Reading and Writing, Food and Flogging: The Unwritten *Biographia*

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The Origins of the Biographia

There are many ways into the *Biographia*, but the inner hall of Coleridge's ramshackle house, into which almost all other rooms open, is the imagination. Our consciousness of that word is focused on chapter 13, where it is distinguished from fancy, and its two modes—primary and secondary—are defined for the first and only time in all Coleridge's works, though he frequently makes the distinction from fancy.[1] Because that definition, and that chapter, is the subject of perennial discussion, our attention is sometimes drawn away from how much the idea of the imagination pervades the two volumes. It is as early as chapter 4 of the *Biographia* that Coleridge first distinguishes fancy from the imagination, when he begins his discussion of Wordsworth's earlier poems and the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. However, the philosophical excursus, chapters 5-13, an attempted metaphysical underpinning of the imagination,[2] with an interlude telling us, among other things, of Spy-nosy and the Watchman tour, was written and inserted after he had completed most of the book. That is, the sense of continuous discussion of the imagination would be much greater if one skipped straight from chapter 4 to 14, where he begins his famous definition of poetry and poets;[3] this itself is a prelude to his presenting Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* as a working example of the imagination, and that a preliminary to what will occupy most of the second volume, a discussion of the pros and cons of Wordsworth's poetry, in which the imagination is the constant point of reference. Sometimes we seem closer to it, sometimes further away, but it is always the loom of the lighthouse, swinging round to meet us.

So we have a book, centred on the imagination, constructed around Wordsworth's poetry, more or less metaphysically underpinned, spurred into life by a direct sense of competition with Wordsworth's 1815 volume—its new preface talking uncertainly, in Coleridge's opinion, about fancy and imagination—and Coleridge wanting to set the record straight in a 'preface' to his own projected volume of poems, *Sybilline Leaves*. Even so, that does not tell the whole truth about the origins and impetus of this complex book. In 1803, some twelve years before dictating the *Biographia* to John Morgan, Coleridge jotted in a notebook:

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[1] It is a curious fact that those two modes, primary and secondary, remain isolated in that chapter, the only instance of this differentiation, never mentioned again in any part of the *Biographia*, nor in any of his other works.

[2] Something he'd long planned: CL II 671, where he is prevented by illness. See*Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination*, Gregory Leadbetter, (Palgrave 2011) 140; hereafter cited as Leadbetter.

[3] With a nod towards his 'preceding disquisition on the fancy and the imagination'—a puzzling reference, as the editors note, since there's nothing as substantial as a 'disquisition' either in chapter four or thirteen (BL II 15).

> 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 and fortunes of S T Coleridge. (CN I 1515)

Why? we might ask. Why autobiography? Years before Coleridge had told Tom Poole what he thought would make a good book:

> I could inform the dullest author how he might write an interesting book—let him relate the events of his own Life with honesty, not disguising the feelings that accompanied them.—I never yet read even a Methodist's 'Experience' in the Gospel Magazine without receiving instruction & amusement… . (CL I 302)

The methodist's experience, like much of puritan confessional literature, was very attractive to Coleridge, whose need to confess was as urgent as his need to obscure his confessions, or, 'he liked to hide himself in the open.'[4] And his ability to turn his own experience into a good story would make it interesting to the general reader, just as the Landing Places of *The Friend* were designed to relieve the burden of severe and continuous thinking. So the justification of autobiography in 1797, the note to himself in 1803, the very subtitle of the book—*'Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions'*—and the opening chapter, a discussion of the merits of 'The Author's First Publication', maintain a consistently autobiographical approach across some 18 years. In a letter written just after he completed the *Biographia*, he himself described it as an autobiography.[5]

Reading: the beginning

But does Coleridge begin at the beginning? The furthest he takes us back is the classroom at Christ's Hospital, and Boyer insisting that poetry, even in 'the wildest odes', has a logic of its own, as severe as that of science.[6] So the *Biographia* begins when he is about 15 or 16,[7] which might be compared to Wordsworth, who writing his story, takes us back at least to the age of five; Coleridge thus omits ten crucial years of his childhood, his years of misery,

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[4] Leadbetter 185; cf.BL I liii: the editors note on of the distinctive if paradoxical qualities of Coleridge: his deep need to apologise or explain, and his strong inner taboo against dwelling on self.

[5] Cf. CL IV 584: 'Therefore instead of Poems and a Preface I resolved to publish 'Biographical Sketches of my LITERARY LIFE, Principles, and Opinions, chiefly on the Subjects of Poetry and Philosophy, and the Differences at present prevailing concerning both: by S. T. COLERIDGE. To which are added, SIBYLLINE LEAVES, or a Collection of Poems, by the same Author…'; and ibid. 585: 'The Autobiography I regard as the main work: tho' the Sybilline Leaves will contain every poem, I have written, except the Christabel which is not finished—both because I think that my Life &c will be more generally interesting, and because it will be an important Pioneer to the great Work on the Logos, Divine and Human, on which I have set my Heart and hope to ground my ultimate reputation…'

[6] BL I 9

[7] Is it a co-incidence that he begins his autobiography when he begins to be happy? In a note (unlocated) he comments on the importance of bringing children up to be happy until they are 15 or 16.

which are closely associated with the origins of his literary life. However we do learn about the genesis of the imagination in him—though not in the *Biographia*—but chiefly in the autobiographical letters to Tom Poole. He tell us that before he was three he could read a page of the Bible—not a unique ability—but from that point on reading wasn't just a skill, it became a passion, opening up the life of the imagination. His explanation of the origins of that passion is as interesting as I suggest it is probably an inversion of cause and effect:

