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Paradise Rewritten? Coleridge's *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree*

Timothy Fulford

Although this article will mostly comprise a close reading of *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree*, I shall be bearing in mind a number of questions that concern Coleridge's work as a whole – I will list them now and will return to them explicitly at the end, hoping I will be able to throw light upon them in the detailed criticism of the poem.

First – in what ways do Coleridge's late poems differ from his early?

Second – how does his embrace of fragmentary texts relate to his thought about the nature of imagination, originality, and genius?

Third – what does Coleridge mean by his gendered account of the human mind, and what are the contradictions in it?

I will start with a passage from *Aids to Reflection* in which Coleridge suggests that the Adam and Eve story is a tragic myth of a fall from an androgynous mental unity into sexually divided selves. The serpent, he claims, was in “the temple-language of Egypt” a symbol of the Understanding. When this understanding is not supported by the reason it becomes the pander to “the Desire, ... the Woman in our Humanity; and through the DESIRE prevailing on the Will (the Manhood, Virtus).” Coleridge goes on to cite the “old tradition of the Homo androgynous, i.e. that the original Man, the Individual first created, was bi-sexual” in support of his interpretation of the fall story.¹

Two things have happened in this passage from *Aids*; first Coleridge has read scripture as a myth, a story in narrative form of what is universal mental experience. Second, he has blamed desire, “the Woman in our Humanity,” for the fall. It is no longer Eve's historical act, but feminine desire in general, that leads the mind into division and sin. Androgyny is lost and the fallen state is one of sexual division and of our knowledge of our own halfness – a

¹ *Aids to Reflection in the Formation of a Manly Character* (London, 1825), pp. 251-52. Henceforth cited as *AR*.

knowledge confirmed by the existence of the “old tradition of the Homo androgynous” in the kabbalah and other mystical lore.

The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree can, I suggest, also be seen as Coleridge’s attempt to create his own myth of the fall as a sexual split, as an attempt which is also a meditation on the necessary incompleteness of texts. It is an attempt to make Coleridge’s own problems in forming satisfying relationships with women and in completing poems into a symbolic story of universal dilemmas, inherent in the human condition and in language itself, as the Preface shows:

I seem to have an indistinct recollection of having read either in one of the ponderous tomes of George of Venice, or in some other compilation from the uninspired Hebrew writers, an apologue or Rabbinical tradition to the following purpose:

While our first parents stood before their offended Maker, and the last words of the sentence were yet sounding in Adam’s ear, the guileful false serpent, a counterfeit and a usurper from the beginning, presumptuously took on himself the character of advocate or mediator, and pretending to intercede for Adam, exclaimed: “Nay, Lord, in thy justice, not so! for the Man was the least in fault. Rather let the Woman return at once to the dust, and let Adam remain in this thy Paradise.” And the word of the Most High answered Satan: “*The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.* Treacherous Fiend! if with guilt like thine, it had been possible for thee to have the heart of a Man, and to feel the yearning of a human soul for its counterpart, the sentence which thou now counsell’st, should have been inflicted on thyself.”

The title of the following poem was suggested by a fact mentioned by Linnaeus, of a date-tree in a nobleman’s garden which year after year had put forth a full show of blossoms, but never produced fruit, till a branch from another date-tree had been conveyed from a distance of some hundred leagues. The first leaf of the MS. from which the poem has been transcribed, and which contained the two or three introductory stanzas, is wanting: and the author has in vain taxed his memory to repair the loss. But a rude draught of the poem contains the substance of the stanzas, and the reader is requested to receive it as the substitute. It is not impossible, that some congenial spirit, whose years do not exceed those of the Author at the time the poem was written, may find a pleasure in restoring the Lament to its original integrity by a reduction of the thoughts to the requisite metre.²

² *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. E.H. Coleridge, 2 vols (Oxford, 1912), I, 395-97. Henceforth cited as *PW*.

The Preface seems to have been added, like that of *Kubla Khan*, years after the original verse – probably in the late 1820s. And like the Preface to *Kubla Khan* it is not completely frank. The date-tree story is much more likely to have come from his friend Hyman Hurwitz's collection of Rabbinical Tales than from Georgius of Venice, a neo-Platonist mystic and architect whose work Coleridge probably knew. Similarly, the story of the date-tree itself comes ultimately not from Linneaus, but from Johann Gleditsch.³ It is, of course, ironic that in a Preface in which most sources cannot be properly identified, the one which is is a mistake. When we come to the poem proper, the text is similarly unstable. A manuscript still exists – perhaps the very one Coleridge claimed to have mislaid – in which the first stanzas exist in verse – and their tone and imagery links the original poem to the *Dejection* poems of 1802. However, the concluding stanzas of the piece are themselves adapted from a medieval German poem, and had been published by Coleridge as such in *The New Times* in 1818. The text quoted above, that published in 1834, is a compendium of other more original texts, some verse some prose, some originally by Coleridge, others not.

