Coleridge's Epitaph: Rediscovering *S.T.C.*

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IN MARCH 1977, DOING RESEARCH AT THE OLD BRITISH LIBRARY in order to edit the *Biographia Literaria*, I walked from Russell Square to Highgate and read Coleridge's epitaph on his burial slab in the nave of St Michael's. It was puzzling. In 1991, working on the *Early Family Letters*, I retraced those steps and read again his epitaph. Richard Holmes states that 'it ends with two of the most wonderfully ambiguous lines he ever wrote'.[1] Scrutiny will show them to be two of the most revealing. The poem appears in the *Poetical Works* of 1834 (and in no earlier edition or printing) as the last poem, its final place repeated in many later editions. The title used now is *S.T.C.*

> Stop, Christian Passer-by! Stop, Child of God!
> And read with gentle heart. Beneath this Sod
> A Poet lies: or that which once seem'd He.
> O lift one thought in prayer for S.T.C.
> That he who many a year with toil of Breath
> Found Death in Life, may here find Life in Death.
> Mercy for Praise, to be forgiven for Fame,
> He ask'd, and hoped thro' Christ. Do Thou the Same.
> (*PW* 1, 2, 1145-46)

'The first version' of Coleridge's final epitaph, remarks James Mays, 'appears to have consisted of lines 3-6 only' and is 'in the spirit' of an earlier, different epitaph he wrote for himself in 1803, *Epitaph on Poor Col.* Mays conjectures that Coleridge wrote the four lines of the 'first version' of the final epitaph while visiting Tom Poole. Even for a poet concerned with revision, it is noteworthy that in 1833 he wrote what Mays numbers as eight later manuscript versions of the final epitaph in which he added couplets at the beginning and end.[2] He composed several versions in late October and early November 1833. The last known text in his hand comes from his letter to J. G. Lockhart dated November 5, 1833 (*CL* VI 973, where 'sod' is however not capitalized) and is printed above.

One version he wrote on what he believed was his 'spiritual birthday' or baptismal birthday, the night of Monday, October 28, 1833. Actually, he was baptized December 30, 1772 (*PW* 2, 2, 1341). It appears in a letter to J. H. Green (*CL* VI 962-63) filled with reflections on pantheism, atheism, Socinianism, and 'the idea of the Trinity,' crucial matters concerning his own beliefs. In the final paragraph to Green, Coleridge writes, 'I send you the Epitaph, I rewrote last night, or rather re-*thought* (for I am now first to re-*write* it) on an Author not wholly unknown; but better known by the initials of his Name than by the Name itself—which he fondly Graecized.' Coleridge then

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1 Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 557*.

2 *PW* 1, 2, 1145-46 and n; see also *CM* II 903-06, marginalia from 1833, also *CL* VI 963, 968-70, 973, *TT* I 450, and *PW* 2, 2, 1359-63.

gives the Greek for he hath stood (actually, he hath placed, but then the play on the Greek initials would be lost), he lies at rest, he will rise again, along with a similar Latin rendering, here he lies who stood, awaits, will rise again (*CL* VI 963 and n). An adjusted set of Greek and Latin lines meant to explain the play on S.T.C. also follows his final version of *S.T.C.* to Lockhart (*CL* VI 973). As early as 1799, long unhappy with his given names, he had played on his initials and signed their Greek form to his poem *A Christmas Carol*, published in the *Morning Post* on Christmas 1799.[3] What became the final version of *S.T.C.* may have had a history spanning twenty-five years or more, with multiple revisions in the space of a few months less than a year before he died.

'Mercy for Praise'

What to make of his plea—really a prayer—'Mercy for Praise …/ He ask'd'? In a note to the version of November 5, 1833, the last one in his hand, he adds, 'N.b.—"for" in the sense of "instead of".—' Mercy instead of Praise. But why yoke 'Mercy' with 'Praise' as a prayer?