> My Father was very fond of me, and I was my mother's darling—in consequence, I was very miserable. For Molly, who had nursed my Brother Francis, and was immoderately fond of him, hated me because my mother took more notice of me than of Frank—and Frank hated me, because my mother gave me now & then a bit of cake, when he had none—quite forgetting that for one bit of cake which I had & he had not, he had twenty sops in the pan & pieces of bread & butter with sugar on them from Molly, from whom I received only thumps & ill names.— So I became fretful, & timorous, & a tell-tale—& the School-boys drove me from play, & were always tormenting me—& hence I took no pleasure in boyish sports—but read incessantly. (CL I 347)

It's an odd fact, paradoxically expressed, that despite believing that his parents loved him, he was miserable as a child, even though he would later look back on his 8 years in Ottery with some nostalgia. He puts his misery down to a competition with Frank for love and food—a battle between between two boys and two women who were, in effect, two mothers. Coleridge is asserting that this conflict drove him to reading, because he had no-one to play with. Note that 'so' after describing his conflict with Frank and Molly—'So I became fretful… .' What I want to keep in mind is the possibility that the reading came first, and that the beatings, though in some respect inevitable then in any boy's life, were also partly the consequence of his incessant reading, and the behaviour which it induced. However, this suggestion runs counter to everything Coleridge said, as I shall now illustrate.

In 1799, he had dinner with Godwin, then in his early forties, and at the height of his fame, who was nonetheless sufficiently struck by his young guest, only 27, to jot down four pages of notes about his life. This is Godwin's complete account of Coleridge's life in Ottery:

> The youngest son, & on that account treated by the nurse-maid of his next older brother, as an intruding rival—beaten and sickly, takes refuge in immoderate reading, particularly the Arabian

> Nights—accustomed only to the conversation of grown-up persons, he becomes arrogant & conceited [8]

Note the arrogance and conceit—we will meet it again in other forms. Godwin's note starts with the fact that Coleridge was the youngest son: his place in the family hierarchy is significant. Given their ages—his father was 53 when Sam was born, and his mother Ann 45, having had 10 children in 18 years—Molly, the nurse-maid, might reasonably have expected Frank, born two years earlier, to be the last of John and Ann's children, and that he would thus enjoy a fair share of the family's limited resources. So there is a raw truth in Coleridge's belief that he was treated as a rival: the last, sickly, runtiest fledgling in an overcrowded nest, to be booted out so that Frank, handsome, lively, outgoing, could survive. All his life he maintained that his alienation from Frank, his not being allowed or not being able to play, caused his reading. Some 33 years later, when he was 59, writing for Gillman's biography, he tells the same story, beginning with 'the Jealousy of Old Molly, my Brother's Frank's dotingly-fond Nurse':

> … by the infusions of her Jealousy into my Brother's mind, I was in earliest childhood lifted away from the enjoyments of muscular activity—from Play—to read my little books and to listen to the Talk of my Elders—I was driven from Life in Motion to Life in thought and sensation. (CN V 6675)

Listen to all those phrases—'the School-boys drove me from play… I took no pleasure in boyish sports—but read incessantly… beaten and sickly, takes refuge in immoderate reading… lifted away from the enjoyments of muscular activity… driven from Life in Motion to Life in thought and sensation…'. Coleridge's account is consistent, and he regards his failure to live as a child when a child a profound misfortune. He wanted to play, and it is another curious paradox that he was a playful man all his life—but he felt that his alienation from all boys of his own age drove him into reading.

'Life in Motion', as opposed to 'Life in thought', is, he recognizes, the true and healthy life of a child. Alienated from his peers, inhibited in his ability to act, the significance of objects and events in the immediate world are diminished, and he lives more in the world of his reading than in the world around him. 'Sensation' sounds as though it has to do with the senses, but it is best thought of as connected to our use of the word 'sensational'—that is, vicariously exciting, as novels and romances are. In the 1832 note Coleridge remarks 'I never thought as a Child; never had the language of a child.—' (CN V 6675). He began to read so early, and his reading was so intense, that his language and thinking were developed from his reading and his listening to adult conversations: they were not developed through play or playing with

[8] Abinger Dep c.604/3, Bodleian Library, Oxford

other children. The beatings may have prevented his playing—though more likely the thumps and beatings were an attempt to get him up and moving—but the intense reading would almost certainly have happened, beatings or no beatings. The thesis of this paper is that his turning inward, away from outward impressions and physical activity, is the beginning of the life of his imagination. To all intents, he turns away from the immediate world, partly because it contains realities he can't deal with—Frank's jealousy, Molly's thumps, the schoolboys' spurning—and partly because he finds the world of novels and romances much more exciting. It is his form of play. To my mind, the seeds of Coleridge's tragedy lie in that alienation from the immediate.

Burning the Arabian Nights

When he came across the *Arabian Nights*, before he was six, one tale in particular enthralled him:

> (the tale of a man who was compelled to seek for a pure virgin) made so deep an impression on me (I had read it in the evening while my mother was mending stockings) that I was haunted by spectres, whenever I was in the dark—and I distinctly remember the anxious & fearful eagerness, with which I used to watch the window, in which the books lay—& whenever the Sun lay upon them, I would seize it, carry it by the wall, & bask, & read—. (CL I 347)

Why the tale of a pure virgin should haunt him, we will come to later. But it says something about the power of the tale that even the physical presence of the book, or books, induced a deep anxiety in the boy. The extraordinariness of the scene is a little masked by its matter-of-fact telling. He would gaze at the window seat where the book was until the sun shone upon it, which would give him the courage to 'seize' it—a kind of theft?—and take it to the garden, away from prying eyes; and then 'bask'—a double-edged word: he is of course partly basking in the sunshine, but more so in the tales he was reading: there is a subtle interplay between the immediate world and the dangerous world of his imagination. He first read the tales in the safety of his mother's presence, on his little stool, out of the reach of Molly's thumps. As long as he was not in the dark, the book was safe; but at night, or when it was too dark to read, the tales came back to haunt him. High levels of fear and excitement are realized in the mere act of reading. This is surely an extraordinary relationship for a boy so young to have with a book.

