Coleridge, Yeats and the Sage

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IN A DIARY ENTRY from 1930, William Butler Yeats contemplates Coleridge's metamorphosis from a poet into a sage:

> From 1807 or so he seems to have some kind of illumination which was, as always, only in part communicable. The end attained in such a life is not a truth or even a symbol of truth, but a oneness with some spiritual being or beings. It is this that fixes our amazed attention on Oedipus when his death approaches, and upon some few historical men. It is because the modern philosopher has not sought this that he remains unknown to those multitudes who thought his predecessors sacred.[1]

The 'illumination' Yeats describes is of a kind he depicts in his translation of Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus* (1934). The aged exile Oedipus gains a sudden insight, foretelling his death and overcoming blindness:

> It is my turn to guide those that long have been their father's guide; come, come, but lay no hand upon me; all unhelped I shall discover my predestined plot of ground, my sacred tomb.
>
> (*Oedipus at Colonus*, ll. 1195-98)

Oedipus' gift of prophecy originates in kinship with divinity. Apollo has cursed him, but now enlightens him. Consequently, Oedipus is not only prophetic but powerful; foreseeing the future, but also guaranteeing it with his curses and benedictions.

Coleridge's role as sage is familiar to scholarship. Typically, it is plotted as a sort of ideological destination in the evolution of his thought that Coleridge reaches during his residence at Highgate. There is a prevailing image from this period of Coleridge dispensing wisdom from his sick-bed, attended upon by admiring disciples. Rosemary Ashton entitles a chapter of her biography 'Coleridge the Sage: *Aids to Reflection* 1821-25'.[2] Interpreting *Aids to Reflection*, David Boulger detects Coleridge's obsession with the 'ignored seer', evoking a sense of mystical insight.[3] Both J. C. C. Mays and Adam Sisman describe Coleridge's self-identification with the Ancient Mariner as increasing later in his life, suggesting an evolution towards the wise, embattled exile.[4]

But Yeats dates the moment of Coleridge's 'illumination' as 1807, a year in which Coleridge turned only thirty-five, and long prior to his residence at Highgate. Furthermore, Yeats's date of 1807 connects Coleridge's

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1 W.B. Yeats, *Explorations*, ed. by Mrs W.B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 32.
2 Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996), pp. 344-65.
3 David Boulger, *Coleridge as Religious Thinker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 5.
4 *PW* I.1, pp. 365-68; Adam Sisman, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Friendship* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 203.

transformation to a period of crisis. Coleridge's only significant composition of this year is his response to Wordsworth's recitation of part of *The Prelude*. Coleridge confesses intimidation at his friend's ability, and apprehends his own creative death:

> Flowers
> Strewed on my corse, and borne upon my Bier,
> In the same Coffin, for the self-same Grave!
> ('To William Wordsworth', ll. 73-75)

In Yeats's view, Coleridge attains sagacity in a similar manner to Oedipus, by heroic endurance of crisis. To Yeats, the creative death Coleridge articulates in his poem 'To William Wordsworth' occasions a rebirth; Yeats values Coleridge's poetic discouragement as giving rise to the author of *The Friend,* a model for Yeats's own foray into public affairs. [5]

In this paper I emphasise how self-consciously, and over how great a period, Coleridge constructs the sage. In identifying Coleridge with Oedipus, Yeats corroborates a number of statements on, and by, Coleridge, which demonstrate his self-dramatisation, and his invocation of particular role models. Hazlitt depicts the young Coleridge lecturing, in phrasing that connects the 'Ancient Mariner' to Greek tragedy:

> As the impassioned critic speaks and rises in his theme, you would think you heard the voice of the Man hated by the Gods, contending with the wild winds as they roar, and his eye glitters with the spirit of Antiquity![6]

In 1798 Charles Lamb sends Coleridge a parodic list of queries:

> Learned Sir, my Friend,
> Presuming on our long habits of friendship and emboldened further by your late liberal permission to avail myself of your correspondence, in case I want any knowledge (which I intend to do when I have no Encyclopedia, or Lady's Magazine at hand to refer to in any matter of science), I now submit to your enquiries the above Theological Propositions.[7]

Coleridge provokes such treatment. Tom Mayberry notes the 'air of theatricality' in evenings at Highgate in which Coleridge appeared in almost clerical dress, offering arcane knowledge.[8] Coleridge's famous remark that he has 'a smack of Hamlet' exemplifies further his self-dramatisation in middle

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[5] For a further examination of Yeats's interest in Coleridge see Matthew Gibson, *Yeats, Coleridge and the Romantic Sage* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000).

