REVOLUTION, RESPONSE, AND "CHRISTABEL"

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> Amidst images of war and woe, amidst scenes of carnage and horror of devastation and dismay, it may afford the mind a temporary relief to wander to the magic haunts of the Muses, to bowers and fountains which the despoiling powers of war have never visited, and where the lover pours forth his complaint, or receives the recompense of his constancy. The whole of the subsequent Love Chant is in a warm and impassioned strain.
>
> —note accompanying "Lewti" in the *Morning Post*, 1798[1]

> A heavier objection may be adduced against the author, that in these times of fear and expectation, when novelties explode around us in all directions, he should presume to offer the public a silly tale of old-fashioned love: and five years ago, I own I should have allowed and felt the force of this objection. But alas! explosion has succeeded explosion so rapidly, that novelty itself ceases to appear new; and it is possible that now, even a simple story, wholly uninspired with politics or personality, may find some attention amid the hubbub of revolutions, as to those who have remained a long time by the falls of Niagara, the lowest whispering becomes distinctly audible.
>
> —from Coleridge's "Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie," 1799[2]

Readers of "Christabel" may well wonder why, during the years Coleridge was composing poems like "France: An Ode," and "Fire, Famine, and Slaughter," he began and returned again and again to what appears to be a gothic fantasy. But one may also wonder whether, as the first epigraph suggests, a poet's own passionate response to "scenes of carnage" may not be channeled into the presentation of erotic passion. As Coleridge's "Introduction" implies, it was impossible for him, in 1799, given his early interest in "the hubbub of revolutions," to write a poem that *was* "uninspired by politics or personality"; the very decision not to treat the political explicitly was itself politically meaningful, and to the modern reader the crashing sound of Niagara behind Coleridge's poetry

may be more audible than it would have been to contemporaries. It is my contention that "Christabel" can be read as an extended, troubled, (and in certain ways masked), meditation on modes of response to "exploding novelties"—extended because the question of response was complicated by Coleridge's own engagement with the French Revolution, and troubled because the matter had a direct bearing on the inspiration for and subject matter of poetry.

I

We can begin by examining the context within which the various types of response the poem explores are set. To do this requires that we take the social landscape of the poem seriously, and not simply as gothic machinery, mere intertextual pointers. The hermetic and disintegrating world of Leoline, a rich baron whose name suggests a kingly genealogy while his title ranks him among the lowest classes of the nobility, is forcefully figured in his "ironed" castle (127). As Geraldine and Christabel make their way through this silent castle in part one, all of its various characteristics suggest isolation and decay. Leoline is "weak in health" (118), the mastiff bitch is old and toothless (7, 145), the brands are dying and lying in their own white ashes (156–57), and Leoline's shield is hung in a "murky old niche" (163).

Our sight of the baron in action in part two only confirms our sense that he is part of a rapidly collapsing order. His chivalric response to Geraldine's supposed wrong sounds sadly antiquated; his "noble heart" (432) becomes enraged, and he swears to "proclaim it far and wide, / With trump and solemn heraldry, / That they, who thus had wronged the dame, / Were base as spotted infamy!" (434–37)—an empty gesture. The problem is not just that Leoline is wrong about Geraldine and therefore misled in his efforts to help her; in the world of this poem, which seems to contain only four people, it is difficult to imagine the public to whom this proclamation could be made, much less made meaningful. And the old baron's intention to take on five young men in his "tourney court" (441) seems not only hubristic, given his age and ill-health, but also inappropriate as a response to a crime committed not by knights but "warriors" (81) (in alternate versions "ruffians"). In retrospect, and as critics have long recognized, the leaf hanging "on the topmost twig" of the oak tree, the "last of its clan" (49), dancing madly, seems a pointed figuration of Leoline's line.

The poem opens with an equivocal movement out of this limited and disintegrating world: Christabel's walk—apparently the first such movement through the ironed gate since "an army in battle array had marched out" (128). Ostensibly Christabel goes out merely to pray, but the narrator hints from the outset that this is an anti-familial gesture: "The lovely lady, Christabel / Whom her father loves so well, / What makes her in the wood so late, / A furlong from the castle gate?" (23–26). It almost sounds as if Leoline's love for Christabel should have been sufficient to keep her inside, and in fact, the various incestuous impulses that will be played out on and through Geraldine (Christabel-Geraldine as mother, Leoline-Geraldine as wife, Leoline-Geraldine as daughter) suggest a family tendency toward aristocratic endogamy.

