The Ghost of the Sage of Highgate

Richard Haven
University of Massachusetts at Amherst

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Some years ago, when my collaborators and I completed our bibliography of nineteenth-century writing on Coleridge, we were interested to see the image, or rather images, of Coleridge reflected by that material, and particularly the images of Coleridge as a thinker.¹ A few of the comments which we had read in books, articles, letters, and journals sounded cooly judicious. A number were flattering, some even verging on idolatry. But a large number were contemptuous or denunciatory. What intrigued me was the fact that while he was frequently attacked as having accomplished little or nothing, Coleridge was at the same time roundly condemned as a dangerous and subversive voice. It was not clear what prompted such negative and sometimes even vitriolic responses. Coleridge's prose works attracted little attention on publication, and while they were reissued after his death, they never, at least in England, seem to have drawn any large number of readers. And his critics unite in calling him obscure, indecisive, confused, worthless. But rather than giving clear accounts of the doctrines which they think Coleridge was promulgating and which they oppose, they more frequently turn to ad hominem attacks. Hazlitt, in 1823, wrote of him: "His mouth was gross, voluptuous, open, eloquent . . . but his nose, the rudder of the face, the index of the will, was small, feeble, nothing—like what he has done." And again, "I observed that he continually crossed me on the way by shifting from one side of the footpath to the other. . . . I did not at that time connect it with any instability of purpose or involuntary change of principle, as I have done since. He seemed unable to keep on a straight line."² In 1851, over thirty years after he had visited Coleridge at Highgate, Carlyle devoted a chapter of his Life of John Sterling to a brilliant but slanderous account. "He hung loosely on his limbs with knees bent . . . in

*This paper was presented at the Seminar on the Early English Romantics, 15 October 1982, on the occasion of the dedication of the W. Hugh Peal Collection at the University of Kentucky.
walking, he rather shuffled than decisively stept; and a lady remarked, he never could fix what side of the garden walk would suit him best, but continually shifted, in corkscrew fashion, and kept trying both." Carlyle found similar qualities in Coleridge's conversation, "tal—k" as Carlyle called it, "which spread everythither in inextricable currents and regurgitations . . . terribly deficient in definite goal or aim, nay often in logical intelligibility . . . so that, most times, you felt logically lost; swamped near to drowning in this tide of ingenious vocables, and spreading out boundless as if to submerge the world."3 Hazlitt and Carlyle had personal axes to grind, but Ruskin did not when he wrote of Coleridge as "nothing more than an intellectual opium eater, a man of many crude though lovely thoughts—of confused though brilliant imagination, liable to much error—error even of the heart, very sensual in many of his ideas of pleasure—indolent to a degree, and evidently and always thinking without discipline; letting the fine brains which God gave him work themselves irregularly and without end or object—and carry him whither they will."4 And many now less remembered writers expressed similar sentiments.

It seems odd. The frequent nineteenth-century repetitions or echoes of this image of Coleridge as either impotent genius or self-deluded fraud make one wonder why so many writers felt the need to attack him. It was not, certainly, merely because a handful of his poems slowly came to be accepted in the canon of English poetry. His critics were not, for the most part, concerned with his poetry but with his supposedly unintelligible and unreadable prose. One would think that they were beating a straw man long since pulverized into chaff. But there must have been a reason why they continued to hear Coleridge as a dangerous voice which challenged and threatened them.

The reason, I think, was an awareness of Coleridge's effect in both England and the United States on any number of bright and promising young men, not as the source of doctrines but as the teacher of a way of thinking that enabled them to free themselves from authority and challenge established orthodoxy. He offered them not the codified results of reflection, but Aids to Reflection. Whether they understood him or not, and many of them did not, his critics perceived the threat. And it was real. Reforms in the Anglican church and new currents in American theology, major alterations in the curricula of British and American education, new
currents in political thinking, cannot, of course, be attributed simply to Coleridge. They were in the air of the times. But his was the name with which many conservative minds associated such changes and pressures for change. And not without reason.

