parable of the talents, he did not appear to have invested wisely what he had been given (see Matthew 25:14-30), but his ability to write poems of this depth and complexity never faltered. They fill his *Poetical Works* with coruscating variety, and the rumour that he deserved to fade into obscurity in 1800 or 1802 — or 1902, or 2022 — is yet again disproved.

The 'Reply to a Lady's Question' is an idiosyncratic masterpiece, and Mozley's careful summary is accurate. I am certainly not claiming the poem is Coleridge's 'highest and rarest,' as Craik did, because, besides the three great 'Mystery Poems,' he wrote a handful of great 'Conversation Poems,' AND Political Poems, AND Love Poems—AND very many Moral Poems on

[10] *The Printing Machine: or, Companion to the Library* 12 (16 August 1834), 275-79 at 279. *The Printing Machine* was published bi-monthly by Charles Knight, costing four pence, and it ran for three volumes between 1834-35 before being absorbed by Leigh Hunt's *London Journal*.

Immoral Subjects. This is a great deal for someone who did not claim to be a poet in the way Wordsworth and other contemporaries aimed to be. At the very least, he wrote a lot of poems like the 'Reply' that repay more serious attention than we currently give them.