Christabel discovers in Geraldine de Vaux the epitome of disruptive foreignness; although Geraldine's first claim for herself is that her sire too "is of a noble line" (79), we soon learn that she has come not to augment but to shatter this household. The "army in battle array" has done no good; destruction in the form of Geraldine has entered by the back door, and has done so successfully precisely because she was able to trick her victims into identifying with her. Geraldine is possessed of a kind of revolutionary energy, one all the more threatening because it inspires confidence and sympathy. Her apparent purity, through its very excessiveness, proves to be a sign of radical impurity, rather in the way that the pure and rational ideals of the Revolution, carried further and further, finally led to the destructive and irrational rigor of the Terror. Even according to Geraldine's own story, she is carried to the castle by *warriors* whom she, oddly enough, leads ("they rode furiously behind" [86]). This woman resembling "a lady of a far countrée" (225), has, according to some commentators, characteristics of a vampire—she survives on the blood of others.[3]

The point here is not to draw an allegorical equivalence between Geraldine and the French Revolution but to lay a groundwork for understanding the implications of her relations to the other characters in the text. The problem that those characters face is that in the world of "Christabel" the only alternative to stifling tradition is terrifying indeterminacy. Of course, the contention that Geraldine can be understood as the embodiment of social disruptiveness—incomprehensible novelty—encoded as sexual and moral indeterminacy, immediately raises the question of why such a mystification should be necessary, and how one can reasonably argue the

existence of a connection which is, after all, more or less absent from the poem as we have it. These questions can only be answered cumulatively over the course of this paper, through the gradual unearthing of a social context which can finally help to bind together the poem, to ground this notoriously ungrounded text.

At this point it may be useful to suggest the fitness of a domestic setting as a field within which to work out broader social concerns. In "The Fall of Robespierre," written a few years before "Christabel" was begun, the two principal victims of Revolutionary strife are family ties and free speech (significantly, Geraldine attacks these as well). And there, as in "Christabel," the disruption of families not only provides a vivid picture of discord as registered on a personal or private level, but also suggests the threat of an uncontrolled intermingling of persons and bloodlines:

> O this new freedom! at how dear a price
> We've bought the seeming good! The peaceful virtues
> And every blandishment of private life,
> The father's cares, the mother's fond endearment,
> All sacrificed to liberty's wild riot.
>
> (*LR*, 1:10–11)

That the loss of the fond endearments of private life should be so lamented in a fictional world where heads are falling every moment need not be taken simply as a sign of Coleridge's relative insulation from the events the poem treats—the perceived threat to the family reflects the dangers the middle class's "own" revolution presented to itself. Liberty, equality, and fraternity may make upward mobility possible for the middle class, but it also opens up that class to insurgence from below, a disruption which here takes the form of an attack not just on family lines (a more properly aristocratic concern), but on that peculiarly middle-class social unit, the affective nuclear family. The domestic may thus reasonably become the locus of the revolutionary's fears about revolution.

At the same time, however, the domestic realm may appear to afford refuge from political conflict. Insofar as it does, its use as poetic subject matter may provide welcome relief from overtly political concerns. Coleridge does assume that private and public life are usually opposed; as he says of Burke: "It might have been expected, that domestic calamity would have softened his heart, and by occupying it with private and lonely feelings, have precluded the throb and tempest of political fanaticism."[4]

II

In "Christabel," what is ultimately more important than social upheaval per se (Geraldine) is that "throb and tempest" that marks involvement in it, and the way one stations oneself with respect to it (Christabel, Bracy, Leoline). All of the three latter characters have distinct ways of positioning themselves in relation to others, so that they become, for the reader, object-lessons in response.

We can begin, as the poem does, with Christabel's response to Geraldine. Of the three castle inhabitants, Christabel is the most susceptible to Geraldine's machinations, and, as several commentators have suggested, she seems almost complicit in her own undoing. The reasons offered for her leaving the castle seem insufficient, and she would appear at the very least to be aware at some level that something is amiss even before Geraldine displays "the seal of [her] sorrow" (270): "But through her brain of weal and woe / So many thoughts moved to and fro, / That vain it were her lids to close" (239–41). While many have taken unspoken motives for Christabel's midnight stroll as necessarily morally tainting, in the context of the poem's strictly social landscape Christabel's escape from the castle, so far as it really is an escape, would appear to be a healthy exogamous move. Christabel is open enough to identify willingly with the stranger, and draws her into her own world.

The results are, of course, equivocal. Christabel loses her innocent simplicity (or at least an innocence at the level of consciousness), and appears in some way to have fallen: the star that has set, though generally taken as a reference to her mother, could also refer to her, and the "wood and fell" (310) which end the same verse paragraph invite a punning reading. At the same time, the experience infantilizes Christabel; she is held like a child, she smiles like an infant. This is not simply a *felix culpa*—this is a fall which is somehow restorative.[5]

One can approach the positive, restorative aspect of the experience in a backward fashion by way of a later comment by Coleridge on the subject of childhood:

> To the idea of life victory or strife is necessary. . . . So it is in beauty. The sight of what is subordinated and conquered heightens the strength and pleasure. . . . And with a view to this, remark the seeming identity of body and mind in infants, and thence the loveliness of the former; the commencing separation in boyhood, and the struggle of equilibrium in youth; thence onward the body is first simply indifferent; then demanding the

> translucency of the mind not to be worse than indifferent; and finally all that presents the body as body becoming almost of an excremental nature. (*LR*, 1:230)

The concept of fruitful strife is here undermined rather than concretized through the example of the mind-body relation; the subordination of the body generates disgust, not beauty. As Karen Swann deduces from a line in a letter to Humphrey Davy in 1800, " 'disgust' is not the mind's critical pronouncement on a body (although it may masquerade as such), but a symptom of the subject's mourning or revulsion for the lost, mutual pleasures of mind and body."[6] Christabel's triumph lies precisely in the fact that she achieves what the Coleridge of this later lecture could no longer imagine; lying in bed, smiling like an infant and weeping, with the "blood so free" (324) tingling in her feet, Christabel represents a sort of ideal: she is characterized by an integration and plenitude characteristic of infancy but, in this case, achieved through strife. Her encounter, although disillusioning and distressing, has literally rejuvenated her. The outcome of part one suggests at least the possibility that sympathetic response can open one up to valuable experience.