The kind of influence of which I am speaking is of course elusive, and it is difficult, perhaps ultimately impossible, for a later scholar to trace its effects with any certainty. Since he did not create a philosophical or theological system, though he frequently talked about system, Coleridge did not found a school whose activities and significance can be clearly identified. But I think it is possible to give an idea of the nature of his effect by considering, first, the position which he was seen to occupy during the later years of his life, and then by turning for examples to two particular groups of young men, the first at Cambridge University in England and the second at the University of Vermont in the United States.

In 1816, after years of struggle against mental depression, ill health, and opium addiction, Coleridge placed himself under the care of Dr. James Gillman, and thereafter lived with Gillman and his family at Highgate on the outskirts of London until his death in 1834. During those years, which saw the publication of the *Lay Sermons*, *Biographia Literaria*, a revised and much expanded version of *The Friend, Aids to Reflection*, and *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, as well as a number of series of lectures on literature and philosophy, Coleridge attracted a growing stream of visitors, finally establishing Thursday evenings as occasions on which he was regularly available to those who wished to see and listen to him. Those who came were offered not so much an opportunity for conversation or discussion as a chance to listen, to observe Coleridge in the act of speaking and thinking as he delivered long monologues occasionally punctuated by questions. As his reputation grew, he came to be seen as a kind of oracle, as "the old man eloquent." It was this image to which Shelley alluded in his "Letter to Maria Gisborne":

You will see Coleridge—he who sits obscure  
In the exceeding lustre and the pure  
Intense irradiation of a mind,  
Which, with its own internal lightening blind,  
Flags wearily through darkness and despair—  
A cloud-encircled meteor of the air,
A hooded eagle among blinking owls. (lines 220-28)

And it is this Coleridge whom Carlyle describes with eloquence if without approval:

Coleridge sat on the brow of Highgate Hill, in those years, looking down on London . . . like a sage escaped from the inanity of life’s battle. . . . His express contributions to poetry, philosophy, or any specific province of human literature or enlightenment, had been small and sadly intermittent; but he had, especially among young inquiring men, a higher than literary, a kind of prophetic or magician character. He was thought to hold, he alone in England, the key of German and other Transcendentalisms. . . . A sublime man; who, alone in those dark days, had saved his crown of spiritual manhood; escaping from the black materialisms, and revolutionary deluges, with “God, Freedom, Immortality” still his: a king of men. The practical intellects of the world did not much heed him, or carelessly reckoned him a metaphysical dreamer: But to the rising spirits of the young generation he had this dusky sublime character; and sat there as a kind of Magus, girt in mystery and enigma. 5

Shelley and Carlyle both reflect a negative judgment of Coleridge, but putting that negativism aside, we can see in both the figure that many people perceived. Many of those who came to Highgate came out of curiosity, to see a phenomenon they had heard of. Many others, including some who found themselves caught up by a glittering eloquence, came away baffled. But others, especially some of those “rising spirits”, discovered something which, as Coleridge would say, “found them.” They saw Coleridge thinking, and thinking in a way other than that to which they had been accustomed. Some returned again and again and became, in effect, his students, even his disciples.

Among the “rising spirits” who visited Coleridge were three students: Arthur Henry Hallam, Tennyson’s close friend whose death inspired In Memoriam; Richard Monckton Milnes, later a politician, writer, and patron of writers; and John Sterling, in whose biography appears Carlyle’s famous description of Coleridge.
from which I have quoted. Sterling was one of those who returned again and again until, as he said, he had worn a pathway up Highgate Hill. All three were members of a small discussion group at Cambridge University known as the Apostles, which met weekly for dinner and to hear and debate papers written by members.