The hope of divine *mercy* for his laudanum habit he hints at in 1802, about a year after he began to use laudanum heavily, especially the 'Kendal Black Drop,' an unusually strong preparation.[4] On January 22, 1802, Coleridge writes to William Godwin that he wishes Godwin to know 'the whole Truth … of my character.' 'Partly from ill-health' he reports that 'my ideas, wishes, & feelings are to a diseased degree disconnected from *motion & action*. In plain & natural English, I am a dreaming & therefore an indolent man…. If I might say so, I am, as an acting man, a creature of mere Impact. "I will" & "I will not" are phrases, both of them equally, of rare occurrence in my dictionary… I evade the sentence of my own Conscience by no quibbles of self-adulation; I ask for Mercy indeed on the score of my ill-health; but I confess, that this very ill-health is as much an effect as a cause of this want of steadiness & self-command; and it is for mercy that I ask, not for justice' (*CL* II 782-83).

If his ill-health is an effect as much as a cause, then the want of steadiness and self-command is a cause of that effect, and his lack of will has its root and primary manifestation in doing something that reveals a 'want of steadiness & self-command'—his taking of laudanum. He is close to a full confession: 'I confess …and it is for mercy that I ask, not for justice' and will later transform this thought into a prayer of 'Mercy for Praise' and ask others to pray for him, too: 'O lift one thought in prayer for S.T.C.' In that letter to Godwin, Coleridge perhaps did not tell the 'whole Truth' but held back an explicit cause of his ill-health and his being 'indolent,' a codeword for the state caused by his taking laudanum, at the time a word frequently associated with taking the drug.

Consistently throughout his Notebooks, the cry of 'Mercy' and a plea for mercy he connects with extreme distress over his laudanum habit. Instances

[3] *CM* I 92-93 and n10[3]; also *CM* III 165 and n48[2].

[4] The authoritative work on Coleridge's opium addiction remains Molly Lefebure, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1974). She mentions his final epitaph and reprints it (50) without discussion. See also James Gillman, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: William Pickering, 1838), 247.

abound. If there is one personal action or behavior, over many years, that Coleridge repeatedly and strongly associates with 'mercy' and a plea for mercy, it is his dependence on laudanum, which he regards as a moral failing, a sin, and, worst of all, a sin he commits repeatedly and cannot quit.

This Notebook entry is from Malta, 2:00am the morning of Saturday, February 16, 1805: 'And did I not groan at my unworthiness, & be miserable at my state of Health, its effects, and effect-trebling Causes? O yes!—Me miserable! O yes!—Have Mercy on me, O something *out* of me! For there is no *power,* (and if that *can* be, less *strength*) in aught *within* me! Mercy! Mercy!' (*CN* II 2453). Echoing the letter to Godwin three years earlier (see above), this is more personal, dire, and introspective. Later that day: 'Worse and worse! "Why will ye die?"' (Ezekiel 18:31, 33:11, about starting a new life, turning from evil ways). This is the 'Death in Life' he experienced, and named it so in his epitaph. 'The Soul is smitten with despair, and fears to form a resolution/Even to resolve is a Lie at the Heart, a Blasphemy!' (*CN* II 2454).

In a Notebook entry that Kathleen Coburn dates late 1811-early 1812 (*CN* III 4121), she indicates that Coleridge quotes Erasmus on literary style, with Coleridge's added remark in English interspersed. His entire entry:

> Style. Sicuti Sal modice cibis aspersus condit et gratiam saporis addit, ita si paulum antiquitatis admiscueris, Oratio fit venustior.[5] And I have seldom seen that way of writing faulted but by such as for a certain odd reason find that the *Grapes are sour*. However for myself—veniam pro laude peto.