But if part one is ambiguous about the value of Christabel's experience and therefore of her initial openness, when Coleridge resumes work on the poem in 1800 much of the ambiguity vanishes. It is not surprising that commentators who treat Christabel's experience as a necessary step towards maturity glean most of their evidence from part one. H. W. Piper is one of the few recent critics to discuss the differences between the two parts of the poem, differences which he relates to a shift in Coleridge's attitude toward nature. For him, the major distinction is that part one is "full of ambiguities," whereas part two is "comparatively unambiguous" and makes use of a relatively straightforward imagery.[7] Piper is right, I think, in judging that the difficulties and paradoxes raised in part one are not only not solved but are in fact not confronted in part two. In part two, the turbulent mixture of sensations that Christabel experiences at the end of the first part is schematized as two distinct, and distinctly unappealing, modes of knowledge. This knowledge comes only in flashes, and then only in the form of passive rapture, or grace ("in its stead that vision blest . . . Had put a rapture in her breast, / And on her lips and o'er her eyes / Spread smiles like light!" [464–69]), or passive imitation of Geraldine, or evil ("all her features were resigned / To this sole image in her mind: / And

passively did imitate / That look of dull and treacherous hate!" [603–606]). The exclamation marks that close both descriptions are further signs of their excessive, overdetermined quality. This knowledge hardly qualifies as knowledge at all, and appears instead to be an effacement of Christabel's identity.

Why does Coleridge shift from a model wherein sympathy leads to experience which generates a state of chaotic abundance of sensation, to one wherein sympathy leads, not to development, but to passivity and self-erasure? The answer, I believe, can be grounded in the adjustments in response patterns which the course of the Revolution seemed to require. Peter Kitson traces the step by step shift in Coleridge's stand on the Revolution during the years 1792 through 1798.[8] He points to 1798 as a pivotal year, a year when Coleridge finally gave up any hope of social improvement through political action and made collective guilt a frequent poetic theme. This change of heart is perhaps best exemplified by the publication of "France: an Ode" under the title of "The Recantation: an Ode." Coleridge's mounting resistance to sensibility can best be understood in the context of his own desire to become less immediately responsive to Revolutionary enthusiasm.

Although aware of the "dangers" of sensibility as early as 1796, initially his objections to it are measured. In writing a brief epistolary autobiography for Thomas Poole in 1797 he claims that before age eight he "was a *character*—sensibility, imagination . . . were even then prominent & manifest."[9] In 1796 he defines benevolence as "*Natural sympathy* made permanent by an *acquired conviction*, that the interests of each and of all are one and the same"—sensibility with republican reason superadded (*ET*, 1: 139: my emphasis). At this point, Coleridge's principal objection to conventional sensibility is that in practice it often amounts to little more than hypocritical self-staging and precludes a more substantial involvement with real human suffering: "the fine lady's nerves are not shattered by the shrieks! She sips a beverage sweetened with human blood, even while she is weeping over the refined sorrows of Werter or of Clementina" (*ET*, 1: 151). Benevolence, Coleridge argues, is fundamentally different from sensibility in that it leads to socially meaningful action.

By 1825 his objections have shifted and deepened. In a piece devoted to the topic, he begins dispassionately enough, defining sensibility as "a constitutional quickness of sympathy," but going on to associate it with "shapeless feelings" and passivity.[10] Over

the course of the essay, one senses a mounting anxiety as Coleridge recurs several times to the threat of seduction which for him inheres in sensibility: it becomes the "instrument[s] of seduction," and can lead a man to "attempt to seduce" his friend's wife or daughter (*AR*, 32). It would appear then that sensibility, whether in men or women, poses a threat primarily to women—but this is not quite the case. The real threat here surfaces in the confusion of genders in the argument: the distinctions between men and women may break down, leaving the *men* in danger of being seduced. Finally, the introduction of the sentimental meaning of the word "Love" into scientific inquiry is figured as the presentation of the muse of science "*rouged* like an Harlot, and with the harlot's wanton leer" (*AR*, 33). Sensibility is no longer a problem by virtue of being a willed and self-serving inaction; it is now threatening primarily because it leaves one vulnerable to "seduction." Although Coleridge had long associated seduction with what he considered excessively radical principles, by this time his discussion of it has taken on a surplus emotional charge. The dangers of sensibility now appear particularly acute to him because, as he says, his is "an over-stimulated age" (*AR*, 31). As his contemporary Josiah Conder notes in his review of "Christabel," the power of Geraldine's spell to "so [work] on the sympathy, as to make its victim passively conform itself to the impression" is as "terrible [an] engine of supernatural malice" as one can conceive, but "the spells of vicious example in real life [are] almost a counterpart to this fiction."[11] A concern that people won't be politically active enough is replaced by a concern that they will not be able to maintain a necessary and general aloofness.