At the time and for some years thereafter, formal education at Cambridge was rigid, static, hidebound. Aristocrats, like Byron a few years earlier, and candidates for a pass degree were required to do little or no academic work. Candidates for honors degrees, commonly preparing for careers in the church and perhaps education, read for a series of competitive examinations focusing on classics and mathematics and including a mandatory examination in divinity limited to textual analysis of two biblical passages and an exposition based on Paley’s rationalistic *Evidences of Christianity*. In order to receive a degree, students were in addition required to subscribe to the thirty-nine articles of the Church of England. There was no provision for new ideas and no room for concern with contemporary issues and problems—religious, social, or intellectual. For those not already members of the establishment, the university (and this was true of Oxford as well) provided access to at least the fringes of the establishment through college fellowships and church livings, many of which were at the university's disposal. What the university required was conformity to the practices and doctrines of the establishment, including those of Anglican orthodoxy.

Bright and inquiring students who wished to examine other ideas could do so among themselves, in undergraduate societies and in the debates of the Cambridge Union, so long as they exercised some discretion and did not follow the example of Shelley and Hogg, who got themselves expelled from Oxford for publishing a “Defense of Atheism.” The ideas which attracted a majority of such bright students were those of Bentham and utilitarianism. It was a few who were dissatisfied with the narrowness of Cambridge education but not inspired by Bentham who founded the society called the Apostles in 1820.

The very first Apostles would seem to have been a serious but rather unremarkable lot; most of them became obscure clergymen. But in 1823, Frederick Dennison Maurice was elected. It was Maurice who first brought the society distinction, who introduced into it his friend John Sterling; the two of them gave it its
Coleridgean character. Both of them were students of Julius Charles Hare, one of the rare liberal Cambridge dons, who was already a supporter of Coleridge from his reading of *The Friend* and *Biographia Literaria*, and from his own Thursday evening visits to Highgate. ⁶

Maurice came to Cambridge already acutely familiar with intellectual and theological controversy. One of the large family of a Unitarian clergyman and teacher, he was from his childhood confronted with a conflict between the views of his father and those of his two oldest sisters, who had been converted to a passionate and intolerant Anglican evangelicalism and a Calvinistic belief in original sin. Unable to accept either, uncertain, lacking external support, and naturally introspective, Maurice attempted to find his own way through intense self-examination and through reading which included both Coleridge and Mme. de Stael, whose book *De l'Allemagne* introduced him to German thought.

What Maurice, like Hare, learned from Coleridge, and what Sterling learned from them and from Coleridge himself, was first of all what was implied in the distinction between two kinds of thinking: between “understanding”—the rational, empirical thought of post-Lockean psychology, which could lead either to a Paley or a Bentham—and “reason,” the faculty of perception of a spiritual reality underlying the physical and transcending it, permitting apprehension or at least glimpses of wholes rather than parts. This had many implications both for Coleridge and for his followers, and it seemed to validate what many of them already felt. It provided an escape from a narrow and sterile orthodoxy which taught that transcendent truths could be known only from tradition and not discovered in one’s own experience. Equally it provided an escape from a mechanical empiricism which could explain wholes only by reducing them to their constituent parts. And it provided an escape from seemingly irreconcilable controversies by suggesting that one did not need to choose between conflicting opinions so much as to understand what was valid in each and to arrive at syntheses. Related to this was the notion that real education was not mere inculcation, but a training of the mind to know itself and think for itself. And from this in turn derived an intellectual and social ideal of cooperation and wholeness rather than competition and fragmentation. It was this last, suggested in the *Lay Sermons* and developed in *Church and State*, which informed what Maurice later called Christian
Socialism and which, incidentally, provided the basis for a book, *The State in its Relations to the Church*, by an Oxford friend of Maurice and Hallam, the future prime minister W. E. Gladstone.

