Coleridge, Female Friendship, and Lines written at Shurton Bars.

Reggie Watters

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My main focus this morning is upon Coleridge in 1795, the year of *Lines Written at Shurton Bars,* the year of his marriage. In June of that year he began his Sixth Lecture on Religion at the Assembly Coffeehouse on Bristol Quay with a fable. Unfortunately, that portion of his lecture is now lost. But a later reworking usually called The Fable of The Maddening Rain and published in *The Friend,* in 1809, includes a fine evocation of the Golden Age before the coming of the modern world's corrupt societies based upon selfish greed:

> when there existed in the Sexes, and in the Individuals of each Sex, just variety enough to permit and call forth the gentle restlessness and final union of chaste love and individual attachment, each seeking and finding the beloved *one* by the natural affinity of their Beings.
>
> [*The Friend,* No.1. June 1, 1809J

It is a noble passage, but of course there is no way of knowing whether Coleridge could have said it in 1795, in the era of Sara Fricker rather than Sara Hutchinson.

Later still, in the mid-1820s, enriching, as was his wont, the margins of an obscure book belonging to his friend the German London merchant Carl Aders, STC wrote: 'Friendship is Sympathy, but Love Correspondence'. (M II 197) Again, fine sentiments. And what Coleridge meant here by Correspondence might be illustrated with an anecdote from his daughter's *Memoir* where she remembers how he understood her childish Night-Fears better than other people:

> My Uncle Southey laughed heartily at my agonies. I mean, at the cause. He did not enter into the agonies. Even my mother scolded me for creeping out of bed after an hour's torture… But my father understood the case better. He insisted that a lighted candle should be left in my room… From that time forth my suffering ceased. (*Memoir,* N.Y. 1874, p.49.)

That lighted candle is a perfect Coleridgean emblem to which I shall return. But my first point is simply to question whether he was capable of such fine empathy in 1795.

Coleridge's Christ's Hospital adolescence had been a place sadly lacking in such moments. Living together in their largely single-sex 'brotherhood', with

only a Ward Nurse to mother them, C.H. boys were for the most part deprived of those natural surroundings of family life which Coleridge described longingly in a note of 1803 as 'the beautiful Graduation of attachment, from Sister, Wife, Child, Uncle, Cousin, one of our blood, etc. on to mere Neighbour—to Townsman to our Countrymen (CN I 1637) This note states an idea which recurs several times in early Coleridge and which throws light on the

passage in Frost at Midnight where the poet recalls himself as a C.H. boy daydreaming of home and gently reverses 'the beautiful Graduation of attachment':

> Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
> A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
> For still I hoped to see the stranger's face,
> Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
> My playmate when we both were clothed alike.

The monolithic masculine regime of that stern preceptor James Bowyer which dictated much of STC's young life—'Boy'. The School is your Father…' The School is your Mother.' and so on—has been beautifully dissolved through graduations of feelings, until it reaches a wonderfully subtle image in which brother and sister dissolve even the distinguishing marks of their sexes.

Elsewhere in his Bristol Religious Lectures of 1795 Coleridge had commented briefly on a passage in Deuteronomy which pronounced that 'a Woman shall not wear a man's garment, neither a man put on a Woman's garment'. The definitive thesis on 'STC and Cross-dressing' has yet to be written. I'd merely suggest that, even at school, his views may have been subtler than Bowyer's, whose memorable bellows seldom expressed fine graduations of feeling.

The C.H. male hierarchy in which Coleridge was bred had its own arid forms: Little Erasmus, Great Erasmus, (named not after the humanist but after a school Governor, Erasmus Smith), Deputy Grecians, Grecians, and that other order, beyond the pale for classicists like STC, the King's Boys of the Royal Mathematical School. It was a system which superficially served Coleridge well. According to Gillman he was noticed when a junior, with his head in a copy of Virgil during playhours, by Thomas Middleton, future Bishop of Calcutta and then a Deputy Grecian. Middleton brought him to Bowyer's attention and he was soon granted the privileges of early selection for future academic honours, that systematic rewarding of precosity upon which, for so long, so much English education was based. Perhaps today we are likely to be a little more aware of the psychological dangers involved in such methods. I shall leave you to decide. Such systems usually depended on forms of single-sex favouritism, from empowered older male role-model to younger protegé. Such methods of male patronage must have suited Coleridge. He sought them through most of his life. We all know the male anchor-figures who litter the ocean-bed of his biography: Middleton, Southey, Poole,

