

Here, for once, he places complete trust in his Imagination, and it cannot fail him.

The Ancient Mariner is not, like *Kubla Khan*, a poem about poetry. The shaping spirit, or Secondary Imagination, is not its theme, though recently critics have tried for such a reading. The Mariner's failure, and his subsequent salvation, is one of the Primary Imagination, "the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." God looked upon His Creation and saw that it was good. The Mariner has now first learned to repeat in his very finite mind this eternal act of perception and creation. This awakening certainly does not bring the whole soul of this man into activity; the Mariner does not learn to order his experience so as first to balance and then be free of it. He falls victim to it, and its eternal verbal repetition becomes his obsession. Had the Mariner been a poet, he could have written the Rime he incarnates. He has seen the truth, but the truth does not set him free. He returns to life as a mere fundamentalist of the Primary Imagination, endlessly repeating the story of his own salvation and the one moral in it that he can understand:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

The other moral is less simple, but quite as elemental. Coleridge has written the poem as an alternative reaction to the Mariner's experience, for that experience of purgation through love of the One Life is his own. The higher Imagination shapes truth; the lower merely takes it, through Nature, from the Shaping Spirit of God. The poem celebrates the continued power of creative joy in its creator. But the poem also foreshadows the eventual fate of its creator, when the activity of the whole soul will yield to torpor. Coleridge as theologian and philosopher found more willing auditors than the Mariner did, but his quest came to duplicate that of his creation.

CHRISTABEL

Christabel is more a series of poems than it is a single fragment. Part I opens on an April midnight, chilly and in the light of a full

moon, but the light is shrouded, and the moon looks both small and full. Christabel, Sir Leoline's child, described as a lovely lady, goes into the midnight wood to pray for her distant betrothed. Christabel's mother is dead; some say that her ghost haunts the castle. As Christabel prays beneath a huge oak tree, she hears a moan. She goes to the oak's other side and sees:

a damsel bright,
Drest in a silken robe of white,
That shadowy in the moonlight shone:
The neck that made that white robe wan,
Her stately neck, and arms were bare;
Her blue-veined feet unsandal'd were,
And wildly glittered here and there
The gems entangled in her hair.

This damsel, Geraldine, is later revealed by the poem to be both sexually ambiguous and a vampire, but she has the only vitality contained in the poem's world. The work of Imagination in *Christabel* is to transform the crudity of evil into something beautiful, and to present a nightmare as if it were a fulfillment of desire. Nature in *Christabel* is absent, or depraved, or lacks will. A denial of life has brought a rapacious and disordered sexuality into a world that can neither contain nor effectually combat it. The poem's vividness and energy belong to Geraldine; Christabel comes to life only in torment or when under the vampire's spell. The poem, like *The Ancient Mariner*, is a ballad of the Imagination's revenge, in this case upon a repressive atmosphere that has impeded its free and autonomous functioning. The night world rebels against the evasions of consciousness, and to the frightened consciousness it takes on the appearance of the demonic.

Christabel's mother died giving birth to her only child. The girl's name indicates that her beauty has a particular innocence about it, being associated with the beauty of Christ. The Virgin Mary's name sounds through the poem, as the narrator continually and vainly calls upon her to protect Christabel from violation. Hovering closer is the ghost of Christabel's mother, haunting Geraldine, and providing another ineffectual safeguard.

The denial of life in the poem begins with Sir Leoline. The baron, since the death of his wife in bearing Christabel, has willfully sought death in life:

Each matin bell, the Baron saith,
 Knells us back to a world of death.
 These words Sir Leoline first said,
 When he rose and found his lady dead:
 These words Sir Leoline will say
 Many a morn to his dying day!

This is the framing border of Christabel's world, a deathly bound brought to being by the child's birth. Against this background we can see more clearly the pattern of seduction by which Geraldine entraps her half-willing victim. She begins by twice begging Christabel to "stretch forth thy hand," without fear, and thus comfort a supposedly distressed maiden.

Christabel herself makes the next advance, in absolute innocence yet pragmatically seductive:

All our household are at rest,
 The hall as silent as the cell;
 Sir Leoline is weak in health,
 And may not well awakened be,
 But we will move as if in stealth,
 And I beseech your courtesy,
 This night, to share your couch with me.

The motive is overtly innocent charity, but in this context the extremes of innocence and evil meet as one. "As if" qualifies but does not negate the "move in stealth," as victim and ravisher find a single purpose, latent in one, manifest in the other. Geraldine cannot cross the threshold, which probably is charmed against her, so it is Christabel who actively introduces evil into the castle by lifting the vampire over.