One can map out Coleridge's growing resistance to sensibility across the two parts of "Christabel"; Christabel's sensibility is at least of ambiguous value in part one, whereas in part two it is obvious that it has rendered her pathetically passive. This shift away from sensibility includes a shift away from qualities which were associated with both sensibility and republican feeling: childlike or youthful exuberance and infectious emotional intensity. In 1796 Coleridge wishes that France could settle into a state of peace, imagining that "the *juvenile ardour* of a *nascent* republic would carry her on, by a rapid progression, in a splendid career of various improvement" (*ET*, 1: 167: my emphasis). He praises General Pichegru for his ability to make a successful army out of "undisciplined boys": "he found no one principle of an army upon which to

act, except *enthusiasm* in the cause in which they were engaged; he seized upon this great *passion* and made it equal to all the rest; discipline, science, *maturity*, fell before it" (*ET*, 1: 172: my emphasis). He could write of Burke that his admiration for him was increased rather than diminished by the fact that he "secured the aids of sympathy to his cause by the warmth of his own emotions," adding that those who find this characteristic a fault in Burke "disgrace the cause of freedom" (*ET*, 1: 108).

In 1796 Coleridge wrote to Benjamin Flower that he would be "unworthy the name of Man if I did not feel my Head and Heart awefully interested in the final Event" of the Revolution.[12] By 1799, however, all is changed, and it is imperative that one resist the temptation to sympathize with the French: "Alas, poor human nature! Or rather, indeed, alas, poor Gallic nature!" "the French are always children, and it is an infirmity of benevolence to wish, or dread aught concerning them" (*ET*, 1: 184). This refusal of identification and the shift in the connotation of youth signal a closing down of sympathy around 1800 which, as we shall see later, causes a broad range of problems for Coleridge. He will have learned to disengage and will find himself, at least temporarily, without any of the pleasures or powers that come of engagement.

III

The shift in the representation of Christabel's response is paralleled by another shift, this one from the example of one saint to another. In his notebooks Coleridge quotes lines 43–64 of Crashaw's "Hymn to St. Teresa" and says that "these verses were ever present to my mind whilst writing the second part of *Christabel*; if, indeed, by some subtle process of the mind they did not suggest the first thought of the whole poem."[13] The lines focus on the fact that Teresa must leave her home and native land to find martyrdom; it requires considerable imagination to connect this with the events of "Christabel," part two. Several commentators have used the remark to support a reading of Christabel's experience as a vicarious expiation of some sin—the best way to make sense of the remark as it stands.[14] On one level, then, Coleridge was through this comment moralizing "Christabel" in retrospect, encouraging a more profound and doctrinal mystification of an already mystified piece, and hoping to bring even part one under a spiritual cloak. (Interestingly, a manuscript version of 1824 includes moralizing marginalia.)[15] But the reference to Saint Teresa makes more sense

in light of her difference from another saint whose experiences truly do resemble Christabel's (particularly Christabel's experiences in part one): Coleridge's own St. Joan from "Destiny of Nations," a poem written two years before part one of "Christabel."[16] Joan undergoes an experience strikingly similar to Christabel's:

> Ah! suffering to the height of what was suffered,
> Stung with *too keen a sympathy*, the Maid
> Brooded with moving lips, mute, startful, dark!
> And now her flushed tumultuous features shot
> Such *strange vivacity*, as fires the eye
> Of Misery fancy-crazed! and now once more
> Naked, and void, and fixed, and all within
> The unquiet silence of confuséd thought
> And *shapeless feelings*. For *a mighty hand*
> *Was strong upon her*, till in the heat of soul
> To the high hill-top tracing back her steps . . .
> Unconscious of the driving element,
> Yea, *swallowed up in the ominous dream, she sate*
> *Ghastly as broad-eyed Slumber*! a dim anguish
> Breathed from her look! and still with pant and sob,
> *Inly she toiled to flee*, and still subdued,
> Felt an inevitable Presence near.
>
> Thus she toiled in *troublous ecstasy* . . .
> And a voice uttered forth unearthly tones . . .
> "Maid beloved of Heaven!"[17]

Like Christabel, Joan has a supernatural encounter which is facilitated by her sensibility and results in a chaotic amplification of her passions. This general resemblance throws the differences between the two into relief. Joan, like Christabel, is led by "inexplicable sympathies" (187) to venture outside, but she encounters not a mysterious lady but a homeless and miserable family destroyed by war. It is Joan's responsiveness to the family's tale, her "suffering to the height of what was suffered," that precipitates her supernatural vision, and it is in response to this vision that she determines to fight in the war. Joan's story has political meaning, and her fantastic experience leads to determinate action. Christabel's almost seems to be the same story, but so mythologized and abstracted that it hardly releases determinate meanings at all:

> Yea, she doth smile, and she doth weep,
> Like a youthful *hermitess*,
> Beauteous in a wilderness,

Who, praying always, prays in sleep.
And, if she move unquietly,
Perchance, 'tis but the blood so free
Comes back and tingles in her feet.
No doubt, she hath a vision sweet.
What if *her guardian spirit* 'twere,
What if she knew her mother near?
But this she knows, in joys and woes,
That saints will aid if men will call:
For the blue sky bends over all!

