What Was Left of Coleridge's Cain

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COLERIDGE'S NOTEBOOKS KEPT DURING 1797 ARE REMARKABLY SPARSE. The handful of entries are fragmentary quips, minor observations and partial commonplace entries, most only a few lines long. In one, Coleridge writes on Robert South's 1727 sermon "The Certainty of our Saviour's Resurrection," an apologetic critique of skepticism through the example of Doubting Thomas. In South's sermon, Coleridge notes, "Hume's argument against miracles is clearly stated & put in Thomas's mouth—…'Now surely things suitable to the stated course of nature should be believed before such are quite beside it and for a dead man to return to Life, is preternatural; but that those who report this may be mistaken, is very natural'" (CN I 327). The two concerns of Coleridge's note—epistemological doubt in the objects of the senses, and bodily resurrection from the dead—circulate through the 1797 poems as well: Christabel, for example, is deceived by her senses to trust the evil spirit impersonating Geraldine; the Mariner, on the other hand, follows conventional expectations of the Gothic wanderer, living in a state of "death in life," a sort of parody of bodily resurrection. While both "Christabel" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" have received a wealth of critical attention, comparatively "The Wanderings of Cain"—a fragment from the same year—has been largely ignored. The fragment, a mix of verse and prose, picks up the story of Cain well after the Biblical narrative leaves off and imagines the now-aged fratricide and his young son, Enos, scavenging through the barren wastes beyond Eden. Despairing, Cain tells Enos of his desire to die—but also laments that even in death he will not be free of the ever-watching, ever-judging eye of God. His lament is interrupted when he and Enos stumble upon a mysterious figure who is by all appearances the murdered Abel. Described as a "shape" with skin "like the white sands beneath theirs feet,"[1] Abel is no disembodied spirit. Shocked that his righteous brother should not find rest in the afterlife, Cain, bewildered, asks, "Didst thou not find favor in the sight of the Lord thy God?" Abel enigmatically responds, "The Lord is God of the living only, the dead have another God" (II.117-118). Cain, already branded a murderer in the books of the "God of the Living" desires to find this God of the dead, in the hope that there might be a way of escape from his judgment. The 1828 fragment published in *Poetical Works* closes with Cain and Enos following the mysterious Abel in search of the God of the dead, "silent as the shadows" (II.148).

In spite of Coleridge's legacy as imaginative Anglican thinker *par excellence*, there is a good deal in "The Wanderings of Cain" that runs counter to the accepted ideas of Anglican orthodoxy in the period. Coleridge's "Cain" is a fragment—remains left like dry bones scattered across the valley of the poet's corpus; but it is possible to anticipate the rest of the story. Scholarly

[1] S. T. Coleridge, "[160.] The Wanderings of Cain," in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Poetical Works I, Poems (Reading Text):* part 1, ed. J.C.C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), II. ll 79; 109. Hereafter cited in text with PW line numbers.

reconstructions of "The Wanderings of Cain" from various unpublished journals have attempted to breathe new life into these dry bones, offering flashes of the narrative's closing vision: the Shape of Abel is revealed to be an "evil spirit," as the heavens open and Cain sees the true glorified spirit of his murdered brother "in his angelic appearance" (PW 2, 1, 496); if only Cain had the presence of mind to see the Shape of Abel for its deception, he would have been able to resist its temptation. But the fragment Coleridge published in 1828 does not end with such final reassurance of the Anglican faith or the certitude of natural theology.

However, in what was left of Coleridge's Cain, I believe there is enough to draw out a surprising conflict between the State Church and orthodox Christian theology—specifically between the Church of England's prescribed burial rites and the orthodox doctrine of bodily resurrection. Critical attention to Coleridge's theological ideas abounds, and there is no shortage of historical analyses of religion in the period; however, analyses of Coleridge's relationship to the Anglican tradition and Christian theology skirt the issue of bodily resurrection.[2] Likewise, criticism of "The Wanderings of Cain" is scarce.[3] In this paper, I hope to fill this gap in scholarship by positioning "The Wanderings of Cain" within the filial competition between the burial of the dead and the doctrine of the resurrection in the period.