Wordsworth, Sir Alexander Ball, James Gillman… And Coleridge was always happy to attempt the role himself. The actor Charles Mathews enjoyed giving an impersonation of an elderly STC perambulating the Highgate streets and greeting a stray apothecary's boy with the words: 'Boy, did you never reflect on the magnificence and beauty of the external universe?' *Boy*: 'No, sir, never.' [1] Mathews' choice of subject-matter is surely revealing. Was Coleridge going back beyond his school days, trying to recreate that *first* male favouritism he had enjoyed from his father while they discussed the pattern of the universe together at Ottery? The father image he evoked here, of course, may have been merely one side of that robust self-made man's true character. But it offered STC a model from which beautiful graduations were still possible, similar to those some of us celebrated on the fly-leaves of favourite books in our own childhood:

> ‘Sam Coleridge, The Vicarage, Ottery St Mary, The County of Devon, England, Great Britain, Europe, The Western Hemisphere, The World, The Solar System, The Universe, The Mind of God…’

At home in Ottery, as the youngest of a large family, he had felt closest to his father, and then a certain gap of difference from his brothers Luke and Frank and his sister Nancy. Less close to his mother maybe and less close again to his nurse, certainly, but still protected by a pervading feminine *warmth*—from which, of course, he could choose to run away at moments of crisis, but which remained important to him all his life. As we all know, the natural hierarchy of life at Ottery soon began to shatter. Between the age of 8 and 20, Coleridge lost not merely his father but all the others in the family who were closest to him: Luke died in 1790, Nancy in 1791, Frank in 1791 or 2. His life-long hypochondria may have been stimulated by the fear that the Coleridges were a family particularly susceptible to those sudden, inexplicable, often fatal illnesses which threatened the bonds of family life right up until our own time. And at the very moment when he most needed female reassurance, the small boy was sent away C.H., to be brought up among those who thought of themselves as ‘orphanotrophians’—inmates of the orphan house. Much of STC’s later domestic life seems to have been aimed at recreating a potential sickroom in which he could enjoy the reassuringly child-like status of a privileged patient tended by a devoted woman or two. And this was a pleasant means of escape he must first have discovered in the Sick Bay at Christ’s Hospital. Even when most absorbed in his male-centred system of privilege, Coleridge seems also to have retained a rather healthy sense that there was a female world elsewhere.

So, as he matured from young Sam, Charles Lamb’s inspired Charity boy, to Colly, Bowyer’s favourite Grecian, [2] STC was also engaged in trying to

recreate a surrogate family life outside C.H. First, according to GilIman, he found a local shoemaker and his wife who were persuaded to approach Bowyer with a proposal for an apprenticeship. A proposal which, of course, brought an offer of violence and another memorable bellow: ‘Ods my life, man, what d’ye mean?’ Then, more protractedly, once he was a Grecian with a protegé of his own, the cultivation of the London family of Tom Evans. Years later he recalled: ‘O! from 16 to 19 what hours of Paradise had Allen and I in escorting the Miss Evanses home on a Saturday, who were then at a Milliner’s, whom we used to think, and who I believe really was, such a nice Lady…’

Remember Byron’s gibe in Canto Three of Don Juan about Coleridge and Southey espousing two milliners of Bath, and you get a sense of the fine graduations which applied for so long to the English social classes! STC’s happy recollections continue in terms which seem worthy of Dickens to start with and then turn inimitably Coleridgean at their close:

> ‘we used to carry thither of a summer morning the pillage of the Flower Gardens within six miles of Town with Sonnet or Love-rhyme wrapped round the Nose-gay. To be feminine, kind, and genteely (i.e. what I should now call, neatly) drest—these were the only accomplishments to which my Head, Heart, or Imagination had any polarity—and what I was then, I still am.’
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> (CL V. pp. 216-8. Letter to Thomas Allsop, March, 1822)

‘POLARITY: Tendency to the pole’ (Johnson’s *Dictionary*). For Coleridge, feminine kindness and feminine neatness of dress constituted a ‘pole’ towards which he went on being attracted all his life, and which in Christ’s Hospital days must have stood at the opposite end

of the magnetic globe from Bowyer's insistently masculine 'Muse, boy, Muse? Your nurse's daughter, you mean!' Coleridge equated the need for such a polarity between the masculine and the feminine with some sense of the vital flow of magnetism, if not actually of electricity. Notice, also, that he enlisted, perhaps because of adolescent insecurity about his own maleness, the assistance of the strikingly handsome Robert Allen. Was he remembering the effect his more handsome brother Frank could have upon their own nurse and mother?