(319–31, my emphasis)

Although, as we saw earlier, Christabel's encounter can be read for its social significance, the poem tends to overwhelm its social implications with moral and sexual ones. And even those implications are formally destabilized through the excessive use of conditionals and questions. The sing-song and sentimental quality of the third to the last line particularly unsettles our sense of the tone of the passage and strengthens our suspicion that faith in saints is ridiculous. Fittingly, in the abstract space within which the poem operates, Christabel herself seems to be suspended in a kind of half-consciousness; we certainly don't expect her to go off and lead a war.

Coleridge's swerve from a politicized and active Joan to a somnolent Christabel who operates in a hypothetical space is repeated in the further swerve to the Christabel of part two and finally to St. Teresa. Teresa, like Joan, felt a passionate enthusiasm to leave home in order to fight for a worthy cause. Teresa's enthusiasm, however, though beautifully sincere, was *childish*; as Crashaw argues, God did not intend for her devotion to lead to an early death among the Moors. She is brought home by concerned family members, and later in life founds an order of nuns. More important, she devotes herself to the refinement of her inner life, a process traced in the pages of her autobiography. Whether or not her own feelings would have been consonant with his, her life could serve as a demonstration of Coleridge's own disaffected convictions: "those feelings and that grand *ideal* of Freedom which the mind attains by its contemplation of its individual nature, and of the sublime surrounding objects . . . do not belong to men, as a society, nor can possibly be either gratified or realised, under any form of human government; but belong to the individual man, so far as he is pure. . . ."[18] One finds freedom not through social activity but private contemplation.[19] The connection drawn between "Christabel"

and the "Hymn to St. Teresa" can then be taken as a (self) diversionary tactic. With Teresa rather than Joan serving as patron saint of the piece, what similarities there are between "Christabel" and "Destiny of Nations" are more thoroughly effaced, and a life of exemplary political involvement is displaced by a life of exemplary spirituality.[20]

IV

If Christabel's sensibility becomes by part two the sign of a dangerously passive sympathy, the first alternative model for response we are offered is Bard Bracy, who is himself immediately presented with a difficulty similar to the one created by Christabel's overactive sensibility. The baron's control of the production and meaning of the toll of the matin bell makes that toll a sign of the impression produced by established authority: "not a soul can choose but hear / From Bratha Head to Wyndermere" (343–4). Bracy's response to this imposition is in several respects unlike Christabel's response to the impression Geraldine makes. First, rather than simply passively "hear" the knell, he appropriates Leoline's position to command it: "Saith Bracy the bard, So let it knell! / And let the drowsy sacristan / Still count as slowly as he can!" (345–47). By accepting Leoline's power actively, Bracy gains a kind of derivative power for himself. He then proceeds to generate a power of his own by focussing on the gaps between the tolls: "There is no lack of such, I ween, / As well fill up the space between " (348–49). He goes on to construct an imaginative scene on the framework of the tolls, a scene not only of his own making, but one which forms a sort of contrapuntal response to the original sounds:

> With ropes of rock and bells of air
> Three sinful sextons' ghosts are pent,
> Who all *give back*, one after t'other,
> The death-note to their living brother . . .
>
> (352–55, my emphasis)

Initially, then, it would appear that Bracy, by literally working within the established power structure, is able to gain a critical purchase on it. Bracy's would seem to be an intermediate form of response, a simultaneous identification and distancing, which is at once marked by and productive of his mediating imaginative scenes, dreams, and so forth. Unfortunately, the double sense of lines 354–55 hints proleptically at Bracy's shortcoming: that the

imaginatively animated echoes give the death-note to their living brother could indicate that they sound its death-note, that is, that they kill it; but, insofar as the note was declared a death-note to begin with, they are after all merely hollow reduplications of Leoline's power.

Bracy's bind is demonstrated more concretely in his next appearance, where Leoline appropriately commands him to act as mediator, to tell Roland that "Sir Leoline greets thee thus through me" (504). Bracy offers instead another form of mediation, which he hopes will convince Leoline to allow him to take independent action. His account of his dream is itself a thoroughly mediated representation of Christabel's novel situation, but it does not accomplish the task of bridging the gap between either Christabel and Leoline or himself and Leoline. Bracy's claim that he can purify the woods with "music strong and saintly song" (561) exaggerates the practical effect of his poetic power—he will not even be given an opportunity to go to the forest, which isn't where the "serpent" is anyway. Leoline prevails, and Bracy is sent off to act as a transparent, passive mediator: " 'Why, Bracy! dost thou loiter here? / I bade thee hence!' The bard obeyed" (651–52). Leoline walks off with Geraldine and part two ends. Bracy is too completely co-opted to serve anyone effectively, even Leoline. His relation to those around him finally seems, not sympathetic while still critical, but insufficiently intimate while still circumscribed.

Of course, the reception of Bracy's vision also reflects on Leoline, who practices a third mode of response. If Bracy's failing lies in the fact that he tends to become little more than a passive mediator, Leoline's is that he habitually uses mediators. He uses both Geraldine and Bracy to mediate his relationship to Roland, and his romantic/fatherly interest in Geraldine looks like a deflection of an incestuous interest in his daughter and a lingering desire for his dead wife. This deflection is not unreasonably thought by the baron to provoke in Christabel "more than woman's jealousy" (646).