Bodily resurrection had been held by the earliest Christians to be the ground from which believers could resist the oppressive powers of the Roman State: because Jesus had been raised from the dead, no earthly King could master the bodies of his followers.[4] As the relationship between church and state became increasingly entwined over the centuries, the revolutionary potential embedded in the doctrine faded—rising again only at times of political instability, and when tensions mounted between established systems and religious believers. By the late decades of the 18th century in England, international conflict, increasingly polarized party politics, revolutions in philosophy, and the profusion of Dissenting religious beliefs opened the potential for the revival of belief in bodily resurrection; however, due to Anglicanism's proximity to the throne, the State Church (and those aligned with traditional English Christianity) were unable to assert powerfully the orthodox doctrine, leaving it in the hands of those heterodox (and even heretical) systems outside the Church of England. In this way, I argue the figures of Cain and Abel in Coleridge's "The Wanderings of Cain" draw from the orthodox Christian doctrine of the resurrection in order to assert a radical autonomy beyond state power. If death too had become subject to the King and State, the last act of

[2] E.g., Joel Harter, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Faith: Symbol Allegory and Herneutics* (Tübigen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). Harter addresses Coleridge's careful dance between acknowledging the literal history of biblical miracles and a more Enlightenment-resistant emphasis on the "universal wisdom" miracles symbolize (77). Coleridge certainly believed in the Resurrection of Jesus, but makes no mention regarding Christ's physical body or the hopeful bodily resurrection of the saints.

[3] The most significant treatment of the fragment in print remains John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1927).

[4] Regarding the political implications of the Resurrection, see N.T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) chs. 12 and 19.

resistance would be circumventing death altogether.

§ 1: The God of the Dead

The English State Church maintained a virtual monopoly on burial space until 1820. Tracing the history of English burial reform, Julie Rugg notes, "cemetery establishment in Britain had its origins in … the need for burial provision which was—most importantly—free from control of the Church of England"[5]. At the start of the 19th century, Dissenters had a few unconsecrated plots for burial, of course, notably Bunhill Fields in London; but for those outside the city centers, or those too poor to secure burial elsewhere, the local parish churchyard was the only option. Moreover the dictates of the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Constitutions and Canons of the Church* regulated burials according to the Anglican rites—and, by extension, to law of the King. Regardless of a person's professed beliefs in life, in death they became Anglican. Not only was the state—the King via the church—sovereign over life and death, it was also the arbiter of the body *after* death.

Burial—like many Christian beliefs—was caught up in the period's political theology. The marriage between state and church rested on two beliefs: first, the power of the King as the earthly sovereign; second, a formal adherence to traditional Christianity. While the sovereignty of the king fits nicely in the language and structure of English Protestantism, once granted, the King's authority came into direct conflict with Christ's authority. The *Constitutions and Cannons* prescribes a minimum of four church services per year dedicated to veneration of the king, professing "the King's Power…is the highest power under God; to whom all Men…do by God's Law owe most Loyalty and Obedience, afore and above all other Powers and Potentates in the Earth"[6]—a strangely incongruous statement arising from a system of belief that explicitly claims Jesus is "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords." By contrast, Jesus' royal title "King of Kings" only appears three times in the *Book of Common Prayer,* and only in services relating to the continued power and strength of the King and State. If the King of England must be recognized "afore and above all other Powers and Potentates in the Earth," then Jesus must be "King of Kings" someplace else—in heaven not on earth. But even this eternal hereafter was molded on the Crown's own sovereignty, re-cast in heaven as it had been on earth: it is not only that Jesus is the ruler of Heaven while George is the rule of earth; Jesus is the ruler of heaven *just like* the King of England is the ruler of earth. The language of bodily resurrection would be wrung through this "two-kingdoms" paradigm, with "resurrection" becoming a kind of graduation from the physical body into the spiritual body.