I shall return to the importance of such ideas for the Apostles, both Maurice's contemporaries and succeeding generations. But first I should like to go a little further with Maurice, Hare, and Sterling. Drawing on Coleridge's published work, particularly *Aids to Reflection*, which had appeared in 1825, Hare and his brother Augustus published in 1827 a substantial volume of brief essays entitled *Guesses at Truth by Two Brothers*. "Most of my thoughts," Hare wrote, "will appear to have been impregnated" by the spirit of Coleridge, and successive editions included ever more material drawn from that source. Maurice found *Guesses* second only to *Aids* itself and praised both Coleridge and the Hares as among those who "make it their great object to set free their own minds and those of their fellow men, to feel as deeply and think as earnestly as they can, and to teach others to do so." Maurice left Cambridge in 1833 to take up a family living in Hurstmonceaux, to marry Maurice's sister, and later to become Archdeacon of Lewes. His book-lined home, which included the largest collection of German philosophy and theology in England, became a mecca for friends and like-minded intellectuals. Maurice left Cambridge in 1827 to pursue the study of law in London and to write for such journals as the *Westminster Review* and the *Athenaeum*. A year later he was joined by Sterling and together with others they bought first the *Literary Chronicle* and then the *Athenaeum*, which, merged, became a center for what one described as a "gallant band of Platonico-Wordsworthian-Coleridgean-anti-utilitarians." Maurice and Sterling also became active in the London Debating Society, where they argued Coleridgean views against the dominant Benthamites; it was through these debates that John Stuart Mill, the precocious young utilitarian on the verge of a nervous breakdown, was introduced to Coleridge and Wordsworth, who helped him to survive that breakdown and who profoundly influenced him.

In what have become classic essays on Coleridge and Bentham, Mill later wrote that they were the two seminal minds of the age, and that both were great questioners of things established. But whereas Bentham led men "to ask themselves, in regard to any ancient or received opinion, 'Is it true?' Coleridge led them to ask 'What is the meaning of it?' The one took his stand outside the
received opinion and surveyed it as an entire stranger to it: the other looked at it from within, and endeavoured to see it with the eyes of a believer in it; to discover by what apparent facts it was at first suggested, and by what appearances it has ever since been rendered continually credible—has seemed to a succession of persons to be a faithful interpretation of their experience."

Maurice went on to become ordained and to become first Professor of Literature and of Divinity at the University of London (a position from which he was expelled for unorthodox views) and later Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge. He also became one of the most influential of Victorian theologians and an important force both for liberalization in the church and for reform in education, at Cambridge and also through the Working Men’s College in London, which he founded.

Sterling, after a spell in Germany, became briefly Hare’s curate in Hurstmonceaux. Resigning because of the recurrent ill-health which caused his early death, he returned to London where he became the center of a group of friends with whom in 1838 he formed a club reminiscent of the Apostles, meeting regularly for dinners and discussion. This group included such Apostles as Maurice, Milnes, and Alfred Tennyson, as well as Hare. It also included such other Coleridgeans as W. B. Donne, and Connop Thirlwall, Hare’s Cambridge colleague whose rooms Coleridge used when he visited Cambridge in 1833. Others were Thackeray, Bishop Wilberforce, and Sterling’s new friend Thomas Carlyle. The group had the Coleridgean purpose, according to Milnes, of “bringing together earnest men, who might not otherwise have come in contact, and in the variety of whose opinions, each might learn to appreciate and honour the belief of others.”

By the time Sterling died of tuberculosis in 1844, he had by Victorian standards become something of a freethinker. This along with the fact that the members of his club were known to represent a diversity of views led to a significant series of events. Hare, as literary executor, edited a volume of Sterling’s Essays and Tales with a memoir giving great attention to Coleridge’s influence and conscientiously tracing Sterling’s later religious doubts. This led to a lengthy attack in the High Church English Review by a member of the Oxford Movement, entitled “On Tendencies towards the Subversion of the Faith,” arguing that the influence of Coleridge and others on Sterling was subversive and pernicious. Hare replied with a pamphlet Thou shalt not bear false witness.
against thy neighbor,¹⁴ and the Eclectic Review weighed in with a vigorous defense of Coleridge and his followers.¹⁵ Carlyle, feeling that Hare had devoted too much attention to Sterling’s doubts and anxious to assert the importance of his own influence and to minimize that of Coleridge, produced his own Life of Sterling in which appeared the portrait of Coleridge as the unintelligible spinner of inconclusive metaphysical dreams. The importance of all this tempest—and there was somewhat more of a tempest than I can describe here—is that it reflects how much Coleridge and his ideas and influence were a matter for passionate debate, even though much of that influence and that debate was beneath the surface.