But Leoline's indirection is just one aspect of his tendency to maximize the distance between himself and other people or objects. Frequently the creation of this distance either requires a "misreading" on his part of the object at hand, or it produces such a misreading. This distanced and often antithetical response is examined most directly in the coda, but we see hints of it from the opening of part two: "Each matin bell, the Baron saith, / Knells us back to a world of death" (332–33)—the baron reads the announce-

ment of a beginning as a reminder of endings. Leoline's first response to Geraldine, too, is symptomatic: "Sir Leoline, a moment's space, / Stood gazing on the damsel's face: / And the youthful Lord of Tryermaine / Came back upon his heart again" (427–30). The baron, unlike his daughter, waits a moment, temporally constructing a distance between himself and Geraldine. It would seem that he has what Coleridge called "manly benevolence," a considered and willed, rather than instinctive, kindness. As Swann notes, "separation is something of a habit with the Baron," who divides and opposes "potential 'sames' or potentially intermingling parts of 'the same,' "[21] a habit which Swann associates with paternal law struggling against feminine instability. This separation, unfortunately, both isolates the baron, and, rather than protecting him, opens him to more danger; he is no less a victim of Geraldine than his passive, unthinking daughter, and his effort to recover a lost noble friend leads him to relinquish his only child, who was to carry his blood and wealth into the future. Manly benevolence is no more useful a form of response than is sensibility.

The coda treats the problem of antithetical response in a purer and yet more cryptic form, and it poses a confrontation between the two extremes which Christabel and Leoline represent. The little child and father with which it opens have been associated both with Christabel and Leoline, and with Coleridge and his son Hartley, and both of these connections seem convincing and useful.[22] The dissimilarities between the pair of the coda and the other two, however, cease to be a critical problem if we take the relation between the characters and not the characters themselves as the central issue. The child, in its psychic self-sufficiency and plenitude ("Singing, dancing to itself . . . always finds, and never seeks" [657–59]), threatens its father in a two-pronged manner: first, simply by being a vision of abundance (arousing desire), and second, by impressing itself too directly and immediately upon its father (rendering him passive). "[P]leasures flow in so thick and fast / Upon his heart, that he at last / Must needs express his love's excess / With words of unmeant bitterness" (662–65). What we have here, then, is a final representation of antithetical response, but in this case, defenses are specifically being erected against the childish, full, and passive state of which Christabel herself is the prime representative in this poem. That is, it is as if the coda locates the true danger not in alien disruptiveness (Geraldine), but in the tendency

to yield to that disruptiveness (Christabel); the real threat to Leoline is Christabel.[23]

The coda, then, is a final effort to exorcise Christabel, in all her shapeless sensibility, but the problem remains that no truly workable mode of response has been found. Leoline's antithetical responses are ridiculous and often worse than useless, and the coda itself cannot imagine a way out:

> Perhaps 'tis pretty to force together
> Thoughts so all unlike each other;
> To mutter and mock a broken charm,
> To dally with wrong that does no harm.
> Perhaps 'tis tender too and pretty
> At each wild word to feel within
> A sweet recoil of love and pity.
> And what, if in a world of sin
> (O sorrow and shame should this be true!)
> Such giddiness of heart and brain
> Comes seldom save from rage and pain,
> So talks as it's most used to do.
>
> (666–677)

This passage mockingly uses sentimental language to describe antithetical response (" 'tis tender too and pretty," "sweet recoil"). The speaker's wild words not only alienate him from his listener but also create in him a self-division, a sweet recoil from his own language. The "giddiness" which characterizes this separation marks a liberation from others which is both thrilling and dizzying (in Leoline's case, it is accompanied by a sense of power and a painful confusion). This giddiness is presented as being at once a response to loss and pain and a reduplication of it. The phrase "rage and pain," here the cause of "giddiness," is itself an echo from the description of the baron's response to Christabel's plea. That is, pain both spurs antithetical response and characterizes it. As Swann notes with reference to the death of the baron's wife, the "Baron's response to a traumatic event is to commemorate it," to recall it compulsively.[24] If Christabel's manner of response is naive, the baron's is jaded.

But perhaps the most troubling feature of antithetical response is its inflexibly conservative character. In talking "as it's most used to do," giddiness of heart leads not only to unkind words but also to the same ones. The baron's responses throughout the poem are not

only inappropriate but also outdated, as we saw earlier. If Christabel's openness leads to too much change, the Baron's considered benevolence goes hand in hand with an unwillingness to change which, ironically, leaves him unable to resist change effectively. "Christabel" can offer no model for a successful engagement with novelty. It is entirely fitting that the poem never clarifies the mystery of Geraldine or shows her overcome. The text is helpless before her.