For the burial of the dead in particular, the resulting uneasy marriage between Christian theology and the state posed a two-fold problem. First, the

[5] Julie Rugg, "The Origins and Progress of Cemetery Establishment in Britain," in *The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal*, ed. Glennys Howarth and Peter C. Jupp (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 109.

[6] *The Thirty-Nine Articles and the Constitutions and Canons of the Chruch of England: together with several Acts of Parliament and Proclamations concerning Ecclesiastical Matters* (London, 1773), 20.

orthodox Christian belief in the resurrection of the body became fossilized in the ritual practices of burial—practices established long before the genesis of modern political theology.[7] For example, rules on the orientation of the body in the grave, the taboo on cremation, or the final rites prescribed in the *Book of Common Prayer*, all once designed around the image of a raised physical body, were neutralized by a shift in emphasis toward a disembodied future "life in heaven." Just as Christ's kingship was pushed off into a discontinuous, disembodied heaven, so too was the soul after death. Second, emphasis and regulation concerning the corpse after death remained a feature of English piety that was under the control of state-authorized ecclesiastical law. According to Cannon LXVIII, "No minister shall refuse or delay…to bury any Corpse that is brought to the Church or Church-yard…*in such Manner and Form as is prescribed in the said Book of Common Prayer.*"[8] That is, the body—even the dead body—was regulated according to the prescribed order, in line with rites submitted to the King's sovereignty. Therefore, burial rites would reflect the state-sanctioned afterlife, in which the soul would leave the Kingdom of Earth and advance into the Kingdom of Heaven, while the body decayed in the custody of the state.

Whatever language in the Christian tradition that would apply to bodily resurrection would be wrung through this paradigm: if there is a resurrection, it is spiritual (not bodily), and it is in heaven (not earth). This redefinition would impact all uses of "resurrection" in the State Church's authoritative texts, from *The Thirty-Nine Articles* to Scripture itself.[9] The doctrine of bodily resurrection designed to resist the state had become its servant. In response, I argue, the revolutionary potential of the raised body migrated from theological discourse to literary representation. In this way, the literary convention of an undead antagonist—a convention featured often in Romantic Gothic texts—took up the mantle of resistance to the state's control over death.

§ 2: Raising Cain

Lurking behind Coleridge's Cain is the figure of the wanderer, a character neither living nor dead that shambles through a number of Romantic texts, as, for example, the Wandering Jew. The wanderer is a liminal figure, beyond the reach of law and reason. The liminality of the Wanderer, I argue, creates the

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[7] On the development burial practices in England and their theological resonances, see Julie Rugg, "From Reason to Regulation: 1760-1850," in *Death in England: An Illustrated History*, ed. Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000), 120-160; Julian Litten, *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral since 1450* (London: Robert Hale, 1991), Ralph Houlbrooke, "Death, Church, Family in England between the late fifteenth and early eighteenth centuries," in *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*, ed. Houlbrooke (London: Routledge, 1989), 25-42; Roy Porter, "Death and the Doctors in Georgian England," in *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, 77-94; Clare Gittings, "Sacred and Secular: 1559-1660," in *Death in England*, 147-173.

[8] *Thirty-Nine Article and Constitutions and Canons*, 46 (emphasis added).

[9] In the mid-eighteenth century, 1 Corinthians 15 had become part of Socinian apologetics against the Trinity (e.g., Clayton *An Essay on Spirit* [London, 1751], 28). In response, exegesis on the "Resurrection Chapter" was dominated by Trinitarian debates, and physical resurrection was largely ignored (e.g. Jones, *The Catholic Doctrine of a Trinity* [New York, 1852], 53-56). Similarly, commentary on *The Thirty-Nine Articles* specifically advocated Jesus's resurrection body should be understood as "Ethereal" (Burnett, *Thirty-Nine Articles, An Exposition* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1796], 82)

potential to circumvent the system of state authority that recognizes not even death as its limit. As a character that is unable to die, the wanderer opts out of burial; but, by living in a state of "death-in-life," he is excluded from the circle of the living as well.