What happened next is no less bizarre for its continuing matter-of-fact tone: 'My Father found out the effect, which these books had produced—and burnt them.' The act indicates not only John Coleridge's impetuosity, but the depth of his irritation or even anger—and possibly represents another attempt to get his son to behave more like a normal boy. Coleridge delineates the

consequences of his father's action—and if there is any blame, it is tacit, not expressed. Note again that indicative 'So' with which the passage begins:

> So I became a *dreamer*—and acquired an indisposition to all bodily activity—and I was fretful, and inordinately passionate, and as I could not play at any thing, and was slothful, I was despised & hated by the boys; and because I could read & spell, & had, I may truly say, a memory & understanding forced into almost an unnatural ripeness, I was flattered & wondered at by all the old women—& so I became very vain, and despised most of the boys, that were at all near my own age—and before I was eight years old, I was a *character*—sensibility, imagination, vanity, sloth, & feelings of deep & bitter contempt for almost all who traversed the orbit of my understanding, were even then prominent & manifest. (CL I 347-8)

That initial 'so' suggests his father's action induces all the consequences described here; but it is a repetition of the 'so' he used to desribe the consequences of Molly's actions; more precisely delineated here, they are of a kind with the thumps and the schoolboys' rejection which drove him, he says, to incessant reading. It seems much more probable that his intense, inward, sedentary, solitary life was the ill his father was trying to cure. 'Fretful' is used on both occasions: which is perhaps the feeling that arises from a thwarted wish to play.

What an unboy-like boy he has become. Vanity, in respect of his intelligence, contempt for his peers, solitary in his soul, lazy in body, passionate when he does act (remember him running at Frank with a knife) dreaming his way into other worlds much more dangerous and sensational than anything Ottery had to offer, he had become an infant prodigy, a thing he despised, almost before he knew it. His intellectual arrogance went deep, and it made him a difficult presence, even to those whom he loved and who loved him. It went so deep that he was even willing to visit his intellectual judgements on his father.

Coleridge appears to have been beaten by many people—Molly, Frank, his mother (whom he expected to flog him for running at Frank with a knife) and possibly even his very first schoolmistress, Old Dame Key, whom he said was the very image of Shenstone's, a 'matron old…/Who boasts unruly brats with birch to tame'.[9] But the one person, though he believed in the 'argumentum baculinum', or the argument of the cane, for whom we have no evidence of his beating, is Coleridge's father. However, on one occasion, he came extremely close to receiving something of the kind, and for good reason. William Jerdan remembers Coleridge, late in life, recalling his Devon schooldays when a junior pupil in his father's boarding-school:

[9] William Shenstone, *The Schoolmistress* (1737) stanza 2,

> It was a speech and breaking-up day, and the parents were gratified with the exhibition of a drama enacted by their sons. Among the rest, Coleridge had to say something, accompanied by a laugh, which he unhappily uttered without an attempt at cachinnation, [loud or immoderate laughter] "Ha! ha! ha!" The father, who had bestowed great pains on the passage, and was dreadfully provoked, as one of the *irritabile genus vatum* ought to be, by its being "come tardy off," leaped upon the platform, and, seizing the delinquent by the ears, vociferated a *laugh* by way of example, though hardly more genial than the first offence. At any rate, it was out of time and place; and the more he shook him, shouting, "Ha, ha, haw!" the more the culprit failed in his imitation, till at last his doleful "Ha!" was emitted with a blubber and a howl, which set the whole audience in a roar.[10]

It's a gem of a scene. John Coleridge, demonstrating his multifarious talents, to delight and amuse the parents paying for their sons' education, had written a play to celebrate the end of term, and trusted a small part to young Sam, adjudged old enough to manage a few words. In front of all the parents and all the boys, the headmaster is let down, if not downright cheeked, by his own son—that is, he made no attempt to enter into the spirit of the moment, and merely said, 'ha, ha, ha'. The impassioned and impetuous father leaps upon the stage, grabs his son by the ears, and instructs him ferociously, only to induce a sob and a howl—much to the amusement of the watching parents.

You may say that the poor child was incapable of doing what he was asked, though that would then make us question the justice of his father's actions. But there is evidence that young Sam knew exactly what he was doing, and thus that his father knew that he knew. Coleridge remembered this event in 1810, while writing a scathing commentary on Scott's *The Lady of the Lake*, and its 'unmeaning use of commonplace poetic metaphors, which are mere slang…', two of which are contained in a single line, 'Nor *bid* a warrior smile, nor *teach* a maid to weep?' He comments,

> Surely, to *bid* a man smile, is rather ridiculous—what if a Jokist after one of his Jokes were to say to his Servant, Laugh, Sir! or Strip! (N.B. My Father's Comedy)… (CN III 3970 f 132[v])

Coleridge had been bid to laugh at what, in his intellectual precocity, he didn't find funny. So he refused. He subjected even his honoured father to his intellectual scrutiny.[11] In his arrogance, he takes no prisoners.

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[10] William Jerdan, *Men I Have Known*, (London 1866) p.123, quoted from *Coleridge the Talker*, p.275; 'come tardy off' – *Hamlet* III ii 25

[11] Soon after his father's death, when he was only eight, he lampooned John Coleridge's successor for lack of grammar knowledge, even though, he says, 'Parson Warren did certainly *pulpitize* much better.' (CL I 388) This discrimination between the two men shows extraordinary powers for such a young boy, which if not quite the work of imagination, is certainly the work of a remarkable intelligence.