[6] *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 9 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), VII, p. 101.

[7] *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb* (3 vols, 1975–78), I, p. 128.

[8] Tom Mayberry, 'S.T. Coleridge, Edwin Atherstone and the Grove Conversazione: Some Newly-Discovered Letters', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, n.s., 18 (2001) 43-52 (p. 47).

age, but kinship with tragic figures is evident much earlier. Repeatedly, Coleridge depicts his failures and difficulties as revelatory experiences. In 1796 Coleridge argues for his suitability as a mentor for Charles Lloyd's son on political grounds:

> I have now seen my error. I have accordingly snapped my squeaking baby-trumpet of sedition, and have hung up its fragments in the chamber of Penitences. (CL I 240)

That Coleridge's declaration is a histrionic flourish is evident in his repetition of the same paragraph in a letter to George Coleridge one year later (CL II 902). Neil Vickers demonstrates that Coleridge regards illness as 'a blessing in disguise', an ordeal tolerated 'in advance of medical science'.[9]

Much earlier than the Highgate period is there evidence for John Holloway's claim that Coleridge is the 'founder in modern England of [a] kind of thought' that Holloway attributes to the Victorian sage, whose function is 'to express notions about the world, man's situation in it and how he should live', typified by 'earnestness and oracular prose' and 'prophetic utterances'.[10] I think that Coleridge first assumes the role of sage in response to circumstances of the 1790's, the well-established contexts for the themes of Romanticism: Britain's war with France, fears of invasion, food shortages, and restrictions of freedom. Thomas Pfau provides a useful evaluation of the resultant social-tension, 'a situation of extreme interpretive agitation and urgency'.[11] In this atmosphere, Coleridge identifies society's need for an exemplary figure.

Models of the sage appear in Coleridge's writing as early as 1795. In the 'Allegoric Vision' the narrator encounters a pilgrim who describes a parabolic dream, an embattled man allegorised by a rugged, masculine setting of the 'weather-stained' walls and stone furnishings of a chapel 'Allegoric Vision', (ll. 28-29). The narrator notes the enigmatic melancholy of the pilgrim, in whom he detects hardships overcome that empower him as a messenger of hope:

> Amid the gloom of the storm and in the duskiness of that place he sate like an emblem on a rich man's sepulchre, or like a mourner on the sodden grave of an only one—an aged mourner, who is watching the wained moon and sorroweth not. (44-47)

The sage returns in the dedication to Thomas Poole of the 'Ode on the Departing Year' in its first publication in 1796. Both poet and prophet, Coleridge has us know he suffers for his art. Addressing Poole publicly, Coleridge declares that he has fought off 'a rheumatic complaint' to complete his composition, and he pre-empts accusations of pretension. Through his

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[9] Neil Vickers, *Coleridge and the Doctors: 1795-1806* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 4.
[10] John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* repr (Archon Books, London, 1962), pp. 1-4.
[11] Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), p. 77.

ostensible addressee, Coleridge challenges his reader's knowledge, implying that to question Coleridge's sagacity is to demonstrate ignorance:

> *You*, I am sure, will not fail to recollect, that among the Ancients, the Bard and the Prophet were one and the same character; and you *know*, that although I prophesy curses, I pray fervently for blessings.
> (PW I.1 302-03)

In 'Religious Musings', Coleridge uses another framing device to accentuate his visionary powers. Here he uses the title, dissembling concerning the date of the poem's composition to exaggerate his prophetic gift. The first published version of the poem appeared in 1796 and includes revisions made that year. Ian Wylie detects allusion to the protest over food prices in 1795 that culminated in a projectile passing through the King's carriage as he travelled to the theatre.[12] Coleridge portrays the King's desperate assailant:

> O thou poor Wretch,
> Who nurs'd in darkness and made wild by want
> Roamest for prey, yea thy unnatural hand
> Dost lift to deeds of blood! ('Religious Musings', ll. 278-81)

Coleridge presents this passage as prophetic by placing a date in the full title of the poem: 'Religious Musings. A Desultory Poem, Written on the Christmas Eve of 1794'. Yeats adopts this strategy in a poem entitled 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', responding to an incident that took place in 1920. As in 'Religious Musings', a shooting becomes a synecdoche of the context of unrest: 'a drunken soldiery | Can leave the mother, murdered at her door' ('Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', ll. 27-28). To Yeats the arrival of the Black and Tans in Ireland ends revolutionary naivety; like Coleridge, he manipulates dates to claim foreknowledge and suggest poetic wisdom instead as a tool of reform.

Examining Coleridge's assumption of authority as an interpreter of catastrophe necessitates an evaluation of his understanding of inspiration. Jeffrey W. Barbeau establishes the importance of John Coleridge's influence on his son's conception of 'prophets, gifted with divine insight, [who] know future events'.[13] Anthony Harding situates Coleridge's philosophy within 'the late eighteenth-century rediscovery of the oracular voice'.[14] Central to this debate was the question of whether the authors of the scriptures were impelled by God, or were imperfect documenters of divine revelation. Discussion was not confined to Biblical studies but extended to all creativity.

Coleridge does not refute the mystical interpretation of Biblical prophecy, but never decides on the nature of inspiration. In 1826 he writes of the

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[12] Ian Wylie, Young Coleridge and the Philosophers of Nature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 104.
[13] Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion*, Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 150-51.
[14] Anthony John Harding, *Coleridge and the Inspired Word*, (Québec: Mc-Gill-Queen's University Press, 1985), p. 7.

Biblical authors, hesitating on a distinction between revelations granted by *pneuma* (a divine 'breath' of inspiration) and those of the *logos* (reason):

I too contend for their Inspiration, but I contend, that πνευμα and λογος are distinct operations, that may or may not be united in the same act, and that Inspiration is not in all cases accompanied by, much less the same with, *Miraculous dictation.* (CL VI 617)

Coleridge is uneasy concerning inspiration: attracted to the mystical experience of *poeisis*, he fears the possibility of delusion, and the threat inspiration entails to Reason. He is liberated by the connections of thought that occur in spontaneous composition, but he does not wish to relinquish the status he accords to his own intellect. Uncertainty troubles the sage in Coleridge's poetical works: unsure of the true nature of inspiration, his visionary experience is a form of madness, and he fears ridicule as an enthusiast. Coleridge's claim in the 'Ode on the Departing Year' that he speaks with 'no unholy madness', while asserting piety, is not a denial that it is madness (l. 10).

What I mean by the 'madness' that afflicts the sage needs explanation, although the meaning of the word has not changed significantly since Coleridge's time. Michel Foucault examines seventeenth-century theories of prophecy in dreams and melancholy:

> There is a melancholia which permits the sufferer to predict the future, to speak in an unknown language, to see beings ordinarily invisible; this melancholia originates in a supernatural intervention, the same which brings to the sleeper's mind those dreams which foresee the future, announce events to come, and cause him to see 'strange things.'[15]

Foucault observes that eighteenth century studies emphasise the possibility that the madman deceives himself rather than suffering deception from an external source. Accepting this, Jacques Derrida complains that Foucault upholds an absolute, '*symmetrical*' distinction between madness and sanity, succumbing to the very separation of the two as opposites that he has been criticising as a social construct.[16] The depiction of madness in Greek tragedy, as Ruth Padel interprets it, is closely akin to Derrida's view: 'Greek images present madness not as "opposite" to reason and right order, but astray from it.'[17] Thus, conventional portrayals of madness in the Romantic period are compatible with its occurrence in Greek tragedy. This commonality is important because it facilitates Coleridge's use of Greek tragedy to explore his own powers of insight and to set up paradigms of sagacity.

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[15] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. by Richard Howard, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967; repr. Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2006), pp. 95-98.