Mrs Evans with her three daughters, Mary, Anne and Elizabeth, remained, as we all know, a focal point for Coleridge's affections well into his Cambridge days. He wrote to his brother George in 1792 explaining, somewhat defensively, how he had spent two weeks of his first Cambridge Christmas vacation with the Evanses rather than at Ottery because: 'I have indeed experienced from her a tenderness scarcely inferior to the solicitude of maternal affection'. (CL I No.11) At the end of his life he was more unequivocal, telling Gillman that Mrs Evans 'taught me what it was to have a mother' and adding 'she had three daughters, and of course I fell in love with the eldest'. I'd want to claim that, at the time, the role of the mother was at least as important as the daughter's. It is relevant to recall how Robert Allen

went on to marry a widow as old as himself, and with a daughter, just a year or two later. Their fellow Grecian Val Le Grice did something similar in Cornwall. Such attachments were, of course, encouraged by the marital (and financial) success of the hero in Christ's Hospital's private romance, *The Fortunate Bluecoat Boy*.

We can still catch a flavour of Coleridge's relationship with the Evans family from his early letters. That to Mrs Evans from Cambridge, dated February 13th 1792 begins with an overt claim to be one of the family already:

> My very dear—
> What word shall I add sufficiently expressive of the warmth which I feel? You covet to be near my heart. Believe me, that You and my Sisters have the very first row in the first box of my Heart's little theatre—and—God knows!—You are not crowded.

This rather arch air of self-conscious display is typical and I suspect STC enjoyed the company of his Villers Street 'Sisters' more than his blood relations down at Ottery because the Evans family responded better to his showing off. Also, there was always the possibility of a little piquantly flirtatious banter. Mrs Evans appears to have wondered (surely not disingenuously?) which of the family's letters Coleridge may have opened first. He insists it was hers:

> I not only read your letter first, but, on my sincerity! I felt no inclination to do otherwise: and I am confident that had Mary happened to have stood by me, and had seen me take up her letter in preference to her Mother's,—with all that ease and energy, which she can so gracefully exert upon proper occasions, she would have lifted up her beautiful little leg, and kicked me round the room.

In the little theatre of his Heart this was just the kind of intimate knockabout comedy STC enjoyed. There is quite a potent mixture here of coyness and physicality, understandably highly charged for a lonely adolescent, but something which he never quite outgrew, and which ran through later writings to women friends. Mrs Evans has announced she intends to return to her homeland in the Welsh marches for an early summer holiday and Coleridge sends her a suitably flowery poetic invocation:

Then haste thee, Nymph of balmy gales!
Thy poet's prayer, sweet May! attend!
Oh! place my Parent and my Friend
'Mid her lovely native vales.

Peace, that lists the woodlark's strains,
Health, that breathes divinest treasures,
Laughing Hours, and social Pleasures,
Wait my friend in Cambria's plains.

[6]

Feminine Friendship and its associated 'laughing Hours' went on being a cherished ideal throughout his life and such coy, flirtatious social verses—what he himself was happy to dismiss, to his rather masculine brother George, as writing of the 'namby pamby genus' (CL I 58.)—form a substantial part of his work.

In passing it is interesting to note that STC knew where the Evans family came from and chose to go there himself during his walking tour with Hucks in 1794. This rather undermines the surprise and shock expressed in his well-known letter to Southey announcing the sudden appearance of two Evans sisters outside his inn window at Wrexham. I'm inclined to think a certain amount of careful stage management of the little theatre of the heart was going on there, perhaps on both sides of the window pane. After all, such moments of aroused Sensibility were fashionable among the young and helped particularly to feed that rare blend of Self-display and Self-discovery which we now think of as the Coleridgean consciousness.

Coleridge's Cambridge letters to the Evanses are worth rereading. They seem at their best like minor scenes of theatrical comedy—and maybe that is just what they were. Here is a snatch from a February 1792 letter to Mrs Evans:

> Yesterday a Frenchman came dancing into my room, of which he made but three steps, and presented me with a card—I had scarcely collected, by glancing my eye over it, that he was a Tooth monger, before he seized hold of my muzzle, and baring my teeth (as they do a Horse's in order to know his age) he exclaimed as if in violent agitation—Mon Dieu! Monsieur!—all your teeth will fall out in a day or two, unless you permit me the honour of scaling them!