Coburn justly connects this entry—the final sentence is, 'I ask pardon for praise'—with his epitaph, 'Mercy for Praise.' However, Coleridge did not take from Erasmus this entry, an entry he would recall (or consult) for his epitaph. Rather, his entire Notebook entry—English, Latin and English and then Latin again—he copies from Cotton Mather's 'General Introduction' (its fifth unnumbered page, second column) to *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, the Ecclesiastical History of New-England* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702), a book written by an American but first published in London in 1702, in which Mather borrows from Erasmus, stating his name. Coleridge's entire Notebook entry begins with the English word 'Style' (in Mather, not in Erasmus) and comes word for word from Mather, save substituting 'sour' for 'unripe' and 'However for myself' in place of Mather's archaic 'of which yet I only.' Coleridge read Mather's volume among Southey's books at Greta Hall, almost certainly in February 1812 (*CM* III 816), a time that fits snugly with Coburn's dating. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the book in which Coleridge read '*veniam pro laude peto*' is one concerning the great workings of Christ.

'*Veniam pro laude peto*' would normally be translated, 'I ask pardon for praise' or 'I ask forgiveness for praise' and not 'I ask mercy for praise.' If the Latin were *misericordiam*, 'mercy' would be apt, but it is *veniam*. The Notebook entry recalls his 1802 letter to Godwin (see above): 'it is for mercy that I ask, not for

[5] 'Just as salt, lightly sprinkled on foods, seasons and adds pleasantness of taste, so if you mix a little antiquity, a speech becomes more agreeable'. (Trans. Kathleen Coburn and Lorna Arnold).

justice.' So, how does this connect with 'Mercy for Praise'? Paracelsus gave the name laudanum (or ladanum) to his recipe for preparing a drug that included opium. It is unclear if he had in mind the Latin *laudare*, 'to praise,' or *ladanum*, a word akin to plant resin. His preparations contained such resins. Nevertheless, Paracelsus usually called the drug laudanum. Coleridge might not have known that detailed history, but he knew that laudanum—so named by Paracelsus, who also said, 'The dose makes the poison'—was, by the eighteenth century, a name universally assumed to be derived from the Latin *laus*, 'praise,' or *laudare*, 'to praise,' because of its beneficial effects.[6]

Two years after that Notebook entry, writing about his opium taking ('the ACCURSED Habit') to Joseph Cottle on April 26, 1814—Cottle had berated Coleridge, telling him coldly to give up opium 'from this moment'—Coleridge states, 'that for years the anguish of my spirit has been indescribable, the sense of my danger *staring*, but the conscience of my guilt worse, far far worse than all!—I have prayed with drops of agony on my Brow, trembling not only before the Justice of my Maker, but even before the Mercy of my Redeemer' (*CL* III 476).

He would make a terrible plea yet again for 'Mercy!' in his Notebook on March 8, 1832 (as he had in past entries): now he asks mercy for 'my folly and my sin' and his editors aptly state that this 'folly' is 'almost certainly a reference to his first use of opium.' He calls on God 'abundant in forgiveness and in Judgement remembering Mercy—in the Multitude of thy Mercies have Mercy on me, who call <on> thee in the name of Christ Jesus, in whom thou hast opened out the fountain of thy mercy to Sinners, All mercies in one sovereign Mercy! …while I call—pray to thee to sanctify my folly and my sin to the alleviation of the pains & distemper <of> which it hath been the cause! to convert the poison into medicine!' (*CN* V 6674 and nn). Here, in private, is the cause of his ill-health explicitly identified (see letter to Godwin and *CN* II 2453, both quoted above). The entry the next night, March 9, contains a retrospective of his early life to 1800. James Gillman used part of it for his biography, though not where Coleridge speaks of taking opium as 'the curse ~~of~~ [*sic*] and slavery of my life.' Coleridge claims that he first took the narcotic to relieve pain, not 'in any low craving for sensation,' but now, decades later, he must face the continuing consequences. '—Bad enough as it is—God forgive me—~~My~~ [*sic*] the Penance has been most bitter—' and penance more he'd do. (*CN* V 6675 and nn).