The instability of the text is, of course, played upon by Coleridge in the Preface. It opens with an immediate acknowledgement of loss: the origins of the “apologue or Rabbinical tradition” Coleridge is about to quote are too indistinctly recollected to be identified with certainty. The tradition might come from the kabbalistic or neo-Platonic mysticisms discussed by Georgius, but even this is called into doubt by a note of 1820 where Coleridge refers to George of Venice, but seems not to have read him, only to have read of him: “I fancied at least, that our Donne had attended to Georg. Ven. in his whimsical Catalogue of Books.”⁴ Thus even this authority for the tale is doubtful and is approached only through another unreliable “whimsical” text. Aided by clues kindly provided by James Mays I have searched through both Georgius and Hurwitz. What is striking about both sources is Coleridge's difference from them. If he was using Hurwitz, then he had changed the context and significance of the tale – Hurwitz translates T. Tanith's tale in which the date-tree is a symbol of fruitfulness in the

³ I am grateful to James Mays, editor of the poems in the forthcoming *Collected Coleridge* edition, for suggesting these texts as probable sources. They are Hyman Hurwitz, *Hebrew Tales* (London, 1826); Franciscus Georgius, *De Harmonia Mundi* (Venice, 1525) and *In Scripturam Sacram Problemata* (Paris, 1575); Johann Gottlieb Gleditsch, “Essai d'une fécondation artificielle, fait sur l'espèce Palmier, qu'on nomme Palma dactylifera fol flabelliformi,” *Histoire de l'académie royale des sciences et des belles lettres de Berlin année 1749* (Berlin, 1750).

⁴ *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols (London, New York, and Princeton, 1957 -), IV, 4709. Henceforth cited as *CN*.

desert, a reward for the faithful. Similarly the “ponderous tomes” of Georgius do not seem to contain the story as Coleridge tells it – they simply ask why God allowed the temptation and fall to occur through Eve, suggesting in a Pauline manner that woman is made the weaker vessel.⁵

It seems, then, that either the Coleridge of the Preface is to be believed – he did have a bad memory for his sources – or that he was creatively revising them, creating a new text of his own using stories and symbols that have been powerful in different religions and mystical traditions. At the same time he is portraying himself not as a carefully revising author, but as a library cormorant, whose fallible memory is the price paid for his immersion in authors so arcane that most of his audience will not have heard of them, still less read them. A portrayal of this kind, then, may be a deliberate disguise of Coleridge’s creative method of careful revision of others’ texts designed to dramatize, but also excuse, his inability to complete for publication original works of his own.

The author of the Preface appears as fallible, but deeply learned, and the Adam and Eve text he goes on to cite of similar fallibility – not the actual words of the source (whatever that is) but Coleridge’s memory of them. Consequently the reader is unable to trust the discourse. Is the version of the fall-story an ancient tradition, Coleridge’s version of it from (bad) memory, or his invention? The words on the page defer to a number of possible originals, a worrying uncertainty when the story being told is itself that of original sin. What relation does it have to the Bible story – the original story of origins and fall? The certainty of Biblical authority is displaced, as is Coleridge’s own authority, into an irresolvable slippage from text to possible text.

The fall-story as given in the Preface bears clear resemblances to that, already examined, given by Coleridge in *Aids to Reflection*. Again the woman is blamed, but the burden of her guilt is passed to the serpent (here the mediator, in *Aids* the medial understanding). God’s punishment of Adam and Eve is then rewritten seemingly, but only seemingly, as a reward for Adam’s conscious fidelity. He will not destroy Eve and leave Adam solitary, from sympathy for “the yearning of a human soul for its counterpart.” This reward is itself the punishment: man’s fate is to feel a yearning for soul-union that cannot be fulfilled, to experience the separation of masculine from feminine that constitutes fallen sexuality. The desire of lust replaces the complete unfallen unity of soul expressed in the *Aids* passage as an androgynous Adam and, in Coleridge’s lecture notes on Adam and Eve in

⁵ Hurwitz, pp. 93-94; Georgius, *In Scripturam Sacram*, pp. 6-8.