V

The poem's inability to present a productive response to novelty within the world it creates is reproduced at the textual level as a problem of reception. Contemporary reviewers are divided in their response to the poem just as the inhabitants of the castle are to Geraldine. Though perhaps in the minority, some reviewers did respond to the piece "sympathetically," finding in Christabel a pure and lovely heroine "all innocence, mildness, and grace" and in Geraldine a majestic but vicious Duessa (*RB*, 141). Such reviewers tend to say little of Leoline or Bracy and find something charming and even sublime in the tale's indeterminacies: "it appeared to be one of those dream-like productions whose charm partly consisted in the undefined obscurity of the conclusion"; "the reader . . . must be prepared to allow for . . . the glorious and unbounded range which the belief in those mysteries permits" (*RB*, 140). It is precisely this kind of response that encapsulates for a reviewer like Hazlitt the threat of the poem: "the effect of the general story is dim, obscure, and visionary. It is more like a dream than a reality. The mind, in reading it, is spell-bound. The sorceress seems to act without power—*Christabel* to yield without resistance. The faculties are thrown into a state of metaphysical suspense and theoretical imbecility" (*RB*, 146). Hazlitt, in refusing to give in to a passive, Christabelian reception, responds, instead, like Leoline—antithetically. The temptation to lose oneself in the poem necessitates a powerfully negative response to it. The poem acts much like a figure/ground image: one can respond to it sympathetically or antithetically, but not both at once. Its generic instability and fragmentary form (the essence of the new, even in its "finished" form it is in the process of becoming) make it impossible for the reader to find a comfortable intermediate perspective from which to judge it; the text is as deformed and unstable as Geraldine herself.

Coleridge's own relation to the poem was similarly polarized. As Swann notes, he described the composition of part two as characterized by "labor-pangs," and compared the poem's publication to a miscarriage, saying it "fell almost dead-born from the press."[25] This painful and "feminine" engagement with the poem is later replaced with the controlled, masculine disengagement of Coleridge's chivalric relation to the poem-as-lady jokingly described in a letter to his wife.[26] The distinctness of male and female roles here parallels and acts as a metaphor for the distinctness of sympathetic and distanced modes of response. A productive androgyny does not seem to be attainable; one can do nothing but vacillate between extremes.

The bind presented in the world and fabric of the poem helps to account for Coleridge's lack of desire or capacity to complete it. As he was to say in a letter in 1800, "The delay in Copy has been owing in part to me, as the writer of Christabel—Every line has been produced by me with labor–pangs. I abandon Poetry altogether—."[27] The paralyzing conflicts which "Christabel" registers but cannot resolve can be traced to causes more specific than a growing sense that nature is fallen or a mysteriously increasing incapacity to confront "the ambiguities of the unconscious and its visionary exploration."[28] The need to gain a critical distance from early radical engagements requires the shutdown of sensibility (including sympathy, ardor, childlike enthusiasm), but in 1800 a distanced form of response seems heartless and foolishly conservative. Nor can the intermediate figure of Bracy provide consolation. Edward Dramin has not been alone in suggesting a connection between Bracy's failure and Coleridge's own "suspended animation" with regard to poetry in 1800.[29] Bracy's practice is specifically reminiscent of Coleridge's in some respects; his concern to fill "the space between" tolls is much like the speaker's procedure in "Frost at Midnight," a poem which almost seems to be generated out of the speaker's desire to fill up the silences between the owlet's cries. But Bracy is hemmed in rather than liberated by that aural framework; he never becomes anything more than a pawn in the hands of power. And Bracy's dream presents a practical problem in such mediated and mythic terms that it encourages a "Half-listening" (565) reception, a failure of sorts which "Christabel," as a kind of dream vision, replicates. The profound inconclusiveness of "Christabel" indicates more than just a problem with that particular poem; a satisfying and workable way of responding to nov-

elty was for Coleridge an essential part of poetic production. As Michael Holstein points out, Geraldine has much in common with the "intruders" of Coleridge's meditative poetry, such as the "stranger" of "Frost at Midnight"[30]—but Geraldine does not stimulate a productive response.

The danger of the decision Coleridge tries to justify in the second epigraph, the decision to write a poem "wholly uninspired with politics or personality," is that it might simply end up being "wholly uninspired." "Christabel" has simultaneously too much connection to politics and personality and too little connection to them; the piece has a high emotional charge but can propose no way to ground it. That Coleridge wrote less poetry over the next several years and focused more closely on his strictly theological and philosophical interests may indicate that the only way he could escape suspension was by retreating from this mode and subject of inquiry. When he finally published "Christabel" in 1816, he remarked in his introduction to it that if he had published it in 1800 "the impression of its originality would have been much greater"; but after all, around 1800 "exploding novelties" were to be avoided, not sought.

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NOTES

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[1] *Coleridge: Poetical Works*. ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1912), 253. All references to "Christabel" will be from this edition, 213–236.

[2] *The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge, 4 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 1:51 (hereafter cited as *LR*).

[3] See, for example, Arthur H. Nethercot, *The Road to Tryermaine* (1939; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1962); James Twitchell, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1981), 40–51; and Edward Strickland, "Metamorphoses of the Muse in Romantic Poesis: *Christabel*," *ELH* 44 (1977): 641–658. Insofar as Geraldine's behavior can be taken as vampiric, it is the appropriately horrifying counterpart to the castle inhabitants' incestuous tendencies. Their desire to keep themselves "all in the family" is ironically paralleled by Geraldine's cannibalistic relation to them. But whereas they "feed on" each other in an effort to distinguish themselves from others, Geraldine's feeding on them marks them as indistinguishable from beasts—hers is the ultimate act of levelling.