In a letter to Mrs. Dashwood of July 5, 1834, a few weeks before his death, he states that 'my Conscience'—the word he had used in 1802 and again in 1814 regarding his taking of laudanum—has not accused him of 'any deliberate wrongs to my fellow-creatures' but instead, '"Against thee, O my God! Have I sinned" [Psalm 51:4], against thee only and against my own spirit — in opportunities lost from procrastination and from bodily indolence, both too

[6] See Henry E. Sigerist, 'Laudanum in the Works of Paracelsus,' *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 9.5 (May 1941): 530-44, 530-32. '*Laudanum* became a generic term for praiseworthy remedies, some of which contained opium' (544).

compatible with energetic activity of mind and unremitting effort! But in sinning against myself, I have sinned indirectly against my fellow-men!' He concludes the paragraph: 'But, God be praised! His grace and fatherly chastisements had long humbled me to trust wholly and exclusively in the perfected righteousness of the Redeemer and Saviour, abjuring all plea and claim in myself to the all-merciful Father, save only my own exceeding need of mercy' (*CL* VI 986-87).

Again, the conscience of 'bodily indolence' as a sin against himself and God, means that the only hope for 'my own exceeding need of mercy' is redemption, as the epitaph says, 'thro' Christ.' It must come as an act of mercy from 'the all-merciful Father.' Praise of no kind is desired, neither the drug nor adulation; rather, 'God be praised!' Coleridge does use 'Praise' in the sense of applause for authorship—'authorial vanity and craving for Praise' (*CL* VI 912 to William Blackwood, May 26, 1832)—but it would be strange to pray to God for Mercy 'instead of' for that kind of praise, as if he would ask—or had ever asked—God for it. It is inconceivable that he would even entertain asking God for such praise, and equally inconceivable that, given his decades-long practice of explicitly calling to God and to Christ for 'mercy' concerning his laudanum habit (as well as his linguistic sharpness and penchant for serious puns), that he would not be thinking of 'Praise' in the epitaph as something so serious that it required nothing less than God's mercy 'thro' Christ.' It is a devout prayer for what he regarded as a grievous sin.

In a sympathetic set of remarks on Coleridge's habit contained in an 'Introduction to the Philosophical Remains of S.T. Coleridge,' his friend and close associate J.H. Green notes that Coleridge 'vainly endeavoured to free himself' from opium, '& it is most certain that he described it to me as a moral evil, & continued the practice with disgust, self reproach, & even with remorse' (*SWF* II 1525).

No one will ever know Coleridge's struggles with laudanum better than Dr. James Gillman. The following passages by Coleridge come from the biography by Gillman, who places them in the context of Coleridge's opium habit, De Quincey, and charges of plagiarism (Gillman 245-51). According to Gillman, in April 1826, Coleridge wrote a note about 'a few stanzas' he had composed 'three and twenty years ago.' We now know that this refers to *The Pains of Sleep,* composed September 1803 (*PW* 1, 2, 753), a poem clearly related to the symptoms and struggle of his taking opium. In this note, Coleridge writes of his own opium habit and laments of De Quincey, 'with what unutterable sorrow did I read the "Confessions of an Opium-eater," in which the writer with morbid vanity, makes a boast of what was my misfortune, for he had been faithfully and with an agony of zeal warned of the gulf, and yet wilfully [*sic*] struck into the current! – Heaven be merciful to him!' Again, an invocation of mercy for the addiction.[7]

The following two passages in Gillman are reproduced from Coleridge's

[7] Gillman 246-48, 247-48.

Notebooks (Gillman altered their punctuation and spelling):

> O may the God to whom I look for mercy thro' Christ, shew mercy on the Author of the 'Confessions of an Opium-eater'—if as I have too strong reason to believe, his book has been the occasion of seducing others in to this withering vice thro' wantonness.[8]

Here is mercy 'thro' Christ' again as in *S.T.C.* The first part of this entry is about his own addiction:

> 'Prayer is the mediation—or rather the effort to connect the misery of Self with the blessedness of God—& it's [*sic*] voice is—Mercy! mercy! for Christ's sake, in whom thou hast opened out the fountain of Mercy to sinful Man.[9]