What I would like to draw attention to is not only the impetuosity of the father (really not so different from the kind of impetuosity we see in James Boyer) but the wilful stubborness of his son. He is, in effect, refusing to play, refusing to get off his stool and join in. A drubbing is the consequence, probably the kind of drubbing he received from Molly and Frank, and for the same kind of reason. And yet he takes all these drubbings, rather than change his ways. This is surely extraordinary, especially in relation to a father he always claimed he hero-worshipped. He doesn't even make an effort—in which case failure would have been forgiveable: he deliberately sabotages the occasion, and he probably isn't 8 years old.

He behaved much the same way at Christ's Hospital. He was discovered reading Virgil for pleasure, long before he had to study it in the classroom. This was so odd and unlikely, that it was reported to Boyer, the headmaster, who inquired of his form-master, who described Coleridge as a 'dull and inapt scholar', unable to repeat a single rule of syntax, though he could provide his own. That alternative grammar was probably his father's, and Coleridge was challenging Matthew Field to understand it. It was a challenge the gentlemanly Field refused or failed. In 1813, Coleridge remembered the situation. Lecturing on *The New System of Education*, he recalls 'that he was placed in *Dunce's-row*; because he found it easier to be beat than to say his task; with his companions he had nothing to do but dream…'. (LL 1 584) If nothing could have been more enjoyable than dreaming, nothing could have been easier for Coleridge than to say his task. It is his refusal that is interesting, and demonstrates his willingness, just as at Ottery, to take a beating rather than to conform to the dictates of learning or behaviour in which he had no interest. And of course he was extremely happy to be allowed to dream—to give his imagination free rein.

His intense reading fostered what he understood by the term imagination. As a result he asserted that sense-impressions were not the only source of reality; an attitude which one can take as the grounds of his ideology, and would translate into mature beliefs, for example, in the existence of 'another world that now is', a phrase we find in *The Constitution of the Church and State* (117). But it is a power that can degenerate into credulity. Coleridge recognized this, and to illustrate what can happen, I want to put another slant on an oft-told tale. You will remember that John Coleridge took his youngest son on parish visits, and Coleridge recalls one occasion:

> I remember, that at eight years old I walked with him one winter evening from a farmer's house, a mile from Ottery—& he told me the names of the stars—and how Jupiter was a thousand times larger than our world -- and that the other twinkling stars were Suns that had worlds rolling round them—& when I came home, he shewed me how they rolled round—/—. I heard him with a profound delight & admiration; but without the least mixture of wonder or incredulity.

> For from my early reading of Faery Tales, & Genii &c &c— my mind had been habituated *to the Vast*—& I never regarded *my senses* in any way as the criteria of my belief. I regulated all my creeds by my conceptions not by my *sight*—even at that age.' (CL I 354)

A few lines later, he accepts that this method may lead the mind to becoming 'credulous & prone to superstition'. The debate here is between what the sense impressions tell us, and what the imagination can conceive. However, the sentence 'I never regarded my senses in any way as the criteria of my belief' can either refer to a childhish credulity, or to a more mature power that Coleridge is suggesting developed early in him as a result of his reading. The credulity certainly existed, and is exemplified, delightfully, in a little story, told by Cottle, which we can call *Little Sammy goes Fishing*, which demonstrates the slightly ludicrous way in which very simple conceptions of the vast didn't allow his senses to impinge on his imagination:

> Little Sammy Coleridge had heard of fishing, and thought he could catch fish as well as his elders. With this impression strong on his mind he went to his sister Ann, (older than himself) and asked for a hook and line, when she crooked a pin, and tying it to a piece of thread, told him to go and bring home all the fish he could catch in the gutter flowing through the street. Little Sammy thought he should never be able to catch any thing better than eels, in that ignoble current, and having an ambition to catch a whale, he hurried off toward the River Otter. The evening was coming on, and not finding a whale, in one part of the river, he posted off further down; and proceeding still in his lofty pursuit, he wandered to a great distance; till, overcome with weariness, he lay down on the bank of the river, and there fell fast asleep.[12]

Cottle then goes on to mix up this story with his running away after the fight with Frank. Little Sammy wasn't content, like other village boys, to catch minnows, or even eels. Also note how solitary this activity was—Nancy, though he speaks of her as his playmate when they both were clothed alike, didn't come with him. He was playing, but he was playing alone, and so had no-one to regulate his imaginative ambitions. The vasty imagination that can conceive a whale in the Otter differs only in degree to the imagination that can conceive spirits powering boats:

> Under the keel nine fathom deep,
> From the land of mist and snow,
> The spirit slid: and it was he

[12] Joseph Cottle, *Early recollections :chiefly relating to the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge, during his long residence in Bristol*, 2 volumes, (London) Longman, Rees, 1837, pp.240-1; Cottle then conflates this story with his running away after the fight with Frank. A Mrs More, from whom Cottle received this account, lived next to the Coleridges, and said she was in the habit of playing with Sam. But no other source provides corroboration for this.

That made the ship to go.

All his life Coleridge would fight a rearguard action against the steady development of empirical knowledge in the green fields of the imagination, right up to the point of being tempted to suppose that the very predicate of religion, the idea of immortality, was an illusion ('Human Life', PW 482). Where the imagination leaves the ludicrous behind, and touches on or reveals the truths of our humanity, is a boundary finally created by our moral and spiritual beliefs, and not subject to absolute determination.