As they pass through the castle, Christabel is already under the spell of Geraldine's eyes, and neglects the presages of evil: Geraldine's failure to praise the Virgin, the howling of the old mastiff in her sleep out in the cold moonshine, the sudden fit of flame that darts out of a dying brand. Yet Christabel can still see one other thing, and reacts curiously:

And Christabel saw the lady's eye,
 And nothing else saw she thereby,
 Save the boss of the shield of Sir Leoline tall,

Which hung in a murky old niche in the wall.
 O softly tread, said Christabel,
 My father seldom sleepeth well.

Christabel unrobes herself first, "and lay down in her loveliness." What she sees when Geraldine reveals herself, Coleridge cannot bring himself to say:

Behold! her bosom and half her side—
 A sight to dream of, not to tell!

As Geraldine is both sorceress and serpent, and also is divided against herself sexually, we can speculate fairly accurately upon what Coleridge will not tell. At the least, what Geraldine calls "this mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow" must be the traditional affliction of the sorceress, a withered, lean bosom and side, of ghastly hue and possibly scaly. Whatever she be, she does manifest a struggle with self before she embraces Christabel:

Ah! what a stricken look was hers!
 Deep from within she seems half-way
 To lift some weight with sick assay,
 And eyes the maid and seeks delay;
 Then suddenly, as one defied,
 Collects herself in scorn and pride,
 And lay down by the Maiden's side!—
 And in her arms the maid she took

Even as she takes Christabel, Geraldine casts a spell of partial forgetfulness upon the girl. Christabel will remember only that she found a distressed lady in the woods, and brought her home for shelter.

The remainder of the fragmentary poem or poems is obscure in direction. Geraldine has "had her will," yet as she slumbers with Christabel, she seems "as a mother with her child." Christabel, though she weeps on waking from her trance, yet "seems to smile as infants at a sudden light." Her awakening to an experience of evil has brought both pleasure and pain.

Geraldine completes her conquest by a verbal seduction of Sir Leoline, whose dormant friendship for her supposed father is re-awakened by the spell of her eyes and speech. He is deceived despite

both Christabel's tortured and cryptic request that he send Geraldine away, and by the warning of his attendant bard. The bard, Bracy, has dreamed that the dove, Christabel, has been attacked:

I saw a bright green snake
Coiled around its wings and neck.
Green as the herbs on which it couched,
Close by the dove's its head it crouched;
And with the dove it heaves and stirs.
Swelling its neck as she swelled hers!

The warnings are disregarded, and the baron, despite his daughter's appeal in the name of her dead mother, turns from his own sweet maid, and leads forth the lady Geraldine. With this apparent triumph of evil, the narrative proper ends. Coleridge added a very significant passage to his unfinished poem a year later, in 1801. Though it has no immediately apparent relevance to the story, a thematic hint in it can take us to the heart of *Christabel's* enigmatic meanings. The passage seems to be based upon the poet's little son, Hartley:

A little child, a limber elf,
Singing, dancing to itself,
A fairy thing with red round cheeks,
That always finds, and never seeks,
Makes such a vision to the sight
As fills a father's eyes with light;
And pleasures 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.
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.

As psychological observation of a kind of natural perversity, this is acute. Its relation to *Christabel* is that this is Coleridge's apologia for writing that poem, for so nearly allying a sublime innocence and an obscene evil. The father, watching his dancing child, is so burdened with an excess of love that he involuntarily expresses his love by bitterness. This is the perversity of the natural heart, which delights also in blaspheming the recesses of the sacred. There is a "metaphysical" prettiness in forcing together thoughts so unlike each other (Coleridge may be thinking of Dr. Johnson's observations on the school of Donne in his *Life of Cowley*). To write a poem like *Christabel*, or unfairly reprove a child, is "to dally with wrong that does no harm," to work off a demonic impulse without resorting to real and active evil. The aesthetics of profanation are subtly allied to a kind of therapy. At each wild word, whether to the young Hartley, or written about the violation of *Christabel*, the poet feels "a sweet recoil of love and pity." In a world imperfect, with a fallen consciousness of sin, the ecstasy of such aesthetic emotions as love and pity may result only from rage and pain, as one strong emotion provokes its contrary.

This throws a strange light back upon the poem. *The Ancient Mariner* is a purgatorial work, but *Christabel* seems to offer no *catharsis*, no release from the intense suffering it so vividly depicts, the fear it seeks to arouse. Wordsworth and Blake take us into desolations, and in great moments of sudden release reveal realities that transform the dreariness and so give us intense intimations of our own freedom, of a liberation from all that impedes the human. The strong Imagination of Coleridge is hag-ridden by horrors, and "the night-mare and her ninefold" ride over his most luminous visions. Like Blake, Coleridge more than the other English Romantics explores the night world, and distrusts Nature partly because of it. Where Blake defied the demonic and sought to use it for his apocalyptic ends, Coleridge indulged his Imagination by it and came to distrust Imagination in consequence.