Gillman also prints, later in the biography, a letter Coleridge wrote to Gillman on April 13, 1816. Coleridge frankly relates his condition with 'this detested Poison' and calls his own actions 'this wretched vice'; 'the horrors, I have suffered from Laudanum …almost overwhelm me—' (*CL* IV 630, Gillman 275). Gillman objects to 'this wretched vice' and notes, 'This is too strong an expression' (Gillman 275*), but it is how Coleridge continued to regard what he had done. It seems no coincidence that on the Plaque to the Memory of James Gillman at St Michael's '(The Friend of S.T. Coleridge)' are these two particular lines, with spelling and punctuation differing slightly from that in *S.T.C.*:

> MERCY! FOR PRAISE—TO BE FORGIVEN! FOR FAME
> HE ASKED, AND HOPED, THROUGH CHRIST, DO THOU THE SAME!

Coleridge's repeated linking of laudanum with a plea for, or invocation of, mercy is too pervasive and occurs over far too long a period of time to be accidental. Heartfelt, it is inwardly torturing. Have we ever realized the agony and shame, the helplessness and unworthiness that he privately felt and that, decade after decade, he could not escape? If doubt remains regarding the utterly common association of laudanum with praise, here is the 1819 *Cyclopædia* entry for Laudanum: 'a name given by the chemists to certain preparations, chiefly extracts of opium, on account of their excellent qualities; the word being derived from *laudare, to praise*'.[10] Or this: '*Laudanum*, from the Latin word *laus*, praise; implying a medicine worthy of praise; but is now generally applied to preparations of *Opium*'.[11] The identification of praise with laudanum is present in numerous other medical texts, essays, and poems. 'A Sonnet to Laudanum' by E., published in 1806, contains these lines: 'Whilst,

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[8] January 7, 1830, *CN* V 6244, Gillman 250.
[9] January 7, 1830, *CN* V 6244, Gillman 249.
[10] Abraham Rees, *The Cycyopædia, or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, 39 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, & Brown, 1819), vol. 20, entry for Laudanum, no page. The same statement appears in the 1810 edition.
[11] John Feltham, *A Popular View of the Structure and Economy of the Human Body* (London: J. Ginger, 1803), 415.

Laudanum, thy virtues I rehearse, / Whilst in thy praise I raise the grateful verse' (ll. 9-10).[12] In that publication also appears the essay 'Industry and Indolence,' in which the man exemplifying 'indolence' is named Ned Opium (28).

'to be forgiven for Fame'

On questions of fame, Coleridge was an old hand even when young. At Jesus College, he had written a Latin exercise, 'That the desire of Posthumous Fame is unworthy a Wise Man' (*SWF* I 18-23). He had considered fame from the perspective of good fame, ill fame, his own fame as philosopher and poet (the two often coupled), his desire for that fame, and yet his hesitancy to feel deserving of them, especially fame as a poet. But to be *forgiven* for fame? On the analogy of 'for' in 'Mercy for Praise' meaning mercy 'instead of' praise, was he asking, praying, to be forgiven 'instead of' having fame (*CM* II 906n45[3])—an odd prayer from him at this point—or he did he believe that he had attracted or was known for the wrong kind of fame?

Mays conjectures that in 1807, 'when C was looking over his own poems for publication by Longman and was very much aware of the demise of his poetic ambitions' (*PW* 1, 2, 1145), that he composed lines 3-6, beginning 'Here lies a Poet—' and his conjecture is plausible. However, Wordsworth's rejection of *Christabel* in early October 1800 caused Coleridge to reconsider his own gifts as a poet and to say of Wordsworth, 'He is a great, a true Poet – I am only a kind of a Metaphysician' (December 19, 1800, *CL* I 658). It was that winter of 1800-1801 when Coleridge, often ill, fell into heavy laudanum use. To William Collins, on December 6, 1818, Coleridge insists: 'Poetry is out of the question. The attempt would only hurry me into that sphere of acute feelings, from which abstruse research, the mother of self-oblivion, presents an asylum' (*CL* IV 892). The point is, Coleridge repeatedly connects being a poet *and* being a metaphysician with the idea of fame, though after Wordsworth's rejection of *Christabel*, philosophy and metaphysics often seem a compensation, 'an asylum' or 'self-oblivion'—suggestive phrases—from the nearly unbearable strain of the 'acute feelings' that accompany poetry.