[4] S. T. Coleridge, *Essays on His Own Times*, ed. Sara Coleridge, 3 vols., (New York: AMS Press, 1971), 1:109 (hereafter cited as *ET*). In this case, of course, Coleridge is arguing against a kind of conservative "fanaticism," but these early, more radical writings already display a kind of preparatory defensive conservatism on Coleridge's part.

[5] The dark underside of this, it should be noted, is the speechless, helpless character of infants; one could read Christabel's experience as having been so horrible

as to have forced her to withdraw from it and to *regress to* rather than *recover* a childish state.

[6] Karen Swann, "Literary Gentlemen and Lovely Ladies: The Debate on the Character of Christabel," *ELH* 52 (1985): 408.

[7] H. W. Piper, "The Disunity of *Christabel* and the Fall of Nature," *Essays in Criticism* 28 (1978): 216.

[8] Peter Kitson, "Coleridge, the French Revolution, and 'The Ancient Mariner': Collective Guilt and Individual Salvation," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 19 (1989): 197–207.

[9] *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), 1:348.

[10] S. T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. James Marsh (Burlington: Chauncey Goodrich, 1829), 31 (hereafter cited as *AR*).

[11] John Hayden, ed., *Romantic Bards and British Reviewers: A Selected Edition of the Contemporary Reviews of the Works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and Shelley* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1971), 143 (hereafter cited as *RB*).

[12] Griggs (note 9), 1:266.

[13] *The Table Talk and Omniana of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H. N. Coleridge (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1917), 441.

[14] For a discussion of Christabel as a martyr, see, for example, Arthur Nethercot, *The Road to Tryermaine* (note 3), and Marjorie Levinson, "The True Fragment: 'Christabel,' " in *The Romantic Fragment Poem* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1986), 82.

[15] See Barbara Rooke, "An Annotated Copy of Coleridge's 'Christabel,' " *Studia Germanica* 15 (1974): 179–92.

[16] Piper (note 7) also notes the similarity but suggests that the differences simply reflect Coleridge's growth as a poet (221–22).

[17] Coleridge (note 1), 139–40, lines 253–78, my emphasis.

[18] Coleridge (note 1), 244 (from Coleridge's "Argument" to "France: An ode").

[19] Coleridge's wish to make use of Teresa as a model is betrayed in his notes on her autobiography. He first describes her mystical experiences as "*deliquia*" caused in part by the fact that she had a "frame of exquisite sensibility by nature, rendered more so by a burning fever, which no doubt had some effect upon her brain." Later, however, he asserts that her raptures were the result of the perfect application of her reason: she felt the pleasure of "the effects . . . of the moral force after conquest, the state of the whole being after the victorious struggle, in which the will has preserved its perfect obedience to the pure or practical reason, or conscience." This shift from a picture of helpless madness to ideal Kantian citizen is a remarkable effort to salvage Teresa. We see here a lingering attraction to the passionate receptiveness of sensibility, an attraction which in this case is managed by rewriting sensibility as precisely what it is not: a reasoned act of will. (See *LR* 4:68–70).

[20] Interestingly, Crashaw's "Hymn" is immediately followed in the original volume by "An Apologie for the Foregoing Hymn . . . As Having been writt when the Author was yet among the Protestants." The striking juxtaposition of poem and socially-grounded retraction suggests a further motivation for the already overdetermined reference to Crashaw's hymn.

[21] Karen Swann, " 'Christabel': The Wandering Mother and the Enigma of Form," *Studies in Romanticism* 23 (1984): 547, 548.

[22] See Constance Hunting, "Another Look at 'The Conclusion to Part II' of *Christabel*," *English Language Notes* 12 (1975): 172.

[23] It is worth noting that the coda also distances the poem from the reader, lines 664–670 reading almost like a commentary on the poem proper, the poem being the incarnation of the "juxtaposition of unlike thoughts" (at once comic and tragic, sen-

timental and brutal) and a "muttered and mocked charm" (sentimental and a parody of the sentimental, gothic and a parody of the gothic), which, after all, being only a poem, "does no harm." Thus, the coda manages to be a serious treatment of the issues at stake in the poem while encouraging the reader not to take the poem seriously. The most direct treatment of the troubling question of response is necessarily the most mystified treatment.

[24] Swann (note 21), 547.

[25] Swann (note 6), 402.

[26] Recounted in Swann (note 6), 397. Swann provocatively links the rather unusual relation of Coleridge (and his contemporaries) to the poem to "problematically invested literary relations" among various writers, readers, and texts.

[27] Griggs (note 9), 1:623.

[28] Strickland (note 3), 653.

[29] Edward Dramin, " 'Amid the Jagged Shadows': *Christabel* and the Gothic Tradition," *The Wordsworth Circle* 13 (1982): 225.

[30] Michael Holstein, "Coleridge's *Christabel* as Psychodrama: Five Perspectives on the Intruder," *The Wordsworth Circle* 7 (1976): 120.