In February 1793 another Frenchman dances into a letter, this time to Mary Evans:

> But here comes my fidling Master—for—(but this is a secret)—I am learning to play on the Violin—Twit twat—twat twit—pray, Mr De la Peuche, do you think I shall ever make any thing of this Violin?—do you think I have an ear for Music?—'Un Magnifique! Un superbe! Par honneur, Sir, you be a ver great Genius in de music.—Good morning, Monsieur!'—This Mr De La Peuche is a better judge than I thought for. (CL I 33, 50.)

Such stuff is slight enough, perhaps, but briefly Coleridge's Cambridge comes alive, and what enlivens his self-dramatisation is the stimulus of a responsive female audience.

There followed the mysterious self-destructive wildness which included his running away to join the Army. I've long held the view that this moment,

far from being simply the laughable aberration most scholars tend to make of it, had been a genuine, if foolhardy, attempt to emulate his successful military brothers. But, of course, their male role model was not one STC was born to follow. Then came his meeting with a very different kind of masculine ideal, Robert Southey, which encouraged in him a radicalism which he knew the Evanses would not share. His problems led to the well-known letter from Mary Evans, which we know only because STC quoted it in a letter written to Southey on his own birthday. I suspect it leaves most of us with a soft spot for Mary Evans. [CL 1. No 65. pp. 112] She has heard Coleridge is now an Atheist and goes on in terms which are relevant to my theme of Similarity & Difference. [ibid. p. 113] But by then Coleridge was convinced that he and Southey 'thought in all things alike' and, although in his agonised last letter to Mary he claims he is contemplating a respectable career:' in a few months I shall enter the Temple', that is the first and last we hear of such ambitions. In reality they had already been submerged in the wild vortex of pantisocracy, and, among the flotsam borne upon that potent current, for better and worse, the Fricker family had swum into his ken. Interestingly, as with the Evanses and Robert Allen, it was the masculine figure of Robert Southey who gave Coleridge his entree to the family. (His daughter Sara said later that Uncle Southey 'had a friendship with mama first.') The Frickers must have seemed promising successors to the Evanses: an impoverished widow, and five daughters, with only one inconvenient brother, still merely a child. Sara the eldest supported herself by needlework and had learnt the useful secret of appearing genteely dressed on a small budget. Coleridge always prized that in her and recognised how it supplied his need for polarity. As late as March 1808 he wrote to her that: 'I had a PRIDE in you, and… never saw you at the top of our Hill, when I returned from a Walk, without a sort of pleasurable Feeling of Sight.' (CL III No.77) At least initially the Fricker family must have promised a congenial prospect of 'laughing Hours and social pleasures' to replace the Evanses—but with something more, a comforting mixture of Tea and Radical Sympathy.

A word, now, about Coleridge's 1790s Friendship with Robert Southey. Southey has sometimes had a bad press for persuading Coleridge into marriage with the Frickers. Perhaps his fault was to offer Coleridge an example of male steadfastness which STC could not equal. Even in 1812 STC wrote: 'God knows my Heart! And that it is my full belief and Conviction, that taking all together there does not exist the Man who could without flattery or delusion be called Southey's Equal.' (CL III No. 861) An 1803 Notebook passage on Friendship deals at length with their Bristol friendship and quarrel. STC takes as his text the notion that 'the Almighty will judge us not by what we do, but by what we are':

> Apply this now to my former Quarrel with Southey.—On what grounds in the first place, did I form a friendship with him? Because our pursuits were similar, our final aspirations similar, and because I

> saw plainly, that compared with the mass of men Southey was pure in his Habits, habitually indignant at oppression, habitually active in behalf of the oppressed, both by exertion & self-sacrifice.—Not that he was Perfection; but because he was a far better man, than the vast majority of the young men, whom I knew. (CN I 1605)

Here, surely, the reason for Friendship lies in a sense of male similarity. And essentially this was an ideal from which STC moved away, towards the view expressed years later to his

friend Eliza Aders when she had briefly quarrelled with Mrs Gillman. There his essential message was to be : 'Reverence the Individuality of your friend! It is the religion of a delicate Soul.' (SWF II p 1337.) 'Religion of a delicate soul'—a fit feminine occupation!