Paradise Lost, as a “union of opposites, a giving and receiving mutually of the permanent in either, a completion of each in the other.”⁶ Fallenness is a state of universal longing for original unity (including the unity of an original text). It is a state instituted by woman’s desire, in which woman’s sexual difference constitutes Adam’s punishment, for it tantalises him with the prospect of regaining an androgynous soul-union that it cannot bodily fulfil. Before and after the fall it is female desire and desirability at fault – just as, perhaps, it is the side of himself Coleridge designated feminine that is at fault in the fall of his text from “its original integrity.” Thus the content of the “apologue” and its confused textual status form a microcosm of *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree* as an incomplete whole – they dramatise and shift the blame for Coleridge’s unmanning failure to complete the work of which he is “Author,” a failure also implied in his statement of 1820: “a great mind must be androgyne.”⁷

The rest of the Preface dramatises sexual and literary difference by borrowing a text belonging to another kind of universalising discourse – the scientific. The Linnean anecdote concerns the sexuality of plants and shows the impossibility of fruition without sexual contact, and it is precisely the author’s lack of such contact that explains his failure to “repair the loss” and bring his text again to the fruition of its “original integrity.” The fall of the author is the fall of his text, and without a soul-union with a real or imaginary Eve he cannot redeem it. If he cannot, however, he knows who can, and how, for its incompleteness, according to the Linnean and Biblical authorities he cites, is a universal and natural condition. The reader can be that “congenial spirit, whose years do not exceed those of the Author at the time the poem was written.” The reader, implicitly female, will enter into that sexual soul-union that Adam sought, that the tree required, and that Coleridge is now too old to enjoy. She will restore the text’s integrity, allowing its authority and masculinity to be realised by shaping her spirit to the unrealised form implicit in its thoughts: “a reduction of the thoughts to the requisite metre.” This perpetuates the alignment Coleridge had already made in his criticism of Milton and Hooker and in his *Aids* account of the fall, between thought and masculinity on the one hand, and sympathy and femininity on the other.

I turn now to the numbered prose sections which begin the text proper. They replace two stanzas of poetry with which Coleridge had begun the

⁶ *Lectures 1808-1819: On Literature*, ed. R.A. Foakes, 2 vols (London and Princeton, 1987), II, 428.

⁷ *CN*, IV, 4705.

poem in the surviving MS, suggesting that Coleridge's claim in the Preface that "the first leaf of the MS. from which the poem has been transcribed, and which contained the two or three introductory stanzas, is wanting" either refers to another manuscript, or is a myth intended to dramatize the issues of loss and originality. If the latter, Coleridge had deliberately dismantled a finished poem to create a text of incompleteness. If the former the Preface becomes more exclusively a commentary on a biographically based loss of authorial power and memory. With the verse stanzas of the earlier manuscript to hand, it is tempting to speculate that the dismantling was a deliberate act of textual fragmentation:

Hard is my lot, a Life of stifled Pain!
 And oft to thee do I bewail my Doom.
 Yet think not thou that loving to complain
 I nurse sick fancies and distemper'd Gloom,
 A man diseas'd in nature! O no! no!
 It is Joy's greatness and its overflow
 Which, being compleat, disquieteth me so!
 I am not a God, that I should stand alone,
 And, having all, but Love, I want the Whole,
 The Organ, that makes outward Bliss our own,
 The Door, that lets it in upon the Soul
 Sweet Babes make beautiful my Parlour Hearth,
 My Bookroom windows shew a Heaven's Earth;
 And I have a Heart attun'd alike to Joy or Mirth.⁸

The references to "Joy," to "Sweet Babes" and to "My Bookroom Windows" link this verse to Keswick in 1802, and to the themes and language of *Dejection*, composed in that year. Perhaps Coleridge decided to delete them for the same reason he deleted stanzas of the *Letter to Sara* on which *Dejection* was based – the details were too nakedly confessional, too private, too autobiographical to appear in public. Whatever his reason, however, it is clear that the *Date-Tree* he did publish, over twenty years later, marks a shift seen also in some of his late allegorical poems, from a personal confessional style to one in which the author is unimaginable by the reader as a figure beyond his texts, which themselves dissolve into multiple discourses reflecting upon each other and on the nature of textuality.

A multiplicity of discourses is observable in the prose section with which the published *Date-Tree* begins.

⁸ I am grateful to the Pforzheimer Library for permission to quote from the MS in their possession.

I

Beneath the blaze of a tropical sun the mountain peaks are
 the Thrones of Frost, through the absence of objects to
 reflect the rays. ?What no one with us shares, seems scarce
 our own. The presence of a ONE,

The best below'd, who loveth me the best,
 is for the heart, what the supporting air from within is for
 the hollow globe with its suspended car. Deprive it of this,
 and all without, that would have buoyed it aloft even to the
 seat of the gods, becomes a burthen and crushes it into
 flatness.