On March 6, 1801, at the end of that difficult winter in which his laudanum habit deepened, he writes to Josiah Wade and makes a distinction, one between fame won from doing 'good to my fellow creatures' and another kind of fame entirely: 'Herein and in similar instances, with English authors of repute, I have ill consulted the growth of my reputation and fame. But I have cheerful and confident hopes of myself. If I can hereafter do good to my fellow creatures, as a poet, and as a metaphysician, they will know it; and any other fame than this, I consider as a serious evil, that would only take me from out the number and sympathy of ordinary man, to make a coxcomb of me' (*CL* II 705).

What might that other fame be, that 'serious evil'? We are dealing here with two kinds of fame, one of moral worth, the other 'a serious evil.' Even if fame

[12] *Monthly Literary Recreations; or, Magazine of General Information* No. 1 (July 1806), 280 (University of Chicago Library).

is seen as mere notoriety, even a negative literary reputation, by the early 1830s there had long been more than whispers about how this man of genius had dissipated his powers and grown 'indolent,' a word he used of himself (e.g., *CL* II 782; VI 986), and in some contexts a codeword for his laudanum habit. In *S.T.C.*, 'Fame' seems of deeply questionable worth, especially because he asks to be forgiven for it. If he was asking or praying to be forgiven *instead of* receiving worldly fame of a good kind, why would he, a few weeks before dying, joke about his signature being circulated 'To gain such fair Extension to my FAME!' (*CM* VI 989)?

In late 1833, very poor in health, Coleridge included in his epitaph a prayer, and a plea for the prayers of others, to ask mercy for what he considered 'the curse ~~of~~ and slavery of my life,' 'this wretched vice,' 'this withering vice,' 'my folly and my sin,' and to be forgiven for the kind of fame that he considered 'as a serious evil,' long associated with his habit.

'He ask'd'

He asked God, through Christ. The wording echoes many Notebook entries about the pain of his taking laudanum. This asking takes the form of prayer, an act that had become for him so crucial. *S.T.C.* is a prayer. He asks others to pray for him, too. 'O lift one thought in prayer for S.T.C.' It would make little sense in this prayer to ask God through Christ for mercy instead of asking God—or anyone—for praise, or to ask forgiveness for what, throughout his entire life, he had regarded as good fame.

Other phrases

Some of the language and phrasing in *S.T.C.* make earlier appearances and have roots in his letters, Notebooks, and other poems. The 'Stop …stop' of the first line echoes the opening lines of *The Rime*, which twice invokes stopping: the Mariner 'stoppeth one of three' who then asks, '"Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?"' As in *The Rime*, *S.T.C.* tells a story—far more briefly—and provides a kind of warning. 'Christian Passer-by!' is conventional yet also conjures Coleridge's youthful encounters, mentioned in *Biographia Literaria*, with 'any passenger, especially if he were drest in black'—a clergyman (*BL* I 16), as well as recalling his willingness and ability to talk with just about anyone, something Dorothy Wordsworth noted during their Scottish tour in 1803: 'Coleridge, who is always good-natured enough to enter in to conversation with anybody whom he meets in his way'.[13] 'Child of God!' he had already written in another epitaph, *On an Infant Who Died Before its Christening* (*PW* 1, 1, 541). It is an affecting epitaph, perhaps after Lessing, and Coleridge says that he wrote it 'A few weeks ago' before putting it in the letter to his wife about the death of their son Berkeley. Yet, he also says, 'While I wrote it, my heart with a deep misgiving turned my thoughts homewards' (*CL* I 483). It begins 'Be rather than be *call'd* a Child of God!' Did he write it

[13] Dorothy Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, ed. J. C. Shairp (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1874), 37.

before hearing of Berkeley's death? We have no way of knowing, though, given the circumstances, Molly Lefebure states, 'The lines were in truth an epitaph for Berkeley' (Lefebure 284).