Unfortunately, as we all know, Southey's capacity for reverencing his Friend's individuality had its limits. His own maleness went with a certain brisk, no nonsense manner not entirely dissimilar from Bowyer's. We have already had one instance of this in his response to little Sara's night-fears. Here he is writing to Cottle about her father's confoundedly inconvenient habits:

> Nothing is wanting to make him easy in circumstances and happy in himself but to leave off opium, and devote a certain portion of his time to the discharge of his duty. (CL III 475)

'Why,' he might have asked 'can't he behave more like *me?'* In terms of the magnetic poles of Masculine and Feminine consciousness, is it unreasonable to suggest that the Southey passage illustrates the Masculine pole and Coleridge's views on Friendship moves towards the Feminine pole? Some such distinction, I believe, STC recognised again and again in his life, something which began at Ottery with the difference of his own nature from that of his brothers, and continued into the great central creative friendship of his life with William Wordsworth. There Coleridge found a masculine strength which he knew he did not possess.

For example, whereas he himself deeply feared solitude, he believed the ability to use solitude creatively was one of Wordsworth's strengths. The poem he wrote on hearing Wordsworth read the completed 'Prelude' celebrated this in the unforgettable image of 'the dread watch-tower of man's absolute self'. This morning I'd simply suggest that Coleridge envied the Southeys and Wordsworths of this world their apparent male certainties and strengths while hugging to himself somewhere in the recesses of his being the knowledge that there was another kind of strength which enabled you to weave endlessly serpentine paths of uncertainty in the pursuit of Truth. Two centuries later we are still following those paths through the pages of his notebooks.

One thing which helped bind Coleridge to these powerfully male personalities was, of course, the presence of their attendant females. Here is part of a remarkable letter on Sisterhood which he wrote in September 1794

to Southey's beloved, Edith Fricker:

> There is no attachment under heaven so pure, so endearing... My Sister like you was beautiful & accomplished—like you, she was lowly of heart. Her Eye beamed with meekest Sensibility. I know and feel, that I am your Brother—I would, that you would say to me—'I will be your Sister—your favorite Sister in. the family of Soul'. (CL 1 102)

This ideal of Sisterhood was one STC pursued with varying degrees of success throughout his life. What seems remarkable about his appeal to Edith Fricker in 1794 is simply that it was fulfilled when he met Dorothy Wordsworth in 1797. Then the Eye beaming with meekest Sensibility became an eye 'watchful in minutest observation of nature', and the Sister's taste 'a perfect electrometer—it bends, protrudes, and draws in, at subtlest beauties &

most recondite faults'. (CL I 330-1.) 'A perfect electrometer': according to Murray, the word had been in use since the middle of the eighteenth century to describe an instrument for measuring the quality and quantity of electricity. It was an ideal metaphor for capturing Dorothy's responses to nature, poetry and the highly charged relationship which spontaneously developed between her brother and Coleridge. What would have happened to STC's life if Sara Fricker's own sister had, as he hoped, possessed similar qualities, thus binding him both to Southey and to his own marriage? I have to say that I think life would still not have run smoothly for long. Not least because the Sister-figure STC needed, to supply the right degree of correspondent-empathy to cement his male friendship, had to be a woman indeed—herself untrammelled by the commitments of wifehood and motherhood. Such a relationship was to become possible for a single year, just up the lane at Alfoxden. But, inevitably, it was not a relationship that could survive as STC wanted it for much longer than that…

Let's turn now from biographical speculation to a little speculation about a poem which is itself an electrometer, bending, protruding, and drawing in at the changing energies of Coleridge's friendship with Southey and the Frickers in 1795. It is the first poem he wrote here in West Somerset, generally known as 'Lines Written at Shurton Bars', and generally undervalued.