His first years at Christ's Hospital

The intensity of Coleridge's reading grew, rather than diminished, as he moved away from home. It was the shortage of food, rather than any beatings, that he connects most closely with his early reading at Christ's Hospital. The following is his account of himself in his first six years in London, from the note of 1832:

> —Deprest, moping, friendless poor Orphan, half-starved/at that time the portion of food given to the Blue-coats was cruelly insufficient, for those who had no friends to supply them—from 8 to 14 I was a playless Day-dreamer, an Helluo Librorum, my appetite for which was indulged by… a stranger who struck by my conversation made me free of a great Circulating Library in King's Street, Cheapside—& I read thro the whole Catalogue, folios and all…—Conceive what I must have been at 14—I had never played—I was in a continued low fever—my whole Being was with eyes closed to every object of *present* sense—to crumple myself up in a sunny Corner, and read, read, read—fancy myself on Rob. Crusoe's Island, finding a Mountain of Plum Cake, and eating out a room for myself, and then eating it into the shapes of Chairs & Tables—Hunger and Fancy—

Hunger begins the note; hunger ends it; it is here some kind of subliming energy which intensifies his reading—note that he describes his tendency to read as an 'appetite'. Safely ensconced in a sunny corner, as in Ottery, he enters another world and imagines himself marooned like Crusoe, and instead of creating a cabin and furniture (which, in my DIY experience, Crusoe does impossibly quickly), the young Coleridge imagines a mountain of plum cake, and creates his furniture by eating out the necessary shapes. 'Fancy' is a twice-used word in this passage, and as David Fairer has reminded us in Bulletin 37, we really should not distinguish it from imagination, especially during Coleridge's early years. There is a complex relation between suppression of his senses, his 'eyes closed to every object of *present* sense', on the one hand, and a real hunger on the other, which intensifies his capacity to read, and to imagine himself somewhere other than he is. The development of his imagination is

thus closely allied to a suppression or sublimation of the senses, and this suppression perhaps linked to his depression or moping.

Boyer's argumentum baculinum: one just flogging

But of course Coleridge was beaten at Christ's Hospital—by the Rev James Boyer. In the *Biographia*, he associated Boyer's 'severities' with 'the painful sensations of distempered sleep', a phrase that must make us think of 'The Pains of Sleep', and the 'Sense of intolerable wrong' described there, the perceived injustice of his suffering. However these severities, just or unjust, did not, he says, 'lessen or dim the deep sense of my moral and intellectual obligations' (BL I 11). Coleridge's conflicting attitudes to Boyer are epitomized in the tag he gave his teacher, *Orbilius Plagosus*, which he found in Horace;[13] and in a letter Lamb wrote in 1814 to tell Coleridge of Boyer's death: 'Lay by thy animosity against Jemy in his grave. Do not en*tail* it on thy *Poster*ity.'[14] On Coleridge hearing the news, Lamb reports him as saying, "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".[15] And yet, though Coleridge's *principles* of education did not involve beating, he accepted that it was pragmatic.[16] He makes a wry, amusing, not to say fond, marginal note to this effect, when taking Richard Baxter to task for his 'sneaking affection for Puns.' Schoolmasters like puns too, and for reasons similar to those of 'Scholastic Logicians', because the primary sense of the words remain after the jocular have been understood: ' "I have indorsed your Bill, Sir!" said a Pedagogue to a Merchant—meaning that he had flogged his Son William', and then Coleridge remembers one of Boyer's favourite *jeu de mots*:

> "Nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu", [there is nothing in the mind not first in the senses] my old Master, Rd. J. Boyer, the Hercules Furens of the phlogistic Sect, but else an incomparable Teacher, used to translate—first reciting the Latin words & observing that they were

[13] Orbilius the Flogger. CL VI 843; Orbilius was the severe grammarian who taught Horace, and Coleridge is remembering lines from the first epistle of Book II – 'Non equidem insector, delendave carmina Lævi/ Esse reor, memini quae plagosum mihi parvo/ Orbilium dictare;' [Nor do I condemn old *Lævius'* Verses, I know their Value; my Master *Orbilius*, when I was a Boy, took such Care with his Ferula to explain them to me, that they will not easily be forgotten…'.Horace, Epistles II i, ll.69-71, fom *Horaces's Satires, Epistles and Art of Poetry, Done into English, with Notes*, By S. Dunster, D.D., (London, 1729) The epigraph on the title page of this edition is 'Sermoni propriora', which Coleridge chose for 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement', PW 129.

[14] Marrs III 108 – 26? August 1814

[15] Lamb III 162

[16] Writing to Edward, his nephew, of Henry Gillman, about to go to Eton,Coleridge says, 'Tho' my Illness has been a sad loss to him, poor Fellow! yet I trust, you will find him considerably improved—tho' if I had had the strength and the conveniences of *flogging* him, instead of scolding or confining, more would have been done—and yet I am persuaded, that he is desirous to do well.' (CL V 491) One might question as to whether there is any irony in this: context is all, and in context I think not.

> the fundamental article of the Peripatetic School—or "You must lay it in at the Tail before you can get into the Head."[17]

Here, in private, Coleridge maintains the equanimity of his feelings about Boyer asserted in the *Biographia*. This Latin tag stuck in his mind because, for him, it symbolised the mistake made by Locke, Hume and other material philosophers. In one respect he agreed with the proposition, as he understood the importance of observational research, but what was missing was the distinguishing feature of his philosophy; so to this tag he added a phrase he found in Leibniz: 'praeter ipsum intellectum'—'except the mind itself'. The mind has structures and powers of its own, not imposed upon it, and the imagination is one Coleridge had become aware of through his early and intense reading.

Late in life, in May 1830, recalling his schooldays, he told this story:

> I had *one* just flogging. At thirteen, I went to a shoemaker and begged him to take me as his apprentice… Bowyer asked me why… to which I answered… that I hated the thought of being a clergyman. "Why so?" said he:— "Because, to tell you the truth, Sir, I am an Infidel." For this Bowyer flogged me well, and, I think, wisely. Any Evangelical whining or remonstrances would have gratified my vanity and confirmed me in my absurdity; as it was I got laughed at and ashamed.[18]

This is certainly laying it in at the tail. The significance of this passage is that Coleridge regards infidelity, a lack of faith—which to him was a failure of imagination—as an absurdity. He approved Edward Young's line in *Night Thoughts*, 'An undevout Astronomer is mad', adding, 'Much more truly, however might it be said that undevout Poet is mad: in other words, an undevout poet in the strict sense of the term is an impossibility—'.[19] He is therefore, at least long after the event, on Boyer's side.