The Apostles, to whom I return briefly, were unusual in that they have survived until now as an undergraduate society many of whose members long continued to meet for an annual dinner. They continued to select “rising spirits” as members and included many distinguished Victorian names, among them James Maxwell, G. O. Trevelyan, A. J. Balfour, and Walter Raleigh. Closer to our own time were Alfred North Whitehead, Roger Fry, E. M. Forster, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, and Leonard Woolf, some of whom were central figures in the Bloomsbury Group. I would certainly not suggest that these later figures were Coleridgeans in the sense that Maurice and Sterling were (though something of a case might be made for Whitehead). Theology and the nature of religious experience ceased to be central concerns. In later years, thanks particularly to Strachey, they came to see themselves increasingly as an exclusive and elite group of intellectuals. But important Coleridgean elements did persist. Without being aware of its origins, Leonard Woolf described “the [Apostolic] method,” as he called it, of self-scrutiny and the ability to transcend intellectual fragmentation.¹⁶ Donald MacAlister, an Apostle of the 1870s, later recalled in somewhat facetious but most Coleridgean terms, the weekly undergraduate meetings at which, he said, a member “learned to contemplate pure being. . . . There with eyes undimmed, even by tobacco smoke, he beheld the vision of absolute truth. . . . There he mastered the art of reconciling by a phrase the most divergent of hypotheses, the most fundamentally antagonistic of antinomies. . . . There upborne by the ethereal atmosphere of free and audacious enquiry, he mewed his budding wings, and discovered to his delight . . . that he too could soar. . . . He felt
his reality and knew that he was alive."17

Confidence in the value of individual insight, the ability to entertain and understand a multiplicity of opinions, a belief in self-education—these were all Coleridgean legacies. I should like to go on to discuss how memories and echoes of Coleridge appear not only in the work of a few great men but also in scores of forgotten ones. And I should like to consider how Coleridge's ideas, in *Church and State*, of a coherent culture shaping an organic society inform both the Anglo-Catholic T. S. Eliot's *Idea of a Christian Society* and Cambridge professor Raymond Williams's Marxist *Culture and Society*. But I must turn to the United States.

In the early days of the Apostles, two of those whom I have mentioned, Arthur Hallam and Richard Monckton Milnes, visited Coleridge at Highgate. Years later, Milnes recalled that Coleridge had asked them whether either intended to go to America, adding, "Go to America if you have the opportunity. I am known there. I am a poor poet in England, but I am a great philosopher in America."18 The person who introduced Coleridge the philosopher and theologian to America was the young president of the University of Vermont, James Marsh, and there is more than a little similarity between his role and that of F. D. Maurice. Dartmouth College was Congregational rather than Anglican, but as a young student Marsh found there a similar authoritarian attitude towards education, a reliance on eighteenth-century rationalism in philosophy, a narrow curriculum, a preoccupation with sectarian controversy. He too founded a discussion club and turned to self-education; he too found direction in Coleridge and an introduction to German thought in Mme. de Stael. Marsh's club at Dartmouth did not survive him, nor did other groups which he formed at institutions where he studied or taught—Andover Theological Seminary and Hampton-Sidney College in Virginia. The group which did survive and was for a time a somewhat similar conduit was the then tiny University of Vermont, where Marsh became president in 1826 at the age of thirty.

The effects on American transcendentalism of Marsh's 1829 edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, with a long preliminary essay and voluminous notes, are well known. It provided the subject for the first discussion of the Transcendental Club in Boston in 1836, attended by, among others, Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson, Frederick Henry Hedge, and Ralph Waldo
Emerson. Its influence on Emerson and through Emerson has been extensively studied. And the book was widely read and discussed in this country. One might almost say that it took the place for “rising spirits” here of what Coleridge’s Thursday monologues provided in England.