Shurton Bars was and still is a relatively isolated spot reached by a rough track through bean and cornfields. Its low, rocky coast catches the ebb and flow of tides which, a little further out in the Bristol Channel, can he treacherous. That I suggest was the poem's starting point—in Coleridge's standing on the edge of the land and seeing a meaning in the swirling of the Bristol Channel. Looking upstream, you see the island of Steep Holm, with Flat Holm and its dread watchtower just beyond. To the left, and often romantically hazy, the hills of Wales. To the right, the ancient back of Mendip bending to the sea at Brean Down, and, then as now, some sense of Bristowe's hard commercial heartland just beyond. Shurton Bars, like all

Coleridge's Somerset settings, was rich in emblems. Strikingly, he failed to use or even mention the dominant geological structures at Shurton Bars itself. Not that he lacked interest in geology. We know that a few months after writing this poem he was in Derby discussing James Hutton's newly published *Theory of the Earth* with Erasmus Darwin, just as in the last years of his life he was to discuss Lyell's newly published *Principles of Geology* with J.H. Green. But here his interests are focused on the organic needs of his poem. Many details a modern visitor finds at Shurton Bars have become part of the poem's texture: the 'Blossom's bloom' (honeysuckle and wild hedgerow flowers); the 'reft house' of former fisherman or labourer derelict in the fields; the 'rolling stones' of a pebbled shore; the 'channell'd Isle'; 'skylarks 'mid the corn'; 'sunbeam' light blending air and water; sudden weather changes in this stretch of water, caught in the crooked arm of the estuary as it begins to reach out towards the Atlantic. All these details helped create meanings related to Sara Fricker and himself. Because this is essentially a personal poem about relationships, about inner rather than outer weather. At the time he wrote it Coleridge was estranged from Southey and engaged to Sara Fricker, who stood in the emotional crossfire between those two erstwhile friends.

I said a moment ago that I believe the starting point of the poem was Coleridge's watching the swirling water of the Bristol Channel. Is it too fanciful to suggest that, whereas the great blank verse lines of the later Conversation Poems grew from the rhythms of hilltop walking, here the more self-contained, eddying of rhymed stanza mimics the play of water? If

that may be a dubious formal claim, then perhaps the thematic importance for Coleridge of gazing out to sea is less dubious? Here at Shurton Bars he came face to face with that equivocal tract of water which was soon to suggest to him a Nightmare ship of Life-in-Death driving between himself and the evening sun.

The poem's epigraph grounds itself in Friendship and in the warmth Coleridge associated particularly with female friendship:

> Good verse most good, and bad verse then seems better
> Receiv'd from absent friend by way of Letter.
> For what so sweet can labour'd lays impart
> As one rude rhyme warm from a friendly heart?

The opening three stanzas focus then specifically on Sara and offer an attempt at Empathy. Rather self-consciously rejecting the enjoyment of solitary poetic fantasies about either universals or particulars (and even, with strange irony, rejecting a poetic motif suggested by his very new and as yet very slightly-known friend, William Wordsworth) STC enters the confined Bristol room, which has become an emblem for the aching heart of Sara herself.

It's difficult not to notice Coleridge's thumb in the scales at 'Chill'd Friendship'. That sets Southey's cold maleness in its place when compared with his own imaginative identification with Feminine Sensibility. (Though we

might ask, in today's jargon, whether this is an altogether wise method for a young man to employ when trying to colonize the mind of an independent-spirited young lady!) At least in Coleridge's poem this begins a counter-movement in which Sara's imagined presence releases both of them from dim-visag'd Bristol constraints, so that now Sara's soul enjoys with him the delights of a West Somerset evening by the water.

Stanzas four & five usher us into what Geoffrey Hartman once called 'Evening Land', a whole tract of eighteenth century poetic country stretching onwards from the evening poems of Gray and Collins.[3] Yet here 'Evening Land' actually is Sara. The rather limp, commonplace tone of 'tender Dream', 'gentler sense', 'sighing', 'Blossom's bloom', and so on suggest what Coleridge associates with Sara and the Feminine polarity of his imagination. But then he conjures up, with melodramatic energy, his own contrary, destructive vision. There's a theatricality here worthy of De Loutherbourg, and yet something more: subliminally, STC may have linked death with going to sea from the age of eight, and here he already faces the mental seascape about which Wordsworth was to write after the death of *his* brother in the Peel Castle Stanzas. (And, in passing, you will notice a variant of the dread watchtower image Coleridge later used for Wordsworth, but which here he associates with a kind of manic, destructive masculinity he has recognized in himself.)

Stanzas six to ten are surely the imaginative heart of the poem? They give the extra charge which the whole poem must attempt to control. The Sea Vortex image had haunted Coleridge since school. Here it threatens to undercut what he wants to believe about the healing influences of Love and Friendship.