Cain, for his part, is both excluded from the realm of the living and unable to find the death he longs for. The fratricide tells his son, "I desire to die—yea, the things that never had life, neither move they upon the earth—behold! they seem precious to mine eyes" (II.29-30). What Cain desires here is not the "Christian" death, with rites of burial and disembodied clouds forever after; rather it is to cease from being—a state even he fears cannot exist, since there is no place free from the watchful eye of the sovereign God. When the Shape of Abel later reveals the possibility of an unimagined god who "had power after this life, greater than Jehovah" (PW 2, 1, 496), Cain "rejoiced secretly in his heart" (II.119) reasoning "The curse of the Lord is on me; but who is the God of the Dead!" (II.125-126). Cain's hope for another God is structured antithetically, punctuated between "the curse of the Lord" and its negation in "the God of the dead." The statement here is not a question—it is a declaration, an exultation of the God of the dead's character rather than just a question of his existence. At last, there is the possibility that the "curse of the Lord" (Cain's death-in-life exile) might not be the final verdict.

Cain's desire for this unknown God outside the laws of life and death is also evident in the fragment's use of silence and language. Cain tells Enos of his agony, "the torrent that roareth far off hath a voice; … the mighty one who is against me speaketh in the wind of the cedar grove; and in silence I am dried up" (II.35-38). The ever-present voice of God rings throughout nature; but because Cain is excluded from the realm of the living, the language that speaks through "torrents" and "cedar groves" is one he can hear but cannot speak. Therefore, rather than a response, he is "dried up" in silence. Conversely, Cain's own physical appearance speaks a language of its own:

> the mighty limbs of Cain were wasted as by fire; his hair was as the matted curls on the Bison's forehead, and so glared his fierce and sullen eye beneath: and the black abundant locks on either side, a rank and tangled mass, were stained and scorched, as though the grasp of a burning iron hand had striven to rend them, and his countenance told in a strange and terrible language of agonies that had been, and were, and were still to continue to be. (II.51-58)

Conspicuously missing from this description is the notorious "mark of Cain" given by God as a sign of his judgment. In its place—in the silence of God's mark—is the "strange and terrible language" of Cain's countenance, agony that "was and is and is to come," a parody of the description of God's authority given in the Book of Revelation (*King James Version*, Rev 1.8). This "language" of Cain tells his story in his own words (or his own absence of words)—through *agonies* rather than judgment. Yet, the text itself cannot

speak the language of Cain, just as Cain cannot speak the language of God in nature: where we might expect to find the description of the mark—with his "sullen eye beneath" and his "tangled mass" of rent curls on either side—we find only an oddly placed colon. With the language of the poem controlled by the master of heaven and hell and life and death, Cain the wanderer opts for a language of his own.

The desire for a higher power beyond both the curse of life and the judgment of death is awakened in Cain through another wanderer, the Shape of Abel who evades life and death through death-in-life. But Abel's death-in-life seems to promise no better than Cain's curse. When Cain and Enos first come upon Abel, they hear him lament, "Wo, is me! wo, is me! I must never die again, and yet I am perishing with thirst and hunger" (II.81-82). Beyond death, Abel is both "perishing" and yet "must never again die," trapped without life, and yet without the possibility of rest. Ultimately, however appealing the wanderer's resistance to power might be, for "The Wanderings of Cain" this struggle is a failure: rather than circumventing the system of power that controls life and death, the wanderer proves to be victim of both death and life simultaneously.