But I am here concerned with a somewhat different influence. When he arrived at the University of Vermont, Marsh was no carbon copy of Coleridge or of Maurice, but he was imbued with Coleridgean ideas similar to those which I described when speaking of the Apostles and with a similar determination to alter the system of education and to free individual minds from an authoritarian orthodoxy. With the help of his colleague Joseph Torrey, a member of his discussion club at Dartmouth, he reconstructed the curriculum on the basis of Coleridge’s “Essays on Method,” first published in The Friend and later revised as the prospectus for the Encyclopaedia Metropolitana, of which Coleridge was briefly the original editor and which for a time rivalled the more empirical and utilitarian Britannica. The purpose of the new curriculum was described by Benjamin Wheeler, another member of the Dartmouth club and Marsh’s successor as president at Vermont, as “to give a coherence to the various studies in each department so that the several parts shall present, more or less, the unity not of an aggregation nor of a juxtaposition, nor of a merely logical arrangement but a growth, and therefore, the study in it, rightly pursued, should be a growing and enlarging process to the mind of the student.”

That statement is essentially a restatement of Coleridge’s “Essays on Method.” It informed the new curriculum under Marsh, and its continuation was ensured by the fact that he was succeeded as president first by Wheeler and later by Torrey. Eighty-one of Marsh’s students became teachers. Two of his sons went as far as Oregon, one becoming president and another professor at the University of the Pacific.

The story of this spread of Coleridge’s influence is, like the story of its spread through the Apostles, and through many others on both sides of the Atlantic, too complex to be pursued here, and certainly too tenuous ever to be completely recovered. I should like to know, for instance, what teacher may have been responsible for the undergraduate essays which appeared in the Amherst College Shrine in 1833 and 1834 in support of Coleridge, one of them judging him “the most remarkable genius of his
age." But I should like to conclude with one partly personal anecdote which may indicate something of it. When I was an undergraduate at Harvard more than thirty years ago, I was at one point fascinated with some of the work of John Dewey. I saw no connection when, after that, I became involved with the work of Coleridge, which occupied me through graduate school and for many years thereafter. I was vaguely aware that Dewey was a graduate of the University of Vermont, and I had been rather startled when, after I had read what I thought was a rather Coleridgean paper on aesthetics in a graduate seminar in Oxford, and had seen it torn in shreds, another American student said to me, "I don't think they understand John Dewey here." But it was many years later that I was told of Herbert Schneider's story which appears in Corliss Lamont's *Dialogue on John Dewey*. Knowing that Dewey had studied at Vermont under Torrey's nephew, Schneider says, "Finally at some birthday dinner we gave for him we bought him a copy of Marsh's edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* and asked him whether this recalled anything to his mind. Then he opened up and said, 'Yes I remember very well that this was one's spiritual emancipation in Vermont. Coleridge's idea of the spirit came to us as a real relief, because we could be both liberal and pious; and this *Aids to Reflection* book, especially Marsh's edition, was my first Bible. . . . I never did get over Coleridge. Coleridge represents pretty much my religious views still, but I quit talking about them because nobody else is interested in them.'"

I'd like to have pursued this connection, but I have not and probably will not. Interest now in Dewey's religious ideas, or in Coleridge's, is, shall we say, limited. But in a talk at the University of Vermont on the 100th anniversary of the publication of Marsh's edition, Dewey said that the transcendentalism of Marsh [and Coleridge] was "the outer form congenial in his day to [the] purpose [of awakening] his fellowmen to a sense of the possibilities that were theirs by right as men, and to quicken them to realize these possibilities in themselves." The outer form has changed, perhaps beyond recognition. But the issues and purposes have not. And our perception of them is often, I think, affected by what many of us have learned, knowingly or not, from the Sage of Highgate or from his ghost transmitted through successive generations.
NOTES


5Carlyle, Life of John Sterling, 69-70.


9Allen, Cambridge Apostles, 76.


12Allen, Cambridge Apostles, 189.

13English Review 10 (1848): 399-444.

14Julius Charles Hare, Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor (London: J. W. Parker, 1849).


16Allen, Cambridge Apostles, 71.


20Duffy, Coleridge's American Disciples, 7-8.


23Duffy, Coleridge's American Disciples, 30.