'Gentle heart' brings to mind what he had called his life-long, dear friend Charles Lamb *three* times in *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, that is, 'My gentle-hearted Charles!' Coleridge associated the heart itself with Lamb. Not long before dying, he wrote a note in his *Poetical Works* next to *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*: 'Ch. and Mary Lamb—dear to my heart, yea, as it were, *my* heart. S. T. C. Aet. 63, *1834*. 1797-1834 = *37 years*!' (*PW* 1, 1, 350n). The first date is their joint authorship of the second edition of *Poems*; later in 1797 Coleridge composed *This Lime-Tree Bower*. They had actually known one another more than fifty years.

An obvious echo from his earlier work are the words 'may here find Life in Death': a miraculous reversal of the meaning of this phrase in *The Rime*, where the mate of death is identified as 'The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she, / Who thicks man's blood with cold.' Coleridge has reversed her spell, banished his own night terrors, and turned the words into possible salvation. 'He …hoped' in the context brings to mind perhaps his poem *The Visionary Hope* but far more likely the sonnet *Work without Hope*, in which 'Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve / And Hope without an Object cannot live' (*PW* 1, 2, 1030-33). Now, in *S.T.C.*, hope has returned, it is possible for him to hope and to express hope, even though it may be hope for the soul after death.

The wonder is that all these phrases—indeed, the entire poem *S.T.C.*—can seem on the surface conventional, appropriate for almost any epitaph, yet for Coleridge the lines resonate and echo up and down the years of his life and work. As Michael O'Neill remarks, the poem achieves 'the chiselled constraints of the epitaphic form. . . . And yet Coleridge brings, as so often in his poetry, the drama of his career to the poem's centre'.[14] Michael Raiger said something similar almost thirty years earlier: 'the "Epitaph" as a literary work directs us . . . to a consideration of the life before the death of the poet, and, particularly, to that life as a poetic life'.[15]

Given the pain and self-recrimination he had suffered for decades, *S.T.C.* is a triumph of the spirit. He finds a way to condense so much into a title and eight lines. He plays on his long-disliked name and beloved initials; he addresses his decades-long ('many a year') efforts, as well as his shame and self-accused sin; he prays for mercy and forgiveness; he has consulted his conscience; he stops the passing reader—twice—to tell that reader about his ordeal, 'his toil of Breath,' and to ask a prayer from a gentle heart; he seriously plays on 'Praise' and 'Fame'; he considers himself as once and perhaps still a poet; he confronts his own passing; he reaches far back in time yet looks forward to life after death; he affirms his belief in Christ as merciful redeemer;

[14] Michael O'Neill, 'Coleridge's Genres' in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 375-91, 390.

[15] Michael Raiger, 'The 'Epitaph' of S.T.C. and the Path to God: Coleridge's Later Poems,' *The Wordsworth Circle* 21.3 (Summer 1990): 101-05, 101.

he recalls his reading in old books, ventriloquizing Erasmus through Cotton Mather; he likely remembers a much earlier epitaph associated with his son Berkeley; he revises the poem multiple times; cathartically, he overcomes and leaves behind an earlier association of his father's death with his own death and epitaph; and, in the closing imperative, he warns or advises readers similarly to ask for God's mercy through Christ.

It may seem that I have conjured a long list out of a short poem. And yet, that list suggests that the more *S.T.C.* is studied, the more it becomes STC. I hope to be fortunate enough to walk to Highgate again.

STC at 59 or 60
Moses Haughton (1774-1848); oil; 1832; (30 x 25 in.)
Christ's Hospital, Horsham;. MP cat. 23