[16] Jacques Derrida, 'Cogito and the History of Madness' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Abingdon: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978; repr. Routledge Classics, 2005), pp. 36-76 (p. 48).

[17] Ruth Padel, *Whom Gods Destroy: Elements of Greek and Tragic Madness* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.138.

In the 'Ode on the Departing Year' Coleridge captures his feelings on prophecy and inspiration in an epigraph quoted from Aeschylus' play *Agamemnon*, in which Agamemnon returns from the Trojan War to be murdered by his wife. The Trojan princess Cassandra is in Agamemnon's entourage, captured as a prize. Chosen as a lover by Apollo, Cassandra was blessed with the gift of prophecy. Subsequently displeased by her, Apollo now ensures that Cassandra's revelations will not be believed. Coleridge quotes from the scene in which Agamemnon enters his house. Cassandra foretells his death, translated as follows:

> The pain, the terror! The birth-pang of the seer
> who tells the truth -
> it whirls me, oh,
> the storm comes again, the crashing chords!
> […]
> and soon you'll see it face to face
> and say the seer was all too true.
> You will be moved with pity.[18]

Coleridge's identification with Cassandra emphasises the grandeur of his theme. Hazlitt, for example, explains that to invoke Greek tragedy elevates a work, that 'the characters have a correspondent dignity, and an immediate interest, from their mere designation.'[19] De Quincey claims in his 'theory of Greek Tragedy' that 'Cassandra was brought upon the stage […] to confer the solemn and mysterious hoar of a dark prophetic woe upon the dreadful catastrophe.'[20] If De Quincey betrays cynicism concerning the contrivance of using Cassandra, it may be due to his association of Cassandra with Coleridge. In an undated manuscript, following a claim that 'obscurity' is a 'vice, common to Coleridge and Wordsworth', De Quincey remarks 'C. under curse of Cassandra as to profundity'.[21] Alignment with Cassandra also reveals Coleridge's sense that she is a kindred figure. Ruth Padel assesses the reasons for readers to associate themselves with such characters: 'faced with madness and self-destruction in their own life, they found the thought consoling that such violent lonely paths were trodden and explained in an ancient past.'[22] Of Cassandra's appearance in *Agamemnon*, Seth Schein comments that 'it is a "mad-scene" […]. Her first sounds are cries of pain, grammatically unarticulated, followed by riddling puns and questions.'[23] Cassandra's gift is an affliction; she is both a commentator on catastrophe and a tragic figure within

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[18] Aeschylus, *The Oresteia,* trans. by Robert Fagles (London: Wildwood House 1976; repr. Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 151, 153. Coleridge omits Aeschylus' word for 'pity' (*oikteiras*), but it is restored in the 1834 edition of his works.

[19] *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 9 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), V, p. 326.

[20] *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, XX (2003), ed. by Frederick Burwick, David Graves, Grevel Lindop, and others, p. 495.

[21] *Ibid.*, XI (2003), ed. by Julian North, pp. 372-73.

[22] *Whom Gods Destroy*, pp. 6-7.

[23] Seth L. Schein, 'The Cassandra Scene in Aeschylus' Agamemnon', *Greece & Rome*, Second Series, 29:1 (1982), 11-16 (pp. 11-13).

it. Coleridge claims a similar position introducing the 'Ode on the Departing Year', announcing his discomfort. So too the Ancient Mariner, whose account of torment is itself a source of torment.

While association with Cassandra provides a lineage for Coleridge's prophecy, it also reveals his anxiety. Experiencing a type of madness, the sage is ennobled by the discomfort that accompanies his inspiration and by the eventual verification of his revelations. Doubted and cursed as deluded by Oedipus, Tiresias is later proved correct, demonstrating his entitlement to revered status in civic life. Cassandra enjoys no such veneration: she is an outsider, cursed to be disbelieved. I suggest two models in Coleridge's thought: Cassandra, representing Coleridge's fear that his revelations will go unheeded, and Tiresias, model of the Mariner, whose wisdom is recognised.