But this story is told in two ways, as above, which is an affirmation of faith, and another which indicates his intellectual independence, his stubborness in the face of the beating he was likely to receive. In the autobiographical note some two years after his remark on one just flogging, he retells the story in a spirit of intellectual defiance:

> … after I read Voltaire's Philosophical Dictionary—I sported infidel! for which Boyer flogged me soundly—and I determined out of spite to be more infidelical—but that night my heart smote me, & I *prayed*—/My infidel vanity (it never touched my heart) was but of a

[17] CM I 354; the editor supplies the origins of this phrase. Cf Samuel Johnson, *Life*… 662, quoted in note 36 above.
[18] TT 27 May 1830; for Coleridge's contempt for evangelical attitudes, see CL IV 837 and CL VI 656.
[19] LL I 326, and again II 503.

> mock nature… But only in these few months, in the enjoyment of the supposed new light given me by Voltaire, and the pride of courage in bravading them, have I ever been with my lips (with my heart I never did) abandon the name of Christ…[20]

His determination 'out of spite to be more infidelical' ('unlawful' or 'transgressive') suggests that the beating was counter-effective, resulting in Coleridge's assertion of his right to complete intellectual freedom. His reaction to Boyer is of a kind with his reaction to his father. But we can see this debate between the freedom of the mind and the allegiances of the heart at many levels in Coleridge's work, not least in poems such as 'The Eolian Harp' and 'Frost at Midnight'. And just as he refused to laugh at his father's play, so he refused to be an Anglican vicar, which was what he knew his father had wanted him to be. And yet he was willing to say, 'The Image of my Father, my revered kind learned simple-hearted Father, is a Religion to me!'[21] In his heart he loved his father; in his mind he would be free.

To sum up so far: Coleridge always ascribed his beatings and his alienation from Frank as the cause of his reading. Unable to play, he turned to books. I've suggested that this is more a chicken-and-egg question than he allows. What he discovered in those books was more exciting, more sensational, than anything in his immediate world. He thus learnt to set aside the notices of sense in some measure, and find his immediate life in the life of his imagination. This power co-incided with, and was partly the product of, a remarkable and precociously developed intelligence, which he exercised, largely in the form of contempt, on all and sundry. Fretful, lazy, passionate, contemptuous—a lonely playless Day-dreamer—if the child is the father of the man, he was going to turn into a person as remarkable as he was peculiar. But none of this is in the *Biographia*, of course.

Suppression, sublimation and the Arabian Nights

As I have said, what I think is worrying about this mode of development of the imagination is its association with the suppression or sublimation of the notices of sense, though this doesn't make his world less sensational. He closes his eyes to every object of *present* sense, but opens them to an often much wilder

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[20] CN V 6675; Coleridge had said very much the same thing in a letter to George in March, 1794: 'I long ago theoretically and in a less degree experimentally knew the necessity of Faith in order to regular Virtues—nor did I ever seriously disbelieve the existence of a future State—In short, my religious Creed bore and perhaps bears a correspondence with my mind and heart— I had too much Vanity to be altogether a Christian—too much tenderness of Nature to be utterly an Infidel. Fond of the dazzle of Wit, fond of subtlety of Argument, I could not read without some degree of pleasure the levities of Voltaire, or the reasonings of Helvetius—but tremblingly alive to the feelings of humanity, and su[s]ceptible of the charms of Truth my Heart forced me to admire the beauty of Holiness in the Gospel, forced me to love the Jesus, whom my Reason (or perhaps my reasonings) would not permit me to worship—My Faith therefore was made up of the Evangelists and the Deistic Philosophy—a kind of religious Twilight—I said—perhaps bears—Yes! my Brother—for who can say—Now I'll be a Christian—Faith is neither altogether voluntary, or involuntary—'. (CL I 78)

[21] CN V 6675. In St John's Gospel, I.47, Jesus describes Nathaniel as an Israelite without guile. See also, CL V 462: '…my Father, that venerable Countenance and Name which form my earliest recollections and make them *religious*.'

world, sometimes both sensual and sensuous, as we shall see in a moment. He is content to be beaten, if thus he can dream. His hunger feeds his imagination. He doesn't live, like most other boys, in the world that is around him, and he rarely bothers to right the wrongs he suffers.

The book that made the deepest impression on Coleridge during his childhood was *The Arabian Nights*. Its virtues stayed with him all his life, and it became a kind of talisman for the rightly working imagination. In 1830, he used the story of the merchant's son carelessly discarding a date stone which killed a genie's son, and the genie's revenge, to illustrate the proper freedom of the imagination when Mrs Barbauld questioned the lack of a moral in *The Ancient Mariner*. In 1825, he took a story from the *Arabian Nights* to represent his life-long struggle to determine the primacy of Mind or Nature:

> In Youth and early Manhood the Mind and Nature are, as it were, two rival Artists, both potent Magicians, and engaged, like the King's Daughter and the rebel Genie in the Arabian Nights' Enternts., in sharp conflict of Conjuration—each having for it's object to turn the other into Canvas to paint on, Clay to mould, or Cabinet to contain.
>
> (CL V 496)

Writing to Poole in 1797, he wondered whether 'children be permitted to read Romances, & Relations of Giants & Magicians, & Genii?', adding immediately that he believed they should as 'I know no other way of giving the mind a love of 'the Great', & 'the Whole.' 'No other way'—that's a bold declaration—but he goes on to defend it by saying that mere attention to the senses cannot lead to the same insight, and those who have been thus 'rationally' educated 'want a sense which I possess—They contemplate nothing but *parts*—and all *parts* are necessarily little—and the Universe to them is but a mass of *little things*'.[22] Such people, Coleridge felt, lack the unifying power of the imagination, a lack they call 'Judgment'; the idea of a whole, a unity, was at the heart of Coleridge's understanding of philosophy and poetry. The imagination was the power that could discover the grounds of that unity.