35

40

It includes unattributed quotations, and also employs capitalization of initial letters and whole words to create a text that hints at different levels of significance by visual and typographical rather than confessional means. The capitalization of "Thrones of Frost" gives to the mountain peaks a majestic and divine power and invites us to read them as a religious allegory illustrating the need for companionship even amongst the gods. If we do so the unattributed quotations take on the status of traditional moral axioms, powerful because they sum up what seems to be true of nature (mountains) and the divine for which it stands, *without* deriving solely from a single author (although in fact they are Coleridge's own): "What no one with us shares, seems scarce our own." When, however, "the seat of the gods" is explicitly mentioned it is as part of the ballooning metaphor, and we cannot be certain whether it is related to the "Thrones" or not. It is worth noting here that the image of air within and without a balloon is used by Coleridge in a notebook where it illustrates the necessity of reciprocity in God's creation of the world through his loving Word.⁹ And a similar reciprocity is present in the verbal structure of the quoted line "The best below'd, who loveth me the best." Almost a chiasmus, it repeats and inverts the order of "best" and "loved," balancing the halves of the line and appearing to overcome the temporal sequence in which we read by retaining words already used. It is a structure designed to prevent or rather suspend the loss involved in the temporal process of reading, just as mutual love is offered as

⁹ *CN*, IV, 4551. I am grateful to Anthony J. Harding for the suggestion that the air within the balloon represents femininity dwelling in the male which, by itself is unshaped and dispersed. Coleridge viewed Ceres as the "maternal goddess," her name signifying "hunger," "capacity" in his 1825 "Essay on the Prometheus of Aeschylus." See *The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, II, 338.

a way of suspending the loss of original unity. In this way its word order as well as its meaning mirror the procedure of the larger text, aiming to replace an impossible original unity with a pattern of balanced and co-existing discourses. Having said this, it should be remembered that the line establishes mutual love in masculine terms. That is to say that the beloved is conceived of as returning the emotions set out by the writer in *his* terms. As a verbal reciprocity capable of suspending temporal loss, "The best belov'd, who loveth me the best" seeks the a-temporality and reconciliation of gender characteristic of Coleridge's sublime. But it seeks it in words which make the male writer active, the female his sympathetic and largely passive echo.

The second section presents the reader with another shift in discourse, and challenges us to connect it with what has gone before.

II

The finer the sense for the beautiful and the lovely, and the fairer and lovelier the object presented to the sense; the more exquisite the individual's capacity of joy, and the more ample his means and opportunities of enjoyment, the more heavily will he feel the ache of solitariness, the more unsubstantial becomes the feast spread around him. What matters it, whether in fact the viands and the ministering graces are shadowy or real, to him who has not hand to grasp nor arms to embrace them?

45

Replacing the metaphorical style of the first is a treatise on aesthetics, one which appears confident in its ability to deliver law and represent truth. Formal and objective, it offers to draw general conclusions but collapses, its abstract laws undermined by the unruliness of metaphor. Once the image of the feast is introduced as a metaphor for the beautiful, further metaphors disturb the generality and apparent objectivity of the prose: "What matters it ... to him who has not hand to grasp nor arms to embrace them?" This graphic and distressing image of disablement or mutilation shocks the reader out of the formal world of aesthetics into a personal realm where the body cannot be controlled by philosophic argument, and where its disablement articulates pressing authorial concerns. The image appears again in Coleridge's discussion of prayer in his sixth philosophical lecture: "The eye gives you a power which enables you to see but you have not the hand to grasp, and you have not the wing to soar towards it, and what remains for

you? ... You can ask, you can confess ... ask and it shall be given you.”¹⁰ These concerns, unnamed here like the author who nevertheless appears in implicit anguish as the mask of formal aesthete slips, render the arcane disputes about philosophic law nugatory. Whether it is in the individual’s sense, as Hume and Burke suggest, or in the “object presented,” as a rationalist would contend, that the beautiful exists is undecided. Whether the viands are “shadowy” Platonic reflections of ideal beauty or real is unimportant – or rather shown to be unanswerable as the theoretician is sabotaged by his awareness of his crippling and subjective limitations, limitations that precede rational argument. And so this aesthetic discourse leads the reader to a picture of its apparent author as crippled, isolated, unnamed, able neither to master his own discourse nor to confess his inability save by an image in the third-person: “him who has not.” Seemingly a different author from those of the first section and the Preface, with their range of images, tales and quotations, he is read in their context as another mutilated figure of disempowerment. Taken overall, the different sections give no single author but only a composite and seemingly chaotic collection of texts and writers. A common theme of the frustrations of isolation appears, but readers cannot occupy the position of “congenial spirits” healing the lonely poet by reading him since the poet does not appear and readers are left trying to trace him (and to find a procedure for themselves) in the different discourses of the text. The romantic model of mutual consolation through the poetry of a man speaking to men (or, in Coleridge’s case, to women) will not be sufficient to restore this text and its author to unity or to discover the true Law. The writer(s) of the *Date-Tree* seem(s) at this point too unstable, too decentred from its words for its model of androgyny to heal.