With this in mind perhaps the most ominous line of all is what he hopes will be the still point of calm at line 45:

> Ere peace with Sara came

It is difficult not to be dismayed by the human implications of the male/female polarity there, and not to hear Sara protesting loudly, rather as Charles Lamb was to protest in a year or two about being called ‘gentle-hearted’. Coleridge’s need for ‘otherness’ may here threaten to unhinge both his poem and his life. It is when we look at the literary undertones hereabouts that we may find the weight of expectation simply overwhelming.

First, a rather casual verbal echo. The Watchfire on Flat Holm at line 40:

> Like a sullen star
> Twinkles to many a dozing Tar
> Rude cradled on the mast.

Is this a half-memory of Shakespeare’s insomniac Henry Bolingbroke?

> Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
> Seal up the sea-boy’s eyes, and rock his brains
> In cradle of the rude imperious surge?

That echo seems to me to suggest how Coleridge sees the Bristol Channel in vaguely Shakespearian terms, for his sea images are rather landlubberly, literary things. But the Watchfire is ‘ like a sullen star’ and this juxtaposition of Landmark and Star may recall another Shakespearian context. In Sonnet 116, the great affirmation of married love:

> Let me not to the marriage of true minds
> Admit impediments…

Shakespeare had issued a statement whose application to Coleridge and Sara in 1795 is obvious. The whole drift of the sonnet is towards a feet-on-the-land permanence:

> Love is not love
> Which alters when it alteration finds.

And in the second quatrain Shakespeare states his Emblems of True Constancy:

> Oh no! it is an ever-fixed mark
> That looks on tempests and is never shaken
> It is the star to every wandering bark
> Whose worth’s unknown although his height be taken.

These clear navigational images have a fine masculine certainty. Ironically here Shakespeare might be celebrating Southey’s forthcoming marriage rather than Coleridge’s. In reworking Shakespeare, though, if that is what he is doing, Coleridge displays a rather hectic craving for masculine Sublimity in his sea-tempest lines. For the marriage of true minds at Shurton Bars suggests an understated still small Domestic voice set against an altogether more exciting Romantic delight in destructive excess. Unlike Shakespeare, Coleridge’s use of sea-imagery needs to carry a health-warning.

At stanza eleven, the poet’s architectonic Fancy, which he allows us to see shaping the poem with a kind of disarmingly awkward Empathy with Sara, attempts an eddying return to land and the softer maternal nesting images he associates with her.

Then at stanza thirteen Coleridge projects upon Sara his familiar private vision of domestic peace and warmth in a cottag'd dell—to be had for £5 a year's rent in Clevedon in a month or so's time. The final four stanzas

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continue to develop this love-nest imagery in terms which, for all Coleridge's coyness, are full of sensual body movement. What adds a final contemporary touch, so contemporary it needed a long explanatory note when first printed, is the reference to Erasmus Darwin's brave new world of electrical experiment.

Many of us remember a fine lecture Nicola Trott gave at this February's Wordsworth Winter School in which she demonstrated conclusively the disturbing effect achieved by Erasmus Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants*, from which Coleridge took his unacknowledged footnote. Some notion of the highly-charged sexuality of plantlife surely underlies the flower imagery here. And it is supported by a second scientific allusion in the electrical flash of the lover's eye. In 1811 he recalled to Crabb Robinson how 'I many years ago planned as the subject-matter of a poem... long and deep affection suddenly, in one moment, flash-transmuted into Love.' (CL III 304) By then, as Tim Fulford pointed out in *Coleridge's Figurative Language*, the flash of lightning had become associated through his reading with the Shekhinah, the Hebrew term for the glory of God's presence in the world, according to the Kabbalah also associated with the androgynous first created being, a spiritual archetype of oneness which male and female might recapture in sexual union. [4]

Even without such weighty undertones, this final electric flash is a bold move. It aims in the best manner of the later Somerset poems to bring the poem full circle. The first flashing of the lover's eye and the uncanny emerald light of the glow-worm were replaced by the watchfire and then the static electricity of sea lightning which seemed an ominous visitation of God. These now change dynamically back into a strange new life-giving image of the magnetic polarity of newly-wedded Love. Mutually-shared sexual energies replace the isolating, destructive energies of the sea-channel, recalled neatly by the word 'swell' at the close of stanza 14. Such an ending possesses an ongoing vitality similar to the original 1798 ending of 'Frost at Midnight' when, if you remember, the arms of little Hartley stretch out in sympathy towards the melting morning icicles. These endings stress the positive dynamic qualities 1790s Coleridge found in his newly-won domesticity. More specifically, they suggest exactly how, he imagined, the instinctive male/female movements of domestic love, by some miraculous scheme of graduations, key us into larger universal impulses. And it seems to me the eddying stanza movements of this poem imitate such energies.