The futility of Cain's resistance is best shown in an unpublished fragment from Coleridge's notebooks from 1807. The fragment finds Cain brooding over the body a young boy (presumably Enos—who, if we wish to imagine the spaces between fragments, may have been sacrificed by Cain to the false "God of the Dead"):

> The Child is born, the Child must die / Among the desert Sands / And we too all must die of Thirst / for not a Drop remains. But whither do we retire / to Heaven of possibility of Heaven / But this to darkness, Cold, & tho' not positive Torment yet positive Evil—Eternal Absence from Communion with the Creator. O how often have the […] Sands at night roar'd & whitened like a burst of waters / O that indeed they were! Then full of enthusiastic faith kneels & prays, & in holy frenzy covers the child with sand. In the name of the Father &c &c / —Twas done / the infant died / the blessed Sand retired, each particle to itself, conglomerating, & shrinking from the profane sand / the Sands shrank away from it, & left a pit / still hardening & hardening, at length shot up a fountain large & mighty /
> How wide its Spray, the rain-bow plays upon the Stream & the Spray—but lo! another brighter, o far far more bright / it hangs over the head of a glorious Child like a floating veil (vide Raphael's God)—the Soul arises they drink, & fill their Skins, & depart rejoicing—O Blessed the day when that good man & all his Company came to Heaven Gate & the Child—then an angel—rushed out to receive them—. (CN II 2780)

The burial of the child is accompanied by Christian rites that blend deep religious feeling ("enthusiastic faith" and "holy frenzy") with a superficial and

dispensable formal prayer ("in the name of the Father &c &c"). What results seems at first to be the resurrection of the body of the child after burial. The body in the grave sinks and hardens before erupting into a fountain of water with a canopy of spray overhead, reminiscent of Paul's description of the resurrection of the dead as a seed buried waiting to spring to new life (a passage recited in the *Book of Common Prayer*'s burial rites). Then, with heaven opened and God waiting above, the soul of the child arises; but before the Child enters heaven, he "fills [his] Skin." This may be a reference to Jesus's parable of the wineskins in Matthew 9, but the repeated references to "Sands," coupled with the numerous connections between "skin" and "sand" in the 1828 fragment, it may be that the "Skin" filled here is more literal. A resurrection of the same body of the child, its "Skin" refilled with a renewed spirit, is an image at home with historical orthodox teachings of the resurrection of the dead.

But these teachings, in the context of the two-kingdoms divided between earth and heaven had already been appropriated and transposed to fit the model of a disembodied heavenly afterlife. Moreover, in the fragment, whatever might have been gained in the child's resurrection is immediately lost, as the now-glorified child enters into the discontiguous heavenly realm, "then an angel." The body of the Child, even if raised, is changed again into something spiritual, no longer residing on earth but now in the custody of heaven. Abel's death-in-life, Cain's quest beyond life and death, and the child's resurrection all, in the end, acknowledge the power the State Church exerted over death, most directly in its control of burial.

Conclusion:

What, then, was left of Coleridge's Cain? In the narrative, we find an old man watching his son leave one realm of authority and entering another, a fratricide who had vainly hoped to evade judgment by circumventing the system of life and death; in the text, we find the fragments of an aborted poem, loosely stitched together like a moth-eaten quilt, the gaping holes impossible to reconcile. But, in another sense, what was *left* of Coleridge's Cain was a radical political statement, unexpectedly arising from a theological doctrine that had fallen unspoken (had become *unspeakable*) in the state authorized church—the bodily resurrection of the dead. In "The Wanderings of Cain," resistance to the state church's control over life and death is futile. While Cain's "strange and terrible language" of agony attempts to replace God's judgment, the state of death in life that it promises cannot, in the end, operate outside of the prescribed boundaries imposed on life and death. Ultimately, what proves to be more radical than circumventing life and death is defeating death through life. But that possibility—however rich in Christian theological tradition through resurrection—is rendered impossible within the State Church. Rather, pushed to the edges of Christian thought, the doctrine faded from the church, rising again in literary metaphors, horrifying narrative ruptures, uncontrollable antagonists, wandering at the outskirts, "silent as the shadows."