The first section in verse demonstrates in its subject matter and syntax that the reduction of thoughts to metre for which the Preface had hoped may not be sufficient to achieve a fruitful union of masculine and feminine.

III

Imagination; honourable aims;
 Free commune with the choir that cannot die;
 Science and song; delight in little things,
 The buoyant child surviving in the man;
 Fields, forests, ancient mountains, ocean, sky,

50

¹⁰ *The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London, 1949), p. 225. Henceforth cited as *PL*.

With all their voices – O dare I accuse
 My earthly lot as guilty of my spleen,
 Or call my destiny niggard! O no! no!
 It is her largeness, and her overflow,
 Which being incomplete, disquieteth me so!

55

Coleridge produces a list of apparently unrelated or opposed objects – “Science and song.” The grammatical relations between its items are left ungoverned, culminating not in a verb or object, but a dash: “With all their voices – O dare I accuse.” The resolving main verb has not only been deferred but omitted altogether and the “unity of the subject” is only affirmed in an exclamation whose grammatical relation to the list is unclear. It is a self-accusing rather than governing “I” that appears, and its lack of grammatical authority is matched in the meaning of the words that follow: Coleridge’s “earthly lot” undermines his manly confidence through its fertile abundance: “It is her largeness, and her overflow / Which being incomplete, disquieteth me so!” The incomplete fallen man finds the completing female world threatening rather than fulfilling – a place of endless self-displacement as in Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” In this section Coleridge engages in dialogue with Wordsworth, for “the buoyant child surviving in the man” (53) alludes to Wordsworth’s “The Child is Father of the Man.” For Wordsworth his realization of this allowed him to regain his past and overcome the depredations of time upon the self; here, for the narrator the Wordsworthian realization is not so much a blessing as a threat, for the very source of his disquiet is that nothing is lost except the original unity beyond or before even the childhood self. Syntactically and semantically his verse shows all nature, all traditions, all the past recurring together in an excess that overwhelms the self because it is still incomplete. And of course that self, although it now appears in the first person, cannot, after the Preface and the first two sections, simply be identified as Coleridge. It is an “I” that we would like to equate with the author, but that remains unnamed and therefore seems all the more vulnerable.

In the fourth stanza too the “I” and “thou” are not safely identifiable as the author and his real beloved.

IV

For never touch of gladness stirs my heart,
 But tim’rously beginning to rejoice
 Like a blind Arab, that from sleep doth start
 In lonesome tent, I listen for thy voice.

60

Belovéd! 'tis not thine; thou art not there!
 Then melts the bubble into idle air,
 And wishing without hope I restlessly despair.

65

The reader can no longer trust the confessional poem as a transparent communication of its author's biographical situation. For the act of writing seems not to master the self but to displace it into an endless deferral of satisfaction, a masochistic and tantalizing process in which hopes of regaining self-possession through loving partnership are raised only to be dashed. As in the second section the irony is that the author appears most strongly in his ability to find images of his own emasculation. Saying what he is like asserts himself *as an author* for it depends upon the poetic licence given to simile. But the image found threatens his masculinity. He is "like a blind Arab, that from sleep doth start," an image of dependence, isolation, and emasculation.¹¹ The pain and anxiety involved in this is tangible enough for the text to slip free of the claims of its Preface: it dramatizes a personal vulnerability exacerbated by the act of writing rather than a condition of universal loss.

The next section strives to counteract the restless despair of the fourth by seeking a more impersonal discourse, describing a scene of reciprocal love and acceptance, in which each is defined by the other, mother by child, child by mother. This anxiety-free relationship is an ideal somewhat different to the soul-union of Adam and Eve; its sexuality is covert, blanketed by the propriety of the maternal relationship, and it replaces partnership with dependence. One way of reading the stanzas is to see the narrator as being associated with the child who, like the blind Arab, is dependent on a woman. But in the security of maternal contact this dependence is not despairing but blissful, for the child is able, as the Arab is not, to hear her voice and define itself by repeating it.

V

The mother with anticipated glee
 Smiles o'er the child, that, standing by her chair
 And flatt'ning its round cheek upon her knee,
 Looks up, and doth its rosy lips prepare
 To mock the coming sounds. At that sweet sight
 She hears her own voice with a new delight;
 And if the babe perchance should lisp the notes aright,

70

¹¹ Coleridge used the figure of the Arab again in *Love's Apparition and Evanishment*, *PW*, I, 488-89.