But the potent shipwreck imagery remains. Coleridge knew that it was not good for him to stand imaginatively alone. At the start of stanza thirteen, there may perhaps be one last compound Shakespearian echo which helps identify the role he hoped his female Friend might play. In the most considerable poem he had written to that date, 'Religious Musings', STC had dealt at one point with the religious and social dangers of man living alone in the universe:

[14]

> Feeling himself, his own low self the whole;
> When he by sacred sympathy might make
> The whole one Self!

(‘Religious Musings’, lines 149-51)

It was against fear of just such a condition that Shurton Bars was written. By one last Shakespearian analogy, perhaps the vision of an island tempest can be seen as the unhealthy product of a solitary Prospero’s Fancy? In which case, its destructive, vengeful energy might be transformed by the life-giving polarity of a humane Miranda. When he later came to lecture on *The Tempest* Coleridge confessed:

> Of Miranda we may say, that she possesses in herself all the ideal beauties that could be imagined by the greatest poet of any age or country.

Characteristically, he saw her compassion for the freighting souls in the shipwreck as a compensatory act of imagination from one in human isolation. Her great cry:

> O! I have suffered
> With those that I saw suffer...

was an appropriate longing for wholeness with her fellow beings, an act of Love, an ideal act of Correspondence.

When he wrote Shurton Bars the admired Miranda stretching out her arms at stanza thirteen to rescue the artist STC/Prospero from his dangerous solipsism was Sara Fricker. A few years earlier she might have been Mary Evans. A few years later she would have been Asra. For the polar impulses which drive the Shurton Bars lines were crucial to Coleridge’s inner nature. Re-reading stanza thirteen one more time, lines 77-8 make me wonder if it is absurd to see one final Shakespearian hint of Coleridge imagining himself rescued by Sara from the fate of Lear in the storm. If so, Sara bears the somewhat exacting double role of Cordelia as well as Miranda: Coleridge expected much of his female attendants. (And of course the trouble with such allusion-spotting lit. cit. is that, as Dr. Johnson said of *Tristram Shandy* : ‘a man might write such stuff for ever if he would but *abandon* his mind to it’!)

The poem closes with what in the 1790s would have been an exciting contemporary image of electricity. But I would like to close my paper with a quieter light image, something central to the Coleridgean vision of blending male and female sensibilities. An early Notebook jotting, written probably in the same year as the poem, may recall for us Sara’s *Memoir* image of her father’s empathy;

> The flames of two candles joined together give a much stronger light

> than both of them separate… Picture of Hymen. (CN 1 13)

Perhaps by September 1795, in what was for him a great year of hope and expectation, Coleridge really was becoming capable of empathy. The great letter to Lamb at the time of *his* crisis, perhaps the finest moment of its kind STC ever achieved, lay just over a year ahead…

Postscript

In discussion at Kilve, David Fairer commented on the formal tension in the Shurton Bars lines between Ode and Epistle—a tension which, as Graham Davidson pointed out, appears again in Coleridge's 1802 Dejection poems. Jane Stabler characterised this neatly in her summary of Kilve 1999 for the Coleridge Bulletin when she wrote of the poem's ominous struggle between an embattled, masculine ode-like self-consciousness and a feminine, epistolary evocation of 'Peace with Sara'. (C.B. N.S. 14, Autumn, 1999, p.119). I'm happy that the final word of this paper should be theirs.

NOTES:

[1] See *Reminiscences of Alexander Dyce*, ed. R.J. Shrader, Columbus, Ohio, 1972, p.178-9.
[2] See L.Smith, 'Reminiscences of an Octogenarian' in *The Leisure Hour*, 1860, IX 633-4.
[3] See G. Hartman 'Evening Star & Evening Land' in *Post-Structuralist Reading in English Poetry*, ed. Machin & Norris, CUP, 1987
[4] T. Fulford, op. cit. Macmillan, 1991, p. 87

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