Given the importance he attaches to the power that these tales catalyse—possible in 'no other way'—it is curious, if not downright astonishing, that the *Arabian Nights* are not mentioned once in the *Biographia*.[23] If it is about the history and genesis of the imagination, based on his own life and opinions, then this is an almost inexplicable omission. It is true that Coleridge intended to write an essay on the supernatural, and this part of his history might have appeared there had that essay ever been written.[24] Although he divided the incidents that gave rise to the *Lyrical Ballads* into natural and supernatural, nonetheless both were to be subject to 'the modifying colours of the

[22] CL I 354

[23] There's possibly a passing reference in BL II 218, to 'the wildest tales of ghosts, wizards, genii, and secret talismans.' Note the connection of this with overcoming fear. (Leadbetter 218)

[24] BL I 306; LL II 192; CL II 707; CL IV 561, 925

imagination.' A closer look at the tales he read might suggest why he didn't acknowledge the *Arabian Nights* in the *Biographia*.

When Coleridge says he was haunted by the tale of a man compelled to seek for a pure virgin, the tale that he refers to is *The History of Prince Zeyn Alasnam, and the King of the Genii*, which lies deep among the stories, about two thirds of the way through any edition he is likely to have read.[25] We can therefore reasonably infer that, as young as six, he was in the process of reading his edition from cover to cover. The opening tale, which is the framework for the whole, is one of the darkest and most brutal, and Coleridge could not have read the many that he did without being conscious that they were all set against a background of perverse lust, ruthless slaughter and ever-impending doom. If the boy was in any way gaining an insight into human motivation via these tales, it would have been a terrifying realization. He would also have found the tales sensational in the extreme.

Briefly, to get the beauty of it hot, and using Burton's translation, which certainly is hot, I'll run through the opening framework tale, to rid ourselves of any lingering disneyisms. Two brothers, both kings, discover their wives unfaithful—Zaman, the younger, finds his wife 'embracing with both arms a black cook of loathsome aspect and foul with kitchen grease and grime.'[26] The lovers are asleep, and without hesitation, Zaman draws his scimitar and with a single stroke cuts them both in two, closes the door, and goes off to visit his brother, Shahryar. There he sees his brother's queen calling down from a tree 'a big slobbering blackamoor with rolling eyes' whom she embraced warmly, and 'then he bussed her and winding his legs round hers, as a button-loop clasps a button, he threw her and enjoyed her.' Leaving the palace, they come across the closely kept wife of a fearsome genie, who tells them that she has nonetheless had some 570 lovers, and who forces the two brothers to 'futter' her while her husband sleeps: she threatens to wake him unless they perform. They go back to Shahryar's palace, where he orders the execution of the queen, and he himself goes to the Serraglio and slays all the concubines and their Marmelukes. But the worst is yet to come. So as never to be deceived again, Shahryar takes a virgin as wife every night, and has her executed in the morning to prevent what he sees as her otherwise inevitable infidelity, a habit he keeps up for three years—thus slaughtering over a thousand women. Shahrazad, the last of two virgins left, both daughters of Chief Wazir tasked with the daily executions, is saved from the same doom, by her nightly story-telling—after which she always goes to the bed of her husband, 'this pious and auspicious King' as she calls him, not knowing her fate the next day. To an adult, behind this unlikely and cruel framework, there is a touch of dark

[25] Unlike the story he uses to illustrate *The Ancient Mariner* as over-moralized, *The Merchant and the Genie*, which occurs on the First Night.

[26] *The Arabian Nights, Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, trans. Sir Richard F Burton, (The Modern Library, New York, 2001) p.5. Burton's edition appeared between 1885 and 1888, and thus is not the text from which Coleridge read. It is often more graphic than earlier editions, and the sexulaity and brutality are more explicit, but the actions are the same.

comedy. But children don't find it easy to make the distinction between a convention and a reality. Which, the young Coleridge must have asked himself, is the real world: the wild sexuality and ruthless slaughter of the tale he was reading; or his mother mending stockings? Could all women, even his mother and sisters, have had the kind of urge that drove the genie's wife? It's a dreadful question to pass through the mind of a boy so young—almost, my wife said, using contemporary terms, a form of abuse—too much knowledge far too early—or the young Sam thus discovered the power of a transgressive imagination.

The tale that Coleridge read sitting on a stool as his mother darned is, by contrast, completely free of lust and slaughter, is warm, considerate and compassionate—and features a wise and kindly mother.[27] Nonetheless it is full of conflicting forces that might have troubled Coleridge then and afterwards. Prince Zeyn Alasnam of Balsora (modern Basra) is heir to his father's wealth and kingdom, and despite paternal deathbed advice to be loved rather than feared by his people, to be slow in rewarding as well as punishing, wealth and power went to his head, and he 'only regarded what his subjects owed to him, without considering what his duty was towards them.' Nor did he govern himself well: 'He wallowed in all sorts of debauchery among the voluptuous youth', and thus squandered all his wealth, and fell into 'a dismal melancholy'. These sentiments would have made an impression on Coleridge; he later incorporated all of them into his political thinking: love is a better instrument of government than fear; rights are always matched with duties, especially in those privileged with wealth and power; and self-discipline is the basis of public government: 'He alone is entitled to a share in the government of all, who has learnt to govern himself…'[28]

But it is not until we are almost three quarters of the way through the story that we come to the search for the pure virgin—which, very briefly, Prince Zeyn must find in order to recover his wealth. The genie who has been guiding Zeyn by means of dreams meets him on a magical island and sets out his conditions:

> '—you must first swear to me by all that is sacred, that you will return…, and that you will bring with you a maid that is in her fifteenth year, and who has never known man, nor desired to know any. She must also be perfectly beautiful, and you so much master of yourself, as not even to desire to enjoy her, as you are conducting her hither.'[29]

These conditions defy all normal human instincts and require, as it proves, a super-human sublimation; nonethess Zeyn takes 'the rash oath'. Virgins, both

[27] This tale is not in Burton's edition. All the following quotations are from The Oxford World Classics edition (OUP 1998, paperback) pp. 571-583.
[28] CN II 2955
[29] *Arabian Nights*, p.579 (OUP)

pure and beautiful, prove hard to find, but eventually Zeyn locates one, just one. He supposes the girl is for the genie, who forgives him his imperfect suppression of his desires; happily, however, in the end he gets both the girl and the money.

Prince Zeyn's tale asserts the validity of dreams, distinguishing the chimerical from the mysterious or revelatory. This would have appealed to Coleridge in much the same way he was later able to distinguish the credulous from the literary or religious imagination. But put side by side, which of course they aren't in the book, we have on the one hand the unrestrained sexuality of the first tale, and the impossible purity of the second. Coleridge was haunted, he says, by this tale—that is, it induced fear in him. This is odd, since in itself it is entirely charming; but I wonder whether these two tales don't in some way represent the two poles of Coleridge's amatory consciousness—the warm wild, daemonic lover, and the pure beautiful, undesiring maid? But would such an irresolvable conflict create fear? There are indications that it might.

In Malta in 1805, Coleridge reviewed his life, and finds that he has 'always been preyed on by some Dread', or a sequence of dreads, as it proves. Having mentioned 'a short-lived Fit of Fears from sex'—which, given his dissolute life at Cambridge, could refer either to the act or the disease that might ensue—he moves on to the the next:

> a state of struggling with madness from an incapability of hoping that I should be able to marry Mary Evans (and this strange passion of fervent tho' wholly imaginative and imaginary Love uncombinable by my utmost efforts with any regular Hope—/possibly from deficiency of bodily feeling, of tactual ideas connected with the image) had all the effects of direct Fear, & I have lain for hours together awake at night, groaning & praying— (CN II 2398)[30]

Is Mary Evans the image of the maid he must not desire in order to have? When he described it as a 'wholly imaginative and imaginary Love' he did not mean someone he barely knew, a Dante and his Beatrice: all the evidence is that she was as much attracted to him as he to her—they met when they were both about 16, and saw each other regularly for three years. So what does he mean when he says that this love was 'uncombinable with any regular Hope'? He links this with a 'deficiency of bodily feeling, of tactual ideas connected with the image'. Does he mean he doesn't fancy her? I don't think so. In his last letter to her, he speaks of the 'ardor' of his attachment. Coleridge makes a further comment on hope at the end of this note, asserting 'the influence of bodily vigor and strong Grasp of Touch in facilitating the passion of Hope…'—a comment with sexual implications as indicated by the ciphered phrase that follows: 'eunuchs—in all degrees even to the full ensheathment and

[30] Fear, sleep - or lack of - and dreams: a powerful cocktail for Coleridge, see *The Pains of Sleep*, and CL IV 496, quoting *Remorse* IV i 68-73; also quoted in CN III 3322

the both at once…'. Coleridge seems to be describing an unrealizable sexuality. His love is 'imaginative and imaginary'—that is, a work of the imagination in some form, creating an image, with both positive and negative connotations. What he seems to find impossible is to associate this love with the hope of its physical realization—the strong grasp of touch is, for whatever reason, not there. By the time his relationship with Mary Evans ended, Coleridge had no fears of sex.[31] But did the tale of a man compelled to seek a pure virgin—which proved no tautology—in anyway influence his relationship with Mary Evans? Did his willingness to suppress his senses, which he had learnt through his intense reading in the face of hunger and beatings, prevent his ability to attune his senses to the immediate? Did he see the degraded sexuality of some of the tales as destroying or destructive of women? Or, on the other hand, was a libidinous woman a threat to him, to whom he could not respond—thus becoming a metaphorical eunuch? Or to put the whole question another way, could Coleridge ever permit the Abyssinian maid to wail for her demon lover, or, as he almost does, Geraldine's warm powers to live in the cold flesh of Christabel?

I have strayed beyond the bounds of the *Literaria*, if not the *Biographia*. To return to the question as to why the *Arabian Nights* did not appear in his 'autobiography': my notion is that the version of the imagination they represented for him was darker, more daemonic, than he permitted himself freely to admit, and he looked askance on his own discoveries, just as he looked a little askance on *Kubla Khan*. Coleridge used these tales to illustrate the kind of power or powers free of moral boundaries—he answered Mrs Barbauld by saying not that the Mariner had too little of a moral, but too much, and described what he meant by underlining the inconsequentiality of the genie's revenge; it is a *rebel* genie who is in conjuration with the King's Daughter; and nature is a wily old *witch*, getting the better of Lady Mind: here, subsconsciously employed, are the terms of his argument with himself, happily set against each other in the lower and the upper cases: the rebel and the witch, the free and powerful, in opposition to the King's Daughter and Lady Mind—the pure and proper. And in rebel and witch is a kind of power Coleridge is only half-admitting; it is a curious fact that he began his illustration of the imagination with reference to two of Shakespeare's headiest poems, *Venus and Adonis*, and *The Rape of Lucrece*—from both of which he distances himself with prudish comments. It is that kind of self-censorship which makes us turn to his less cautious notes and letters to understand why so much of the *Biographia* was unwritten.

[31] He seems to have indulged himself pretty liberally while at Cambridge, and we even have the name of one of his likely indulgencies—Sal Hall.