VI

Then she is tenfold gladder than before!
 But should disease or chance the darling take, 75
 What then avail those songs, which sweet of yore
 Were only sweet for their sweet echo's sake?
 Dear maid! no prattler at a mother's knee
 Was e'er so dearly prized as I prize thee:
 Why was I made for Love and Love denied to me? 80

This is the nearest the piece comes to a vision of an original and integral text. The mother/child voice is a harmony of joy and delight with propriety as the triple rhyme stresses and as Coleridge wished his sublime to be. It suggests that for Coleridge the nearest human language to a pre-fallen original one would be that of the "buoyant child," buoyed up on mother love, dependent and probably ignorant of the meaning of the words it utters. In this case, the only perfect language would be one of nonsense, one in which the perfect repetition of sounds forms an imitation without consciousness of difference. Knowing neither the words' meaning nor itself, the child copies without introducing new intentions or significations. There is, therefore, no self-betrayal possible, no loss of the original maternal text through imitations of it which can never reproduce it exactly. And it almost seems as if Coleridge wants to regain a stable self by modelling his own text and its vision of the author/reader partnership on such a language. He repeats words as he discusses the child's echo of its mother, as if to suspend difference, temporal sequence and therefore loss in his own verse. "Sweet," "dear" and "prize" all recur in this way: "What then avail those songs, which sweet of yore / were only sweet for their sweet echo's sake? / Dear maid! no prattler at a mother's knee / Was e'er so dearly prized as I prize thee" (76-79). But repetition of this kind can of course only gesture towards a language of perfect imitation. Coleridge's text has to occupy the area of loss and differences, as he makes clear in noting that "disease or chance" threaten to destroy the child and leave its mother forlorn. It is also apparent that, however well the buoyant child survives in the man, self-consciousness and the formation of an individual ego makes baby language impossible.

It is worth asking at this point why Coleridge may have chosen to write a text idealising the linguistic relation of mother and child and why he should have offered that relation as an analogy for the partnership of author and reader when, in the Preface and earlier sections, that partnership is conceived as a *sexual* communion of equals. Coleridge's idealisation of the mother is usually an idealisation of security, so that it is not surprising that he traces

language acquisition to the child's touch of the mother's breasts: "the first education which we receive, that from our mothers, is given to us by touch; the whole of its process is nothing more than ... an extended touch by promise."¹² The priority of the maternal self to the child's self places her at the end as well as the beginning of language. Words try to re-collect the maternal unity from which they spring, and dedicate the self to an original security that the mother's body symbolised for the child. She becomes a path to the sublime, a symbol for the child of what the blue sky symbolises for her and other adults – "what the blue sky is to the mother, the mother's upraised eyes and brow are to the child, the type and symbol of an invisible heaven."¹³ Here Coleridge nears the imagery of a Catholic *pietà* – a surprising resemblance considering his dislike of Mariolatry. It is, however, properly religious and socially uncontroversial, unlike the female personifications of Liberty in his early radical poetry.

On this reading original linguistic integrity is at root, not the sexual partnership or androgyny announced in *Aids to Reflection* and the Preface to *Date-Tree* as both Biblical and botanical. Rather it is ideal maternal succour. In this light Coleridge's myth of the fall occurring through desire ("the woman in our Humanity") could be seen as his universalisation of revenge for women's refusal to accommodate his infantile sexuality. Similarly, calling his own desire for sympathy a *feminine* weakness could be seen as a self-exculpatory renaming of a boy's need for a mother. But this view would only be a partial one for, as a letter of 1822 shows, Coleridge also saw the end of the poem as the words of the man in him to Sara Hutchinson, words then that would link him with the mother. "She too," he wrote

had no accomplishments, to whom *the man* in the Poet sighed forth
Dear Maid! no Prattler at a mother's knee
Was e'er so deeply prized as I prize thee –
Why was I made for love, and love denied to me?¹⁴

The unaccomplished Sara would become the infant loved, protected and taught by the motherly Coleridge, a fantasy that would allow him more power than that in which he was himself the infant. A related poem of 1801-2 shows Sara first as the babe to Coleridge's mother, then reverses the roles:

¹² *PL*, p. 115.

¹³ *AR*, p. 186-87.

¹⁴ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E.L. Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford, 1956-71), V, 216; cf. IV, 907, where Coleridge applies the last line to himself and his wife. Henceforth cited as *CL*.