The Sage of Highgate in Coleridge's later life is evidence that he has used more effective tactics to ensure acknowledgment as a Tiresian seer: suffering, possessed and prophetic, but occupying a revered status in society. I think the decisive period in which Coleridge convinces himself that he has become a sage, and produces texts that persuade others, is the year from 1816-1817. With the title *Sibylline Leaves*, Coleridge overcomes the creative failure of incomplete works by presenting them as intellectual puzzles, ennobling his reader as the hierophant making sense of the scattered leaves on which are written the insights of the prophetess. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge creates two author figures that are distinct temporally. The book is substantially retrospective, portraying the misguided, young Coleridge. But I think Coleridge's main aim is to create a sense of the present, speaking Coleridge as sage in the reader's mind. The anecdotes and history of thought form Coleridge's *curriculum vitae* as Tiresian wise man.

In closing I want to look at *The Statesman's Manual.* Coleridge announces the new work in a letter:

> I had been solicited by the House of Gale & Fenner […] to give them a small Tract on the present Distresses […]. I undertook it—money I was to have none—but as a mark of respect […]. I labored from morning to night. (CL IV 672)

Due to the sudden cessation of conflict in Europe, the British economy, which was heavily reliant on the war industry, experienced said 'Distresses', including food shortages and inflated prices. Ironically, Coleridge's *Statesman's Manual* is addressed to those least affected by the shortage, 'the higher classes of society'. Coleridge assumes the role of advising the elite, shaming them for listening to 'the guesses of star-gazers' instead of his own 'permanent prophecies' (LS 7). For Yeats, appointed a Senator of the Irish Free State in 1922 and keen to identify similarities with his poetic precursor, Coleridge's claim to political importance is the culmination of the transformation Yeats identifies as commencing in the crisis of 1807; it is notice that his state of 'illumination' deserves to receive.

In practice, Coleridge's 'prophecies' reveal little and it is his attitude to social distinction that indicates the nature of his aspiration for reverence. Using a quotation untraced in the Bollingen edition, Coleridge implies that 'the labouring classes' should not read *The Statesman's Manual*:

> 'They are not sought for in public counsel, nor need they be found where politic sentences are spoken.—It is enough if every one is wise in the working of his own craft: so best will they maintain the state of the world.' (LS 7)

Conflating different quotations, Coleridge's source is Plato. In the *Republic*, defining justice as 'doing one's own work', Plato depicts Socrates reasoning in favour of class division and the exclusion of the masses from politics:

> The power that consists in everyone's doing his own work rivals wisdom, moderation, and courage in its contribution to the virtue of the city […]. Meddling and exchange between [the] three classes, then, is the greatest harm that can happen to the city and would rightly be called the worst thing someone could do to it.[24]

Both authors draw attention to the scarcity of true philosophers: Plato claims that 'the majority cannot be philosophic'. This is recalled in Coleridge's claim that many people lack the 'philosophic organ' in *Biographia Literaria* (BL I 251). Plato argues that 'those who are to be made our guardians […] must be philosophers', and it becomes evident that his ideal king is a self-portrait.[25] In response to Plato, Karl Popper cites G.B. Stern's satire *The Ugly Dachshund*, in which the Great Dane imagines the perfect dog, then realises it is himself. To Popper, Plato makes an unabashed case for his right to rule.[26]

Without quite aspiring to the throne, Coleridge uses similar strategies to Plato to establish his own importance, which is above those of politicians:

> It would not be difficult, by an unbroken chain of historic facts, to demonstrate that the most important changes in the commercial relations in the world had their origin in the closets or lonely walks of uninterested theorists […] Their results […] had their origin […] in the visions of recluse genius. (LS 141)

With this self-portrait, Coleridge signals his move from the position of Cassandra, the victim of tragic process, to that of Tiresias, the wise but detached commentator on it, who has overcome his hardships; a state figure commenting on the 'objective necessity' of catastrophe, the sage.

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[24] *Republic*, trans by G.M.A. Grube and rev. C.D.C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 971-1223 (pp. 1051-1052, sections 433[d]-434[c]).

[25] *Republic*, p. 1124 (503[b]).

[26] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies Volume One: The Spell of Plato* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2003; repr. 2007), pp. 165-66.