And o'er my lips a subtle feeling ran,
 All o'er my lips a soft and breeze-like feeling –
 I know not what – but had the same been stealing
 Upon a sleeping mother's lips, I guess
 It would have made the loving mother dream
 That she was softly bending down to kiss
 Her babe, that something more than babe did seem,
 A floating presence of its darling father,
 And yet its own dear baby self far rather!
 Across my chest there lay a weight, so warm!
 As if some bird had taken shelter there;
 And lo! I seemed to see a woman's form –
 Thine, Sara, thine? O joy, if thine it were!
 I gazed with stifled breath, and feared to stir it,
 No deeper trance e'er wrapt a yearning spirit!¹⁵

Here Coleridge associates himself with the mother, re-defining his love as a mother's for its child. But the translation of sexual into maternal feelings is only partial: the mother sees the baby's father, her husband, renewed in the child and this turns the relationship into a sexual one. The poem moves in and out of the maternal imagery, and in the next verse Coleridge seems to take the child's role, feeling its mother bending over it, in lines which are also highly sexual: "Across my chest there lay a weight, so warm!" and "I gazed with stifled breath."

In *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree* too the power of the narrator's needs disorientates the piece, by similarly destabilizing the translation of a sexual relationship into a more "original," innocent and unfallen one. As in his letter of 1822, the poet uses the mother's authority to accuse his beloved maid/child of denying the love owed him – "Dear maid! no prattler at a mother's knee / Was e'er so dearly prized as I prize thee: / Why was I made for Love and Love denied to me?" This is a bizarre reversal and a bizarre androgyny with the male poet taking the mother's role. However, its causes are discernible; by portraying the maid's refusal to repeat and complete his idealizing song as a child's refusal of its mother's words of love, he is able to blame the poem's incompleteness not just on female wantonness, but on perversity too. The maid is guilty of the worst denial of all, that of her mother, and is thus inhuman and false to her own possible future maternal role. It is the conclusion of a poet, burdened by his model of language as a sexual partnership, who wants, but does not want to

¹⁵ *The Day-Dream*, II, 10-24, *PW*, I, 387.

admit that he wants, linguistic mothering and so blames the woman who refuses to give it to him first as a bad *child*, only then as a bad *mother*.

And yet a different reading of the final stanzas is possible; going something like this: – The last line of the text illustrates the narrator's unease with the maternal model of linguistic communication. For it could be read as being directed not principally towards the maid who denies love, but to an unnamed power that destroys the mother/child poet/maid relationship by "disease or chance." Read in this way, it echoes Adam's implicit question to God in *Paradise Lost* when he and Eve (made by God as his living companion) are to be expelled from Eden: "To the loss of that, / Sufficient penalty, why hast thou added / The sense of endless woes?" (X, 752-4). It is a cry also heard from the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and in both cases it acknowledges and resents the ultimate power of a male Creator whose word is law. In the *Date-Tree* the question "Why was I made for Love and Love denied to me?" is unanswered and is apparently unanswerable. It rebounds upon the fall-story of the Preface for, if directed towards a God who controls "disease or chance," it suggests that "the Most High," having allowed Eve to survive as Adam's companion from his understanding of "the yearning of a human soul for a counterpart" (14) nevertheless resembles Satan in allowing other loving relationships, maternal and sexual, to be destroyed by untimely death. On this reading, the Coleridgean sublime (in which the linguistic relation of mother and child is an image of perfect unfallen unity because it is without differentiation) succumbs to a Burkeian masochistic sublime in which all language, all relationships, all selves, are vulnerable to the unremitting power of a just Father. Coleridge's myth-making and textual borrowing would then be an attempt to overcome this vulnerability, not by challenging God on his own authority, but by forming strategies and stories, in which human and textual alliances can reassure the self and (albeit temporarily) displace the Creator's sublime justice into a language of love.

Such a reading seems persuasive, and it is not entirely ruled out by the fact that the *Date-Tree*'s final question is more explicitly directed at the "dear maid" who has denied her love. Coleridge's tongues can be seen as bound, as was his own Christabel's, by his piety and deference towards the divine father, so that he is unable to accuse him directly, blaming instead the female figures he himself has invented for their inevitable failure to allow him to overcome God. It is true that his attempt to translate sexual partnership into a mother/child relationship is fraught with difficulties of its own that suggest that Coleridge had not been able to dispel a guilty feeling

that it was Adam and Eve's sexual yearning for a counterpart that introduced sin and fall. If so, then offering as he does such partnership as a way of redeeming his fallen text in particular and language in general is bound to fail if not transformed into innocent terms. And, in a final twist, we can read the final line as revealing the frustrations that destroy even those innocent terms from within since, taken by itself, "Why was I made for love and love denied to me?" is a child's accusation. The reader suddenly sees the narrator as a deprived child instead of the loving mother implied by "as I prize thee." There is, it appears, no wholly innocent or fulfilling linguistic relation, none that can exclude loss, denial and a terrible questioning.

Here it is worth remembering that the last stanzas are themselves in Coleridge's words an "Imitation of one of the Minnesinger of the 13th century" published elsewhere by Coleridge. In their context in *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree* the stanzas seem to be the most nakedly confessional in the poem, and yet they are an imitation, one, moreover like the Rabbinical tale in that they are not attributable to a named author. Neither Coleridge's nor an original German poet's unique voice can be located in them. At the same time, Coleridge's use of the stanzas outside *Date-Tree* in different contexts disrupts the apparent unity of the text.¹⁶ Rather than the organic unity which the Romantics treated as a sign of a poet's original genius, the text displays instability, being composed of translations as well as half remembered tales and fragments used elsewhere. It demonstrates in its own structure an awareness that the authenticity of the text and the figure of its originating writer are dependent not only upon the interpretation of unknown readers but upon a determination to isolate it from the other discourses to which it relates, traditional and contemporary. The appearance in *Date-Tree* of those discourses, and of parts of it in them, makes such a determination appear to be a limiting and futile conspiracy between Romantic writer and reader to pretend that poetry is a "man speaking to men." In contrast to Wordsworth – and to his own earlier practice – Coleridge has his text speak (or rather write) instead of him, making conventional assumptions about literary communication open to doubt. The congenial spirit for which he hopes in the Preface may be needed to give him the status of originating author of a unique poem, but her task will be almost impossible as she seeks the "true" text and author through a

¹⁶ Although in fact Coleridge's dependence on them is slight – one of creative imitation rather than copy (to use his own distinction). He seems only to have taken the general theme of mother and child, the stanza form, and the rhyme scheme from the German. For a contemporary translation of the Minnesinger see Edgar Taylor (ed.), *Lays of the Minnesingers or German Troubadours* (London, 1825), p. 195.

labyrinth of allusions, translations, versions and fragments. Only before or beyond the first story itself, that of the fall, could a text unmediated by a context of loss and difference be found and that, as Coleridge had already suggested, is a text we have always already forgotten.

Coleridge's gendered account of the mind is part of a meditation on language's search for origins, for an Other in which its difference can be stilled. But his account of the fall, of androgyny, and of sexual partnership is flawed, veering between idealisation and resentment of the mother, yearning for and subordination of the beloved. The poem dramatises the conflicts of desire, knowledge and language in a highly self-conscious and perceptive way, although it ends by blaming the woman for its own and its author's incompleteness with a bitterness and desperation that suggests that the preface's hope for "some congenial spirit" to complete it was optimistic. The act of reading cannot be, at least not in the terms advanced in the Preface, a reconstitution of original androgyny and it would be more likely that Coleridge's need for a motherly language would triumph over his struggle to conceive a language of adult partnership or androgyny and that both would remain in thrall to a masterful Law of the Father which they could only hope to displace, again and again, into less original but more humane versions. Support for this view can be found in his comments on Cary's translation of Dante, comments which defined androgyny as a learned man's approximation to maternal piety and propriety: "it is not only pure *Language* but pure *English* – the language differs from that of a Mother or a well-bred Lady who had little but her Bible and a few good books – only as far as the Thoughts and Things to be expressed require learned words from a learned Poet."¹⁷ His renewed creativity under "the most affectionate and sisterly nurse to me" as he called Mrs. Gillman confirmed it in his personal life after 1816.¹⁸

And yet *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree*, like several of Coleridge's late poems, remains an innovative text, new in its very form, disrupted as it is into fragments, translations, quotations, sections of prose. It represents Coleridge's attempt in the 1820s to surpass the language of mastery to be found in the Wordsworthian sublime and in the prose criticism by which he himself had sought to make that sublime culturally powerful. In its structure and arguments it ventures a reflection upon textuality and originality which is an implicit critique of Romantic theories about genius, imagination, and poetry as a "man speaking to men." Coleridge's daughter

¹⁷ CL, IV, 781.

¹⁸ CL, IV, 669.

records that he crossed out the statement that the imagination is a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am in his copy of *Biographia Literaria*. The *Date-Tree* seems to me to dramatize similar acts of revision, to doubt the possibility of a direct representation of the original creator's voice, whether that creator be God or the author himself. Nor can the author be constituted by a single sympathetic act of interpretation by a congenial reader for, despite the hopes of the Preface, the text bravely faces up to the dispersal of its author into different discourses. In doing so it makes a new kind of Coleridgean – and Romantic – text; out of his inability to complete poems such as *Christabel* had come a work which, refusing simply to accept the endless deferral of loving and linguistic unity, struggles to make its own flawed incompleteness articulate the limitations of the self as sexualized by language in general and Romantic theories and practices of literature (including the sublime) in particular.